

HELPLESS IN THE FACE OF IT?

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I can't seem to control the endless advance of harsh events like the shootings in Connecticut, or is it that we have stopped reporting anything but sensational news? And what can I do about it? Of course I vote, and perhaps that helps some, but I can't seem to instantly solve all of the problems this old Earth has, much less make much of a dent in the politicians, who are just too deeply embedded in themselves. At the same time I am not happy just coasting on the surface of things while Rome burns, and making no effort. So what can I do to be of use?

Perhaps that is why I am so much into macro photography, peering into and photographing small worlds, perfect flowers where the bias of politics and the stains of business have not appreciably penetrated.... at least not yet.

Money and business are inherently problematical, so the Buddhists tell me. It seems to be true. Business of almost any kind is a real tar baby, hard to get into it and back out without getting stuck, or at least a little bit dirty. And then there is the fact that Karma is no respecter of persons and is infinitesimal in its exactness. What used to be a steal-of-a-deal is now up to me not to take advantage of someone, and so on.

At the same time I don't want to just be a diagnostician of all the world's problems, constantly decrying and complaining about how things are. Far too many people I know are doing that these days. As Shakespeare said, "Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds." For me, endless complaining is the perfect definition of "adding insult to injury." It is bad enough that so many harmful things have been done to Earth and the people on it. To accurately diagnose those harmful things and then spend the rest of my life hating and crying about it is to me one of that saddest things of all, a further insult to whatever injury we have already suffered. I say chin up and eyes forward.

Yes I want to make a difference, to assist things to change, to help make a change, but how can I best do that? As mentioned, I can't control the politicians or the government except with my vote, and they have that. Nor can I even assist my close friends and family with anything other than my friendship and support. Which leaves me with myself. But changing myself is also very, very difficult to do.

For me, awareness is the key. Yet it is hard to work on being more aware, hone my sensitivity, and not become still more sensitive to everything. And sensitivity kind of hurts, does it not? With so many tragic news stories and other heavy or negative happenings raining down on life, it's hard to keep my mental windshield wipers working. For me, the clouds gradually pile up and it gets foggy out. It can be hard to see clearly.

It seems that only my own mind and attitude is what is mine to work with, my response to all of this. As most of you may know from reading these blogs, I have found that developing greater awareness is the only all-in-one cure for both myself and what effect I could have on those around me and the world. I am slowly learning to be more aware, and find that in fact (just as the teachings say) increased awareness 'IS' the key to compassion, its only avenue.

Trying to be compassionate, trying to help others, trying to be kind... all are well intentioned, but may or may not actually be of much benefit. However, every modicum of awareness I can develop has the immediate benefits of generating greater compassion, kindness, insight, and overview. In my life this has been true.

As the Buddhists teach, it is very easy to know whether you are getting better or worse with your dharma practice. If you find yourself becoming kinder, gentler, more flexible, and more compassionate, you are practicing the teachings correctly, better yet if others tell you this. If not, then no matter how high you sit and what lofty teachers you work with, you are not practicing the teachings correctly. It is that simple and anyone of us (in a moment of honesty) can determine this for ourselves.

So I work on awareness. As far as outreach, my own is minimal. I take this or that photograph with as much care and awareness as I can. I write this blog or that article with as much care and awareness as I can. I do my best to look beyond the clouds and sorrow that I sometimes find and not let them depress or slow me down. It is, at times, tough, when you have events like the recent school shootings in Connecticut, etc., overwhelming sorrow.

I take my essential teachings from the Tibetan Buddhists, and then some of their outward application from the Zen Buddhists, such as working to be aware of each moment and action... like 'this' photograph, 'this' blog, 'this' friend, 'this' problem, and so on. I often tire of trying, but I can see my eventual goal is to be aware all the time. Meanwhile, my emotions still can rage out of control, but it seems less so than I remember.

Intellectual ideas I can grasp easily; putting those ideas into practice (where the rubber meets the road) is quite another thing. The Tibetan Buddhists have a profound teaching called the "Two Accumulations," which took me a long time to understand. The two accumulations are Merit & Awareness, also called Wisdom & Skillful-Means. Abstract sounding, the two accumulations are quite simple and they are recursive in that they depend (actually interdepend) on one another, a perfect Catch-22 machine. Of course there are books about this teaching, but my point here is not hard to follow.

The Wisdom-of-the-Ages (being a know-it-all) is of no practical use without the Skillful-Means to apply it without harm. Anyone can grasp an idea (at least minimally), but not everyone has the skillful means to bring it through in real-life situations. Wisdom without skillful means is the mark of a fool. Skillful means without wisdom, the mark of a tyrant. This is why so many Buddhist teachings point to the middle way, the happy medium, and the balance between insight and action. They are meant to be interdependent and go hand in hand through life with one another.

And the two accumulations feed on each other. The more awareness we have, the more we can see to do things skillfully, and the more skillfully we do or execute things, the more awareness that arises from our more perfect action. Wisdom without meaningful application is empty, the words of an intellectual pundit. Blind action without awareness and wisdom is dangerous and possibly destructive.

What I am looking for is a happy medium for all of us, myself included.