

Adjacent opportunities (17.4)

The complex buddhist

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In January, 2016, Emergent Publications will bring out a new collection of Adjacent Opportunity Columns called, *The Complex Buddhist – Doing Good in a Challenging World*. This is an excerpt from the introduction.

In 1992, two powerful approaches to looking at the world exactly as it is showed-up in my life. I had known about each for years, but at this point in time, they both walked in the door and made themselves comfortable in what I call *my* life. One: the sciences of complexity and its attendant complex adaptive systems, and Two: Tibetan Buddhism. Seemingly the strangest of bedfellows, but actually more closely akin than certainly I first thought in 1992.

And while Buddhist teachings warn against systems of thinking that one can embrace and thereby limit one's capacity to be open to the world as it truly is, Complexity is, ultimately, like Buddhism, about being comfortable with the uncertainty and ambiguity with which we are often met. Both are also about how the world is, not how we want or expect it to show-up. And while one defines itself as science, and the other as a spiritual way of being, the distinction as we dig deeper is very thin.

The Complex Buddhist – Doing Good in a Challenging World, however, is not an attempt to chip away at the veneer that separates them, but rather, it's a series of observations about how these two work together and can inform our lives. I have had the great opportunity and privilege, for over a decade now, to write in these pages about how these two forces have helped me meet the world. In doing so, I have been able to explore their relationship and dig into to how they work and interact, together.

Kurt Richardson, the publisher of Emergent Publications and the E:CO journal, has basically given me free reign to unleash this rather personal exploration on our reading audience. Neither of us really knew what might emerge from this concoction, but perhaps our lack of knowledge allowed us to take the plunge without getting too serious about the outcome. Of course, anyone who knows us also knows that taking either of us too seriously is far from a lasting proposition. Kurt's great sense of humor and his brilliance as a complex brewmeister has allowed this process to delve more fearlessly into the mixing of these potent elixirs. He has also made sure we didn't become too intoxicated by our own cleverness.

The process of self-organization always requires some sort of boundaries, even though Buddhism is quite comfortable without them. And so the relationship emerges and evolves.

My interest in Complexity and Buddhism found its initial ground in the early 80s when I spent seven months working with Nobel Physicist Murray Gell-Mann, who told me within the first 15 minutes we were together that everything I knew was wrong. We were working on an interview for Omni Magazine, and because of that, he didn't write me off totally. He knew there was some rightness in my quest to bridge things together, but the answers weren't in physics, but they might be found among complex adaptive system scientists. I hate to admit it, but to a certain degree Murray was right.

I had begun my Buddhist practice in the early 90s, but it was because of Gell-Mann's advice about complex scientists that I met Howard Sherman, a complex businessman, with whom I would eventually write *Open Boundaries* (Perseus Books) in 1997. Howard, for those who knew him, was much more than a businessman. He was a professor of philosophy and co-founder of The Santa Fe Institute Business Network. The book we wrote together, nearly 20 years ago, was a way to language the emerging sciences of complexity within a context that could be applied to organizations and enterprises. Then three years later, when Senn-Delaney Leadership provided me and Paul Nakei with the opportunity to write and publish *The Mindful Corporation* (Leadership Press) in 2000, it was my first attempt to bridge the gap, if one existed, between my Buddhist practice and my complexity education.

It was not too surprising that shortly after the publication of these seminal works in my understanding I was introduced to social entrepreneurship. The progression, in my mind made perfect sense. A) if one understands how things emerge, then B) one is willing and able to meet whatever shows up exactly as it does, then C) finding solutions to pressing social issues has to follow. Well, at least the progression made sense in my mind.

The Complex Buddhist is actually the second collection of my essays Emergent Publications has published. The first, *Adjacent Opportunities: Sparking Emergent Social Action*, introduced my proclivity to what is often characterized as doing well by doing good. I will say, however, the doing well part has not always led the way, and my very patient wife, Laura, will certainly attest to that. But the doing good aspect has been worth every moment spent. And as my friend and colleague Stephen Heffernan helped me see, there is a significant difference between doing well and well-doing. I can live with that distinction.

In publishing these essays as a single collection, it implies that there might be a certain linearity within the assemblage. This presents a bit of a challenge, especially since both Buddhism and Complexity are non-linear in their nature. There has been an

attempt to create enough interaction between the pieces so that there might be both some coherence and some greater emergence from their juxtaposition. But alas, that will not be for me to say.

As to the content, from the notions of Engaged Emergence with its karmic interactions that introduces this volume, to the happiness and well-being ideas that close it, they are all part of the complex nature of this thing we refer to as our mind. And it is, without recourse that I must mention, at this time, Diffugia Arcellinida, a single-celled critter to which I was introduced to this summer by Michael Turvey and Claudia Carello from the University of Connecticut. Diffugia have no brains and subsequently, by common definition, no minds, and yet they are capable of constructing an amazingly beautiful fluted house for themselves from found objects. Their emergent innovations are not based on brain-power. The lesson of Diffugia for me means that our thinking is greatly over-rated and undoubtedly misunderstood. And I would say that a Buddhist would undoubtedly agree with that single-celled critter. The complexity scientist, not so much.

In spite of this knowledge and to a certain degree because of it, *The Complex Buddhist: Doing Good in a Challenging World* is being brought out by Emergent Publications. My hope is that it will be of benefit.