

# Applying dharma to world tragedy

Eric Kolvig • 24 June 2002 | <https://audiodharma.org/speakers/91>

I'm very glad to be with you again, and very impressed at how large a group this is. I've been hearing wonderful things about this center. I think you're very fortunate not only to have a sitting group, but to have a center with its own physical space, and not only to have a center, but to have a resident teacher who gives a lot of ongoing support. And not only to have a resident teacher, but to have the extraordinary resources of the dharma of all these folks coming through northern California, and hearing teachers with all sorts of different perspectives.

You know, if you were in Birmingham, or Des Moines, or Billings, Montana, it would be very different. It's really an incredible resource that you have here, almost unique, actually, in the west.

I'm really glad to be with you again. The last time I spoke, you hadn't yet moved into this space. It was on September 10th of last year, Monday evening,

And for weeks after September 10th, I thought to myself, I wish I knew what was coming the next day, because I would have spoken about what sort of resources or tools one could use from the dharma for dealing with what happened the next day, on Tuesday,

And somehow things have come around in a beautiful way. Gil Fronsdal invited me to come and do the talk this evening, because I'm on my way to an international meeting of teachers at Spirit Rock meditation center.

About two weeks ago, I got an email asking me to present to that teachers' meeting tomorrow on the subject that for the agenda, basically introducing the subject for us to discuss, and would like to read the agenda item to you.

How do we as teachers, practitioners, and humans respond to global tragedies? How do we help our practice community to respond to suffering in the larger community? Do we have consensus on certain social, political and environmental issues? Do we speak as a group on some issues?

And I thought, gee, that's really brought things around. When I was asked to present on that topic, I thought maybe I would talk about that topic this evening as well, because I'm sorry to think that our global tragedies are not all in the past. There may, in fact, be global tragedies coming to us in the future, and it may be useful to consciously use the resources of the dharma to respond.

So I'd like to start by talking about some tools for coping when a tragedy happens. One is pretty obvious, but it's a lesson that I've relearned in recent months, and that is actually how much information and images to take in when a tragedy happens. Of finding the middle path between being in denial and avoidance about something happening on one extreme, while the other extreme is being overwhelmed or washed over by what happens.

I spoke here on Monday, September 10th, and a friend from graduate school from many years ago picked me up after the talk, and I stayed at his home in Milpitas with the expectation of flying out from San Jose on the morning of September 11th. But I didn't listen to the news on September 11th, and went to the airport. It was closed. Like so many travellers far from home, I was stranded for a few days as a guest in my friend's home, in a home where the television was on most of the day.

I don't actually own a television, and if I had been at home, I would have had a more balanced way of taking in information. I was more or less a captive audience, and I found that I got overexposed on September 11th. I have a history of post traumatic stress, and I found that our communal or social trauma actually retriggered personal trauma. I've talked to many people for whom this happened. I was thrown off balance, actually, for several weeks afterward as a result. Joanna Macy speaks beautifully on this topic of just how much to take in, not to be in avoidance about events in the world, but also not to be so overwhelmed that we can move into despair or discouragement.

Another tool that I have found extraordinarily useful, and have been teaching much more in recent months, has been the practice of loving kindness, or metta. It was particularly useful for me for weeks after the events of September 11th and the ensuing events. It's been sort of an ongoing global disaster, actually.

I found myself switching exclusively to loving kindness practice, because loving kindness stabilises the mind. Just as in psychotherapy, they talk about two different kinds of therapy. There's the stabilising therapy when people are way off balance emotionally and stabilising the mind is very important. And there's

uncovering psychotherapy. In the same way, we have two practices. We have a stabilising practice of loving kindness, and associated practices and, and we have an uncovering practice with vipassana or awareness practice.

Knowing where to find that balance when you need it, not only in response to public events in the world, but whatever is happening for you internally when you're doing the practice, there are times when we feel off balance, when we feel close to being overwhelmed, or past being overwhelmed. And doing metta, doing loving kindness practice is very helpful, because it creates a mind which is strong, stable, unified, and happy.

