

Zen Activism, Personal Transformation, and Global Healing

Robert D. Lyons

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I can summarize my talk simply by saying that I feel that we face a calamitous situation in world today, and that we all have a moral responsibility to work to change it. How this is done, and how each of us integrates our work with our own faith are of course private and personal matters. I want to share with you three ideas that have some power and promise for me: first, to cultivate a spiritual practice that itself has an orientation toward social engagement; second, to study and develop in service of social change; and third, to organize with others to act to transform our societies in a non-violent way.

I along with many of you am horrified about rampant globalization and Western-style consumerism; about American empire and militarism at home and abroad; about the breathtakingly rapid destruction of our natural environment; and about the savage realities of the culture we live in.

I am also alarmed by the mind-boggling environmental catastrophe that is bearing down on us. In his recent book *The Future of Life*, Edward O. Wilson points out that on or about October 12, 1999, the world population reached 6 billion, and that by current trends it is expected to peak at between 9 and 10 billion in about 50 years. Using food consumption as a measure, the carrying capacity of Earth would be roughly 9 billion if we all eat a vegetarian diet; but if we eat like Americans and Europeans, we would need 4 earths to sustain us. The crunch is not now and will not in the future be felt evenly across the globe, or across society. The Middle East, sub-Saharan Africa, many parts of Asia, and the Amazon—these are the places where human life and eco-systems are most severely stressed, and where wars over the control of resources; and civil wars and famine due to scarce and dwindling resources, like water, fuel, and arable land, will be a constant fact in our lifetimes. Women, children, indigenous peoples and refugees are most often the victims. The Thai-Burma border areas are a living testament to this, just a few hours away from here.

Against this backdrop, the American policy of militant imperialism and the American public's appetite for unrestrained self-indulgence are grotesque indeed.

The challenge, for those of us who work for social change, is twofold: to alter the way we live, each of us individually, and to transform the system of greed, hatred and delusion that is carrying us into the abyss. To do this, we need to change hearts and minds, especially in America. But the dominant culture makes this exceedingly difficult.

At the grossest level, the modern media/entertainment edifice deliberately cultivates appetites and strong emotions, such as greed, lust, vanity and pride. It is in the air that we breathe. We get it from TV, movies, radio, print media, and from those we meet as we go about our daily lives. There is a continuous reinforcement of consumerism and conformism, to pernicious effect. In the words of zen poet Gary Snyder: "The free world has become economically dependent on a fantastic system of stimulation of greed which cannot be fulfilled, sexual desire which cannot be satiated, and hatred that has no outlet except against oneself, or the persons one is supposed to love They try to create populations of *preta*—hungry ghosts, with giant appetites and throats no bigger than needles."

A second factor is that much of the culture seems built on a foundation of smoke and mirrors: confusion, lying, spin-doctoring, distraction, and symbolic substitution that together undercut the whole notion of truth. With no firm ground to stand on, we live increasingly in a vortex of emotion, where symbols are manipulated for their power to draw the attention of the masses and call forth strong passions—aka "weapons of mass distraction."

Just to give one example of how unhinged we are from reality: the US has the largest military in history, larger than the next twenty countries combined. We have imperial garrisons all over the world, and we have a huge arsenal of nuclear weapons. For such a warlike nation, we as a people have almost no concept of the meaning of war—in the past 140 years, the only attacks on the US mainland were at Pearl Harbor and the World Trade Center, both of which were huge traumas to the national psyche. Those Americans who do

have personal experience of our most recent "real" war, (as opposed to the video-game wars we wage with smart bombs), are the Vietnam veterans, who suffer from extraordinarily high rates of post-traumatic stress disorder, alcoholism, and homelessness, and who are treated as social pariahs in the society they fought to defend. More Vietnam vets have committed suicide since the war, than died in combat. The Vietnam experience—and especially the knowledge that over 3 million Vietnamese died at our hands—is one that we as a nation have been trying to forget and suppress for the past thirty years. And yet we have few qualms about exporting war to all corners of the globe, as well as the social, economic and cultural distortion and manifest suffering that the threat of war or internal repression brings to our client states.

A third effect is that our society is so complex that we find ourselves cut off from the impacts and effects of our actions. Where does our gasoline come from, and at what price? What is the true cost of our coffee or sugar or bananas, or the paper we use in our offices and bathrooms? Where does all the garbage go? What are they teaching our kids in school and on TV? What do our taxes pay for? It has been said that Goethe was the last man to have assimilated the full breadth of human knowledge of his time. A modern day Goethe would be a genius indeed, to hold in his mind what we now know of the cosmos, the religions and cultures of man, the subtleties of the human psyche, and the arcana of international economics in the age of globalization. It is no wonder that people feel powerless to understand the world they live in, or the consequences of their actions.

