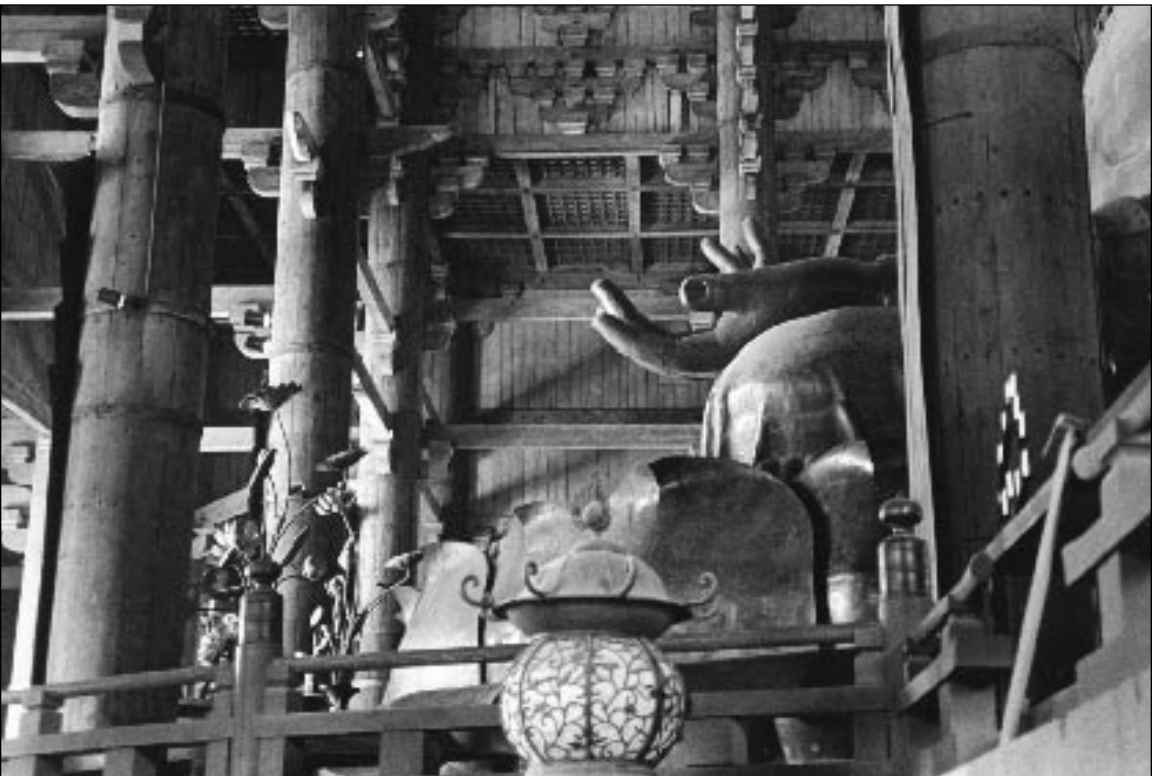


What Can Buddhism Offer a Violent World?

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The Hand of the Buddha, China; photo, Laura Crosby

INTRODUCTION

I begin with two well-known stories, the kind that even Buddhist children know. The first concerns the robber and serial killer, Angulimala. Angulimala terrorises a number of villages, and garlands his neck with the fingers of those he has killed. The Buddha enters the killer's territory, alone – others had only dared travel in groups. Angulimala spots him, decides to kill and leaps towards him as he had done before with humans, elephants and even running horses. But, however fast he moves, he

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finds that he cannot reach the serenely walking robed figure of the Buddha. So he stops, stands still, and calls out: “Stand still hermit, Stand still.” The Buddha, still walking, replies: “I am standing still, Angulimala, you too stand still.” Angulimala remonstrates: “It is I who am standing still, not you.” The Buddha replies: “I, Angulimala, am standing still, having laid aside all violence against beings, You are still unrestrained in this. So I am standing still. You are not.”¹

The result of this is that Angulimala is ordained a *bhikkhu*, a monk. He is utterly changed. All violence is eradicated.

