

Talk at Tsunami Memorial

Auckland Cathedral of the Holy Trinity

Sunday January 16, 2005

By Ajahn Chandako

“Thus should you look upon this changing world:
All component things are impermanent.
All component things are subject to breaking apart.
See all of this world
As a star at dawn, a bubble in a stream,
A flash of lightning in a summer cloud,
A flickering lamp, a phantom and a dream.”

I spent 16 years living in Asia, mostly in Thailand, and I knew its western coastline well.

So why do disasters happen? Is this God's mysterious will? Or does God merely stand by, caring but equanimous? From the Buddhist perspective the question does not arise. Elements are simply operating according to the natural laws of cause and effect. When certain conditions arise, certain results come about. In Buddhism the emphasis is on the response, responding with wisdom and compassion.

We know how horrific the effect of the tsunami was. The positive side of disasters is that they can bring out some beautiful human qualities, for example the ability to empathize with the suffering of others. Only the hardest of hearts could not be moved, and opened, and enlarged by seeing the photos of parents weeping for their missing children; hearing the stories of loss, and ruin, and death. This can motivate us to act with self-sacrifice, overcoming selfishness, helping others in need. In the past two weeks we've seen superhuman efforts by ordinary people collecting supplies and donations and flying out to the affected areas, to serve and benefit their fellow human beings regardless of nationality or religion. Ironically, difficult times can bring out the best in people.

I feel it is also important to look at the long-term emotional effects of a tragedy of this scale. The scars can go deep and last a lifetime if they are not addressed. The key to freeing someone from emotional trauma is to

fully acknowledge the pain with clear awareness, and then let it go. But it takes time to allow the process to happen. People need to wait until their environment feels secure again before pain and loss can be deeply accepted, worked through and released.

Why do disasters happen? Why not? Has there ever been a time in the history of the planet that there have not been earthquakes, active volcanoes, hurricanes and tornadoes? Disasters are a normal part of life. Small or large, they are happening all the time; but sometimes it takes a huge disaster to bring home the fact that life is inherently insecure and unpredictable. None of us know exactly how much time we have remaining. Even good people die unexpectedly. It's easy to assume we will always have the good things we have now; that we will always be surrounded by the family and friends we love so dearly. The Buddha taught however, that nothing short of spiritual enlightenment can offer any real security. In the mean time, the tsunami has helped me be more grateful for all the wonderful things I do have here and now.

Buddhism is all about awakening to the Truth of nature, waking up from living a life half asleep. Sometimes it takes a shock. If we reflect on the fact that we could all be swept away at any time: by cancer, a car accident, or a wave, then we gain insight from tragedies, insights that can transform our lives. We can take a close look at what is truly important. What are our deepest values and aspirations? What is the most meaningful thing we can do with our lives, with however much time we have remaining? Then we can clarify our priorities, and stop wasting time worrying about things which aren't actually all that significant in the big picture; and we can decide to devote the remainder of our lives to doing what is most beneficial: for ourselves, for our loved ones, and for the entire world. Never think that one life can't make a difference. We can then hopefully live, embodying wisdom, creating peace, and even discovering some beautiful human qualities in the face of hardship.