

## **Contemplative Traditions and Peacekeeping from the Perspective of a Socially Engaged Buddhist**

In a time of terror like ours, spirituality is increasingly an indispensable antidote against mindless violence, hypermilitarism, and, more specifically, nihilisms—the nihilisms that are conspicuous, on the one side, in the grand strategy of the lone superpower, which is seconded by its pathetic “coalitions of the willing” and, on the other side, in the platforms of the violent groups that are against it. Both sides are terroristic despite their pious rhetoric of God, Good, and Evil, seeking to destroy each other and triggering in motion a vicious cycle of violence. Contemplative traditions are vital in alleviating this spiritual poverty, a predicament that may well jeopardize human survival. Contemplative traditions may well contribute to the ‘world opinion,’ which many see as the second superpower, to counteract these nihilistic trends nonviolently and compassionately.

The contemplative tradition on which I will focus is Buddhism, or more specifically socially engaged Buddhism. The master precept in Buddhism—if there is such a thing—is ahimsa or nonviolence. Buddhism is about individual and collective transformations in the spirit of nonviolence. Let me put some flesh on this observation. Buddhism is a wise ploy to help awaken us from greed, hatred, and delusion, which are seen as impurities of the mind influencing us to be selfish, exploitative, de-humanizing, violent, spiteful, and so on. Buddhism seeks to heal this splitting, aggression, and hostility through personal and collective transformations, both of which must take place simultaneously. Both levels of change are co-original to peace and nonviolence.

The transformations that Buddhism is looking for are as follows. One, the transformation of greed into generosity. This not only means the giving of basic necessities—the redistribution of rights and resources—but also entails speaking the truth to power and to a society full of lies, distortions, and half-truths. By giving more than taking one reduces self-attachments. Simplicity, humility, and self-reliance will serve as one’s guidelines. Buddhism sees self-attachments as a major cause of fear. Practiced seriously and consistently, generosity contributes to the absence of fear, and without fear one will have no enemies: one will not see “the others” as enemies, and one will be able to truly forgive the wrongs that others may have done toward oneself. Remember the war cry “If you are not with us you are against us”?

Two, the transformation of hatred into compassion, which is akin to a flame of love without the smoke of jealousy, possessiveness, anger, etc. Gradually reducing self-attachments, one relates to all sentient beings and the natural environment mindfully and harmonically. One nurtures rather than oppresses them. Justice and equality will guide one's conducts, physical as well as mental. Generosity may be about the provision of equal opportunities, but compassion is also concerned about equal outcomes. Three, the transformation of delusion or ignorance into wisdom. Buddhism points out that wisdom emanates from reflexivity or critical self-reflection. One must have time to cultivate inner peace and reflexivity through mental training or meditation. And one must try to expand one's circle of virtuous companions who act as one's external voices of conscience. With wisdom one does not fear to admit one's wrong doings and offenses: one develops responsibility for the consequences of one's actions or inactions—that is, for both commission and omission. And one confronts and works to dismantle the “fascism” in one's mind and the structural violence that accommodates it. Without wisdom, the oppressive structures will remain intact, and generosity and compassion will be merely palliatives.

Cultivating generosity, compassion, and wisdom is part of the three-fold training in Buddhism. The three-fold training suggests that violence is not just the result of pathological madness or a faulty political economy that prizes profits over people. It also springs from a peculiar worldview or consciousness, relying on peculiar forms of images, symbols, representations and feelings; and from a peculiar kind of culture, as culture is about the production, circulation, normalization, homogenization and consumption of shared meanings. Buddhism urges us to contemplate on these cultural elements—elements which are conducive to violence and detrimental to peace.

