

The Buddha Taught Nonviolence, Not Pacifism

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In the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, I have found myself musing about nonviolence, its contributions, its limits, and its place in the Buddha's teaching. I have also been surprised to hear many of my acquaintances confuse the Buddha's teaching of nonviolence with pacifism (which I will here take to mean the objection to any kind of violence for any reason), so that, due to their confusion, they find themselves either rejecting nonviolence as hopelessly naive and inadvertently destructive, or embracing the politicized group allegiances of pacifism, which they imagine incorrectly to present what the Buddha taught.

The Buddha did not intend to form either a religious or political position, nor a philosophy of society. Historically, he lived before the era of organized, systematic theorizing about the human collective. He addressed himself as an individual to individuals. Even when he spoke to large groups, as he frequently did, he focused on individual responsibility. He understood every group - for example, the democratic states that existed in the India of his times - as resting upon the insight, conscience, and actions of each of its participants. He had no theory of, nor belief in, supervening collective structures of society or government that could amend or replace the bedrock of individual choice.

Rather than a theologian or a systems thinker, the Buddha was a liberator, a spiritually attained practitioner and teacher of the path to nibbana, freedom from hate, delusion, and fear. His goal was to help as many beings as possible live in equanimity, harmony, and loving kindness. He was against all embracing belief systems - a position that confounded many of his contemporaries, and that still puzzles people today who want to understand what "ism," what philosophy, he propounded. Many people still yearn to find in his words some "Buddhist fundamentalism" by which they can anchor ideological convictions and security against the turmoil of life.

The "Dhamma," or path to liberation for which the Buddha was spokesman, is not an idea but a mode of conduct and a way of life that leads to personal realization. Its goal is to release its practitioners from authorities and ideologies, not anarchistically or capriciously, but through training, by deepening their personal experiences of the nature of their true self and its ethical implications. It is through these long cultivated, gradually deepening experiences that the Buddha led his followers to autonomy from ideas philosophies, scriptures, even from himself. His classic similes focused on direct tangible experience. Like a man from whom a poisoned arrow is removed, the student of Dhamma will experience relief from pain. Like a man who eats nourishing food, the student of Dhamma will know the taste of liberation. These direct experiences of life's meanings

and values are the Buddha's teaching. Many practitioners of Dhamma do not call themselves "Buddhists," just as the Buddha never did.

Morality is the first guidepost on the path the Buddha taught. Why is morality given so much initial attention in a non ideological, experiential path?

In order to see oneself, to know oneself, to experience one's own true nature, one must focus observation repeatedly, continuously, as a lifetime practice, on who one really is. This lifestyle of awareness, meditation, and observation requires openmindedness - hence the Buddha's emphasis on freedom from rigid beliefs - but the path also requires patience, calm, and integrity. To make mindful observations of oneself as a way of life, one needs a steady, focused mind. This can only be obtained when honesty, harmony, modesty and sincerity are already adhered to. It is for this reason that whenever the Buddha taught Dhamma, he started with the five moral precepts: not to steal, lie, use intoxicants, commit sexual misconduct... and not to kill. Nonviolence is a prerequisite to, and the first step of the Buddha's teaching. It appears not as a belief, but as a practical necessity to the intentional and aware path of Dhamma. Initially, for the student of the Buddha, nonviolence is a psychological necessity for self-development.

However, this utilitarian and personal introduction to nonviolence as a moral precept is only the surface layer of the Buddha's teaching. Continuing to eschew ideology or philosophy, the Buddha's guidance was toward experiences that deepen discernment. The student is led to the point where he or she sees themselves clearly through the practice of meditation. What happens to the moral precept of nonviolence when a person has lived a way of life that directs them to encounter the transience of personal existence, the insubstantiality of ourselves, of our perceptions, of our viewpoints, of our history, of our world? Is there any value or meaning to nonviolence for a small, temporary being, born out of past causes, destined to live briefly then die, a passing aggregate of mind and matter scintillating for a moment in the vast corridors of endless time?

