

Engaged Buddhism and the Spiritual Challenges in the 21st Century

I begin with a somber and alarming observation. We live in a time of terror, a time which demands personal and collective efforts to halt the drift or dance towards the precipice of destruction and nihilism. It is a time that confronts us with daunting challenges, not only intellectually but also spiritually and emotionally. I use the word nihilism because it well captures the despair and spiritual impoverishment in the present, a condition forged by the compulsion to put all our faith in the sublimity of the market and of empire. And a lot of people have done that—not only the fanatics or fundamentalists but also the sane and rational. Once again we are asked to put all our eggs in the basket of absolutism with equanimity. But—and here is a note of optimism—at this crucial moment spiritually driven human agency, small-scale or otherwise, can cultivate far-reaching positive transformations in a world of crises. Let us not despair. Rather we should confront the roots of our spiritual suffering with compassion, understanding and wisdom. We should critically reflect on how the world works on and through us now and here, because—and this may sound like a cliché—we are the world. And therefore we must engage with it mindfully and nonviolently. We must engage with the world without fear; that is, without self-attachments. Fear, from a Buddhist perspective, is the result of self-attachments—of the myth of the autonomous self. It is only through our social and spiritual engagement with the world that we will become enlightened, that the world will become enlightened. We are both subjects produced by the world as well as subjects with agency. In David Loy's acute and memorable observation, "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." Of course, this will not be a walk in the park. It is painful to confront the sufferings of others, to say the least. It is equally painful to critically examine our possible collusion and complicity in causing or aggravating the pains of others through our greed, hatred and delusion. But that is what being awakened is about—this recognition of inter-being.

It is far too easy to make terror or violence ramify hideously. It is far too easy to hate our aggressors and call for their complete elimination or conversely to identify with their values and become their cheerleaders. It does not take a talent to employ the rhetoric of moral absolutism—of God, Good and Evil—to search and destroy our foes: both the terrorists and the equally terroristic anti-terrorists are using it. Meaningless violence may escalate (violence indeed begets violence) and the loss of

innocent lives may be callously ignored in the name of ridding the world of the scourge of infidels or terrorists. Cruelty becomes acceptable, inevitable or even banal. Hatred is not only warranted; it is being fueled. Forget human rights. Abuses at Abu-Graib prison and the abductions and beheadings conducted by militant groups are merely the tip of the iceberg of nihilism. It is thus best to be armed to the teeth—to embark on hypermilitarism—in this nasty and brutish world. And in this process the whole world becomes blind. How can the world be healed in this splitting, aggression, and hostility? There cannot be perpetual peace through perpetual war, contrary to what the terrorists and anti-terrorists believe. The spectacles manufactured by the global mass media have also made it all too easy to divide the world into kin and aliens, friends and foes, humans and subhumans—to divide the world into the moral and the immoral worlds. They permit little avenue for dialogues or for options other than violence. We are all asked to beat the tom-toms of war and join the dance of death. Thus as the world is coming together through the overcoming of various spatial and temporal boundaries, we may be growing apart emotionally and psychologically and in the process we may once again be denying our common humanity.

It also does not take a talent to join the chorus extolling the virtues of the free market system, of neoliberalism. Raise greed to the altar for everyone will eventually benefit we can argue thus and appease our souls. Wealth should be our only public idol. Transnational corporations are our saviors so we must increase their already exorbitant rights and power. Forget workers' rights. Forget the deteriorating conditions of the natural environment. Forget equality, justice and democracy. Indeed being the mouth-piece of neoliberalism—deliberately or otherwise—may come with tangible personal privileges or benefits. In heralding the sublimity of the market we may well be seconding its patterns of internal exclusion—again this amounts to the division, hierachization or separation of humanity in a globalizing world, in the global village. 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. And perhaps the majority of the world's poor are women; and the number of rural women living in absolute poverty rose by nearly 50 percent from the mid 1970s to the mid 1990s. It is also estimated that some 18 million people die prematurely each year from easily preventable diseases and other poverty-related causes. Another harrowing indicator is that the average life expectancy in Africa is only one-half or one-quarter to that of the US and the rich North Atlantic democracies. In