From Plato to Descartes, a mind-body dualism can be seen in western philosophy. The well-known Cartesian dictum “cogito ergo sum” is an exemplary case. In this dualism, the mind is seen as trapped inside or even enslaved by the alien body. Here the body is also depicted as traitor to or an enemy of Reason: it distracts the mind's pursuit of truth in various ways—lusts, hunger, sickness, fatigue, fantasies, etc. Thus the body threatens our ability to control: the ultimate objective of control is literally transcendence, the triumph of the will over the body; that is, doing way with the body to attain what is called “the view from nowhere”—or in a more theological fashion, the God-eye's view. Equally important, the mind here is often associated with Man, and the body with Man's other—the woman. And through the history of imperialism and

colonialism, the mind became associated with the White Man (the true human type), and the body, the irrational or hysterical natives—those mind-less bodies. So the mind-body dualism not only creates a hierarchy, but also prescribes the control and disciplining of the others in name of superiority and disembodied objectivity—that is, quite literally, the voice of Reason.

“I breathe therefore I am,” might have been the Buddha’s response to Descartes. Here the mind and the body are seen as one; there is no splitting. I am embodied, and must always be acting from somewhere, and I must be aware of this fact. It is not about getting out of the world or about being thrown into the world. The body may often have its sensual attachments but it is not a prison-house of the mind. Hence it is not something to be punished, abused, tamed, and disciplined or sculpted a la plastic surgery; rather it has to be understood through compassion and nonviolence and live harmoniously with. Ultimately, Buddhism urges us to be "awake" or what is often called "enlightened." Being awake in part results from proper or mindful breathing. And the objective of being awake is not attaining the view from nowhere (or the view from everywhere for that matter). Rather, it is about being mindful, about being aware of one’s limitations and prejudices, about Right Livelihood, about the here and now. As I have cited numerous times before: according to a Buddhist story, a leader of a religious sect came to visit the Buddha one day and asked Him, "If I follow your Way, what will I do day by day?" The Buddha replied, "Walk, stand, lie down, sit eat, drink...." The religious leader then inquired "...what is so special about your Way?" And the Buddha answered, "It is indeed special. The ordinary man, though he walks, stands, lies down, sits, eats, and drinks, does not know he is walking, standing, lying down, sitting, eating and drinking. But when we walk, we know that we are walking. When we stand, we know that we are standing...."

It is this mindfulness that is vital when engaging with others and the world. David Loy has nicely clarified on what it means to be awakened based on Buddhist sociology. Loy writes thus: “To wake up is to realize that I am not in the world, I am what the world is doing right here and now. When Shakyamuni became enlightened, the whole world awakened in him and as him. The world begins to heal when we realized that its sufferings are our own.”

The mind-body dualism also posits a kind of narcissism. Given the ideal of the view from nowhere, one becomes enamored by monologues of the mind. Many have pointed out that the modern social conception of

the self is rooted in narcissism or even autoeroticism. Ken Jones captures this well in *The New Social Face of Buddhism* when he writes, "...there is in the culture of high modernity another influential perspective of the self, which focuses on narcissism .... [which] means a total self absorption and self-preoccupation. The whole experience of the world is interpreted in terms of self-need, to the extent that valid boundaries between the self and the external world become indistinguishable. Self-need becomes no longer objectionable." To know the world in this light is thus intertwined with power and may be inextricable from killing: knowledge here is what some call, knowledge that kills. It is this narcissism, especially when linked with power, that breeds hostility, division, aggression, and war. The world cannot be reduced to an either/or choice. There are singularities and particularities as well as universalities. We must understand the particularization of universalism and the universalization of particularism, as one sociologist puts it. We must understand their interpenetration and ambiguities; for instance universalism maybe narcissistic while particularism may be relativistic.

If as Loy suggests, "I am not in the world, I am what the world is doing right here and now" and if "The world begins to heal when we realized that its sufferings are our own" then Buddhism urges us to substitute compassion and humility for narcissism, dialogues (wisdom) for monologues—in short, nonviolent social engagement. We will never be able to know what the world is doing right here and now and heal its sufferings without engaging with it. There is no such thing as personal or individual salvation in Buddhism. The process of understanding life therefore cannot be realized by rejecting the world, but by working for social justice and change. As Christopher Queen of Harvard University has recently observed, "There's been a sea-change in the Buddhist tradition....Buddhists have gotten up off their cushions, recognizing that collective sources of suffering in the world must be addressed by collective action."

