

## Can We Make the World a Better Place? Part II

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In Part I of this article, I delved into the matter of whether any one of us as individuals can hope to do anything to make the world a better place. There are of course, different realms in which one can operate in order to achieve this: there is the intimate, personal level of spirituality, in which every one of us can make a positive impact on the world, however minute and unmeasurable it might be, just by engaging in practice and working on ourselves; there is the external, impersonal, macro-scale level in which none of us can reasonably expect to make any impact, given the world's current human population of 7.3 billion. We can join or support causes which seek to diminish hunger, social injustice and environmental degradation in the world, and those are all worthy causes, but whether it will be enough to stave off a calamitous future for humankind owing to overpopulation and climate change remains to be seen.

I concluded what I wrote with the following paragraph, which I will insert here as a point of departure. 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 is 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 here.

Regardless of whether we can actually accomplish anything to make the world a better place, there remains our own interior attitude and relationship with what is going on in the world, which is what the five stages of accepting the inevitability of old age, decay and death address. ("Old age, decay and death" is a Buddhist turn of phrase, which dovetails nicely with this process.) Denial is what we engage in when we just aren't ready to face the hard reality of something difficult. We do it all the time when confronted with some unexpected turn of events or things not working out as we had hoped: we deny the reality of what has happened and we fight it. In fighting it, naturally we put ourselves in an angry state of mind and being. Anger is the predominant characteristic of the human realm, along with our capacity for love, sympathy and empathy. Because we can mentally project into the past and the future, we desire that things be better than they are now, and from desire there comes the chronic frustration of things being not as we want them to be. Then we get angry.

The world right now is a study in this human phenomenon on an all-inclusive scale. As a species, we desire so much, we want and need so much luxury, so much material wealth and comfort, so much of everything—and having it all only blinds us to the hard reality that the world cannot support a high standard of living for 7 billion people. It is already stretched too thin. So right now we have one foot in the denial stage and one foot in the anger stage of coming to grips with it. As a species, we have too many conflicting factions, and far too much collective anger to actually work in harmony towards solutions to the problems of humankind.

Still, there are those who claim that real progress is being made in the world. I imagine it is a matter of how you measure these things, interpret the data, and then arrive at a conclusion, but one school of thought holds that slowly but surely we are improving the overall quality of life in the world, and that widespread conflict is on the decline worldwide. I would like to believe that

this is true. With the advent of super-sophisticated electronic gadgetry, it is now possible to be aware of and read about things that happen anywhere in the world within a few hours. This greatly expanded availability of information might make it appear that things are really going to hell in a hand basket, but it might just as easily be that this is only an illusion created by the onslaught of information about the world in general.

Part of the difficulty in assessing whether or not the state of the world is improving is that there are so many different currents of human activity going on at once, just like the world's oceans. There are warm and cold currents, prevailing currents and intermittent currents; there are phenomena like El Nino, which occurs every so often and the reasons for that are not really understood. Parts of the world that have, in the past, seen a lot of violence and upheaval do quiet down, and vice versa. Buddhism recognizes that there is constant change—anicca—and that is simply a fact of existence.

My teacher, Rev Master Jiyu-Kennett taught that there is also a law of the universe which is to the effect that *without fail, evil is vanquished and good prevails*. On the face of it, this can seem like an overly simplistic aphorism. Very often it seems that, in a great many situations, evil in fact triumphs. To be honest, I have often contemplated this saying and really questioned its validity. But I have come to the following conclusion: given enough time, it is probably true. That is to say that, whatever happens in the world, or whatever happens to any individual, however tragic it might appear initially, given enough time, good will come of it because that it is nature of the universe.

So, to extrapolate on the idea that good ultimately prevails in the world regardless of circumstances, there are still going to be calamities such as typhoons, hurricanes and disastrous earthquakes, tornadoes and famine. These things happen regardless of human activity, and it is also probably true that we are making weather events like hurricanes, droughts and deluges bigger and more frequent; we cannot hope to make sense of it unless we take a very long-sighted view of things. The longer our range of vision, the further we can step back from the immediacy of what is happening at the moment, the easier it is to see that the laws of the universe simply keep operating indefinitely, that there is constant change, and that good can come forth from anything which happens given enough time.

Looking with far-sighted vision helps us to develop acceptance of the way things are right now. Moving through our list of the five stages culminating in acceptance, we deny, we fight and become angry, we bargain, we try to buy our way to peace and security, we try to insulate ourselves from the constant change inherent in everything, but all of it, given enough time, fails. All our attempts to change the way the universe operates fail, just as surely as the reality that good can and does come forth from everything which happens, given enough time.

Depression is a normal human response to loss, and what we face today is the loss of nature, of humankind living in balance with nature. Things have drifted so far out of balance that now a great many people who are of a sensitive nature feel a visceral sort of unease about the world which can manifest as diagnosable depression. Or it might be more subtle than that, but no less real to the person who feels it. As conditions in the world deteriorate, depression will most likely become pandemic—virtually everyone will suffer some form of it. But we also have the capacity to move beyond it into acceptance.