other words, the majority of Africans are living only half-lives or quarter-lives. The One World we are living in is therefore definitely not a moral utopia but far from it. And the idea of One World looks like a bad joke or a simulation when viewed from below or the grassroots. And we the more privileged or lucky are made to believe that they are wallowing in a sea of suffering because of their own inanity, which has nothing to do with us.

The advancements in techno-science have speeded up time, contributing to what some have called “timeless time.” We see it in split-second capital transactions in global markets where trillion of dollars are circulated daily; in the quest for immortality or eternity through the denial of death or various anti-aging regimens including the promised wonders of plastic surgery; in instant wars and instant democracy delivered by imperial cruise missiles and bombers; in the virtual 24/7 culture of the internet; and so on. Timeless time is a vital component of the casino capitalism and has brought about recurrent financial crises and instability; the destruction of companies and jobs due to the sudden shift in the financial environment or investment climate; the increasing job insecurity worldwide, and so on. Life becomes an anxiety-prone gamble, and immediate is always better than deferred gratification. Selfishness is raised to the altar—who knows what will happen tomorrow? The world seems to be in flux, and it is understandable that many are seeking for an anchoring in this runaway world of ours. Against this fragmenting and exclusionary backdrop, it is not surprising that many have sought for certainty and security in various monological –isms, which not infrequently are exclusionary and even hateful, triggering various inter- and intra-group violence in many parts of the world. Again this contributes to splitting, hostility, and aggression.

As an engaged Buddhist, I turn to the dhamma for spiritual guidance in order to travel down the path of compassion and awaken myself and the world. One of my principal guides here is none other than His Holiness the Dalai Lama who states, “Although attempting to bring about world peace through the internal transformation of individuals is difficult, it is the only way.” I build on His Holiness’s wisdom and add that internal and external transformations are co-original to peace. In other words, internal transformation is both a cause and a consequence of external transformation.

What are the main transformations that Buddhism proposes? We must understand that the substance of Buddhism is like a wise ploy to help awaken us from selfishness so that we will be able to serve all sentient beings. Once awakened, we will be able to transform our greed

into generosity, hatred into compassion, and ignorance into wisdom. And once these transformations are achieved will we truly have a culture of peace or nonviolence.

At the basic level generosity entails the giving of material goods and the provision of equal opportunities. It contributes to distributive justice whereby resources and equal rights are provided to cultivate personal and collective well-being. Perhaps the rich and the privileged should be willing to make some sacrifices to their well-being to make the exploited and poor better off. At a deeper level, generosity also means the giving of the dhamma. Put differently, generosity also means the giving of truths to society, especially to a society that is full of deceits, half-truths, and totalitarian views (such as moral absolutism, nationalism, monarchism, and other isms). When practiced consistently, generosity contributes to the absence of fear. If we have no fear we will have no enemies, will not see others as our enemies. Fear is the result of self-attachments. This is therefore the gist of generosity.

Compassion means love without selfishness. It entails attending to the sufferings of others and is necessarily dialogical. One nurtures rather than oppresses them. It is thus linked to social harmony and orderliness, justice, ways to mitigate exploitation and oppression, and natural preservation and equilibrium. If generosity is about the provision of equal opportunities, compassion is concerned about equal outcomes. Equal rights will be meaningless if the stronger always takes advantage of the weaker, for instance. In Buddhism, compassion is cultivated through moral training.

Wisdom entails self and social understanding. It means understanding how the realities of the world ‘work’ on and through us as well as the truth of the dhamma. Buddhism points out that wisdom emanates from reflexivity or critical self-reflection. We often prefer the comforts of amnesia and willful ignorance to the anguish of embarrassing facts. Therefore, 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, raising embarrassing facts that we may not want to hear. 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—in other words, any transformations along the lines of generosity and compassion will be merely temporary or easily overturned.

