

Freedom of Mind – the Root of the Social Gospel

for Dr. David Hilfiker,

by Jason Espada

'We belong to each other'

I. The social gospel defined

The social gospel is the view that we are made to care for each other; that we are here to protect, support and encourage each other; to love, nurture and celebrate every one of our family, from birth, through all the stages of life, in struggle and difficulty, and in times of ease and success.

That this orientation to our whole life sometimes rises in a person, in different times and places and cultures, independent of religion, tells me that this capacity is something fundamental to us as human beings. There's something in us that can be tapped into that preceeds organized religion. Religions can foster a social gospel, or, remarkably, they can get in the way, but what's happening when this ethic towards the whole of life arises in a person, whether it is facilitated by a Tradition, or not, I would suggest, is the same.

II. Its cause

Everything we see people doing has roots in their inner life – whether there's anger or gentleness, greed or generosity, distorted views or wisdom and respect – it's always the case that what we see reveals what's in a person, or group of people. This is true right up to what we call mass movements, such as militarism, or in economics.

The same holds true of the social gospel - it comes to be, and is sustained in people by causes, the chief of these being inner freedom.

By this I mean something more exact than a pleasant feeling, or being able to do to as one pleases. Inner freedom, as it's understood by contemplatives

everywhere, entails much more than that. It refers to a mind, or a spirit free of greed, of aggression, and of delusion regarding ourselves, those we share this life with, and our world. Such freedom, that has wisdom and virtue as its nature, is always what has made it possible for a person to think of others and act to on their behalf.

III. What is then born

On a group level, when enough people together gain a clarity of vision and conscience, works are set in motion that make for real changes in society. It can start with one, or a few people, but eventually many are brought into the work. Witness the changes brought by the civil rights, labor, or women's movements. All these came about because there was an availability and an awakening in a number of people's hearts, and that they in their turn awakened and empowered others, lifting them to higher levels.

IV. Inclusive compassion

Some people wonder out loud how Mahayana Buddhism came into being, historically, with its emphasis on all inclusive compassion. I can tell you that I think it happened because the methods taught by Shakyamuni worked to free enough people from their afflictions and self preoccupation that empathy and active compassion were naturally born in them.

The Thai teacher Ajaan Lee said, 'The mind at normalcy is the substance of virtue'. This has been talked about by others over time in different ways: as an Edenic state, as our own original nature revealed, full of grace.

Our humanity, when it is healthy, sane, and flourishing, is naturally inclusive. It reaches out. As long as one person is still confused, and don't know their own worth, they they will create suffering for themselves and for others, and so we have to take care of each other, to the fullest extent, including everyone.

And as s Dr. King expressed it, 'No one is free until every last one of us is free'. This is only common sense - drawing out the ethic of love to its logical conclusion.

At the most basic level, as Shantideva taught, we should remove suffering simply because it is suffering, and care for others just because it's the right thing to do. Seeing this, teachers in the past encouraged us to know the great value of freedom of mind in terms of the whole group, of every life.

V. To know that Freedom of mind is attainable

That we don't need to be caught in suffering and a narrow perspective is remarkable news. For someone who hasn't heard it before, it may be hard to believe, but right there is the proposition.

As for myself, my esteem for those who teach and vividly demonstrate that this is possible for us only increases as time goes on. Without them, we'd only have a story someone told once in a book, that we would then need to argue over. And so I pay homage to Thich Nhat Hanh, the Dalai Lama, Bokar Rinpoche, Lama Yeshe, Bhikkhu Bodhi, Ajaan Lee and the Thai Forest teachers, Thomas Merton, Carl Jung, Joseph Campbell, Mother Teresa, and the sages who demonstrate by their good works in our world that they have found what has real meaning.

How do we know if the roots of a tree are in touch with living water? We can see it in the broad shade of their branches, and in their fruits – which are abundant, rich, and life sustaining to us all. And so it is with people in this world.

VI. What we all need

Whether or not we're part of a tradition, what we all need is the same, and that is to meet and engage this world in a way that is not confused or afflicted, and, with that as the ground, with a natural heart full of love, to help one another as much as we can.

