

Can We Make the World a Better Place? Part I

By Rev. Master Seikai

My reason for posing this question is because it is one of those existential questions which lurks in the background of the mind, and influences our thoughts and behaviors. Many people, especially the young, want to make the world a better place by helping to reduce social injustice, hunger, poverty, environmental degradation, and the many other causes to which a person can belong. I am not so much hoping to give a final, authoritative answer as wanting to explore the question and its many ramifications.

Also lurking in the background is an assumption that most Buddhists, or you, the reader, genuinely would like to see the world be made better, at least in some achievable ways. But first, let us question that basic assumption. Does the world need improving, or is it just fine the way it is? This is actually not the easiest question to answer. I have read several accounts of Buddhist practitioners—whether monk or lay person makes no difference—who have had deep experiences of seeing the world anew, and seeing it as essentially perfect. Not a thing out of place! And so, if that is a view of reality that one might arrive at in Buddhist practice, does that mean that all the effort we expend in trying to make the world better is all a futile effort? If the world is already perfect as it is, why go to any trouble to try to make it better? Or could it mean that there are two very different ways of viewing the world which might seem to be mutually exclusive, but in reality are not?

I've had numerous experiences of seeing the world as fine just as it is. *The Scripture of Great Wisdom*, which we recite every morning, says the following:

“O Shariputra, form is only pure; pure is all form—there is, then, nothing more than this, for what is form is pure, and what is pure is form; the same is also true of all sensation, perception, mental activity and consciousness.”

I've always taken this teaching of the Buddha to heart and endeavored to see the world through this vision, a view which is without any discrimination or judgment. It is a beautiful vision, one which sees into the true essence of everything, including oneself. The only problem is that one cannot remain indefinitely seeing things this way, or at the very least, seeing things this way without it being accompanied by what is called discerning wisdom. Because out of the basic purity (or emptiness) being spoken of in the scripture, there emerges the complexity of the world, and causality. Because there is also causality, we experience pain, suffering, unhappiness and all the other human experiences which motivate one to find solutions, to find ways to bring suffering to an end—or to make the world a better place.

So going back to the question of whether the world needs improvement or whether it is just fine the way it is, I have had to conclude that both are true simultaneously. And it is necessary to have the flexibility of mind to move back and forth from one view to the other, sometimes turning on a dime, so to speak. And of course

there are many things about the world which we know we cannot hope to change one iota, and therefore we need to learn a deep acceptance of things as they are, which, in and of itself, is a profound religious practice. Deep acceptance, however, is not apathy or resignation about the way things are; rather it is more like a foundation from which one can step off into doing things to improve the human condition, or the condition of the world. Because acceptance is the foundation, we can approach life without too much in the way of idealism and high expectations, which always seem to turn around and bite us in the behind before very long.

Before we can go any further in deciding whether or not we are able to make the world a better place, I think we need to ask the question, can I make myself a better person? This, too, is one of those existential questions which has two sides to it. It has, on the one side, the view which arises out of sincere religious practice, that I, a human being endowed with physical form, five senses and the capacity for perception, rational thinking and consciousness, am just fine the way I am. I am void, unstained and pure. On a very deep level fundamental to being alive, I am complete and need no improvement. Having the kind of personality which is prone to viewing myself as inadequate, however, I personally have to keep coming back to this pure vision of myself, again and again. It is pretty much necessary in order to maintain sanity, a modicum of self-esteem, and a positive outlook on life.

Then again, all of us have flaws, and few people would argue that they are perfect and have no room for improvement. I know I can make myself a better person because I have done so. I expect that most people can, except perhaps for the most proud, confused and embittered human beings. But making myself a better person has been a project, as it is for everyone who tries, because I'm complicated and have deeply embedded views of the way things are and of myself. That has never stopped me from making as full an effort as I possibly can to improve myself. In essence, the vow to make oneself a better person is never to give up; I know that so long as I make the best effort I can make, things continue to get better. My teacher, and her teacher before her, both stressed that just continuing to put one foot in front of the other and not giving up is the essence of practice.