As a student of the Buddha matures on the path, he or she opens to new perspectives, and the mind becomes more able to see various viewpoints simultaneously. The path the Buddha taught is a deepening realization, without reduction to doctrine. Experiential apprehension of nonviolence replaces mere moral adherence to it. In the depth of realization of personal impermanence, certain truths become self-evident. All things are impermanent; all beings are transient; all beings suffer the common experiences of loss, decay, death. While each person, plant, or animal, has its own causes, its own seeds, that brought it into being, all share the bond of birth and death. Ultimately, nonviolence is a recognition of the simple facts that the quality of our life is the same as the quality of our moment-to-moment thoughts and feelings, and that enmity, hatred, and violence never improve our state of mind. Just as a man would not seethe with violence against his own body, he wouldn't harm himself by seething with violence...period. Liberation means nonviolence.

The Buddha's path begins with behavioral acquiescence to vows not to kill, but it culminates in an identification with nonviolence as the essence of what liberates the mind

and heart from hate, fear, and self promoting delusion. “All fear death. Comparing others with oneself, one should neither kill nor cause to kill.” [Dhammapada 129] Nonviolence is the essence of what the Buddha taught. Nonviolence is liberating because in each and every moment that it suffuses one’s mind, in that moment the mind feels compassion, identification, and empathy with other beings. For the Buddha, nonviolence is a precept that enables the journey to experience the root meaning of itself. Initially, the student obeys the precept of nonviolence. Eventually, he or she comes to embody nonviolence as a cherished tone quality of life.

II

Here are two key differences between nonviolence as taught by the Buddha, and pacifism. First, the Buddha did not teach social and political philosophy; and second, he taught a path of life, not a blanket ideology. Guiding each interested individual to walk the path, the Buddha encouraged a pure mind that seeks the least harm. He recognized different levels of personality development, different social roles and obligations, different responsibilities and necessities incumbent on different individuals according to their history and choices. The Buddha taught people according to their “karma.”

Himself a member of the warrior caste, the Buddha maintained cordial relations with kings. Numerous Suttas in the Pali Cannon record his conversations with Kings Pasenadi and Bimbisara. Shunning political involvement, the Buddha never advised his royal students to convert their kingdoms into democracies, despite the fact that many local states were in fact kingless republics. Although we have on record numerous discourses that the Buddha gave in the presence of, or even directly to, royalty, he never counsels them to abandon legal administration with its attendant consequences and punishments for crimes, nor to abandon warfare and protection of their state.

In a poignant conversation that occurred when both the Buddha and King Pasenadi were eighty years old, the king praises the Buddha, his teaching, and the conduct of his followers, while describing himself as “... an anointed warrior-king, able to have executed those who should be executed...” After the king departs, the Buddha comments to the meditators around him that the King’s insights were “monuments to the Dhamma” that should be learned and remembered as “fundamentals of the holy life.” [Majjhima 89] This passage clarifies that the Buddha neither condemned nor even rebuked the king for his fulfillment of the kingship, with its dire responsibilities.

A similar window into the early and ancient interpretation of the Buddha’s teaching comes from King Ashoka, who lived several hundred years after the Buddha, but who is credited as being the greatest Buddhist king both in the extent of his influence and in the depth of his understanding of Dhamma, and who is responsible for the famous edicts carved in rock, which constitute “the oldest surviving Indian written documents.” These wise and humane passages, which imply a level of civilized conduct to which humankind still aspires, praise such virtues as self-examination, and religious tolerance. They are based on Dhamma, - the universal path to liberation - and never mention Buddha or “Buddhism.” Explicitly banning animal sacrifice (which had been the foremost religious

ritual before the Buddha's time), the edicts praise non-harmfulness but stop short of rigid absolutism: "Not to injure living beings is good." Although Ashoka's conversion to Dhamma led him to abandon military conquest (of which he had already done a lifetime's share), and to claim "... conquest by Dhamma is the only true conquest..." he did not, according to an authoritative historian "...abjure warfare, never abandoned armies...and he avoided disastrous pacifism,...retaining the option of capital punishment..." There is no reason to imagine that the Buddha ever encouraged those of his students who held administrative responsibilities to promulgate an anarchic abnegation of governmental function.

In a brief discourse, the Buddha is challenged by a General who claims that Dhamma is mere passivity. The Buddha replies that he teaches inactivity in regard to unwholesome things and "activity by way of good conduct in deeds, words, and thoughts." There is no further blanket position taken towards government, warfare or the karma of Generals. What constitutes good conduct is left to the General's discernment. The Buddha gave the principle, not the details of the infinite varieties of interpretation and application.

