

THE BROKEN HEARTED ACTIVIST



Distilling clarity from rage

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The Broken Hearted Activist

Activism for any cause can be overwhelming. It brings up a great deal. Because of the scale of aggression in the world today and the scale of the pain, it is very easy to end up feeling deeply frustrated. That frustration tends to go in two directions. It can lead to despair and personal paralysis. Or various forms of aggression towards ourselves or others. Often we feel helplessly gripped by both. A growing number of people are asking themselves how to deal with this seemingly intractable situation.

I'm not going to provide a formula for changing the world, but I would like to offer a few thoughts about this very personal dimension. How can we cultivate ourselves and each other so that we are able to be effective in this situation? How can we prepare ourselves for the long haul and continue to be helpful? How can we offer a lifetime of experience and good work, rather than just sprinting at the outset and then getting so depressed and burned out that we end up closing down our broken heart and telling everyone that there's no point in doing anything.

The suggestions I'd like to offer from my own experience can be summed up:

- Distilling clarity from rage
- Going beyond mental extremism
- Working with inner antidotes
- Being the lotus in the flames
- Practising The Four Exhilarations

Distilling clarity from rage

The feminist scholar, Rita Gross, made a very helpful suggestion in an article she wrote in an excellent book titled *Mindful Politics* published by Shambhala Publications. Her suggestion comes from years of presenting a feminist perspective. She says that the clarity of her perception was mixed almost inextricably with the rage she felt. Instead of people listening to what she was saying, many simply reacted to the intensity of her anger.

She says that as her meditative practice deepened, she was able to distinguish between the clarity and the rage. When she began to present her concerns in a different way, she felt able to communicate more clearly. Not everyone automatically agreed with her, but she felt she was not giving rise to nearly as much hostility as was so common before.

Her experience made me think about what it would be like to be an activist running on clean fuel. Rita points out that if you are able to do that, you don't get so tired or burned out. It is not the clarity of insight that tires us out; it is our inner turmoil that so often exhausts us. It clogs up our ability to engage constructively with others.

If we run on clean fuel, we are able to return again and again to the subject, which is what's involved in sustained advocacy. We are always looking for ways in which we can present our point of view so that others will hear it and understand it within the context of their own lives. Working in this way also means that we no longer take disagreement and hostility personally.

In my own experience, we tend to feel that our anger and clarity are the same thing, and we just let rip at others. When others do that we often react against them, feeling they are being self-righteous. But when we do it, we feel the power of our incandescent virtue and we can't understand why anyone would react against what *we* are expressing!

Distilling the clarity from the rage requires personal work. I found a helpful suggestion on this from Thomas Merton, the great Catholic practitioner, in his introduction to a collection of writings by Mahatma Gandhi. He wrote:

The evils we suffer cannot be eliminated by a violent attack in which one sector of humanity flies at another in destructive fury. Our evils are common and the solution can only be common. But we are not ready to undertake this common task because we are not ourselves. Consequently our first duty is to return to our right mind in order that society itself may be sane.

Going beyond mental extremism

While we are doing this inner work we still, nonetheless, get caught up in events around us. I've noticed, in myself and others, a tendency to get trapped in what I'd like to call "mental extremism". This tendency also drains our energy.

It's not all or nothing. We can get demoralized by the "all or nothing" trap. For example, we may be doing our best to recycle. We separate out paper, non-recyclable plastic, bottles and cans, and even tea bags from eggshells and so on. Then someone visits our home and tells us that the drain cleaner we are using has just been shown to be extremely harmful. This comes as a real blow. We feel that using this liquid has made all our recycling efforts useless and, worse, we are a hypocrite when it comes to protecting our precious planet!

It doesn't have to be forever. Another killer is the trap of "forever". If something can't be shown to work forever, and in all situations, then we give up. It is not worth even trying to see if it might help under the present circumstances.

The same trap is often used to defeat conscientious objectors. When people apply for conscientious objector status, they are sometimes asked, "What would you do if your sister was threatened by rape by the enemy? Would you defend her?" The answer is used to prove either the individual is a complete coward or that their resistance to war is not well founded.

One of the reasons our minds get trapped in these situations is that "mental extremism" leads us to believe (often unconsciously) that we should be able to answer all

questions and solve all problems, not only now but for all time. If we can't do that, we say to ourselves, it's not worth trying. This extends to feeling that if we try something and it fails, then it wasn't worth doing. If it didn't work, then what we did was not courageous and well-intentioned, but simply naive. I have seen so many people emotionally and intellectually crippled by this.

Another example of “mental extremism” is taking everything *so* personally that we believe everything is our responsibility or, more commonly, fault. I have friends who are so conscientious that if there is something wrong with their bathroom tap, for example, and it develops a little drip, they feel personally responsible for the world's water crisis – and become incapable of functioning until the tap is fixed.

It's good to know our limits. In the film *Magnum Force*, about fighting police corruption, Clint Eastwood says with great portent: “A man's gotta know his limitations.” I find this helpful to remember. It is tied into the question of egotism. We cannot do everything ourselves, and there is no point in blaming ourselves for everything. I know an awful lot of people who do this, sometimes in very subtle ways. There is no point in doing this. It just sucks our life force.