We may think it's possible to engage the world and make a difference without much freedom of mind, but we can see where egotism and immaturity have gotten us, individually and collectively. Look at how indifference, neglect, indulgence, exploitation, consumerism, boredom and

despair manifest - these show our values, and the state of our inner life. Clearly, something else entirely is needed.

Despite the fact that some measure of freedom of mind and humane values are within reach, what do we see when we look at how most people in this country spend their time and resources?

So many Americans in the twenty first century eat, and over eat, drink, consume, use entertainments to escape, and rely on anti depressants like never before. So many of them are just focussed and closed in on themselves. All these signs of narrow mindedness, to me, point to a widespread lack of inner freedom, and the acknowledgement and respect for others that it necessarily brings.

As it is now, a lot of how we live in this country, in terms of the impact we are having as a consumer society, what we do and leave undone, has to do with people's stresses, appetites, and attachments, but these can and do change.

What we need then for the social gospel to become a reality is more of a collective awakening, with more and more people becoming free of their lesser views and motivations.

Is there any other way? We're all in this together, and so one or two or a few dozen, or a few groups of people getting there is not enough. The few more awakened and free people can be like leaven in bread, but it's clear that the whole lot of us is what we need to influence. We should aim to reach as many people as we can, for all our sake.

VII. Continuing the work

I look to anyone who is actively engaged in some form of peace, or social justice work, and I ask: what do they have that others don't? – and I see, they have a vision; and of those who continue the work, rather than fall away from it – what do *they* have? They have maintained a connection with the view and power they've found, whatever name they give it, either with the help of traditions, or individually.

Activists very often will leave this step out - they do their work until they have no more to give. Their mistake is in not knowing how to replenish their own sources of inspiration. Out of people's vision for what is possible here comes their action, and whenever there's a sustained, useful involvement with others, it means that a person has been able to keep a powerful sense of what motivates them. Whatever our methods, of prayer, or meditation, or solitude, then, we all need to foster that connection to our positive vision and source of strength. There's nothing selfish about this, in fact, this is for everyone's sake.

VIII. The Great Clear Mirror

With the coming of the internet, what is in us as human beings, in terms of our values, is now even more clear. I remember when computers first became a little more widely available. There was the expression 'garbage in, garbage out', to point up the fact that the tools we use are only as powerful as we make them, that they are only as great as our motivation, they go just as far as our vision.

The internet then, is a great clear mirror to our inner life.

Now, more than ever, we can become aware of, and engage with this world of ours. It's remarkable, really, and will only continue to evolve in new ways. Whether this interaction is meaningful, however, or negligent, or exploitive, all depends on who we are inside, on what is in us as a motivating force.

No one would argue - great things are possible like never before, and because of our increased interdependence, now, more than ever, we are in need of a social gospel, a life giving vision.

IX. Teaching the choices we have

What if, then, from grade school on, boys and girls, young men, women, and adults were taught that anger and greed were something that can and should be lessened, and removed entirely?

This goes beyond what any one religion says – it's stating something basic about who we are as human beings, and what we're capable of, that we can choose this as a basis for our life here.

What if, more and more, people had living examples of freedom and virtue in their teachers, and were shown how becoming free of anger, greed, and egotism is possible by a person working with their own minds and hearts? We can imagine, it would have far reaching effects. It would birth a different world. And nothing less than this is what is needed now, more than in any other time that's come before. We are in need of a wide-scale work.

X. With a view to our future together

I find inspiration in the idea of a culture having, or moving toward an ethic – such as that of respect and care of their elders. This reaches beyond ethics – plural, to having a stable basis in a culture, that then expresses itself in a number of ways.

I would say that what we need in America, and in the world now, most of all, is *an ethic* of compassion, even if it takes some generations to bring into being. This is different from advocating one or two, or a handful of causes, such as universal health care, affordable housing, and education. It is more the ground from which these are addressed. And that ethic, in turn, has *its* unmistakable cause.

When enough of us are liberated, naturally, a compassionate society will follow. And this is where I find hope.