So, it follows that if we, flawed human beings, can improve ourselves even a little bit, and recognize that such improvement is a worthwhile endeavor, perhaps we can change the world as well. Is this too big a leap to make? One aspect of this question is the recognition that it is extraordinarily hard to change anyone else besides oneself. Probably everyone tries to change someone else at some point in their lives: husbands their wives or vice versa, teachers their students, parents their children. As adults, we usually come to the conclusion that trying to directly change another person is a lost cause. People are, by and large, stubborn, and only change anything about themselves if they decide they really want to do so—and even then it's a tough job.

It's a beautiful thing when a person succeeds in changing some difficult aspect of their behavior or personality. As a monk, I've seen it done many times. By virtue of making vows to live by a high ethical standard and practicing wholeheartedly, people

succeed in tackling and changing really deep-rooted and often painful things within themselves. It takes persistence, devotion to practice, a positive attitude, never giving up, and above all a willingness to change. As I mentioned, I have made a lot of positive changes in myself over the course of time, and would not still be wearing monk's robes if it weren't the case. If enough people did the same, would it change the whole world?

As a young man, I wanted to help change the world. The 1960s was a decade of sudden, increased awareness of the damage that humankind was inflicting on the natural world. Rachel Carson's very influential book, *Silent Spring*, about the effects the pesticide DDT was having on birds and other animals, set in motion the environmental movement as we know it. The first Earth Day was held in 1970, 44 years ago this April. I was turning 14; it was a big deal in my junior high school. I wanted to be part of that movement, but could never seem to engage with any group of people; I never felt at home anywhere until I entered monastic life in my early twenties. So, on that level of being, I gave up hope of changing the world in any measurable way, and chose a path which, in theory anyway, helps to change it in ways which are invisible and intangible. Buddhist monks constantly offer the merit of their practice to all beings, which we have faith makes the world a better place—and people often confirm that, in their lives anyway, such is the case.

Meanwhile, since 1970, the population of our planet has increased from 3.7 billion to 7.2 billion, an increase of 95%. This means that all of the environmental problems attendant to human over population have, on the whole, only gotten worse. In 1970, global warming and climate change was something which a few people had predicted would happen, but wasn't really at that point measurable. But now, with twice as many people, we can measure it and know that it is a reality that all life on our planet will have to live with for as long as we can imagine into the future. On one level, this appears to be a pretty grim situation.

As I am writing this article, I have chanced upon an article (*It's the End of the World As We Know It...And He Feels Fine* in the *New York Times*) concerning a British man named Paul Kingsnorth, who has been very active and influential in the environmental movement for over two decades. Kingsnorth has come to the conclusion that, at this point, there is nothing we can do to stop the inevitable breakdown of the earth's biological systems, and that mass extinctions and total disruption of human civilization is unavoidable. The article includes this passage:

Instead of trying to "save the earth," Kingsnorth says, people should start talking about what is actually possible. Kingsnorth has admitted to an ex-activist's cynicism about politics as well as to a worrying ambivalence about whether he even wants civilization, as it now operates, to prevail. But he insists that he isn't opposed to political action, mass or otherwise, and that his indignations about environmental decline and industrial capitalism are, if anything, stronger than ever. Still, much of his recent writing has been devoted to fulminating against how environmentalism, in its crisis phase, draws adherents. Movements like Bill McKibben's 350.org, for instance, might

engage people, Kingsnorth told me, but they have no chance of stopping climate change.“ I just wish there was a way to be more honest about that,” he went on, “because actually what McKibben’s doing, and what all these movements are doing, is selling people a false premise. They’re saying, ‘If we take these actions, we will be able to achieve this goal.’ And if you can’t, and you know that, then you’re lying to people. And those people . . . they’re going to feel despair.”

