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Poland's Double Darkness

As we in the "free world" watch the Poles agonize under martial law,
we may forget the more basic bondage we share with them.

by Suhotra dasa

Forty-three years ago, on September 1, 1939, World War II began in Europe with the invasion of Poland by Hitler's Wehrmacht. After a month of valiant resistance, the hopelessly outgunned and outnumbered Polish Army surrendered. On October 3 the Germans staged a victory march through the streets of Warsaw, a cynical celebration that marked the beginning of a five-year rampage of Nazi oppression, pillage, and genocide. In April 1940 Hitler's army invaded Denmark and Norway and brought them quickly to heel. Shortly thereafter, the Nazis conquered Belgium, France, and the Netherlands, and then Yugoslavia and Greece. A British news commentator anguished, "The lights are going out all over Europe."

Perhaps it was the recollection of that grim time, or simply the aptness of the metaphor, that a few months ago led the editors of *Time* magazine to headline their cover "Poland's Ordeal: The Darkness Descends." General Jaruzelski had just clamped down martial law on Poland, at the instigation and with the undercover help of his Soviet bosses. (There were even reports that some of the "Polish" troops we're actually Russians in Polish uniforms.) Solidarity was virtually crushed; its leader, Lech Walesa, arrested and silenced; the West forced to stand by helplessly. The darkness of totalitarian repression had indeed descended once more and snuffed out the glimmers of political freedom in Poland.

Viewed from the perspective of Vedic knowledge, however, the events in Poland carry a deeper meaning. The longings of the Polish people for political freedom and economic well-being are actually misguided expressions of the soul's longings for liberation from the miseries of life in the material world. Why misguided? Because even if—miracle of miracles—Solidarity had triumphed and the Polish people had won full political freedom and economic self-determination, the iron shackles of the fundamental material miseries would have remained. Every Pole would still have had to suffer old age, disease, death, and rebirth in another body. Ignorance of how to gain freedom from *this* bondage is the real darkness in Poland.

This darkness is not merely a Polish affliction, however. Human society East and West is suffering from ignorance of the real self, and this ignorance is a direct result of the predominant ideologies guiding the world's leaders. Capitalism and communism are simply two varieties of materialism, a philosophy that identifies the psychophysical body as the self. Materialism, defining reality as nothing more than the temporary embodied life of sensual perception and action, thus directs human endeavor toward the enjoyment of sense objects. This goal is the same as that of the animals, who also accept their sense perceptions as all in all. So it is not surprising that the philosophy of materialism results in people leading lives closely resembling, in essence, those of lower species—lives of hard struggle for physical survival, lives revolving around defense, eating, mating, and sleep.

The Vedic literatures assure us that the living being can attain a state of existence higher than this, and they urge each of us to try to reach this state by cultivating transcendental knowledge. Indeed, if a human being doesn't rise above the consciousness of animalistic sense pleasure, the Vedic scriptures judge his life a tragic waste. Says the *Srimad-Bhagavatam* (11.9.29), the foremost text for understanding the science of Kṛṣṇa consciousness: "After many embodiments one attains a human form, which is difficult to achieve. Although mortal, it allows one to fulfill life's purpose. Having obtained this form, a sober person should quickly endeavor for God realization before death comes. He should not worry too much about his physical maintenance, for, after all, sense pleasure is available everywhere" (*Bhag.* 11.9.29).

The *Bhagavad-gīta*, another basic Vedic text, teaches that the realm of sense perception is *māyā*, or illusion, because it is temporary and always imperfect, no matter how hard we struggle to improve it. Reality lies beyond the flickering sensual realm, in the eternal, unchanging realm of the spirit. A person who perceives his existence in the light of transcendence knows he's not his temporary body—not a Pole, American, or Russian; not a capitalist, communist, or nationalist; not a Hindu, Moslem, or Jew. Such a knower of the truth sees himself as a soul (*jīvatma*), an eternal particle of pure consciousness, whose only real duty is to serve Kṛṣṇa, the Supreme Personality of Godhead.

In this world of illusion we have misdirected our service because of *māyā's* influence, and thus we foolishly serve our senses and their extensions: family, society, party, nation, and so on. Although we may sometimes achieve some apparent happiness or success in such service, its ultimate result is inevitably the destruction of the present body and the continuation of the soul's ignorance and suffering in future embodied lives under the law of *karma*, the law of action and reaction. Neither peace nor happiness is possible for the eternal soul as long as he remains in material consciousness. Therefore the *Bhagavad-gīta* (2.71-2) advises, "A person who has given up all desires for sense pleasure, who lives free from desires, who has given up all sense of proprietorship, and who is devoid of false ego—he alone can attain real peace. If one is thus situated even at the hour of death, one can enter the kingdom of God."

Unfortunately, today's leaders are too enamored of the kingdoms of this world. Instead of imparting a sense of detachment to their people and leading them toward spiritual perfection, the leaders of both the capitalist and the communist nations strive to satisfy the demands of their people for ever greater material comfort and more consumer goods. But this is an impossible proposition that will always result in such miseries as those currently tormenting Poland and the rest of the world.

What society on this planet can claim to have solved the problems of birth, old age, disease, and death? Human reason pushes us to try to overcome these problems through medical technology, and any apparent headway we make is called progress. Indeed, we often measure the advancement of a nation by how far it has gone toward increasing longevity or eradicating such diseases as smallpox or tuberculosis. But despite all such achievements, humanity remains victimized by the same old miseries—birth, old age, disease, and death. We inevitably fail to conquer these intractable enemies because beneath it all we nurture their very sustenance: materialism, or the identification of the material body as the self.

In May 1981 President Reagan declared in a speech at Notre Dame University that the West would "transcend communism." Unhappily, Mr. Reagan's words and actions to date indicate that he simply meant the West would try to outproduce the communists economically, outmaneuver them diplomatically, and outflank them militarily. But the West cannot hope to avoid the same fate as the East if it does not transcend communism by implementing transcendental knowledge. In the Thirteenth Chapter of *Bhagavad-gita* Lord Krsna explains that transcendental knowledge consists of understanding the ins and outs of the material world, the nature of the soul, and the position of the Supreme Soul, Lord Krsna Himself. And the result of such knowledge? "When one is enlightened with transcendental knowledge, by which nescience is destroyed, then this knowledge reveals everything, just as the sun lights up everything in the daytime" (Bg. 5.16).

At present, the West does seem to have a certain advantage over the Soviet Union, but that advantage is based only upon temporal, material wealth, which can at any time be destroyed by a sudden turn of international events. Any ideological system that defines reality as nothing more than the consumption of sense objects by the material body will be subject to the same fate as the body: destruction by the inexorable force of time. President Reagan's prophecy will come true only when the West transcends the bodily concept of life and bases its culture and civilization on the eternal platform of spiritual reality.

As long as the leaders of the Western world continue to preach the doctrine of materialism, they will remain blind to the real goal of human existence, devotional service to God. If blind men lead a blind populace in the West as well as the East, how can we expect anything good to come of it? The entire world is devoid of spiritual light, and only by the systematic introduction of genuine spiritual knowledge into human society can any light return anywhere.