None of this, however, justifies hatred, or violence in service of personal goals or gains. For the government servant who, for example, as a soldier must kill, the Buddha implicitly asks of him two questions. The first is: "Can you do this task as an upholder of safety and justice, focused on love of those you protect rather than on hate for those you must kill? If you are acting with vengeance or delight in destruction, then you are not at all a student of Dhamma. But if your hard job can be done with a base of pure mind, while you are clearly not living the life of an enlightened person, you are still able to begin walking the path towards harmony and compassion." The Buddha's ethics clearly allows differentiation between situations like American soldiers fighting to liberate the concentration camps at the end of World War II, versus death camp guards and mass murderers. If the soldier is acting in a protective, pure hearted way of life, he may be an agent of justice who simply is the vehicle by which the karma of the murderers ends in their own death.

However, the Buddha's teaching implies a second question for soldiers, police and all of us.

III

Fundamental to the Buddha's teaching is the concept of volition or "kamma" (often rendered in English as "karma.") Our quality of life is a product of our choices. Every major choice in life entails commitments, limitations, and consequences. Although no consequence is permanent - because liberation from all kamma is possible, though it may take lifetimes, even millions of them! - a man who accepts the kingship or who becomes a soldier also accepts the responsibilities incumbent upon the role. He can be a good king and improve his own lot as he provides security and justice to his subjects, and he can meditate and thereby take steps on the Path of Dhamma, but he cannot claim the exemptions and privileges of a "Bhikkhu." Implicitly the Buddha asks us all to examine our fundamental position in life, our deepest choices.

According to the Buddha, a committed student of his path by definition practices nonviolence, but those who have not chosen this role may, or must, fulfill other social roles and follow other precepts. The Buddha's teaching asks us all to consider whether we are ripe to take up the responsibilities and limits incumbent on the life of a committed practitioner of Dhamma.

Therefore, while the Buddha never lectured at his longtime student, King Pasenadi to forsake his throne, when the aging King felt death closing in on him, he concluded, with the help of the Buddha's questioning, "There is no scope or use for battles when aging or death are closing in...what else can I do but walk in Dhamma?" So different choices are appropriate for different people and for different life stages in the same person. The Buddha respected and befriended King Pasenadi while he remained King, and the King mirrored that mutual respect and persevered as a student of the Buddha while continuing with Royal prerogative and problems; until the King, based on his own insight and volition, ripened to a new level of commitment to Dhamma and to nonviolence.

It is to serious, committed meditators, who are lifelong practitioners of moral precepts, daily meditation, and a purified mind, that the Buddha gave his often quoted, stunning guidance on non-violence, "Even if bandits brutally severed him limb from limb with a two handled saw, he who entertained hate in his heart on that account would not be one who followed my teaching." [Majjhima 21] Please note that this famous passage does not preclude skillful and vigorous self defense that is free of hate.

The committed meditator is not only nonviolent, but is also a witness to nonviolent potential in daily living. This again expresses "...activity by way of the good..." as the Buddha advised the General. By example and in speech, the committed meditator seeks the least harm for all beings in all situations. On the other hand, this lifelong practitioner of Dhamma does not promote him or herself as a political leader. His or her witness is personal, exemplary and public, but not power seeking nor self promotional. Two key criteria the Buddha imposed on himself and his followers were: never to speak for the sake of worldly advantage, and never allude to yourself.

According to the positions one has undertaken, different relationships to nonviolence evolve. The committed meditator purifies his or her mind so that all violence becomes impossible, but he or she does not automatically condemn the governmental servant who diligently seeks to ascertain justice while defending society against violence, and who is thereby occasionally called to the use of force. When asked whether a judge should abjure capital punishment, Mr. Goenka replied that the judge should uphold his legitimate judicial functions, while at the same time working for the long-term elimination of capital punishment.