Psychological responses to these three factors—the cultivation of appetites, blurring of truth, and ignorance of the effects of our actions—come in various forms: Many Americans are taken in, and do as they are trained to do: work 60 hours a week, aspire to become a millionaire, watch TV, buy as much stuff as they possibly can, and vote for politicians who promise to give them more emotional and physical security. Those who don't get what they want from life often become confused and angry, and sometimes inflict violence on their families, or commit hate crimes, or gang murders, or road rage. Oakland, California, near where I live, just had its 53 and 54th murders of the year. Drug use and alcoholism are rampant, especially among disaffected young people. In the well-educated middle class,

there is widespread denial, with a tendency toward hedonism and self-absorption. Those who would change things, if they weren't struggling so hard to take care of themselves and their families, are often so overwhelmed by the magnitude of these problems, that they resign themselves to being carried along with the flow, vainly hoping for some *deus ex machina* to save us all. Or we use tokenism to assuage our conscience, and make sure to vote every two years and recycle the newspapers so we can get on with our lives.

But there won't be any *deus ex machina*, and tokenism won't have much effect. By these various responses, by our participation or acquiescence, we feed this beast. Our programme must instead be to resist, to withdraw our consent, and to build a new culture and society in its place. We would see greed transformed into generosity, hatred into compassion, and ignorance into wisdom. To do this we must transform and transfigure ourselves, our communities and our political, social, and economic culture. This is a tall order, indeed. But then, what choice do we have? What are the alternatives? And: where do we start?

Well, as we say in America: "Regime change begins at home" —we should start with our own selves. For those of us with an inclination toward spiritual life, there are great resources available to us. When I took ordination as a lay zen buddhist, I took the bodhisattva vow to save all beings. The vow is a source of power in many religious traditions: it focuses us, gives us strength and resolve, summons up energy, and brings the support of the community. Rather than pledging allegiance to the flag, as I was required to do daily as a child, shouldn't we instead pledge ourselves each day to helping change the world and save all beings?

I moderated a panel last week at the INEB Conference in Seoul, and asked what we might use as a practical tool for social change: Sulak replied that we should pay attention to our breath. Being mindful and intentional in all of our actions, 24 hours a day, would give us great power we could use in service of the good. David Chappell answered the same question by saying we should cultivate *kalyanamitta*, or spiritual friends. In these two answers lie two complementary paths to transformation: one oriented inward toward

personal transformation, and the other outward toward healing social relationships as well as the grand project of remaking our politics, culture and economy.

In the area of personal transformation, I have found three areas of work to be especially valuable: spiritual practice, study, and training.

There is a tradition in most of the Buddhist schools of cultivating wholesome mental states through directed meditation. The earliest and most basic of these are what is known as the Four Brahmaviharas: *metta*, (loving kindness); *karuna* (sympathetic action); *mudita* (altruistic joy); and *upekkha* (equanimity). Another related and now fairly well known technique is the Tibetan practice of *tong len*, in which the suffering and evils of the world are breathed in as darkness or blackness, and then purified and offered back out to the world as radiant white light.

Daily meditation practice can bring to our attention our patterns of anger, greed, and delusion, and enable us to soften and dissolve these old habits that we so closely identify with our Selves. These practices offer an antidote to the appetite stimulation of our culture, and help to diminish its power over us. Through meditation we can re-enter the world in a new way, with suppleness and receptivity and creativity.

We also work at the practice of non-duality, which is most helpful in our dealings with "the enemy" or "the Other." In Buddhism we don't believe in a separate distinct self, with an irreducible essence or soul. We believe we are inseparable from the "Other". This is captured in the Sanskrit word for self, or identity—"ananiyata", which can be translated as "the other of the other is me" . . . in other words you have to go to the web of life to find your own identity. But non-demonizing of the other can be a difficult and challenging practice, which you can experience for yourself if you imagine engaging George Bush, Donald Rumsfeld, or Saddam Hussein in a sincere relationship that is devoted in part to their personal liberation. But it is just this kind of effort and purposeful openness of spirit that will be needed to heal the conflicts of the world.

Study is an area dear to many of us here at this conference. Diligent study of the wisdom texts of all faiths offers invaluable insights into our own spiritual struggles. And of course study with a living guru or spiritual advisor helps to bring the teachings from our heads to our hearts; and keeps us pushing forward, even when we might rather not.

