

Meditating on the Brink
Buddhism and violence in the post-9/11 world
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War with Iraq, paramilitary death squads in Colombia, the 11,000 people killed by guns each year in the United States, or the destruction on September 11th (2001 and 1973) – violence in one or more of its forms weighs heavily on all of us these days. To sort through the complex issues surrounding violence, some people have turned to religions, including Buddhism. In its treatment of violence, however, the Buddhist tradition offers mixed messages. On the one hand, Buddhist texts, doctrines, and ritual practices advocate ahimsâ, non-harming or nonviolence. The Buddha reportedly told his followers,

*All are afraid of the rod.
Of death all are afraid.
Having made oneself the example,
One should neither slay nor
cause to slay.²*

The first of the Five Precepts admonishes us to refrain from taking life, and early monastic codes list the taking of life as one of the four grave offenses.³ Mahayana texts carry this rejection of violence forward; for example, the Dashabhûmika-sûtra proclaims that Buddhists “must not hate any being and cannot kill a living creature even in thought.”⁴ Historically, Buddhists have formulated institutional and ritual supports for this ideal, as seen in the uposatha ceremony when Theravadan monks twice a month recite the precepts and confess transgressions.

Despite these apparently universalist admonitions against killing others, Buddhism equivocates. Several sutras recount how the historical Buddha killed people in his past lives to protect the innocent or the Dharma, and thereby also protect near-murderers⁵ and slanderers⁶ from karmic retribution in hell. The Mahâparinirvâna-sûtra allows for situations when not only the Buddha but also his followers must ignore the first precept and take up arms to protect the Dharma;⁷ this sutra also exhorts the laity to use force to protect the sangha.⁸ In philosophical treatises, Buddhist thinkers have articulated justifications of violence.⁹ Over the centuries some Buddhists have followed the lead of these reinterpretations and qualifications of the doctrine of ahimsâ: Buddhist sectarian groups have engaged in warfare and Buddhist institutions have publicly supported violence by rulers and their armies.

This is the tradition in which contemporary Buddhists find themselves. To negotiate their way through the issues surrounding violence, they are left to their own exegetical devices. At the very least, however, Buddhism offers resources for their critiques of, personal wrestling with, and active responses to violence, that is to say, resources for theoretical analysis, religious practice, and political praxis.

Insofar as Buddhism strives to cultivate insight into conditioned arising (Skt. pratîtya-samutpâda), Buddhists are compelled to explore the causes of violence. A genuinely Buddhist response, for example, to the September 11th violence is to probe its causes. Was it caused by “evil doers” whose ontological make-up compelled them to lash out at all that is good? Was it caused by fanatics, evil or otherwise, who hate “the American way of life” and take special

offense at women in tank tops? Should we stop our causal analysis there, as is the preference of President Bush? What about several hundred years of Western imperialism and the concomitant oppression and humiliation of Muslims? What about the lingering effects of U.S. support for – and what was later perceived as betrayal of – Osama Bin Laden and other Muslims who fought against the Soviets in Afghanistan?¹⁰ What has been the causal role of U.S. support for repressive regimes in the Muslim world, or the lingering U.S. military presence near sacred Islamic sites in Saudi Arabia? Or U.S. stances on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict? How might we analyze the role of globalization in exacerbating the international maldistribution of wealth, especially in the face of longstanding Islamic commitment to helping those in need? And what has been the role of Wāḥḥābīya (Islamist puritanism), especially when backed by royalty and wealth, or unpopular Arab regimes' deflection of local discontent away from themselves and onto the bogeyman of a decadent, secular West?

The need to pursue systemic analysis of causal factors, direct and indirect, is perhaps most pressing for Buddhists in the United States. As Eqbal Ahmad has astutely pointed out, when it comes to “terrorism,” the U.S. government demonstrates little interest in rigorously exploring causation.¹¹ Indeed, the Bush Administration has largely succeeded in making its representation of the cause – evil-doers who hate freedom, democracy, and other “Western values” – nearly hegemonic in U.S. media coverage and civic discourse, effectively marginalizing analyses of terrorism that extend beyond such facile causal explanations.

Though Buddhism may not offer any distinctive tools for analyzing the broader historical, political, and economic causes of 9/11, it does offer a framework for exploring psychological causes of violence. Central to the Buddhist analysis of the cause of dukkha (suffering) is the doctrine of the Three Poisons: ignorance, greed, and hatred. Buddhism prods us to look at these defilements in ourselves and in those who might confront us, and how, in each of us as both perpetrator and victim of violence, these hindrances derive from certain conditions and cause certain actions. The third of these defilements, hatred, or, as the Pali term is sometimes translated, anger, relates most directly to violence. The force of the Buddhist argument about the Three Poisons compels us to investigate the contours and source of Al Qaeda anger, while cautioning Americans about our own anger, especially insofar as it may distort our analysis and trick us into choosing rash vengeance.