Loving kindness practice is also extraordinarily helpful, I find, because it was originally taught by the Buddha as an antidote to fear. In fact, it functions as an antidote to all forms of aversion – to fear and anger and hatred and grief. It's very helpful. It's a very useful practice.

■ don't think we have begun to tap the extraordinary power of loving kindness here, yet in the western world. Mohandas Gandhi once said that if one person develops the highest form of love, it can neutralise the hate of millions. This is an amazing statement, and it wasn't an empty statement on his part. He actually demonstrated that, particularly in Calcutta in 1947 during the civil unrest.

I imagine that many people in this room have done loving kindness or metta practice. If you haven't, I'd like to recommend Sharon Salzberg's book on the subject, *Loving kindness*. I have also brought some brief instructions on doing the practice, if you're interested.

Another way of coping with global tragedy, actually is awareness practice. It's useful because it helps us to turn toward the feelings that come up in response to some dramatic event, to actually engage them and to dance with them, and to decide whether we want to believe them, and ultimately then to abandon them.

So, when experiencing fear or anger or hatred, for example, or overwhelming grief, there is nothing more effective than using vipassana once the mind is stabilised.

I find also that awareness practice, for me, has been particularly useful in staying aware of the public stories that get told, and deciding whether those stories lead to happiness, or lead to suffering, whether they're skilful or unskilful, whether

they're wholesome or unwholesome. And for all of us, we can decide for ourselves whether we want to believe them, and if we want to question them.

One public story that has been around for a few months now is whether there is an 'axis of evil'. I live in New Mexico, and the *Albuquerque Journal* is a quite conservative newspaper, but they had a political cartoon a few months ago that showed President Bush with the axis of evil running out like this, and the axis of simple minded thinking running like this.

[LAUGHTER]

I don't want to suggest the answer to that question, but it's really useful to question the public stories. Is it true? Does patriotism or national social ... national chauvinism ... sorry, that's quite a slip, isn't it?

It's interesting to think that national socialism was *National* Socialism, to look at the function of nationalism over the over the last 300 years, say. Is it useful? Does it lead to happiness? And again, this is a public story that has been running very powerfully for months now. Are we willing to take a look, to see for ourselves, to decide for ourselves?

Is it possible to find security and safety and peace through war? That's another public story. Decide for yourself, but it's really useful to look and to see. Has hate ever ceased by hate? Do we want to indulge hate? Do we want to indulge division?

So awareness is very helpful for that. It's basically being aware of conditions, seeing where they come from, and where they're going, and making a decision for ourselves whether we want to believe them or not.

**S**ometimes, we're called to open our hearts in hell, and to keep our hearts open in hell. It's quite a challenge. As I was flying here today, I reread a classic book that has been extraordinarily important for me. You may have encountered it. Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search For Meaning*. For me, it has been a very *a propos* because Frankl was a psychoanalyst who was sent to Auschwitz, and to other Nazi concentration camps, and his description of how people were able to make a choice under the most inconceivable conditions, what would be inconceivable to us, is extraordinary.

People were making the choice to be generous, to be kind, to be calm. You know, the basic teaching of the dharma is that it's not what happens to us that brings our freedom, but it's how we respond to, or relate to, what is happening to us. In our conventional minds, we believe our external circumstances – you know that someone is unkind to us, they're causing our unhappiness.

But to hold a mirror up to the heart and to realise, no, it's not the conditions, whatever they may be, but really how we're relating to, or responding to, the conditions that matters. We don't have control over what happens to us. We *can* learn to have a choice about how we choose to respond. And what I find most remarkable about this book is that he's describing people making wholesome choices in the most difficult circumstances imaginable.

So it's really wonderful, and it's also really wonderful to see the dharma coming through a mind that probably never read much about Buddhism.