With generosity, compassion, and wisdom one will be able to enter in continuous and active dialogues with others and overcome dualisms that pit "us" against "them", human against subhuman, rich against poor, man against woman, and so on. Indeed misrecognition can lead not only to aggression, but also to asphyxiating self-hatred. What others, especially one's significant others, think thus affects one's identity, potential for self-realization, and social position because it also impacts the fair and equal distribution of resources and opportunities. For instance, human beings are also cultural beings, and an attack on a culture is simultaneously an attack on the bearer of that culture. This is because

identity is dialogical as opposed to monological. On this view, the sources of injustice must also be addressed at the cultural or spiritual level, requiring cultural, discursive, and symbolic remedies.

With generosity, compassion, and wisdom one is open to the maybes and the perhaps, to the singularity of the others. They will become our partners in conversation and transformation, contributing to what some call a “fusion of horizons” or “transvaluation” that is vital for the coming community. This will only occur in the context of ongoing conversation that affirms rather than denies diversity and incommensurability, and that sees any agreement reached as contingent rather than fixed. “Keep going!” should be an important rallying cry. Putting an end to a conversation is the harbinger of disaster or terror. This approach is particularly useful for cross-cultural encounters between and within groups, and especially for decentering hegemonic relations or values—such as the presumed superiority of the Western lifestyle. In the process, hegemonic values may be de-valued and marginalized ones re-valued. We must envision difference as a resource rather than an obstacle to dialogue. Modern societies are too pluralistic to begin with the presumption of unity; that is, a unity of shared values and understandings. Yet at the same time, difference must not be cited as a pretext for torture, and sameness must not destroy diversity or singularities. A plurality of voices will help break the monologue of each group or individual and strengthen objectivity and democratic participation. This process will help the members of each group to transcend their particularity, perhaps even facilitating cosmopolitanism and augmenting the social knowledge of participating group members.

And with generosity, compassion, and wisdom come forgivingness and reconciliation. One has no fear to forgive (even the seemingly unforgivable). Forgiveness is thus the absence of fear. One does not simply tolerate or place conditions on one’s hospitality, one truly forgives. Or as some put it, tolerance is akin to invitation, while forgiveness connotes visitation. Forgiveness has to be unconditional in order to be worthy of its name. His Holiness the Dalai Lama is exemplary in this case. Some social ills are so damaging and horrendous such as the Chinese invasion of Tibet and all the dreadful events in that country. Yet to have a simple monk like His Holiness and his followers insisting that we all learn to love and empathize the Chinese people and to forgive the Chinese government which has committed acts of aggression out of ignorance or delusion, not to mention out of greed and hatred, is profoundly illuminating.

Furthermore, if “I am not in the world, I am what the world is doing right here and now” and if “The world begins to heal when we realized that its sufferings are our own” we have to critically reflect on our collusion, ideologically as well as practically, in the sufferings of the world—on how we take part through our actions and omissions in perpetuating these sufferings. We have to see our collusion as collusion, not as liberation. For instance, not infrequently we unequivocally identify with the values and worldviews of the aggressor or the dominant group, seeing them as emancipatory as opposed to oppressive and thereby buttressing the patterns of hierarchy or segregation. Conformity often comes with privileges, which one may end up enjoying them.

