

BUDDHIST IDEAS FOR ATTAINING WORLD PEACE

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INTRODUCTION

Buddhism teaches that whether we have global peace or global war is up to us at every moment. The situation is not hopeless and out of our hands. If we don't do anything, who will? Peace or war is our decision. The fundamental goal of Buddhism is peace, not only peace in this world but peace in all worlds. The Buddha taught that the first step on the path to peace is understanding the causality of peace. When we understand what causes peace, we know where to direct our efforts. No matter how vigorously we stir a boiling pot of soup on a fire, the soup will not cool. When we remove the pot from the fire, it will cool on its own, and our stirring will hasten the process. Stirring causes the soup to cool, but only if we first remove the soup from the fire. In other words, we can take many actions in our quest for peace that may be helpful. But if we do not first address the fundamental issues, all other actions will come to naught.

The Buddha taught that peaceful minds lead to peaceful speech and peaceful actions. If the minds of living beings are at peace, the world will be at peace. Who has a mind at peace, you say? The overwhelming majority of us live in the midst of mental maelstroms that subside only for brief and treasured moments. We could probably count on the fingers of both hands the number of those rare, holy persons whose minds are truly, permanently at peace. If we wait for all beings in the world to become sages, what chance is there of a peaceful world for us? Even if our minds are not completely peaceful, is there any possibility of reducing the levels of violence in the world and of successfully abating the winds of war?

To answer these questions, let us look first at the Buddha's vision of the world, including the causality of its operations. Then, in that context, we can trace the causes of war. When the causes are identified, the Buddha's suggestions for dealing with them and eliminating them can be discussed. Finally, having developed a Buddhist theoretical framework for understanding the nature of the problem and its solution, we can try to apply the basic principles in searching for concrete applications that we can actually put into practice in our own daily lives.

SOME ASPECTS OF THE BUDDHIST WORLD-VIEW

The Buddha taught that all forms of life partake of the same fundamental spiritual source, which he called the enlightened nature or the Buddha-nature.

He did not admit to any essential division in the spiritual condition of human beings and other forms of life. In fact, according to Buddhist teachings, after death a human being is reborn, perhaps again as a human being or possibly in the animal realms or in other realms. Likewise, animals can, in certain circumstances, be reborn as human beings. All sentient beings are seen as passing through the unending cycle of the wheel of rebirth. They are born, they grow old, become sick, and die. They are reborn, grow old, get sick and die, over and over and over again.

KARMA: THE NETWORK OF CAUSE AND EFFECT

What determines how you are reborn is karma. Whether you obtain a human body, whether male or female, or that of an animal or some other life-form is karma. Whether you have a body that is healthy or sickly, whether you are intelligent or stupid, whether your family is rich or poor, whether your parents are compassionate or hard-hearted--all that is karma. Karma is a Sanskrit word that is derived from the semantic root meaning 'to do'. It refers to activity--mental, verbal, and physical--as governed by complex patterns of cause and effect. There are two basic kinds of karma--individual and shared. Individual karma is not limited to a single lifetime. What you did in your past lives determines your situation in your present life. If you did good deeds in past lives, the result will be an auspicious rebirth. If your actions in past lives were predominantly bad, your situation in the present will be inauspicious. If in this life you act more like an animal than a human being, your next rebirth will be as an animal.

Shared karma refers to our net of inter-relationship with other people, non-human beings, and our environment. A certain category of beings live in a certain location and tend to perceive their environment in much the same way, because that particular shared situation is the fruition of their former actions.

The doctrine of karma is not deterministic. Rather it is a doctrine of radical personal responsibility. Although your present situation in every moment is determined by your past actions, your action in the present moment, in the present circumstances, can be totally unconditioned and, therefore, totally free. It is true that you may mindlessly react according to the strengths of your various habit-patterns, but that need not be the case. The potential for you to act mindfully and freely is always there. It is up to you to realize that you have the choice and to make it. This realization is the beginning of true spiritual growth.