Then there is the poison of greed. How has American greed, especially our craving for cheap oil, fostered anger around the world? And what about the cravings of those who would exploit the discontent of impoverished Muslims to promote apocalyptic agendas?

And how should we work with ignorance, whether the broad ideological brush that paints the West as Satan or the rationalizations and denials offered by Americans pursuing economic gain in the guise of promoting freedom and democracy, and in this way denying moral culpability for the uglier dimensions of our foreign policy and international business dealings? How can we overcome widespread ignorance of certain issues that results from corporate influence on the media? How might we respond to the blindspots in Francis Fukuyama's triumphalist rhetoric about the “end of history” and Samuel Huntington's overstated civilizational explanations of global tensions? Despite what the declarations of the world, it is not at all clear that we are engaged primarily in a class of civilizations. Though civilizational factors do play a

causal role, Huntington's insistence on them masks key factors, such as the economic and political ramifications of globalization.¹²

Another Buddhist analytical tool is the Zen critique of the kind of dualistic conceptualization that is glaringly obvious in the simplistic and incendiary dichotomies between "good" and "evil" that have been offered by Osama Bin Laden and George W. Bush alike. One does not need to be a Buddhist to recognize the polarizing nature of such essentialist characterizations and the degree to which they lead to ideological rigidity. This reification of an "us" and a "them" as inherently "good" and "evil" also exacerbates the objectification and dehumanization of those who threaten us. The wartime portrayal of the enemy as evil, or fanatical, that is, irrational and vaguely insane (Saddam) if not bestial ("Mad Dog" Khaddafi), and hence not meriting moral standing, functions at the extreme end of the dualistic epistemology roundly criticized by Zen, the tendency to experience reality only as a set of objects apart from the self and to become ensconced in that outlook when dichotomous judgments are passed on "self" and "other." The view of the "other" as Satan, evil, an evil doer, or a subhuman animal becomes especially dangerous when the other is seen as deserving extermination, even if this "purification" of the world runs the risk of prompting massive retaliatory violence by those being attacked. History attests to how dehumanizing representations can trigger annihilationist programs if not full-blown apocalyptic crusades. While Bin Laden, Bush, and their apocalyptic supporters may not be disposed to recognize the ambiguity of human actors and the dangers of starkly dualistic characterization, in the service of more nuanced and productive analysis we need to reject their dualism. (As a Buddhist I also take issue with the naïve dualism [and veiled threat] in the president's statements about being either "with us" or "against us" in the war on terrorism, especially when most countries are neither.)

Though my talk of "apocalyptic" crusades may border on hyperbole here, I am struck by how the messianic if not apocalyptic visions of certain evangelical and fundamentalist Christians in and around the Bush Administration have colored rhetoric about the war on terrorism (and have in certain Christian circles generated fervent support for the state of Israel as a necessary condition for the Second Coming of Christ).¹³ Possible apocalyptic tendencies are worth monitoring as the U.S. strives to reassert its invulnerability and superpower omnipotence by massively deploying military power in Afghanistan, pledging to hunt down every last Al Qaeda member ("dead or alive"), and, as outlined in the Bush Administration's recent National Security Strategy, attempting to dominate any government deemed threatening, whether the Taliban or the current Iraqi regime. (As Bernard Lewis has argued, radical Islamists may be trying to reassert past Islamic domination as well.) Drawing from its own resources and thinkers like Robert J. Lifton, Buddhism can shed light on these attempts by our collective ego to regain supposed invulnerability by ridding the world of evil dangers, especially insofar as these attempts emerge from our fear, "psychic numbing," and the hope of controlling our world, if not death itself (a kind of grand overcompensation?).

Needless to say, violence in general and 9/11 in particular are not understood by most Buddhists as mere theoretical problems, issues to be addressed solely through the intellect. Like most people, I feel 9/11 in my gut. And it is there, in the center of my breathing and my practice of zazen (Zen meditation), that I sit with the images and the loss. Zazen constitutes the primary container for my own fear, anger, and sadness around those events and all violence. And as

something with which I sit, the attacks on September 11th offer a stark lesson in impermanence. They make me aware of the fragility of our bodies, loved ones, accomplishments, possessions, and other things we might be tempted to use as stones in the walls of the self-protective ego. Those attacks especially challenge any false sense of security I might have had as a privileged resident of the United States.

