

Responding to the Suffering in this World

I am sure that like me you have been shocked and heartbroken recently by the pictures of desperate Afghanis trying to flee Kabul. You may also be feeling helpless in the face of such severe human suffering. In our modern world, the media more or less constantly brings terrible human and animal suffering directly into our living rooms. So, it is pretty easy to fall into a pit of fear or despair and then to assume that the whole world is going to hell in a handcart. On top of all the endless bad news about the pandemic, I suspect that the news from Afghanistan is just too much for some of us to bear.

As well as being bombarded by images of the terrible suffering in other countries in our daily news bulletins, we also all know individuals here at home who face awful pain and fear in their own lives. For example, I just heard the other day that the partner of one of my cousins recently had a 13 hour operation for mouth cancer that involved removing a section of her jaw. I had not actually had any contact with her for many years, but the news of her personal nightmare really shocked me even though she is apparently making a remarkable recovery.

So in this message, I am going to recommend one or two really positive and helpful ways in which we can respond to all the endless pain in this world so that we feel empowered rather than overwhelmed by the horror of all that is currently going on around us.

First of all, I think it is useful to separate out feeling pity or fear in response to any kind of suffering from courageously cultivating heart-centred compassion for all sentient beings living in fear or pain. Genuine compassion can be defined as empathising with others' suffering whilst wishing to do something – however small -- to alleviate that suffering. So for example, to strengthen our innate compassion, we might hold all suffering Afghanis in our heart and then pray that they may find the strength to get through the terrible times they find themselves living through. Ironically, you definitely do not have to believe in God to pray for others. Buddhists for example do not believe in God in the way that Christians do, but they are always offering up prayers, offerings and compassionate practices for all those in any kind of pain.

Whenever I pause to pray for someone in pain or to ask the universe for some kind of blessing for them, I feel as though I am adding a tiny drop of positive energy to the world instead of moping around inadvertently putting yet more fearful, negative energy out into the atmosphere around me.

The second way in which we can respond to any kind of suffering is to practise a version of Tonglen, a traditional Buddhist practice, during which we imagine breathing the dark energy of others' pain or suffering into our heart and then dissolving the darkness of that pain in the infinitely powerful light of compassion. When people first hear about this practice, they are sometimes frightened that if they imagine breathing in the dark energy of someone's cancer for example, they may harm themselves. But in my experience, once you get used to breathing in the darkness of any kind of suffering in this world, including your own, and then dissolving it in the high, bright energy of love and light, it feels a truly empowering and even joyful thing to do.

As well as practising some form of compassionate meditation in which we extend compassionate well wishes to others or practise a simple, safe version of Tonglen, we might also like to relieve our sense of helplessness in the face of suffering by making a small donation to a charity that is doing its best to relieve a particular kind of suffering in our world.

For example, in the present situation, we might give ten or twenty pounds to a charity working with refugees. The amount of our donation is far less important than the unconditional compassionate energy that goes with our donation!

Finally I believe that it is always helpful to spend some time each day turning our mind away from all the bad in the world to 'take in the good.' (Rick Hanson) For example, we can simply sit quietly for a while and bring our awareness down from our head to our heart. We can then bring to mind some joyful or uplifting sights or sounds that we have experienced recently and breathe in all the positive energy associated with those joyful memories.

Another way to 'take in the good' is to spend a little time each day focussing on gratitude. For example, in response to the current situation in Afghanistan, we might pause for a while to cultivate a deep sense of gratitude in our heart for all those unsung heroes in our world who are currently putting their own lives on the line to assist those fleeing from the Taliban. Cultivating heartfelt joy and gratitude like this is not just beneficial for our own long term health and well-being. It also generates some truly positive energy that then extends out into the world around us to counterbalance all the fearful and angry energy that is so prevalent in our current times.

Cultivating compassion, gratitude and joy certainly works for me, but I have to confess that I am still overwhelmed at times by the fact that the world news has been so miserable throughout 2021. So this September, shall we join together to support each other as we do our utmost to cultivate the life-supporting energies of compassion, joy and gratitude? At the same time we will do our best not to allow ourselves to be pulled down into yet more fear or anger by all the bad news that is in danger of overwhelming us at the moment. We will commit to walking the path from fear to love day by day and we will allow nothing to stand in our way!

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