The second story concerns the Buddha mediating between two warring parties. The Sakyas and Koliyas live on opposite sides of the river Rohini, which is used to irrigate the crops of both peoples. The two had co-operated over some things, such as the building of a common dam. But drought then came and, with it, fears that the river would not yield water enough to bring crops to harvest on both sides. The Koliyas suggest that all the water should be diverted to their side, perhaps meaning to share the harvest with the Sakyans. The Sakyans are suspicious. They do not want to be dependent or to see their crops die. The result? The conflict becomes nasty, with each side preparing for war, not so much because of the water as because of the insults that had been hurled at the royal families. The Buddha is eventually called in. Immediately his spiritual presence has an effect. After all, the Buddha belonged to the Sakyan clan. There is shame in both parties. But there is also a hiding of the real cause of the conflict – wounded pride. The Buddha’s mediation includes

a dialogue that goes something like this, according to John McConnell’s rendering of the Dhammapada Commentary version of the story:

The Buddha: “How much is water worth, Great King?”

The King, “Very little, reverend Sir.”

The Buddha, “How much are warriors worth, Great King?”

The King, “Warriors are beyond price, Reverend Sir.”

The Buddha, “It is not fitting that because of a little water you should destroy warriors who are beyond price.”

There is then silence. The Buddha adds,

“Were I not present today you would set flowing a river of blood. You have acted in a most unbecoming manner. You live in enmity, indulging in the five kinds of hatred. I live free from hatred.”²

The two parties then draw back from conflict.

In the first narrative, an individual is utterly turned around – converted in the true sense of the word. In the second, the same happens to ruling parties fuelling war between two communities. In each, the Buddha transforms violent situations.

Do these narratives have any relevance now? I believe they have. The world of the historical Buddha was different from ours but not so entirely different that no lessons can be learnt from it.

When it comes to violence between individuals, ethnic groups, nations, or groups of nations, I would like to argue that Buddhism can offer wisdom in three areas: understanding violence; preventing violence; offering alternatives to violence. My approach will concentrate mainly, but not entirely, on Theravāda Buddhism, and I will continue to draw from narratives in the Theravāda Canon. I first began to study Buddhism in Sri Lanka, in the context of that country's long-standing ethnic war. As I made personal relationships and studied the religious texts, certain things leapt out at me, a western woman with a Christian social activist background. It is these things that I intend to draw on. Not all of it is new. And it won't be comprehensive. I can only offer pointers within each area.

UNDERSTANDING VIOLENCE

One popular reaction to extreme violence whether perpetrated by an individual or a group is: "How could any human/s do that?" Of suicide bombers we exclaim, "How can a human blow himself and others up?" Of those in the Third Reich who helped Hitler's genocide we cry, "How could ordinary men – husbands, fathers, lovers – carry on with their everyday life and at the same time send thousands of Jews to be killed in gas chambers?" It is as though the violent ones are placed in a sub-human category, far away from us, the civilized, peaceful ones.

We will never understand violence if we stay at this level. Buddhism can help here in two ways. First, it can teach us that violence is to be expected in a



Bodhi Tree, Thailand; photo, Cetta Kenney

world that is in the grip of greed, hatred and delusion. Second, it can force us to see that the perpetrators of violence are not aberrations within the human race. They are formed by a web of conditioning factors that implicate many more people than the actual perpetrator.

Some of you will know that Theravāda Buddhism shows the newly awakened Buddha hesitating before deciding to teach, believing that the path he had discovered was too demanding for anyone to understand. At that moment in his thought, so the story goes, the god Sahampati, in fear that the Buddha would not teach, leaves the Brahma world to kneel before the Buddha. He pleads that the Buddha should teach. “There are people with less defilements, who will understand,” he points out. “Look with your Buddha eye at the world and you will see that this is so.” The Buddha, realising that Sahampati is right, chooses to teach.

When I first met this story, the view of the world it contained resonated with me. All schools of Buddhism stress that birth as a human is precious, a chance for spiritual growth that we squander at our peril. All affirm that life contains joy. However, the Buddhist view of the world, quoting one Pali text, is that it is “smothered, enveloped, tangled like a ball of thread, covered as with blight, twisted up like a grass-ropes” with craving, *tanha*.³ Except for some spiritually advanced people who can choose their rebirth, all humans find themselves in this world, according to Buddhism, because their minds and hearts are not free of the forces that cause violence. The Buddha saw this at his enlightenment. And this is why he hesitated to teach.