And at the collective level, 9/11 bursts the bubble of U.S. exceptionalism: the idea, the delusion, that with our wealth, military might, and geographical location we are invulnerable, or at least generally immune to the insecurities faced by other people around the world. The events of September 11th provided an opportunity to recognize the violence and vulnerability with which most of humankind lives, and not just the violence of ostensibly singular events like 9/11 but violence on an ongoing, less conspicuous, or less acknowledged scale, as seen in the structural violence of economic exploitation and political repression, as well as in state violence, if not state terrorism. September 11th also provided a wake-up call insofar as it opened American eyes to the anger many people around the world feel toward the United States. It offered a jarring call to glimpse a world free from the distortions wrought by our entanglement in the particular American configuration of greed, hatred, and ignorance.

But September 11th is not something that happened 18 months ago. It was a long day, and it isn't over. It still moves in all of us, and none of us has the luxury of gazing at it retrospectively from some vantage of regained security. At the emotional level, perhaps the most skilful response is to sit with, and in, the event. Zazen offers a structure for sitting with and being mindful of our shock, fear of death, anxiety around recent economic vulnerability, clinging to whatever wealth or imagined security we might have, and desire for revenge.

Buddhist practice can also help loosen our fixed senses of self, entrenched characterizations of others, and rigid ideologies. It can promote the epistemological breadth, conceptual flexibility, and fluidity of response necessary for encountering violence without slipping into the vicious circle of attack and counter-attack, or of competing and ultimately mutually-reinforcing discourses of suffering and victimhood. It can help us overcome the Three Poisons by fostering the antidotes: generosity, loving-kindness (or compassion), and wisdom. By cultivating mindfulness we can see more deeply into the process of conditioned arising on a global scale, recognize the need to respond with wisdom and compassion to what we encounter, and deal skillfully with the anger and power of others. (And at the deepest religious level, Buddhist practice can help us confirm the "place" beyond security and insecurity, beyond pre-9/11 and post-9/11.)

Zazen and other forms of meditation can also cultivate the kind of openness and sincere listening so foreign to angry terrorists and arrogant Americans alike. Not that we should accept all that we hear, whether the simplistic rants of President Bush about a new crusade or Islamist tirades about Uncle Sam as the Great Satan. Nor does careful listening preclude skilful responses: we do need international police and policing actions, far preferable to a "war" on terrorism, a mental construct that, along with Bush's comment about a new crusade, feeds directly into the Manichean worldview of those who would all too gladly fight a war to the ultimate end.¹⁴ That is to say, in the stead of the rule of military might in a war on terrorism, a more skilful and compassionate response to 9/11 is the rule of law, ideally through a collaborative international

police force and international criminal court that could apprehend, arrest, prosecute, and isolate those who would commit or support terror, whether Osama Bin Laden, Augusto Pinochet, or Henry Kissinger.

Part of the Buddhist critique of ignorance can take the form of rejecting self-interested unilateralism and calling on the United States to promote democratic self-determination, global distributive justice, and consistency in its denunciations of terroristic violence. From a Buddhist perspective, this seems to be in the ultimate interest of the United States', not as a hegemonic superpower trying to maintain its dominance, but as a champion of multilateralism, of synergistic power –with others rather than them (as Joanna Macy has put it), of a community of nations cooperating to meet the basic needs of all people. In such a global community, those who might fear Islam could recognize and find commonality with traditional Islamic commitments to helping the poor and promoting social justice. They could join with Muslims as co-conspirators in a movement (not a war) against poverty, violence, and environmental degradation, a movement for justice, peace, and ecological health, for a world in which ignorance, greed, and hatred have been replaced by wisdom, generosity, and compassion.

Of course, this long-term utopic vision of a Buddhistically mutual and multilateral world is all fine and good, but the short-term scenario demands attention. What do we do in the meantime, in the face of continued acts of violence, like those on 9/11? In the Dhammapada we read,

*Not by enmity are enmities quelled,
Whatever the occasion here.
By the absence of enmity are
they quelled.
This is an ancient truth.¹⁵*

But is not violence in response to imminent threat to innocent life acceptable from a Buddhist perspective, at least according to certain sutras and treatises? And how can we protect ourselves and still avoid the vicious cycle of violence, of attack, counterattack, and increasing distrust and long-term harm on both sides, serving only those who would recruit for Al Qaeda or lobby for an aggressive U.S. stance in the world? Might Buddhists be able to articulate their own just-war theory, a doctrine of acceptable violence as a last resort, in the face of an imminent threat of the loss of (innocent) life, at a minimal level of force, and without enmity, as an expression of a commitment to minimal suffering, not of ignorance, greed, and hatred? Or is just-war theory a slippery slope, a method that is easily co-opted, and hard to apply whenever reliable and accurate information proves hard to obtain in the midst of possible disinformation and fearmongering? In the aftermath of 9/11 and on the brink of escalated conflict in the Middle East, these questions seem worth pondering, ideally in dialogue with our cousins in other religions.