Another way of putting it is that we have to interrogate our collusion in structural violence. Social structures are also social constructions; they are not unchanging or natural givens. They have their political and historical developments. At the surface, they refer to organizations, institutions, laws, legal agreements, and viewpoints that have materialized. They influence or determine social action. But they also refer to a psychological category. Each structure will pressure the individual to adopt the canon or abide by the created norms. Each structure sets up the boundaries of the acceptable and the unacceptable, of the pronounceable and the unspeakable, the thinkable and the unthinkable—in short, of the truth. Social structures are thus also a worldview, in which we accept without questioning. Our minds become the sites on which they build their foundations, on which they lay their bricks. We follow the social structures tamely. We become their cheerleaders or at least passive spectators. We are afraid to confront the truth or to ask for it. We are afraid to look for hidden truths and reevaluate distorted ones. In other words, the power of social structures is felt intensively, exerting influence over thoughts, actions, bodies, and even attitudes. We uncritically rally behind the flag; support policies in the name of national greatness; raise the pursuit of wealth to the altar; accept the images of kin or aliens represented by the global media; want to catch up economically in for the sake of ‘development’ or progress; defend social norms as if they are unchanging or ahistorical and apolitical givens; become enamored by power; and so on.

From the discussion above, socially engaged Buddhism presupposes nonviolence. As such, it is pertinent to peacekeeping, but also much more than that. *Peacekeeping* means keeping people from attacking each other. It seems to attract the most attention but it is a bit like firefighting. It’s necessary to put out the fire, but it is much better if we can prevent the fire from starting in the first place. When confronted

with large-scale conflicts there is no question that they demand a response. The problem is that many people believe that a nonviolent response means doing nothing, whereas responding with force or violence means doing something. The Middle Way of Buddhism defines very well how one should respond to violence. It is about avoiding extremes—being doing nothing on the one hand, or responding with similar violence on the other. From a Buddhist perspective, generosity, compassion, and wisdom will enable us to wrestle with the horns of this dilemma.

For a violent action to occur there must first be a desire or intention in one's mind to commit the action. This desire arises as a result of greed, hatred or ignorance. Some people may commit a violent action because of ignorance—they do not know what is right or wrong. Others may do it out of hatred. There also needs to be an object for an act of violence to occur. Finally the person committing the act of violence must carry out the action against that object. An action can be either partially or completely fulfilled. Hence, merely refraining from acts of violence only succeeds on a basic level in overcoming violence. To cultivate the good qualities of the mind and actively carry out nonviolent actions represents a higher level of understanding. So in order to truly practice nonviolence we need to eliminate the three poisons of greed, anger and ignorance and cultivate positive qualities transforming the three poisons with generosity, compassion and wisdom.

In any case, a peacekeeping based on nonviolence paves the way to peacemaking or the process of forging a settlement between belligerent sides in a conflict. Through dialogue so much can be achieved. When two parties in conflict are prepared to listen to each other, and to see each other not as enemies but as human beings, then the animosity between them can be dissolved. Overcoming the dualistic thinking that sees things as good and evil, or friend and enemy, is the basis of nonviolence. And nonviolence is the basis of peace. Our task then is to keep the conversation going, incorporating new members in our community of conversation and interdependence. We must oppose the univocity that comes with splitting and stereotypes.

But the peace that is made will only be temporary without peacebuilding. More important, to prevent the fire of violence from flaring up in the first place requires peacebuilding. Peacebuilding treats the issue of peace more broadly. Here peace is not simply the absence of war (as in the peacekeeping scenario). Peacebuilding also addresses the issue of structural violence. For instance, out of the approximately 5.8 billion people in the world in 1998, about 1.2 billion were living with an income of less than a dollar a day; and 2.8 billion were living with less

than 2 dollars a day (or the poverty line according to the World Bank). It is not life that they are living, only something less. It is also estimated that some 18 million people die prematurely each year from easily preventable diseases and other poverty-related causes. In other words, one-third of all human deaths result from poverty: poverty kills. Moreover, peacebuilding deals with the fact of multiculturalism in this age of pluralism: the redistribution of resources, the rights of minority groups, the critical reappraisal of dominant values, the recognition of cultural and subcultural groups, and so on. They are all fundamentally nonviolent.

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