Buddhism says that our world is imperfect because it is permeated by greed and hatred rooted in ignorance. The potential for violence is very much part of this. It contributes to *dukkha*, the unsatisfactoriness that the First Noble Truth speaks of. If we accept this – I

certainly do – then the arising of violence should not surprise us. Buddhism does not have the problem that some theistic traditions have: “Why does a God of love allow this violence to happen?” And Buddhism can perhaps help theistic traditions here.

I must hasten to say that I am not speaking of an acceptance of violence in the sense of becoming hardened to it or opting out of conflict transformation, but of an understanding that violence is to be expected in a world where only a few, relatively speaking, have ears to hear the radical message of the Buddha or indeed the non-violent message of other religions. And the corollary of this is that transforming violence is a long and arduous task, not to be undertaken by the fainthearted. Sudden breakthroughs are possible such as happened with Angulimala, but the setbacks are numberless when we, the unenlightened, attempt it, as the history of conflict in places such as Sri Lanka and Israel/Palestine show.

The second way in which Buddhism can help us understand violence is through pointing us to the importance of cutting through symptoms to causes. Analysis of cause is central to Buddhism. It beats through the Four Noble Truths. If craving arises, suffering or disease arises; if craving does not arise, disease cannot arise either. I have written before about what can happen in the mind before it veers towards violence.⁴ Here I would like to look at another narrative from the Theravāda texts, the Cakkavatti Sihanāda Sutta, *The Lion’s Roar on the Turning of the Wheel*. It is one of only a few discourses in the Pali Canon that places the causes of suffering

in the shortcomings of the state rather than the in the individual.

The discourse charts the deterioration and brutalisation of a state over a massive period of time. The trigger for this deterioration is a King who does not give property to the poor. Poverty therefore increases, and, with it, stealing. The King's attempts to redress this by giving goods to those who steal only makes the situation worse. When people steal in order to gain something from the King, the King beheads one of them. This sets the next precedent. People not only steal but kill the people they steal from. Then they begin to lie about their actions and denounce each other, using harsh speech. Incest, excessive greed and lack of respect for parents and religious teachers follow. Throughout this process, human physiology changes. Humans move from having life-spans of 80,000 years to having only a hundred years and then ten years, and their beauty decreases. A point is reached when there is a sword period during which people regard each other as wild beasts and kill indiscriminately.

There are other Buddhist narratives that chart the deterioration of human society.⁵ Few others, though, claim that the initial cause is a failure of the state to care for the poor. This is the conditioning factor that moulds what follows. It is not that those who kill as a result of this failure are absolved of all guilt. They are not. They have choice and will what they do. But it is recognized that they are conditioned by failures in governance.

A contemporary poem by the Vietnamese monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, *Call Me by My True Names*, further illus-

trates this. Introducing the poem, Thich Nhat Hanh explains that it is about three people: a 12 year old girl, who throws herself into the sea after being raped by a pirate as she was crossing the Gulf of Siam in the Vietnamese War; the pirate who rapes the girl, is born in a poor village, uneducated; and Thich Nhat Hanh, angry at the event but realising that he could have been that sea pirate if he had been born in the same circumstances. So he writes in the poem:

*I am the twelve-year-old girl,
refugee on a small boat,
who throws herself into the ocean
after being raped by a sea pirate.
And I am the pirate,
my heart not yet capable
of seeing and loving.⁶*

In the poem, Thich Nhat Hanh identifies with both the girl and the pirate. The pirate's deed is not justified nor the ghastly fruit of it minimized. But the poem seeks for a way of showing that all of us, the circumstances being right, could have been both the pirate and the girl.

I would suggest that we need that kind of understanding when we face violence now. Some would want to condemn terrorists as intrinsically evil, categorically 'other'. But studies of terrorists have shown that terrorists are often ordinary people, who have become open to paths of violence because they have been victims of violence, discrimination and injustice. The challenge for those who seek to end violence in such situations is whether the causes of terrorism can be sufficiently identified and addressed.