Now if we are unable to understand the underlying messages of generosity, moral training, and meditation, we can easily lose our way because they will simply be empty practices. As mentioned earlier, the basis of these practices is the reduction of selfishness in order to be enlightened. It is easy for generosity to be a fig leaf for selfishness or for moral training to be a platform to boast one's superiority. Even Buddhist monks are not immune to this feeling. If meditation is not performed along the lines of Right Concentration, it can easily transform into various forms of perversity or derangement.

How can we apply these dhammic transformations to the daunting challenges of our times, especially the hostility, splitting, and aggression resulting from war and poverty? I am sure you are all aware that ahimsa or nonviolence is at the heart of Buddhism. Nonviolence is not merely a negation: not to kill; that is, the first precept of the panca-sila. It requires a positive act: to cherish all lives. Therefore, nonviolence is not equivalent with inaction as often misunderstood. War and poverty both kill. And the act of killing is physical as well as emotional or spiritual. They de-humanize both the oppressor and the victim. So nonviolence entails compassion towards both the oppressor and the victim. It unravels the dualism between the victimizer and the victim. For instance, to be anti-war or anti-American in the latest war against Iraq means to be pro-American, for we are also concerned about how the war and violence are de-humanizing a broad segment of American society or are bringing to the fore the most regressive features of American culture. Once the de-humanization process is halted, the parties in a conflict will see each other as equals and dialogues—or at least fruitful disagreements—may begin. The end of conversation spells terror.

Let me delve into the issue of war in a little more detail. Buddhism maintains that nonviolence is always possible even in the midst of war. In war, however, nonviolence can never be perfect; that is, absolute pacifism. Buddhism urges for perpetrating the least possible harm and for “proportionate” violence, which of course is a sticky or vague issue. But it is clear that for a modicum of nonviolence to be upheld in wars requires the upholding of human rights, for both civilians as well as prisoners of war.

There is still of course ambivalence in the Buddhist community's attitude towards warfare. There are of course Buddhist standing armies, and many Buddhist communities have been warlike. In the *Cakkavatti Sihanada Sutta* of the *Digha Nikaya*, the Buddha is said to have justified the existence of a military force for the purpose of protection; that is, as long as protection is done "according to dhamma." A ruler has the duty to protect all sentient beings in his or her domain, the Buddha suggests.

Sallie King comments, "It is quite obvious that offensive warfare is unjustifiable. The question before the Buddhist world is to what extent one can justify engaging in self-defensive warfare. The Buddhist tradition, in the end, offers no clear answer to this question." There will be deaths during and after a defensive war—war continues to kill after the ceasefire. Nonviolence may however rule out the use of nuclear weapons even for self-defense since they cause unnecessary suffering, cannot discriminate between civilian and military targets, can lead to genocide, inflict disproportionate violence, does not uphold human rights, and cause far reaching environmental damage.

To cultivate nonviolence, Buddhism also has the concept of karma. Karma is not about determinism or fatalism. Kenneth Kraft explains it well: "...karma is about action and the consequence of action. All our actions—and even our thoughts!—are continuously creating new karma. It's a dynamic process, unlike 'fate'. Buddhism holds that the laws of cause and effect apply in the realm of morality as well as the physical realm." As the opening verses of the *Dhammapada* teach us, "If one acts with a corrupt mind suffering follows. If one acts with a serene mind peace follows." Another famous verse from the *Dhammapada* puts it: "Hatred does not eradicate hatred. Only by loving-kindness is hatred dissolved. This law is ancient and eternal." We must be aware that how we act now will affect our life in the future. We reap what we sow and we cannot avoid the results of our karma. If we have this awareness then we will try our best to sow some seeds of peace. The law of karma reminds us to be responsible for the consequences of our actions (our commissions and omissions). It tries to nip the outbreak of violence in the bud, lest we prefer more violence and suffering. It tries to pre-empt the de-humanization process that violence entails.