It is also a fact of human existence that the older one becomes, the harder it is to whip up enthusiasm for a cause, no matter how noble or righteous; we tend to leave it to the young to do so. I'm told that the thinking of young people today tends toward a dark outlook of the future, that there isn't much anything anyone can do to stave off some sort of apocalyptic wave of change sweeping over the world, even if it happens in slow motion. Of course, they may be right—few people can see into the future. But all of us can still make conscious choices about how we think about the future, and our overall attitude of mind in the present, which is what matters most. A further paragraph in *It's The End of the World As We Know It, And He Feels Fine*:

*Sitting in the hut, the air stale and the light almost nonexistent, I thought of something Hine told me earlier. "People think that abandoning belief in progress, abandoning the belief that if we try hard enough we can fix this mess, is a nihilistic position," Hine said. "They think we're saying: 'Screw it. Nothing matters.' But in fact all we're saying is: 'Let's not pretend we're not feeling despair. Let's sit with it for a while. Let's be honest with ourselves and with each other. And then as our eyes adjust to the darkness, what do we start to notice?'"*

This strikes me as actually very consistent with a Zen attitude. If we feel depression or despair about the state of the world, OK, fine, allow yourself to experience that but then, rather than indulge in it any further, just stop and look at it. Where does it come from? Where is it likely to lead? Is there any merit in despair or would I be better off making an honest attempt to let go of it? If I am not going to feel despair about the world, what would be a more appropriate, positive thing to be feeling?

All that we customarily talk about within the context of Buddhist and Zen teaching, when held side-by-side with the larger context of whether life as we know it can and will continue for much longer, takes on a slightly altered significance. Can Buddhism expand to include a much broader contextual basis, i.e. the state of the earth in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? In the event of cataclysmic events which might come to pass in the future, will Buddhism serve as a metaphorical life raft for people, enabling them to endure hardship better than they would otherwise?

I included this paragraph from the above-mentioned article [*New York Times*] in Part I;

*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!'"*

I don't think Paul Kingsnorth's experiment in despair is necessarily a narcissistic exercise, as he suggests. I would view such questioning as part of a much larger process which individuals enter into and for which they must find their own solutions, and then on a larger scale yet, a process which all of humankind desperately needs to be engaged in if it is going to survive. Collectively, we have arrived at a place where a serious questioning process needs to be entered into by everyone, given that the stakes are as high as they are. But this would require moving beyond the anger, bargaining and, ultimately, the grief, depression and despair that so many people feel.

If in the long run it turns out that the current doom and gloom scenario with respect to the net impact of seven billion people on the earth is completely overblown and we do, in fact, come up with a whole bunch of workable solutions which stave off disaster, then the process of talking about all of its ramifications will have been a worthwhile exercise. If it turns out that a gloom and doom scenario does indeed come to pass, then we will be asking ourselves why we didn't take the whole thing more seriously while we still had the opportunity to do so

Meanwhile, what we can do involves a combination of internal and external endeavors. I have found that the practice of accepting of things as they are is one of the most powerful ways of cultivating an overall state of happiness and well-being for myself. Acceptance means that all possible outcomes to a situation are OK. It requires putting down our deeply held views and opinions about things, an act of letting go. Whatever happens will be in accord with the laws of the universe, including cause and effect—the law of karma. Maybe there will be a calamitous

future for everyone on earth: so be it. But, having accepted that things may indeed turn out this way, we are free to act in ways which are beneficial to other living beings.

Personally, I can't not do all the small things I do to make the world a better place: recycling, composting, gardening, picking up garbage and, above all, teaching the Dharma. It no longer matters to me whether I have any discernible impact, although I've been told at various times that I have a positive impact on people. One of the little bits of home grown wisdom from my youth that I have remembered is "wherever you go, leave that place just a little better than when you arrived." That's what I try to do.

If being an activist in the environmental movement is your way of taking action, there is nothing about that which is inherently in conflict with Buddhist teaching. If remaining in the background and quietly supporting various causes, as I do, is your way, then more power to you. We should not fool ourselves, however, by thinking that not doing anything has no consequences whatsoever. All courses of action, including total inaction, have an effect. In other words, there is really no such thing as pure neutrality in this matter; we have passed beyond that point years ago.

In summary, I have a number of conclusions I have arrived at, as follows:  
Being alive, we cannot pretend that we are not part of the problem or the solution. Just being alive partakes of both, and so it is incumbent upon everyone to take some kind of action.  
In order to fully arrive at a place in which we can actually do things in our lives which have a positive effect for all living beings, we first need to cultivate a deep level of acceptance of the way things are and then proceed from there.  
The practice of meditation is probably the most powerful tool for affecting change, both internally for oneself, and externally for all other beings on this earth.  
As the Buddha taught, greed and desire for too much, followed by frustration and anger at not getting what we want, followed by bitterness, apathy, despair and all the other delusive states of mind, are what actually lie at the root of humankind's collective ills on all levels.  
We have freedom to choose how to respond, being either part of the problem or part of the solution. It will never be completely black and white, but we can always make the effort to do our best.  
Wisdom is arrived at through trial and error, making mistakes and learning from them. On the largest scale, that of humankind, that is exactly the process we are engaged in.

If the Buddha were alive today, I can imagine he would have a lot to say about the environmental crisis we face on this planet. Even in his time, he advocated for having a minimal impact on the environment, and a number of rules were created for monks in that regard. To do the least harm possible and to practice compassion for all living things are the basis of Buddhist thinking. To extricate ourselves from our current quagmire would require having these principles practiced not just by a few, but on a universal scale. It remains to be seen if humanity can move significantly in this direction soon enough to prevent calamitous events from occurring. Meanwhile, every individual who puts these basic principles into practice in their life, I believe, helps the whole world.