PREVENTING VIOLENCE

In this section I will juxtapose reason and empathy. At the Rohini River, the Buddha prevented violence by appealing to the value of human life. Human life, he argued, should not be sacrificed to feed greed or pride, or fear about livelihood. And the Sakyans and Koliyans listened, perhaps because they knew the Buddha and his teachings and were ashamed. In other words, the Buddha could appeal to an already present religious awareness. And he did this by offering a mirror to the two sides so that they saw the unwholesome in their minds and changed. It was an approach characterised by reason, informed by

what Buddhists call skilful means, in other words the ability to meet people where they are. Such reason is needed today. For we are doomed to failure in conflict resolution if our reasoning is not skilful in the Buddhist sense. If we impose on others values, opinions, and judgements that relate only to our own construction of the situation and not theirs, a hardening of attitudes may result. The flip side of reason, therefore, must be empathy.

In one discourse within the Pali Canon, the Buddha speaks with an elephant trainer, and itemises four types of person: the ascetic who tortures himself; the one with a livelihood that tor-



Elephant camp, Thailand; photo, Cetta Kenney

tures others, for instance a butcher, a hunter or an executioner; the one who tortures both self and others, for instance an ascetic who organises sacrifices; and the one who neither torments self nor others.⁷ The elephant trainer adamantly insists he could support none of the first three, particularly those who torture others, because all “yearn for happiness and recoil from pain”.⁸ This is where empathy starts in Buddhism. It is a motif that runs through the Theravâda Canon, whether seen in *muditâ* or appreciative joy – the quality of mind that can feel joy at another’s success – or in refusing to hurt others because all seek happiness, fear pain and tremble at the thought of death.⁹ The next step is moving over to the other side to glimpse what kind of happiness the other seeks and what kind of pain they are avoiding.

Let me illustrate how important this is by taking the example of Sri Lanka. Both parties to the conflict in Sri Lanka see themselves as the victims and as the minority. The Tamil people are the numerical minority and see themselves as the victims of discrimination, racism and violence at the hands of the majority. But the majority Sinhala people, most of them Buddhist, also see themselves as a minority in the wider geographical region, which includes millions of Tamils in Tamil Nadu, India. They also see themselves as the victims of the terrorism of the major Tamil militant group, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Time and time again these entrenched views have brought the peace process to stalemate.

If there is to be progress, a willingness, on both sides, to move over to the other, empathy is necessary. It is

necessary for the Sinhala people to see that the Tamil people have legitimate grounds for saying that discrimination and violence have been used against them. Tamils, similarly, need to move far enough over into the Sinhala side to see that many Buddhists have a genuine fear that Buddhism in Sri Lanka is under threat and are justified in being angry over the innocent victims of the LTTE’s suicide bombers.

Among the questions, therefore, that Buddhism can pose to a world of conflict is: how far are mediators in conflict helping those locked in conflict understand the grievances of “the other” and their causes? And, when causes are uncovered, conflict will not be resolved until they are addressed.

OFFERING ALTERNATIVES TO CONFLICT

One alternative to conflict that Buddhism can offer to the world is an icon of life lived according to the non-violent message of the five precepts, namely the undertakings not to harm living beings, not to take what is not given, not to engage in sexual misconduct, not to speak falsely and not to ingest substances that intoxicate or cloud the mind. Millions of Buddhists across Asia have tried to live according to these from the time of the Buddha. There are Buddhists now who pride themselves on a life lived without killing even an ant or a mosquito.

Although such things as the silence of Japanese Buddhists when Japan militarized in the mid-twentieth century and the support of some Sinhala Buddhists for a military solution to

Sri Lanka's ethnic war have dented the image of Buddhism as non-violent, it has not destroyed it. Buddhists are still able to offer the world a non-violent icon, which can draw people back to what is important, by living the message that non-harming is more important than consumerism, greed and power-seeking. The Dalai Lama's refusal to resist the Chinese domination of Tibet violently has added living weight to this iconic role.