'Cherish all lives' also applies to the poverty emanating from the free market system much touted by global economic institutions and national elites worldwide. At the superficial level, to cherish all lives here means a call to make the global economy more inclusive, to put an end to the conditions that foster economic apartheid, to bridge the material divide,

digital divide and so on. It calls for the redistribution of resources and protection of workers' rights and the environment, for instance. But then this line of reasoning also smacks of what the high priestesses of market-dominated globalization have been saying: poverty emanates from the lack of access to the global economy, and therefore more open-ness to market penetration is needed. Put another way, the market and techno-science, including its agents and advocates, are essentially good or neutral—only a better system of redistribution and guarantees against abuse or misuse are needed.

But what to cherish all lives here may also mean is to confront the prescribed conception of the good life and prosperity that is tied to the free market system—one that is rooted in consumerism, materialism, and uncritical faith in techno-science. To some extent it uses the Western way of life as the standard and portrays other ways of life as its lack. Thus it is a call to engage in free, open, and continuous dialogues to re-value what has been de-valued, to push marginalized or subjugated views to the center, and to de-center or re-articulate the hegemonic system of values. Since Buddhism denies the myth of the autonomous individual it is plausible to re-interpret the first precept in a more communitarian framework. Put differently, an attack on the individual's culture may also constitute an attack on him or her since culture—seen here as shared meanings—helps him or her make sense of life, serves as an anchor of his or her identity, etc. And therefore a rapid revision or an undermining of culture may not only cause the community to disintegrate but also pose a direct harm on the individual. To cherish all lives thus may be inextricable from the issue of multiculturalism and divergent visions of the good life. It is a call for the recognition of cultural differences and the transvaluation of values. This is of course a serious and ongoing debate among academics, theorists, policymakers, and citizens in many countries. My point here is merely to give the self a more communitarian outlook.

The Buddha's urging for generosity, compassion, and wisdom shapes Buddhism's vision of the good life, a life that manifests simplicity, humility, and self-reliance—values that are by and large antithetical to those of the Market.

The Buddha established the sangha as an alternative community whose basis was equality; alternative, that is, to the segregationist and hierarchical nature of mainstream society at the time which was influenced by Brahmanism. The Buddha stressed that in order to practice the three-fold training and be emancipated from greed, hatred and

delusion sangha members must lead a life of simplicity and humility to lessen their exploitation of other sentient beings and to embark on the road of wisdom. He encouraged them to be wary of the lures of Brahmanism and its elaborate ceremonies. He emphasized the importance of self-reliance as opposed to divine intervention or occultism (which technophilia is the latest manifestation). Most Buddhists have forgotten these warnings. They are attracted to Brahmanism. Worse, monks see themselves as possessors of divine and magical powers.

From a Buddhist perspective, to develop society or the so-called 'backward areas' does not simply mean the provision of material goods. It certainly does not mean refashioning the people in the rural areas in the image of the urban folks or the middle class. Rather it means to make them proud of their wisdom, heritage, identities and communities. It means persuading them to see the virtue of self-reliance and the truth of the dhamma—convincing them to rely on themselves and the dhamma in their struggle against consumerism and transnational capitalism.

For some, spiritual enlightenment is a personal quest. For others, such as those in the engaged Buddhist community, true enlightenment is built upon wisdom and compassion and is intrinsically connected with the well being of all others. The Mahayana tradition is particularly emphatic that all beings must be liberated before the bodhisattva attains enlightenment. So to counter the spiritual poverty and nihilistic tendencies in the present, I encourage you all to engage with the world and with others in the spirit of generosity, compassion and wisdom.

Sulak Sivaraksa