The Dhamma is not an ideology but is a set of tools for assessing one's own volitions, responsibilities, feelings and behaviors, in order to align them with nonviolence, according to one's abilities and capacities. As a group, serious practitioners of Dhamma form a voluntary set of devoted, non-violent witnesses who give a ballast to the reactive

society around them. The Buddha's teaching of nonviolence for serious meditators makes them properly defined as what American Selective Service calls "conscientious objectors" to war.

IV

Freud echoed conventional wisdom when he wrote that civilization consist of good conduct despite the wayward unconscious trends of the human mind. The Buddha stepped outside of convention when he insisted that the mind, not conduct, was the true target of transformation. For him, nonviolence is an essential rule, a culmination of a meditative way of life, a product of individual choice and position, and a non-stop, non-situational way of being.

Here is another key difference between the Buddha's nonviolent position and pacifism: nonviolence is continuous, a pervasive and quotidian effort. Before and after any war, before and after outbreaks of violence, the student of Dhamma, the committed meditator, lives the life of nonviolence towards his friends, acquaintances, animals, trees and food. He even "...holds himself aloof from causing injury to seeds or plants." The student of Dhamma seeks the least harm at all times. Realistically as a surgeon she may have to incise her patient's body, or as a policeman arrest the armed robber, or as a teacher, discipline the unruly student. Realistically, in the ambiguous rough-and-tumble of house holder's life and public discourse, the student of Dhamma may need to call upon difficult decisions, unpopular stances, and unflattering sentences; and he or she will be called upon also to recognize the complexity and ambiguity that rests on the shoulders of those who have positioned themselves to make decisions in a world of turmoil and suffering. But the lifelong devotee of Dhamma understands that the goal of every moment is to generate empathy and compassion, to minimize anger and hate.

This double layer is part and parcel of the Buddha's teaching: to generate skillful, maximally beneficial conduct simultaneously with affiliative, non-retaliatory, identifiatory feelings. Nonviolence is only the surface layer of a heart of love and compassion. Few honest people can say they feel nothing else, but for the student of the Buddha's path, for the practitioner of Dhamma, a pure heart is the goal of every moment, no matter how many thousands of times one's real feelings fall short of this ideal.

Due to this focus on volition, Dhamma awakens its practitioners to continuously assess one's own state of mind, and not just to act. What appears to be noble restraint from retaliation may only be fear or expeditious tactics. What appears to be strong defense of helpless people may only be ego-boosting aggression. The Buddha's primacy on intention allows him to consider a proper role for benign force, as Dr. Olendzki has shown in his analysis of the Buddha's discussion of how a parent must act if a small child were choking on a pebble [Insight, Fall 2001]. In this case, even drawing blood could be compassionate. Nonviolence has room for strong actions whose origins rest in concerned and caring motives.

Similarly, passive, acquiescent enabling of violence is not Dhamma. We have seen how the Buddha reassured the general that Dhamma is not inactivity. We have also seen how speaking up on behalf of Dhamma is part of the definition of a committed meditator. If one truly believes that qualities of heart and mind constitute enlightenment, and that the highest welfare for all beings is a life of harmony and peace, then permitting someone else to perpetrate harm without consequences is not nonviolence.

For the committed disciple of the Buddha's path, it is essential not only to refrain from killing, but also to refrain from encouraging others to kill. The Buddha addressed this problem regarding vegetarianism, where the path contained the sometimes contradictory advice to accept whatever food is given to you, yet also not to kill or cause animals to be killed. The conclusion to this problem was: one should never eat meat of an animal killed intentionally on one's behalf, since this would be encouraging others to kill; but if meat already is present in the food not specifically prepared for you, but now offered to you, one should just accept the gift as given.

This quaint example shows both the seriousness of the concern not to induce others to kill, but also the pragmatism and flexibility with which it was interpreted. How does this apply to the follower of the Buddha, who encourages police or army to protect the civil order? Isn't he or she encouraging others to kill on one's own behalf? Conversely, if the practitioner of Dhamma passively allows, permits or facilitates violence, isn't this encouraging the violent perpetrator on his destructive and downward course?