We also study the truth of suffering and keep it close to our hearts. The Buddha's first step toward enlightenment consisted of a trip outside the palace walls into the world beyond, where he experienced for the first time old age, sickness and death. Suffering is central to Buddhism, not only as the object and orientation of buddhist practice, but also, for many of us, as a door into spiritual inquiry and a personal experience of the dharma. Many Buddhist practitioners work in prisons, hospice, and among the homeless—to be of service, to bear witness, and to connect with the truth of suffering.

Studying the interconnectedness of all things is another gate for us. The first Buddhist precept is *ahimsa*, or non-harming. But how can we practice *ahimsa* without looking beyond our immediate day-to-day actions, and penetrate into their broader consequences? All of our acts have effects beyond our present reckoning. I would recommend to those who have not read it the book *Fast Food Nation* by Eric Schlosser, which is an inquiry into the impacts of fast food: on the animals who are grown for food, on the humans who work in the abattoirs and hamburger joints, on the advertising industry, on urban development, on the twin epidemics of obesity and food poisoning among those who eat all those big Macs, on the labor movement in the US and abroad . . . but more than anything what it lays out is that by the simple act of buying a hamburger you are feeding a system of suffering that is huge and heartless and hidden from view. Our vow to save all beings brings a radical responsibility to never accept things at face value.

One final area of personal transformation I would like to mention is in the area of building our skills through training. Much of what we want to focus on in the social and political area is dependent upon our establishing friendships and alliances and communicating clearly and fully with friends and adversaries. So perhaps the most immediately useful trainings

deal with compassionate listening, non-violent communication, mediation, and generally with opening ourselves to the experience and viewpoints of others.

So let's turn now to the social, political, economic and cultural realm. To make real changes in the world it is essential that we say no to the structures and systems of suffering, and to articulate what they are and how they work. It is equally important that we attempt to put forth an alternative. Mohandas Gandhi spent much of his life working on these two projects: the well-known *satyagraha* actions, consisting of non-violent civil disobedience, economic boycotts, etc.; as well as the lesser known "constructive program" which focussed on creating an alternative society that embodied his core ideals.

I'd like to start with the latter, the constructive program. Gandhi had great difficulty creating the alternative society that he sought, and died without seeing much progress on this front. In America, it is my sense that we are seeing a modest revival of what used to be called the counter-culture: alternative living arrangements in intentional communities such as co-housing; alternative economic systems such as community banks, barter exchanges, food co-ops, and the like; and alternative arts such as street theater, community radio stations, self-published books, and so on. (Although there do seem to be constant inroads from the likes of Starbucks, MTV, and Whole Foods, who commodify these innovations). The internet has been instrumental in connecting people who are repelled by the dominant culture, and in promoting new ideas and virtual communities, in ways that have significant political and economic implications. For those of us who would like to take advantage of the opening offered by history and technological change, the real challenge is one of education and consciousness-raising: to apply this non-violent, non-wasteful, community-oriented and mindful approach to all of our thoughts, words and deeds. We would all do well to live more simply.

There is a place in this matrix for faith-based group action as well. For the past five years BPF has offered a program called BASE, or Buddhist Alliance for Social Engagement, which offers people the opportunity to study, practice, and do socially engaged work in a group setting. People commit to meet once a week for six months, and to engage in specific

social change work in their daily lives. They meet with the group and discuss their experiences and challenges and emotions, and bring their service experience into their meditation and vice versa. Many of the BASE participants have noted that this experience was a true turning point in their lives and informed their choices and their understanding of the world in profound ways.

Another phenomenon we are seeing within BPF is a burgeoning interest from Buddhists around the US in forming new BPF chapters. At the beginning of the run-up to the Iraq War we had about twenty five chapters domestically. In the past six months, we received inquiries from over forty cities across the country asking about starting new chapters (so far we have added five new ones). In New England, we are now looking at creating a regional network, so that people in various cities there can work together and share resources, plan common events, and so on. In our local chapter in Berkeley I witnessed a remarkable amount of personal and communal growth as people cooperated and collaborated on their peace work, designing and distributing flyers, conducting peace meditations and candlelight vigils, attending teach-ins, giving talks and selling hats and t-shirts, getting themselves arrested, and so forth. This is very potent work, and it has had a transformative effect on all of us. There is a yearning community, and for acting jointly for what we believe in.

Turning now to political action: In keeping with the key theme of this inquiry—changing of hearts and minds—I would like to talk a little bit about the recent anti-war movement in the US.