Inner antidotes

What are the antidotes to mental extremism? A lot has to do with our internal dialogue with ourselves. We undermine ourselves sub-consciously and it is helpful to have some antidotes to hand.

The best versus the good. A helpful compass to help us steer by is a little French expression: “The best is the enemy of the good”. It reminds us that we can become so obsessed with doing our very “best”, that we are not prepared to do something that is merely “good”. This can poison our ability to do a great deal that is helpful and positive. We end up doing nothing because we are still waiting for the best.

The great Vietnamese teacher Thich Nhat Hanh warns, for example, that if we are not prepared to accept anything less than absolute non-violence, this is a path of considerable peril. He says there is a considerable amount we can do just to *reduce* the amount of violence in the world. The goal of less violence is achievable. It can be done day by day, incident by incident. It is within our reach individually and collectively. It is a perfectly valid goal. If people were oriented towards that goal, the cumulative effect would be remarkable. This is an invitation to free ourselves from seeing everything in terms of black and white, and to become much more comfortable exploring the rich and rewarding spectrum of everything that lies in between.

Working with others. Another antidote to the egoism of mental extremism is working with others. We cannot do everything on our own. There are numerous people, groups and organizations endeavouring in their own ways to make a healthy, positive contribution that will be helpful to society and our planet. It will take all of us working together in many, many ways to accomplish the changes we want to see. It's helpful to

work in community with others to share the strain and build the future together. It's a profound and practical antidote to the crushing effect of personal paralysis.

Depending on the work itself. I find a little saying by Thomas Merton extremely inspiring. In one of his writings on social engagement he says: "Do not depend on the hope of results. Concentrate instead on the truth and the power of the work itself."

The future is unknown. It is unpredictable. If we lock onto the notion of a particular, predictable outcome, we are not using our natural intelligence. There are multiple influences, multiple causes and multiple conditions which will affect the outcome. The only thing we can be responsible for is the integrity with which we do whatever we do. What matters is what we do in the moment itself, with maximum power and integrity. If we can work that way, moment by moment, we bring our power and integrity to whatever we do and whatever we come across. That is a tremendous antidote to the aggression, burn out and depression that can so easily arise if we are not fully present in each moment.

The lotus in the flames

In Rita Gross's article, she mentions two powers of the mindful social activist. She describes these as:

- The power to act with awareness and equanimity, while believing passionately in a cause and while in the midst of conflict.
- The power to remain content and cheerful in the midst of failure and when confronted with insuperable obstacles.

Some months ago I saw a photograph of a distinguished international official working to halt an epidemic in Africa. His face was a map of unhappiness. You could see his intense dedication etched in his features as well as the terrible toll, physical and mental, it was taking. It was a portrait of a great human being sacrificing himself to take on an immense challenge. While I was looking at this powerful image, I recalled the bodhisattva of the Buddhist tradition who vows to remain in the hell realms until they are emptied of all beings. There are many statues of this bodhisattva. Their faces are not at all anguished. They are positively radiant. This is the beauty and power of that tradition. The analogy that is used for the bodhisattva's experience of working with vast suffering is that of "being a lotus in the flames". The lotus is delicate, tender and completely open. It is surrounded by fire, but the flames do not burn the petals. The lotus is there precisely to be in the midst of the flames. That is what we are training for -- to be able to manifest this quintessential energy of wisdom and compassion that seeks out the flames, yet is not burned by them.

Saving the lives of everyone. Thich Nhat Hanh speaks of his experience of the boat people fleeing from Viet Nam in small boats on hazardous seas, in the midst of storms and with the threat of pirates. He said that often it would only take one person in

the boat to maintain presence of mind, being clear about what to do and not being panicked, to save the lives of everyone in the boat.

I believe this may be why Mahatma Gandhi said non-violence is the greatest form of bravery. And why Martin Luther King Jr said the strongest person is the one who cuts the chain of hate.

The Four Exhilarations

To be that sort of person we have to take care of ourselves. We are all needed. We don't know what challenge will come next or when we'll be needed. If we have already let ourselves get ground down, burned out, fed up and bitter, then when that moment comes who is going to be there to answer the call?

There is a simple teaching on this by Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche, the lineage holder of the Shambhala wisdom tradition. It holds the teachings on what is known as Enlightened Society. The instructions are called *The Four Exhilarations*.

The first is: good sleep.

The second is: good food.

The third is: good exercise.

The fourth is: good meditation.

We need to keep this precious human body in good shape. We want to be able to work hard and withstand tremendous pressure. We will need to keep our minds and hearts clear. Practising the Four Exhilarations will help us as we train in this profound view, so that we can really become the lotus in the flames. We can be the bodhisattva in the storm-tossed boat. As we do that, we will encourage others to be such a person too.

*The material in this article was originally presented as part of **Practicing Peace in Times of War**, a series of programs offered in North America by Ani Pema Chödrön and Richard Reoch, who was at that time the President of Shambhala, the worldwide community dedicated to the Buddha's teachings on enlightened society.*