The Buddha taught that the fundamental cause of all suffering is ignorance. The basic ignorance is our failure to understand that the self, which is at the center of all of our lives, which determines the way in which we see the world,

which directs our actions for our own ease and benefit, is an illusion. The illusion of the self is the cause of all our suffering. We want to protect our self from the dangers of the constant flux of life. We want to exempt our self from change, when nothing in the world is exempt from change.

Life centered on self naturally tends toward the selfish. Selfishness poisons us with desire and greed. When they are not fulfilled, we tend to become angry and hateful. These basic emotional conditions cover the luminous depths of our minds and cut us off from our own intuitive wisdom and compassion; our thoughts and actions then emanate from deluded and superficial views.

THE CAUSES OF WAR

The causes of war are too numerous even to list, let alone discuss intelligently. What we discuss here are what the Buddha considered the most fundamental, the fire under the boiling pot of soup.

War is not something abstract. War is waged between one group of individuals and another. The reasons for war are also not abstract. [We have not yet had a war started and directed according to logical paradigms programmed into a computer.] It is individuals who decide to wage war. Even if the war is global, its beginning can be traced back to the decisions of individuals. And so before we talk about global war, let us first talk about war on the level of the individual.

Wars begin because the people of one country, or at least their rulers, have unfulfilled desires--they are greedy for benefits or wealth (i.e., economic greed) or power, or they are angry or hateful. Either their desires have been thwarted or their pride, their sense of self, has been offended. This can also manifest as racial or national arrogance. They wrongly feel that the answer to problems, which are essentially within their own minds, a matter of attitudes, can be sought externally, through the use of force.

THE STORY OF THE WATER WAR

Four years after his [the Buddha's] attainment of enlightenment, a war took place between the city-state of Kapilavastu and that of Kiliavastu over the use of water. Being told of this, [the Buddha] Sakyamuni hastened back to Kapilavastu and stood between the two great armies about to start fighting. At the sight of Sakyamuni, there was a great commotion among the warriors, who said, "Now that we see the World-Honored One, we cannot shoot the arrows at our enemies," and they threw down their weapons. Summoning the chiefs of the two armies, he asked them, "Why are you gathered here like this?" "To fight," was their reply. "For what cause do you fight?"

he queried. "To get water for irrigation." Then, asked Sakyamuni again, "How much value do you think water has in comparison with the lives of men?" "The value of water is very slight" was the reply. "Why do you destroy lives which are valuable for valueless water?" he asked. Then, giving some allegories, Sakyamuni taught them as follows: "Since people cause war through misunderstanding, thereby harming and killing each other, they should try to understand each other in the right manner." In other words, misunderstanding will lead all people to a tragic end, and Sakyamuni exhorted them to pay attention to this. Thus the armies of the two city-states were dissuaded from fighting each other.

The doctrine of karma teaches that force and violence, even to the level of killing, never solves anything. Killing generates fear and anger, which generates more killing, more fear, and more anger, in a vicious cycle without end. If you kill your enemy in this life, he is reborn, seeks revenge, and kills you in the next life. When the people of one nation invade and kill or subjugate the people of another nation, sooner or later the opportunity will present itself for the people of the conquered nation to wreak their revenge upon the conquerors. Has there ever been a war that has, in the long run, really resolved any problem in a positive manner? In modern times the so-called 'war to end all wars' has only led to progressively larger and more destructive wars.

The emotions of killing translate into more and more deaths as the weapons of killing become more and more sophisticated. In prehistoric times, a caveman could explode with anger, take up his club, and bludgeon a few people to death. Nowadays, if, for example, the President of the United States loses his temper, who can tell how many will lose their lives as the result of the employment of our modern weaponry. And in the present we are on the brink of a global war that threatens to extinguish permanently all life on the planet. When will that happen? Perhaps when the collective selfishness of individuals to pursue their own desires--greed for sex, wealth and power; the venting of frustrations through anger, hatred and brutal self-assertion--overcomes the collective compassion of individuals for others, overcomes their respect for the lives and aspirations of others. Then the unseen collective pressure of mind on mind will tip the precarious balance, causing the finger, controlled ostensibly by an individual mind, to press the button that will bring about nuclear Armageddon. When the individual minds of all living beings are weighted, if peaceful minds are more predominant, the world will tend to be at peace; if violent minds are more predominant, the world will tend to be at war.