So these are ways of coping with global tragedies, of seeing how much information we want to expose ourselves to, of staying balanced around that kind of exposure, of seeing the ways in which loving kindness practice can stabilise the mind, and really can help to dissolve forms of aversion, of seeing how awareness practice can help us work with the feelings that come up, and also work with the public stories that are running through the air.

But I'd like to go a little bit deeper, and see if it's possible to use the dharma to understand a little what may be some of the causes of global tragedies, and how we might respond. In two of the suttas, or the teachings of the Buddha, in the *Digha Nikaya*, the long discourses of the Buddha, the Buddha makes it very clear that one of the fundamental causes of crime is poverty.

He said, if you want to end crime in society, in a country, he said – at that time, it was kings, now it's governments, but it's really the same process – most governments try to control crime through punishment, and he said that will never work. He said, if you make sure that people have enough on the material level, then they will be contented.

There's a beautiful image from from one of the suttas. He said that if people have sufficient income, they will be contented, the country will be peaceful and free from crime. And then, he says, people will be happy and dancing their children on their laps. They will live with open doors.

So, does this seem accurate to you in terms of an analysis of where crime might be coming from? Obviously, there's plenty of white collar crime as well in our society, but if you go down to the deepest level, so much of the source of crime comes from inequalities in a society, or on a planet.

If that analysis seems right, might it also be possible that much of the source of terrorism, if you go deeply enough, comes from poverty, and from the feeling of desperation that people can have?

If that analysis seems right to us, does it make sense as practitioners of the dharma to make a commitment to reduce poverty in the world?

If that makes sense, it may also make sense that in order for us to reduce poverty, we also have to reduce affluence, because I don't think we can have one without the other. What does that mean in terms of our personal choices, in terms of our accumulation of wealth, or patterns of consumption? There's no moral judgement here. It's just looking at the whole picture and seeing what is needed.

Many years ago the poet and philosopher Gary Snyder wrote a very beautiful piece called 'Buddhism and the possibilities of a planetary culture'. It's an extraordinary essay in which he says, 'the mercy of the east is individual insight into the self void. The mercy of the west is social justice. We need both.' Again, the mercy of the east is individual insight into the self void, that is to see the selfless nature of reality.

Wisdom teaches us basically three things: that all things are impermanent, that they're unsatisfactory because they're impermanent, and that they are not self. That the mercy of the east is this kind of insight comes from doing our meditation practice, and the mercy of the west is social justice. Gary Snyder says we need both.

This is not something that the Buddha taught in such an explicit way, but is the concept which the west has come up with and has contributed to global culture, the concept of social justice, congruent with the dharma? Does it lead to greater happiness and less suffering in the world?

If it does, does it make sense for us to commit ourselves, as individuals and as communities, to social justice? I've found it very useful to see the ways in which dharma communities in my own state, New Mexico, are seeking social justice.

There are all sorts of different choices that we can make. Santa Fe Vipassana Sangha has for many years worked at a soup kitchen, feeding the homeless and the hungry. There are people from our communities who regularly go to the Los Alamos National Laboratory and bear witness, and do vigils.

New Mexico, a few months ago, executed its first prisoner since the 1960s. Actually, we had gone for decades without capital punishment happening, and there was a vigil at the prison. We're planning in October to have a vigil at the Trinity site, where the first nuclear weapon was exploded, a metta prayer vigil.

There are any number of things that communities can do, any number of ways that communities can express themselves for social justice. Those are just a few examples.

I have personally found it useful, and it has really been an integral part of my own spiritual practice, to be involved in some kind of issue beyond personal practice. Starting before I came to the dharma, during the war in Vietnam in the 1960s, I have always tried to find some kind of expression for myself, of trying to better conditions in the world, reducing suffering on a public level.

Most recently, I worked for five years for an organisation that is trying to end the sexual abuse of children. For the past three years, I've been involved with a private foundation funding dharma communities and dharma organisations to become more diverse. And it's been really interesting seeing the work that is being done around the country by communities seeking greater diversity, from from large institutions like San Francisco Zen Center and Spirit Rock Meditation Center to a little people of colour sitting group in Brooklyn.