The First Noble Truth of Buddhism is simply the acceptance of suffering. Acceptance, as I mentioned earlier, opens the door to doing something about what is wrong in our lives. So can we in theory apply the same principle to accepting the collective suffering of the world, including environmental degradation? I don’t know how to answer this question, in part because at the time the Buddha lived, around 600 BCE, the population of the earth is estimated to have been around 400 million people, there was not an environmental crisis, and so he was addressing human problems on an individual basis, i.e. what any one person can do to reduce their own suffering. It may just be that now, with the population of the earth in excess of seven billion, the collective karma of just that sheer number wipes out all individual attempts to bring the crisis under control. Still, does that mean we should despair and give up trying?

I personally don’t think so. Despair, in and of itself, is an unsatisfactory state of mind. Being in despair does definitely communicate something to others around us, and does not make anything better. So, I draw a distinction between putting aside magical thinking and accepting hard-to-accept facts, or hard-to-accept truths, and despairing that there isn’t a thing we can do to make the world a better place. In doing so, I might run the risk of being naively optimistic, but I’m happy with that.

Several years ago we at Pine Mountain Temple spent a considerable sum of money to have photovoltaic solar panels mounted on the roof of our workshop, which generate quite a bit of electricity. The following year we added six more panels, making a total of 30, which offsets about 75% of the total amount of power we use in the temple. Since its installation, our system has generated 58,000 kilowatt hours of electricity, which would otherwise have been generated by burning some sort of fossil fuel, putting 98,475 lbs. of carbon into the atmosphere. On a global scale this is meaningless, and a cynic might say “why bother?” But I’m glad we installed solar and have felt good about it from the start; it was an investment in the future of the temple and the future of the earth. The above-mentioned article continues:

Whatever the merits of this diagnosis (“Look, I’m no Pollyanna,” McKibben says. “I wrote the original book about the climate for a general audience, and it carried the cheerful title ‘The End of Nature’”), it has proved influential. The author and activist Naomi Klein, who has known Kingsnorth for many years, says Dark Mountain has given people a forum in which to be honest about their sense of dread and loss. “Faced with ecological collapse, which is not a foregone result, but obviously a possible one, there has to be a space in which we can grieve,” Klein told me. “And then we can actually change.”

Kingsnorth would agree with the need for grief but not with the idea that it must lead to change — at least not the kind of change that mainstream environmental groups pursue. “What do you do,” he asked, “when you accept that all of these changes are coming, things that you value are going to be lost, things that make you unhappy are going to happen, things that you wanted to achieve you can’t achieve, but you still have to live with it, and there’s still beauty, and there’s still meaning, and there are still things you can do to make the world less bad? And that’s not a series of questions that have any answers other than people’s personal answers to them. Selfishly it’s just a process I’m going through.” He laughed. “It’s extremely narcissistic of me. Rather than just having a personal crisis, I’ve said: ‘Hey! Come share my crisis with me!’ ”

We are of course venturing into the whole psychological side of how environmental crisis affects human beings, whether we can deny it is a problem, or accept it and strive for a solution, or despair that it is inevitable, or accept it and just do what you can, however small and insignificant the act might be. I believe that we are all affected by the state of the whole earth, and that we cannot pretend that we are not at all affected, however subconsciously those effects might manifest. This is to say that, with respect to Buddhist teaching, I don’t think it is a question that we can avoid any longer. Just because the Buddha himself didn’t talk about it—in his time it wasn’t a reality—doesn’t mean that, today, as Buddhists, we should avoid the whole matter.

Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, who worked with people facing death and wrote extensively on the subject, noted that people pass through five stages in the process of accepting the inevitability of death: a) denial; b) anger; c) bargaining; d) depression; e) acceptance. We can look around and easily see that there are climate change deniers digging their heels into the earth, fighting the whole notion. We can see people who are angry about the state of the world, demanding that someone—usually governments—must take action. There is plenty of bargaining going on, such as the exchange in carbon credits, which is one way of putting off the real solution of not burning fossil fuels anymore, period, so that we do not continue to increase the level of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. There are those who express depression, such as Paul Kingsnorth and others who have labored mightily to encourage solutions and decided that it largely a lost cause. And finally there is the stage of acceptance. Exactly what that looks like and how to learn to arrive at it and be there, and what one can do within the state of acceptance, is what I will attempt to expand on in Part II of this article.