BUDDHIST PRESCRIPTIONS

Providing people with physical well-being and wealth does not necessarily lead to peace. Lewis Lapham recently wrote:

Apparently it is not poverty that causes crime, but rather the resentment of poverty. This latter condition is as likely to embitter the 'subjectively deprived' in a rich society as the 'objectively deprived' in a poor society.

Mental attitudes and the actions to which they lead are the key.

Buddhists believe that the minds of all living beings are totally interconnected and interrelated, whether they are consciously aware of it or not. To use a simple analogy for the interconnection, each being has his or her own transmitting and receiving station and is constantly broadcasting to all others his or her state of mind and is constantly receiving broadcasts from all others. Even the most insignificant thoughts in our minds have some effect on all other beings. How much the more so do our strong negative emotions and our acting out of them in direct or indirect forms of physical violence! In other words, each thought in the mind of each and every one of us brings the world either a little closer to the brink of global disaster or helps to move the world a little farther away from the brink. If each time we feel irritated, annoyed, thwarted, outraged, or just plain frustrated, we reflect on the consequences of our thoughts, words and actions, perhaps that reflection in itself will help to lead us to behave in a way that will contribute to global peace. If every time we get angry at our wife or husband, girl friend or boy friend, parents or children, we are aware that we are driving the entire world toward the brink of war, maybe we will think twice and wonder whether our anger is worth the consequences. Even if we feel our cause is just, if we in thought, word, and deed make war against injustice, we are still part of the problem and not contributing to the solution. On the other hand, if we concentrate on putting our own minds at peace, then we can broadcast peace mentally and generate peace through our actions. We should use a peaceful mind to act for peace in the world.

As to the interrelations between the minds of beings, the being we may be about to harm or even kill, from a Buddhist point of view, may well be our own parents, children, wives or husbands, or dearest friends from former lives. Because Buddhists see the problem of war as a karmic one, the solution is seen as the practicing and teaching of correct ethical behavior. Good deeds lead to good consequences, bad deeds to bad. If you plant bean seeds, you get beans; if you plant melon seeds, you get melons. If you plant the seeds of war, you get war; if you plant the seeds of peace, you get peace. The most fundamental moral precept in Buddhist teaching is respect for life and the prohibition against taking life. Generally speaking, all living beings

want to live and are afraid of death. The strongest desire is for life, and when that desire is thwarted, the response is unbelievably powerful anger. Unlike almost all other religions, Buddhism teaches that there are no exceptions to this prohibition and no expedient arguments are admitted. The taking of life not only covers human life but all sentient beings. Reducing the karma of killing is equivalent to putting out the fire under the pot of boiling soup. If we end killing, the world will be at peace.

The prohibition against stealing says, more literally, that one must not take what is not given. Stealing, whether it is by individuals, corporations, or nations, occurs because of selfish greed. From the time of the Trojan War, sexual misconduct has also been a cause of war, as has been lying. National leaders whose minds have been clouded by drugs are not rare in history either--their conduct is rarely just and peaceful. The international drug trade in itself has become a major impediment to peace in most parts of the world. The taking of intoxicating substances is also prohibited by fundamental Buddhist teachings.

The Buddhist vision is a world in which all life is sacred, in which selfishness, in the guise of greed, anger and foolishness, does not interfere with the basic interconnectedness of all living beings. That interconnectedness, when freed from the distortion of selfishness, is based upon the potential for enlightenment that every being shares.

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

A beautiful vision, some might say. But how can such a peace be realized in a world such as ours? Isn't it mere impractical fantasy? No, it is not. Now the time has come to outline some concrete and practical steps that can be taken towards making it a reality. As a beginning, here are three steps.

Step One

Since war can come about when the general level of violence in the population reaches the boiling point and can either manifest in civil war or be channeled into foreign wars, anything we can do to reduce the general level of violence in the population will certainly be most helpful. One of the major teachers of violence in our society is television. Turn off your TV-- permanently. Michael Nagler has written:

1. * 96 percent of American homes have at least one television set. The average home has a set going six hours a day.
* In 'ordinary' viewing, there are 8 violent episodes an hour.
* Between the ages of five and fifteen the average American child has watched the killing of 13,000 people. By age eighteen he or she will have logged more than 15,000 hours of this kind of exposure and

taken in more than 20,000 acts of violence. . . .