I have found it useful to stay active in those kinds of ways, trying to be aware of conditions in the world, and trying to respond to them even though one can only do a little piece of it.

I'd like to end by reading a passage about bearing witness by a vipassana practitioner. It's going to be about five minutes. I find it to be really extraordinary. This is an article written by Marian Pargaman in Jerusalem, who is involved with a vipassana meditation group in Israel.

In April, she was on her way to a peace march of Israelis and Palestinians walking together for peace. When she came to a bus stop at Jaffa Gate, she found a very difficult scene. An older Arab man and an Israeli woman were basically screaming

at each other. She intervened in that situation and brought things to some kind of calm, but things erupted again, and they were brought to calm. And she said the police were actually wonderful. They were really neutral, trying to bring peace to the situation. I'm just going to pick it up in the last controversy that happened. I'd like to read this.

**T**hen, a Palestinian woman on her way to Jaffa Gate burst onto the scene. She jumps to the conclusion that the old Arab is under attack, and rushes in a frenzy to rescue him. She yells some insults at the Jewish woman, who was beginning to calm down, and the situation heats up again. All my attention is now focused on her. I feel she is like a bomb ready to explode.

'I tried to explain to her what is going on, but she is furious with me, screaming out her hatred, her despair and her pain. This is Palestine accusing Israel. At this moment, I represent Israel for her, this whole situation is greater than the two of us, and takes it on proportions beyond our present meeting.

'She shouts out her sorrow about what is going on in the territories, the military incursions into Palestinian towns.

'She talks, in particular about Jenin, where some terrible fighting is now taking place. She has family and friends there, and she says our soldiers are war criminals. She is convinced that we that we want to kill them all. Why do we hate them so much? They are not responsible for the Holocaust. Why should they be paying the price? She tells me about the refugees and their constant suffering for which we are responsible. Pointing at the Jewish woman, she assures me that this Sephardi woman was treated with honour as a human being in an Arab country from where she comes, and look at how she behaves with Palestinians now. It goes on and on, she shouts and spews her hatred for Israel at me. I don't try to argue with her at all.

'I don't show any reaction to all these accusations. I feel a huge compassion and an intense need only to listen to her. My patience is nourished by understanding that behind this overwhelming hatred is a deep suffering and pain aggravated by the present situation of war. It must express itself in some way so that healing can take place.



'I am ready to listen to what appear to me as the worst accusations, distortions or calumnies without reacting. I am aware that what reinforces my strength at this moment is that I have absolutely no doubt that the suffering and pain of the Israeli people is not less real and legitimate. I don't let myself get tempted or trapped into guilt or anger. I am sorry for the tragedy on both sides. My compassion for her is not on account of a compassion and sense of loyalty I have for my own people, for myself.

'For me, this is not an issue of who is right and who is wrong, I feel very calm and peaceful deep inside. I know that it is the only way to calm her fury. I let her express herself for a long time without interrupting her. As she continues to shout at me, I tell her that she has no need to speak so loudly because I am listening to her with all my attention.

'At the same time, I find myself caressing her arm. She lets me do it, and progressively lowers her voice while continuing to let her despair overflow. She says to me, "do you understand why some of us come and commit suicide among you? You kill us anyway, so why not kill you at the same time."

'She even mentions the possibility of coming and blowing herself up out of despair. I tell her softly that I don't want her to die. Nobody should come to this decision. We all suffer on both sides. She goes on and on, claiming that the Zionists only want to get rid of the Palestinians. I tell her, you see, I am a Zionist, and I don't want to get rid of you. I wish we could live together as good neighbours.

'She listens to me. She tells me about the demonstration that took place the week before near Ramallah. She complains about the Jewish organisations that took part in it. Then she asks me to donate some money to buy phone cards for Palestinians who need them. I give her some money. At this stage, the conversation is quite normal between us. She doesn't shout any more. She is even able to listen to me.