The Buddha's path of nonviolence guides us through a personal scrutiny, not a pat answer, taking systematic meditation as our most penetrating tool, how to avoid killing, and to be spokespersons for Dhamma—neither violent nor passive. To the extent that one has extracted oneself from lifestyles of force—such as military service—and to the extent that Dhamma has become a committed way of life, then Buddha's answer, by speech and example, is unambiguous: The Buddha promoted nonviolence by spreading Dhamma in its fullness, not by focal political activity or “single issue” thinking. Through exemplary lifestyle, through self-restraint, through verbal explanation, the follower of the Buddha acts on behalf of the good.

The historical record contained in the Pali Canon describes the Buddha as finding a middle path between involvement in specific political issues - which he never did - or complicitous acceptance of injustice - which he also attempted to avoid. Never a direct critic of particular governments or policies, he was assertive and forthright in teaching Dhamma, the way of life.

Ultimately, right speech is described by the Buddha as : “Thus does he live as one who binds together those who are divided...a peacemaker, a lover of peace...a speaker of words that make for peace.” Well spoken speech has five marks: it is timely, true, gentle, purposeful, and kindhearted. While the Buddha is described as participating in public presentations of his experiential, dogmaless Dhamma, and thereby disagreeing with other peoples' practices or traditions, he never did so with an oppositional, conversional fervor. He did not indulge in the excited prophetic banner of charismatic religion or of youthful

fidelities. He expressed his nonviolent ethic but he did not campaign for it. His tone, topic, and style were uniform.

V

We now see the Buddha's teaching of nonviolence as a sieve, through which his students filter the particles of reality. To the extent that one is committed to the path, everything must be passed through this sieve, which demands of us to examine our choices, our motives, our chosen roles, our actions, and our inactions. In response to one event—for example, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001—different sincere followers of the Buddha's way may find themselves arriving at different positions, because each of them is working with a mirror of self-insight rather than with a political formulation. One Dhamma practitioner may see force as the best method of saving the most lives; another may see force as misguided revenge. In fact, in the complex series of actions that followed, force may have indeed operated as preservation against further destruction as well as a vengeful retaliation, both.

For all practitioners of Dhamma however, the core questions are the same: "How can I, given my position, abilities, development, and flaws, best bring to bear nonviolence in my wishes, word, and deeds?" The ethics of a committed meditator spring from a whole life of the practice of self-examination. Lacking one fixed relationship to state or government, the lifelong Dhamma practitioner may move between cooperation, distance, witness and correction.

Even with its clear verbal discourses and its vivid example of the Buddha's life, the Dhamma is not easy to apprehend because it does not conform to thought systems or preconceptions. Though it emphasizes right action in society, it differs from issue-specific politics or social work. Though it emphasizes non-violence, it differs from pacifism. It is an embracing systematic teaching that places non-violence at the cornerstone of its foundation, but it is unaligned with government, movements or religions. It is knowable only as a way of life embedded in meditative insight. It is often described as an absence rather than a presence - an absence of hate, ill will and delusion, an absence of viewpoints and beliefs. It is a clearing away of self absorption that is the root of suffering.

The Buddha never claimed he could bring peace to the whole world. The narcissistic time-scales of the pre-scientific scriptures of the West never occurred to him. He saw that suffering beings are limitless in time and space. The Buddha speaks to us from his position within an endless universe in which our current struggles for peace are not triumphal but eternal. But he also rejects defeatism or cynicism and promises this: a practical path to reduce suffering, which includes a generous dispensation of itself to others.

Nonviolence as the Buddha taught it was directed at each interaction in each moment but was not a comforting myth for denying inescapable truths. Dhamma is a long path, a footpath, rarely culminated by the rare few, and not a fantasy exit from the exigencies of

the human condition. There are no global solutions even hinted at anywhere in the Buddha's dispensation of Dhamma. His followers practice non-violence because it anchors them in alertness and compassion, expresses and reinforces their own mental purification, builds identification with other beings, human, animal, even seeds; and because it is their most cherished realization: mind matters most; cultivation of love, peace and harmony is always the only irrefutable doctrineless meaning that people can experience.

In times of war and times of peace, every day, the committed meditator dwells in love and compassion, radiated outward to all, to those who are alive, or who once were, or who will be; to those who are human or to other living beings; to those who intend good and to those who intend harm, not agreement but loving kindness is sent.

It is through devotion to nonviolence as a compass that one sees glimmerings of nibbana along the horizon. Who would prefer a heart of hate to a heart of love?

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