* 97 percent of cartoons intended for children include acts of violence. By the criteria of the Media Action Research Center, an act of aggression occurs every three and a half minutes during children's Saturday morning programs. Dr. George Gerbner counts one every two minutes by similar criteria.

* In a typical recent year "children . . . witness, on prime time television, 5,000 murders, rapes, beatings and stabbings, 1,300 acts of adultery, and 2,700 sexually aggressive comments," according to a group of concerned mothers.

How can all this be helping the cause of world peace? From an early age our citizens are learning that violence the best solution to their problems, that violence is a socially acceptable and socially approved way of dealing with problems both personal and interpersonal. Turn off the TV!

Step Two

By constantly being mindful of your own thoughts, words and actions and by constantly trying to purify them, we can become part of the force for peace rather than part of the force for war. Teachings about karma indicate to us that no matter how just our cause, no matter how right our ideas, if they are accompanied by anger and hate, they will merely generate more anger and hate. If our minds are inundated with the emotions of war, we aid the cause of war, no matter how noble our cause. Buddhist teachings about karma indicate unequivocally that a fundamentally moral life is a necessary prerequisite for ridding our minds of negative emotions, for transforming them into selfless compassion for all. There are many selfless endeavors that we can take upon ourselves to stir the soup and help cool the pot. But we should remember to be constantly mindful of our own mental attitudes. If we are not, no matter how hard we stir, we may also be unconsciously helping to turn up the flames.

How do we change our own mental attitudes; how do we rid our minds of those strong negative emotions that cause turbidity in our minds? Part of the Bodhisattva Path consists of the practice of giving as an antidote to desire, greed, stinginess, and craving; the practice of patience as an antidote for anger; and the practice of wisdom as an antidote for foolishness.

Step Three

We should work on the systematic extension of compassion towards others. From the level of our own minds, to our speech and then our actions, we can work on generating compassion to those who are closest to us, the members of our own families, and then progressively extend our compassion to our communities, countries, and the entire world.

Many of you may be disappointed in these suggestions. Perhaps you are looking for something more exciting or stimulating. However, I hope that you will realize that there is some indication that these Buddhist ideas do really work. King Asoka, the Mauryan emperor of India who was coronated in 268 BCE, was converted to Buddhism after experiencing personal revulsion in the aftermath of his bloody conquest of Kalinga. Thereafter he prohibited any form of killing and encouraged humane treatment of all peoples and also animals. The Tibetans were bloodthirsty and warlike before conversion to Buddhism. Likewise, their neighbors the Mongols, particularly the armies of Ghengis Khan, terrorized many peoples, from China to the gates of Vienna. It would be hard to find people more fierce and bloodthirsty. Buddhist missionaries subsequently transformed the Mongols into one of the most peaceful peoples of Asia. Buddhists have never advocated war and have never sanctioned the idea of religious war. The ideal of the Bodhisattva (an enlightened being who devotes himself or herself to the enlightenment of all beings) is to voluntarily return, life after life, to our world of suffering to teach the Way to permanent inner peace, which is the only way to true peace in the world. Whether for us or for the great sages of the world, peace can only be brought to the world one thought at a time in the minds of each one of us. Only on that basis, can our actions for peace, also performed one at a time, be truly effective.

Buddhist like Peaceful Exercises in Meditation

1. What do you do/say to others that you feel you should not do/say if you sincerely want to express Peace?
2. Buddhists begin self expression as responsible for their own expression of emotions, never blaming others, never a burden, emotionally or otherwise, to others.

Do you do/say things to others that you feel were their responsibility & not yours? Why? Are you giving control of yourself to someone? Are you in control, do you own your own self expression?

3. United Nations Millennium Development Goals as Attainable by the year 2010. A Well Earth Awareness Campaign. <http://AWellEarth.net>

Visit the A Well Earth website at <http://AWellEarth.net> & click on the link "UNMG 2010". Write your statement of "What I do every day to END EXPLOITATION".