

# Dharmette: Ability to Respond

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on October 3, 2018

There is an important distinction to be made between our ability to respond and responsibility. Our ability to respond is closely connected to our freedom – to be able to respond freely, wisely, and compassionately. Responsibility may or may not be connected to freedom. All too often responsibility is the opposite of freedom. Somehow we get caught in the vise of what we think we're required to do. It's up to us to do it. We're to blame if we don't do it. We are already to blame. We're guilty before we even start fulfilling our responsibilities.

Responsibility for many people is a complicated world. Certainly we have responsibilities – we've agreed to certain things. And if we've agreed, then we have some responsibility to follow up on the agreements. But some people carry with them a policy of being responsible for all kinds of things, when actually there was never any agreement. Maybe it was assumed that the nature of the universe was set up like this. Somehow the universe agreed for us that we're responsible for everyone's suffering. So it's up to us to get involved and do things.

There was a time in my life when my sense of responsibility was my Achilles' heel. It really wore me down, because I felt that whenever something was happening to anyone, I had a responsibility to help support them, and make them feel better. Somehow the fact that they felt bad or troubled meant that I was responsible. The fact that I was breathing made me somehow responsible for their having a bad day.

I think this neurotic feeling that everything is personal, or that I have a personal connection to everything, is pretty deeply rooted in the human psyche, because it seems to come with a certain developmental stage in childhood. Children start to understand cause and effect and their role in it, and they feel that they're the cause of things. It's easy for children to not really understand how everything works yet, and then take some responsibility for things. They think they're the cause.

Here's an example of this from when I was probably about five or six years old. It was the 4th of July, and there was going to be a block party. We lived in an apartment row complex with lawns and a picket fence, and behind us was a swampy river area. That morning I picked up a long stick in the wild place in the back and left it somewhere. During the party, a teenager picked up the stick and attempted to pole vault over the picket fence. He didn't succeed and got hurt in the process. I'm not sure if I remember it accurately, but I think he broke his leg. I was responsible for him breaking his leg, because I had brought that stick there. I felt terrible about what I had caused to happen.

Most people won't agree that a five-year-old is responsible for bringing a stick that a teenager then uses to jump over a picket fence. But it represents the way young children think at a certain developmental age. Some people never grow out of that, or they somehow take on a strong sense of taking things personally, and feeling that they're the cause of so many things around them. They're responsible.

Sometimes this is taught. Certain parents inculcate this idea into children's minds. Whether it's explicit or not, this gives them the idea that they're responsible for their parents and how they feel. They had better behave a certain way so that their parents don't leave. People have told me that when they were young, their parents not only threatened to leave them, but they acted out leaving. They grabbed their suitcase, walked out the door, and then came back. They weren't really serious, but what an impact! So the kid is responsible.

People sometimes feel they have to be a certain way or their parents will be sick or something. It's up to them somehow. Or some people grow up with the idea that they will be responsible for their parents in their old age. Or if their sibling has an illness, the idea is given that they're responsible for caring for that person.

There are all kinds of reasons why this sense of responsibility gets very complicated. Rather than responsibility coming from an ability to respond in caring, compassionate, and wise ways, it comes from a complex and complicated world, which is tight and personal. Unfortunately, sometimes it is connected to guilt, shame, and a sense of requirement. It's particularly unfortunate when there hasn't been a clear agreement that that is what we signed up for.

I have two children. That comes with responsibility, but I signed up for it. Sometimes it's a drag [laughs]. But I can't complain about the responsibility, because that's what I signed up for. It comes with the territory. In my situation, it was a very clear choice to have children. I expressed my freedom in making that choice, knowing that it came with responsibilities – there was an agreement.

How many times do people feel responsible when there isn't a choice or agreement to step into that area of responsibility? How many people feel responsible to be in a relationship with people when there's an implicit agreement that is not healthy?

In this kind of discussion, the standard is to come back to the idea of the ability to respond. Every moment we're alive, we have the ability to respond to the situation we're in. How do we want to enact that ability? Where do we want it to come from? I think that one very powerful primary motivation for responding is generosity: "What's the generous thing to do now?"

Something can be generous only if it's nourishing or feels good for us. Being generous means that we are inspired. Gladness and joy come with being generous. If there's not some kind of gladness in being generous, it's not generosity. It might be obligation. It might be playing an economic game of exchange. I'll do this, and you'll do that. If I give to you, you'll love me. I'm going to be really generous, so that I can have your love. That is not really generosity.

To respond out of generosity in a situation, rather than bearing the burden of responsibility, means that how we respond has a different spin. There's actually a different atmosphere or message that comes through when people feel generosity rather than the heaviness of responsibility. It might be the same action, but it comes from a different place inside. Generosity always comes from a place of freedom. That's kind of the calling card of Buddhism: "Where is our freedom?"

The other place where our ability to respond can come from is compassion. Compassion and generosity go closely together. Compassion is not a good match or partner with a sense of responsibility, because it's too easy for the compassion to get squeezed and heavy. Nowadays we have what's called "compassion fatigue." It's a lot of work. But if it is compassion with generosity, then it's not fatiguing in the same way, because generosity comes from freedom. There's an ease and a gladness to it.

Compassion can also be a part of our ability to respond. If we remember that we have an ability to respond in every situation, that gives us some modicum of choice. That becomes a check and balance to what for some people is a problematic way of feeling responsible. Rather than asking, "What's my responsibility here?" we can turn it around and say, "What's my ability to respond right now?" Just turning it around and asking, "What's my ability to respond?" can protect us from some of the burden of responsibility.

If we learn to be free more broadly, then we can bring it into our responsibilities in such a way that we can enact the things that we're responsible for with more generosity and ease, and less of a sense of burden.

So may your ability to respond help you fulfill your responsibilities with the greatest generosity.