Viewed from one angle, this movement was a failure because we did not stop the war. We may have postponed the start for a few months—or rather, we and our anti-war brothers and sisters in England, Spain, Italy, Turkey, and throughout the world may have postponed it, but obviously we didn't stop it.

Viewed from another angle, the movement was a failure because it didn't change the basic relationship between the warlike governments and peace-loving peoples. Joan Bondurant, in her writing about Gandhi's philosophy and work, draws a critical distinction between

satyagraha, or "holding to truth" and *duragraha*, or "pre-judgement" i.e., stubborn willfulness. These are two sharply differing approaches to political action. *Satyagraha*, which is central to Gandhi's strategy, involves not only a change in policy but also restructuring of the situation that led to conflict. It requires a change in attitude and fulfillment of needs of all parties. The opponent is engaged in a manner which will result in the transformation of relationships into a new and unknown form or pattern. Responses feed back and influence the *satyagrahi's* actions in a dialectical manner. This is very close to the "non-dual" buddhist approach. In *duragraha*, on the other hand, the opponent is objectivized, and often demonized. The campaign, such as it is, is borne of frustration and anger, expression of disagreement, often no real expectation of success; and is reactive, with the powerful establishment setting the tone and dictating the flow of events. The recent movement against the Iraq War, particularly in the US, seemed more like a *duragraha* than *satyagraha* campaign. This is evidenced by the fact that the energy drained quickly after the war began, and even moreso after it "ended". Our force was arrayed against theirs, and our passion and rhetoric clashed and clanged against theirs. And in the end they dismissed us and did what they wanted. It was a *duragraha* campaign also because I believe that there was a hope but never any real expectation that the war could be stopped; that our actions were in response to theirs, and most tellingly it resulted in a widespread feeling of defeat, discouragement, and confusion. I don't presume to know how a *satyagraha* campaign against this tyrannical government might have been waged, or might be waged in the future, but it should have different characteristics: the anti-globalization movement, in particular, and the American civil rights movement, are good examples of long-term, focussed, strategic campaigns, where the momentum built and the movement itself was calling the shots, rather than reacting.

Viewed from a third angle and in a broader context, this movement was an historic success. If this had been undertaken solely for the purpose of waking people up, bringing people out into the streets, forcing a dialogue on bellicose policies and methods, calling into question the legitimacy and moral authority of the Empire, and building coalitions and communications infrastructure, I can't imagine than we could have achieved a more stunning success than we did. In one of the events in San Francisco, I marched with my 19-year old

daughter and my 73-year old mother, neither of whom had never been to a protest rally before. More people participated, and more pushed the envelope of their involvement—many of us getting arrested for the first time, and other fasting or vigiling or doing phone work for the first time. This is the ideal of socially engaged buddhism, to deepen our engagement with the world, within the context of practice and the buddhist ideals of bearing witness and non-duality.

This highlights the two functions of organized political action: first, to achieve the immediate stated goals of the action—for example, to intervene to stop harmful acts, or to redress injustices, or provide assistance and relief. And perhaps more significant, from the perspective of building a movement and forging a new culture, is that these political actions, if chosen carefully and strategically, can broaden community, create and extend alliances, enhance the skills and understanding of the participants, and energize people through a common project.

With this in mind, I would say that, I have more interest and faith in elections than in the democratic institutions that they serve. I worked in municipal government in California for fifteen years, so I come by my jaundiced view honestly. Until the electoral system is overhauled to eliminate private interest group financing (as has been done, incidentally in Arizona and Maine), we will never have true day-to-day democracy. In the meantime, I'm not sure that a Democratic president would be much quicker to eliminate our nuclear stockpile than a Republican. But I do feel that the upcoming election itself will bring forth a huge surge of energy and interest among those who object to the Bush Doctrine and the Bush Regime. It is my hope that there will be a national dialogue on substantive issues that will wake people up and bring into full participation and engagement.

I would like to conclude by summarizing: first, I believe that spiritual practice gives us a method for liberating ourselves from the enslavement of the dominant consumer culture; that spiritual inquiry gives us a framework of truth with which to interpret a complex world; and that by investigating the effects of how we live and act, we can better adhere to the principle of *ahimsa*, or non-harming. I also feel that a faith-based approach to forming community

and engaging in political activism can be invaluable in the grand project of transforming our culture; that communities and networks provide mutual support and other tangible and intangible benefits; and that ultimately we hope that we can help to build a movement in which people take responsibility for their actions the world, and express themselves through engagement in a radically democratic and open-hearted manner.