'She is almost calm when I notice the people of the walk, that is the peace walk, approaching us slowly at the top of the street. They are in a line, a hundred of them, one after the other, walking in silence, slowly, quietly, aware of each step, creating an atmosphere of peace and safety around them. They are very present. They radiate calm and warmth.

'I point them out to her and explain that this is the reason I came here, to join a walk of peace in which Palestinians and Israelis are together. I tell her about the walk, its message of coexistence and peace, peace at every step, here and now, I suggest that she come into the line with me. She hesitates and rejects my offer. At this moment, they reach us. Several people I know shake my hand warmly as they go by.

'A young woman, very active in a group of rapprochement between the two peoples approaches her and gives her a kiss. It appears that they know each other. I notice that she is very moved by the walk, and the atmosphere it radiates. She seems to me calmer and calmer, nothing like the furious woman I had met only several minutes before. The end of the line passes by us, and I want to join it.

'Again I invite her, and again she declines. I tell her that I understand and respect her decision. Before I go, I tell her that I am sure some day we will succeed in building peace between us. She smiles and replies, "me too". Then, to my total surprise, she comes close to me and kisses me on my cheeks.

'She walks alongside the line for a while. She tells me that she likes this walk, that it makes her feel good, gives her relief, and that her mood is much better now. I am very moved. I feel overwhelmed by this encounter, especially by its unexpected ending.'

I wanted to read that account to you to show how people living in the midst of a catastrophic tragedy can still make choices, can choose not hatred, and the beautiful way in this in which this woman demonstrates our training, the training of being fully present, of fully hearing someone, of keeping one's heart open in the midst of a very challenging situation. It's a beautiful example.

So, may we all find the tools that we need in order to respond to global tragedy when it happens.

So is there any question or comment? It's this cheerful subject, don't you think?

This is just one thought, right off the top of the head. If you took the wealth that is spent globally on militarisation and used it for education, for food, for healthcare, for shelter. I mean, it's immense. That's one example.

If I may ask, you were there in those countries as an American. How did you interact with the people? Was there a way in which you were seeking peace and connection?

So to respond with a bit of optimism, the Buddha said that we create our reality. We create our world through our minds, through our hearts. ‘With our minds, we make the worlds’ is the first line of the of the Dhammapada,

If those minds are full of greed, hatred and delusion, we create a world of suffering. If those minds are filled with non-greed, which is generosity, non-hate, which is love and compassion, and non-delusion, which is wisdom, we create a world where there’s much more happiness, and it’s true, it’s been going on for a long time, but the Buddha said that the wholesome qualities of consciousness are intrinsic to our minds, and that the unwholesome qualities – greed, hatred and delusion – are only visitors,

And so, ultimately, the wholesome states are stronger but they need to be supported through ethical conduct, through meditation practice, through the development of wisdom, you know which is our threefold path. So, you’re right. It’s been going on forever. It’s nothing new, but all of the means and the tools are here right now for purifying these minds and hearts, and for creating a different reality.

Essentially, what we do is to create our personal reality, and through our speech and our actions, we impact each other, either through creating suffering or happiness. And collectively, we project our mind states into institutions, and those mind states congeal into institutions. So we can create the institution of war, or the institution of slavery, or the death camps, but we can also create something wholesome.

So ultimately, I feel optimistic, because it isn’t as if evil is something out there in an objective way. It’s simply the projection of our mind states into speech and action in the world. We can change those mind states. I’ve been practicing for about a quarter of a century, a little more, and I’ve seen enormous change in this heart. You know, there’s a long way to go, still, but I’m doing a whole lot less harm in the world than I did a quarter century ago. It’s clear and if it can happen to me, it can happen to any of us, if we’re willing to put in the effort. So just just countering with a bit of optimism. And that optimistic note, thanks so much for your patience.