The power and potential of this iconic role can be seen in the Angulimala story. At first, the Buddha uses *iddhi*, supernatural powers, to disarm the killer. But it is not the supernatural that converts Angulimala. It is the power of the Buddha's wisdom and compassion expressed through absolute fearlessness in the face of a threat to his life. The non-violence at the heart of Buddhism is more than a refusal to kill an ant. It concerns facing the forces of violence without fearing for self, with a mind of compassion.

One passage from the Theravāda Canon that I find myself quoting frequently in inter faith situations is from the Simile of the Saw (*Kakacūpama Sutta*) in the *Majjhima Nikāya*. It begins with the story of Kali, a maid whose mistress is known for always being peaceful. Kali decides to test whether her mistress can be provoked into violence, by getting up late. The first time she does this, the mistress shows anger, but only in words. When Kali continues to test, getting up later and later, words turn to action and Kali receives a blow on the head with a rolling pin. The mistress's reputation for peacefulness is shattered. Having told the story, the Buddha then warns the monks around him that this could also happen

to them. He then sets out a radical path of mind and speech training. The discourse climaxes with this:

Bhikkhus, even if bandits were to sever you savagely limb by limb with a two-handled saw, he who gave rise to a mind of hatred towards them would not be carrying out my teaching. Herein, bhikkhus, you should train thus: "our minds will remain unaffected, and we shall utter no evil words; we shall abide compassionate for their welfare, with a mind of loving kindness, without inner hate. We shall abide pervading them with a mind imbued with loving-kindness; and starting with them, we shall abide pervading the all-encompassing world with a mind imbued with loving-kindness, abundant exalted, immeasurable, without hostility and without ill will."¹⁰

This passage teaches that rigorous adherence to the Five Precepts is not enough if the mind is not also trained to respond non-violently even when personal safety is at risk.

A further message that Buddhism must offer to the world is that we need not be imprisoned by our conditioning. If Buddhism is to offer anything to a violent world, that stereotype must be eradicated. I'd like to go back to the *Cakkavatti Shanāda Sutta*. During the sword period, so the story goes, there are some people who think, "Let us not kill or be killed by anyone! Let us make for some grassy thickets or jungle-recesses or clumps of trees, or rivers

hard to ford or inaccessible mountains, and live on roots and fruits of the forest.” In other words they leave society and go into retreat. When they come out of retreat, they realize that society can be changed. They greet each other in peace, as human beings, and decide to abstain from taking of life. The slow process of regaining what had been lost is then begun. What began as a top-down development – the anarchy that results from the failure of a King or state to provide for the poor – ends with a bottom-up movement as people on the ground initiate change. The imprisoning downward spiral is broken through people detaching themselves from violence and changing the way they see “the other”.

Let me conclude. All religions can offer wisdom to those who seek to make our world less violent. I’ve outlined three areas of conflict-transformation that could benefit from Buddhist insights: understanding violence; preventing violence; and creating alternatives to violence. My hope is that these insights will not remain in conference halls and meditation centres, but will inform action in the *dukkha* of our world.

NOTES

¹*Angulimâla Sutta, Majjhima Nikâya* II 97-105.

²See John A. McConnell, *Mindful Mediation: A Handbook for Buddhist Peacemakers*, Bangkok: Buddhist Research Institute, Mahachula University: 315-325.

³*Anguttara Nikâya* ii 213.

⁴See, for example, Elizabeth J. Harris, 1994, *Violence and Disruption in Society: A Study of the Early Buddhist Texts*, The Wheel Publication No. 392/393, Kandy, Buddhist Publication Society: 21-33.

⁵See for example, the *Aggañña Sutta* of the *Dîgha Nikâya* (DN): DN iii 58-98.

⁶From Thich Nhat Hanh, 1999, *Call Me by My True Names: The Collected Poems of Thich Nhat Hanh*, Berkeley, California: Parallax Press.

⁷*Kandaraka Sutta, Majjhima Nikâya*, I 339-349.

⁸*Kandaraka Sutta, Majjhima Nikâya*, I 341.

⁹See for example Dhammapada verses 129, 130.

¹⁰*Kakacûpama Sutta (The Simile of the Saw), Majjhima Nikâya* I 129.]

¹¹*Dîgha Nikâya* iii 73.

