

Non-Violence (3 of 5) Bringing Peace Into the World

October 25, 2023

SUMMARY KEYWORDS *ahimsa*, *Attadanda Sutta*, arrow, violence, Angulimala, Ashoka, Thich Nhat Hahn, Standing Together, fear, quarrels, refuge, peace, shelters, hospices, poor, wars, passive, calm, boat people, welfare, peacemaker, sacrifice

Gil Fronsdal

One of the most repeated teachings of the Buddha is that of living a life of non-harming, non-violence, *ahimsa*. Sprinkled throughout the teachings are all kinds of little quotes in this regard. If we ask ourselves why the Buddha emphasized this, we could maybe get a clue from the way he described himself before he was awakened.

This description gives you a sense of the Buddha's dismay and the way he was challenged and troubled by the state of the world of his time. This is from the *Discourse on Being Violent*, the *Attadanda Sutta* (Sn 4.15). It's in a book of teachings that I've translated called *The Buddha Before Buddhism*, from *The Book of Eights*, chapter 15. The Buddha states:

Violence gives birth to fear. Just look at people and their quarrels. I will speak to you of my dismay and the way that I was shaken. Seeing people thrashing about like fish in little water and seeing them feuding with each other, I became afraid. The world is completely without a core. Everywhere things are changing. Wanting a place of my own, I saw nothing not already taken. I felt discontent at seeing only conflict to the very end. Then I saw an arrow here, hard to see, embedded in the heart. Pierced by this arrow, people dash about in all directions. When the arrow's pulled out, they don't run and they don't sink.

The pathos of the Buddha's time before his awakening, how he looked around the world and was deeply moved and disturbed by it, is in complete contrast to the idea that many of us have of who the Buddha was after he was awakened. Here the suggestion is that it was seeing the violence in the world, the way people were fighting, the way that they saw no end to the fighting, that motivated him to find an alternative way of living. He didn't see any place for him as a refuge, no place in the world where he could go to be safe.

So he looked within, and lo and behold, he found what he called an arrow that was not inherent to his heart, but that pierced it causing a lot of pain. Because the arrow was not inherent, not part of his heart, that arrow could be taken out. When he did that, he discovered that then one doesn't run about and one doesn't sink. One does not get agitated, nor does one give up and collapse.

I'm very touched by this description. You can see the humanity of the Buddha compared to some of the descriptions of his enlightenment, where he seems a little bit more disconnected from the world, or very much focussed on his personal suffering. A major emphasis for the Buddha during the next 45 years of his teaching career was on the importance of non-violence and the importance of discovering the roots of violence in oneself. Pulling out that arrow became a common theme of what he taught. Part of the reason for that was, I think, that there was plenty of violence in his time. There are descriptions of the wars and the fighting that went on around him, and the cruelty of rulers, bandits, and robbers. It was a dangerous time, and the sad thing is that this world has been dangerous ever since.

Given the history of humanity, I don't think that we can expect that the dangers and the horrors of it are going to stop. They'll probably continue. But there have to be alternatives. There have to be some people who find that arrow embedded in their heart and remove it, so that they are not motivated by their reactions to that pain that doesn't have to be there. Otherwise, when they feel the suffering of the world it is like salt on their wounds and evokes the pain of this arrow that they have within. Their anger, their despair, their dismay, their fear, and the way that they run around acting impulsively and maybe violently, either with their words, their deeds, even their thoughts: all these are born from struggling with their own pain, not knowing how to be with their own pain.

The response to the world is not to try to stop what's in the world from being terrible, but to try to assuage the pain in our own hearts by looking in another direction. In Buddhist practice, the idea is to turn oneself inside out. We go in, find the arrow, and then, after turning ourselves inside out, we step into the world with that peace and that capacity to be a non-reactive presence for the world. Does that mean that we become passive? No. The Buddha stepped forward into the world and sometimes moved toward where the violence was.

A representative example of this in the *suttas* is the story of a mass murderer named Angulimala, a bandit who robbed and killed people. He was apparently quite vicious and killed many, many people. The people at that time were quite afraid of him. When the Buddha heard about it he went into the jungle to find Angulimala. People tried to stop the Buddha and said, "It's too dangerous, don't go there, you're an unarmed mendicant." But he went anyway. The Buddha managed to pacify the murderer and was able to convert him to Buddhism, and he became a monk.

