

RESPONSE ABILITY

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I am taking off my story-telling hat and putting on my didactic hat, because I keep running across folks in my life that have managed to paint themselves into one corner or another because they react instead of respond. It makes me want to comment, and I am.

I have been counseling for something like 45 years now, and I want to share with you what I find to be a key factor in that experience. Much of what takes place in a counseling session boils down to how a person responds to what is happening to them in their life. We can't control what others say and do to us personally, much less what happens in the outside world of news events. That is what dictators try to do and they all eventually fail.

And here I am not referring to our own complex inner filters or the neuroses that we ourselves project outside ourselves on the movie screen of life and then intently watch. Rather I am talking about outside events that are actually independent of us and our mental projections, events that we can't help but react to; we do this all the time.

You and I can't control outside events (what happens to us), but we do have a choice in how we respond to these external events. Our ability to respond is what, of course, is called 'responsibility', a quality much valued in this society. Although everyone has some kind of response to life, not everyone is considered 'responsible'. We can try to learn the correct response to an infinite series of possible events or we can learn to be more generally responsible. This is what employers so desperately look for when they are hiring, someone who is responsible, who naturally has the ability to respond to events in a useful fashion. Trust me, they get the promotions!

And I am making the distinction here between responding and reacting. A simple reaction is not enough; we all do that. We cannot help but react to outside events, but it is 'how' we react that determines whether we react in a so-called 'responsible' manner.

Again: we can't control what happens to us in the outside world; we can only control our own reaction, the way 'we' respond to it. In low-level jobs there frequently is an attempt to anticipate every possible event and train the employee how to respond, by rote. Of course, since there are infinite possibilities, that approach can only go so far.

Much better is to find someone with an ability to respond to all situations, someone who is naturally responsible. This is, of course, an employer's dream. So what am I driving at here?

My point is that it is possible to develop our sense of responsibility to the point where we can naturally just respond to events in a useful (responsible) way.

For example, when someone is angry at us and says or does something hurtful or rude, instead of setting off a domino-effect chain-reaction of anger in response, we can learn to consider the source (they are upset or angry) and just respond appropriately. We can't control them, but we can learn to control our reaction and response to them. This is the essence of many dharma teachings, what is called 'skillful means,' responding skillfully.

In almost every case, instead of reacting to the rain of problems that life too often presents to us in a defensive manner (protecting ourselves from them), if we could instead receive and just handle them responsibly, it would be so much better.... for us and the outside world.

It is all a matter of awareness, of learning to catch ourselves before we over-react and start to push back, and instead facilitate and respond to incoming events in a useful manner, like not letting life push our buttons. Awareness training is the single most valuable tool I have yet found.

Our awareness is what makes us able to respond; we are aware of the situation. Some people are born more aware and they are naturally responsible. The rest of us can develop our awareness until we become more responsible. Either way, IMO the key to how we make our way through life (career) is our ability to respond.