Notes

1. On September 11th, 1973, with U.S. backing, General Augusto Pinochet toppled the democratically elected president of Chile, Salvadore Allende. Paralleling the loss of life on September 11th, 2001, approximately 3000-4000 people were killed, virtually all by Pinochet forces during and following the coup.
2. Carter, John Ross, and Mahinda Palihawadana, trs, *The Dhammapada* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 25.

3. In the Pâtimokkha (in Sanskrit, Prâtimoksa), a code of monastic precepts, killing another human being is one of the four “offenses of defeat,” and as punishment for this transgression the guilty monk or nun is to be immediately expelled from the order. Charles Prebish, *Buddhist Monastic Discipline: The Sanskrit Pratimoksa Sutras of the Mahasamghikas and Mulasarvastivadins* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1975), p. 11.
4. Cited in Har Dayal, *The Bodhisattva Doctrine in Buddhist Sanskrit Literature* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, and Co., 1931), p. 199; quoted by Kenneth Kraft, ed., *Inner Peace, World Peace: Essays on Buddhism and Nonviolence* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), p. 5.
5. The Upâyakaushalya-sûtra relates how in a past life the Buddha, while still a bodhisattva on the path to becoming a buddha, killed a man who was on the verge of killing others, and thereby ensured that the would-be murderer would not suffer karmic consequences in hell. Although the Buddha’s act of killing exposed him to the possibility of time in hell himself, his action was compassionate and hence advanced him on his path and caused the man he killed to be reborn in a heavenly realm. Paul Williams, *Mahâyâna Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations* (New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 145.
6. In the Mahâparinirvâna-sûtra the Buddha relates how in a past life he killed several brahmins for slandering the Dharma, thereby steering them clear of the retribution that presumably would have been caused by further slander. Williams, p. 161.
7. One passage reads, “Men of devout faith, defenders of the True Dharma, need not observe the five precepts or practice the rules of proper behavior. Rather they should carry knives and swords, bows and arrows, prongs and lances.” Quoted by Nichiren, *Risshô-ankoku-ron*, in Philip Yampolsky, tr., *Selected Writings of Nichiren* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), p. 33.
8. Williams, p. 159.
9. In his chapter on ethics in the Bodhisattva-bhûmi (Bodhisattva Stage), Asanga (310-90) seems to draw from the Upâyakaushalya-sûtra in advancing the utilitarian argument that killing one person can be justified if it functions to save the lives of others or to prevent the potential murderer from falling into hell. Mark Tatz, tr., *Asanga’s Chapter on Ethics with the Commentary of Tsong-Kha-Pa, The Basic Path to Awakening, the Complete Bodhisattva* (Lewiston/Queenston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1986), pp. 70-72.
10. Eqbal Ahmad, “Straight Talk on Terrorism,” *Monthly Review* 58/8 (January 2002), p. 53.
11. In an essay on terrorism, Eqbal Ahmad cites a New York Times article about how the foreign minister of Yugoslavia in 1985 asked Secretary of State George Shultz about the causes of violence perpetrated by Palestinians; in response Shultz “went a bit red in the face. He pounded on the table and told the visiting foreign minister, There is no connection with any cause. Period.” Ahmad, “Straight Talk on Terrorism,” p. 48.
12. Revealingly, in *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Huntington virtually ignores globalization and such institutions as the WTO. In an essay entitled, “The West Against the Rest? A Buddhist Perspective on Huntington” (forthcoming in David Hawkin and Michael Hadley, eds, *Confronting Technology, Globalization, and War: Challenging the Gods of the Twenty-first Century* (SUNY Press)), David R. Loy offers a critique of the 1993 article by Huntington that formed the basis of *The Clash of Civilizations*.

13. In this regard, the a-teleological if not dysteleological character of Buddhism, which some have deemed a shortcoming for Buddhist social ethics, may actually be a blessing.
14. A “war” on terrorism logically calls for warriors, which could include Buddhists, given all the talk in Tibetan and Zen circles about warriors, spiritual or otherwise. But perhaps a more useful model than the “warrior” is that of the compassionate police officer, doing his or her best to help the community and using violence only begrudging when it is an unavoidable last resort to restrain those who would do harm to others.
15. Dhammapada, p. 3.

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