The idea is to go toward where the conflict is. Firefighters go toward the fires. Medics sometimes go toward the war, not to fight but to help. People who are deeply trained, deeply liberated, and have pulled the arrow out of the heart are the ones who have the fearlessness to go toward conflict, toward violence.

Another example of the power of being peaceful is the story of King Ashoka, one of the first rulers of a vast area of India, one of the first empires of India. He apparently was a vicious conqueror with a large army that went around conquering and killing. At one point he was involved in a very large battle where thousands upon thousands of people died on the battlefield, even though he won. The day after the battle, he was walking across the battlefield looking at the carnage. Walking right through the middle of the battlefield was a Buddhist monk. The monk had a demeanor, a bearing that was so peaceful and calm. This was such a radical contrast to the carnage of the war that it got the king's attention. So the king asked him, "Who are you and what's going on here with you?" The monk explained that he was a Buddhist. The King asked the monk "What does your teacher teach?" And the monk calmly said, "Hate is not overcome by hate. Hate is overcome by love. This is the ancient teaching."

After seeing the demeanor of peace that allowed the monk to step into the battlefield after the fact with a presence that calmed the king, and then receiving these teachings that touched his heart, King Ashoka became a proponent of non-violence. He became the first righteous or just king of India. He created lots of shelters and hospices, fed the poor, and created shelters for animals. He completely changed his approach to being a king.

There are lots of stories about King Ashoka's transformation from a vicious king into a non-violent king. Whether that story is accurate or not, I don't know, but it's a wonderful representative example.

Thich Nhat Hahn uses a similar example to talk about the boat people who fled Vietnam in the 1970s and early 80s. They traveled on very flimsy boats packed with people trying to get to the Philippines. There were storms and big waves in the middle of the ocean. Thich Nhat Hahn's powerful teaching is that if one person on the boat could stay calm, the boat would stay stable enough so it wouldn't tip over in the big waves, and everyone would be safe. One person needed to be calm, one person to be peaceful.

One of the fallacies about pulling out one's own arrow and being peaceful is that it is avoiding taking care of the world and taking care of others. The Buddha was very adamant about not sacrificing yourself in order to take care of others. Take care of yourself first so you can be an effective peacemaker in the world. A very provocative, challenging teaching of the Buddha is when he says, "Don't give up your own welfare for the sake of others' welfare, however great. Clearly know your own welfare and be intent on the highest good." This does not mean it's OK to ignore other people. When he talks about the highest good elsewhere, he talks over and over again about living a life that is intent on the welfare of self and others, the welfare and happiness of everyone involved.

So we want to look for examples of people who are doing this, to see how we can support that kind of activity instead of the activity of endless war, endless conflict, endless ways in which we continue to evoke fear in people's hearts, endless ways in which we keep driving that arrow deeper and deeper into people's hearts as we continue the cycles of conflict. The more we feel deeply moved by violence in the world, whether it's the violence in Gaza and Israel, or Ukraine, or Syria, or in any of the places in the world right now where thousands of people are fighting and being killed, the more we wonder where are the peacemakers? Are we supporting them? Can we bring them to the forefront?

There's an organization in Israel called Standing Together where Palestinians and Jewish Israelis are working together to bring humanitarian aid to people who need it. This idea of working together and finding a common ground goes against what many, many people, maybe the majority of people are doing. But I think the example of people walking across the battlefield, and the example of someone who's helping are what we want to highlight and to shine a light on in our world.

Can we be people like that? Can each of us be a person who lives peacefully? Here is a king who came to see the Buddha and made this comment when he saw the Buddha with his monastics:

Venerable Sir, kings quarrel with kings, nobles with nobles, brahmins with brahmins, householders with householders, mothers quarrel with children, children with mother, father with children, children with father, brothers quarrel with brothers, brothers with sisters, sisters with brothers, friends with friends. But here I see monastics living in concord with mutual appreciation without disputing, blending like milk and water, viewing each other with kindly eyes.

There are people who live this way. May we shine the light and appreciate those people who are doing this. May we be like those people. May we feel that it is a revolutionary act to be a peacemaker, turning toward the violence in a peaceful way, bringing a peaceful influence. May we be courageous. May we have faith and trust in that courage so that we can find an alternative to violence. Do we want to live in a world without an alternative to violence? Do we want to live in a world where our so-called peace is at the expense of other people's suffering, one way or another? Can we each be an example of someone who has pulled out the arrow in our own heart so as to become a calm force, a peaceful influence in this world around us?

Thank you. May you become a peacemaker in your world.