

Non-violence (2 of 5) Avoiding the Cost of Violence

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This week the topic for our consideration is non-violence. One of the fundamental ethical principles of Buddhism is not to harm. It is represented by the very first precept, which is not to kill. But it is more comprehensive than not killing. It means not to physically harm any living being. This is such an important principle in the world we live in.

I believe that as we meditate, not wanting to cause harm becomes our orientation more and more clearly. There are many reasons for this. One reason is that as we meditate, we develop a heightened sensitivity to the cost to ourselves of harming others intentionally or deliberately. Harming is very stressful for our own system. Harming others involves a diminishment, a narrowing of our scope. It may involve feelings of anger, greed, ill will, and delusion. It involves picking up stress. Once we start meditating, we start feeling the effect that unwholesome and harmful behavior has on us. So part of the motivation to not be violent or cause harm to others is that we see the cost to us is too high.

A second reason is that we see the cost is too high for others as well. We start feeling a kinship with others. Our thinking mind can objectify and get caught in ideas about people and projections into the future. We can carry all kinds of conceit that interfere with our heart's capacity for sympathy, empathy, and understanding. But when we sit still and our thinking mind becomes quiet, we can put ourselves in other people's shoes. We get a sense of what their suffering is and how terrible it is for people to be harmed. Violence committed towards them can be devastating for people.

At some point, the knowledge and perception of violence toward others almost feels like violence toward ourselves, especially if it is being done by us. A shift happens when we spend a lot of time practicing mindfulness and meditating. We experience a movement towards wanting to live a life of non-harming.

In the teachings of the Buddha, one of the definitions of a fully enlightened person is they will not deliberately harm or kill any living being. Someone who is fully enlightened is incapable of killing.

Some of you might want to become enlightened. But if that's what enlightenment is, do you want it? Is it still attractive to you? Or do you have some other idealistic idea about what enlightenment is? Do you feel that enlightenment is only freedom from your own suffering, so you don't suffer, but you have never thought about it as something that changes your relationship with other people?

If you take the Dharma path, it is an ethical path. What will happen is that you will grow in your ethical sensitivity. You will increasingly become someone who lives more and more ethically, even in subtle ways. One of the manifestations of this change is not only not *wanting* to harm anybody, but being *incapable* of deliberately harming.

For example, someone who is well-developed along this path would not be capable of being a soldier, if that meant needing to kill others or go into fighting. If it meant being a medic driving an ambulance, maybe that's something a soldier could do.

In the most personal way, the rationale or reason for non-violence is not logical. It comes from this deeper sensitivity that you would have, for example, if you had a young baby. Of course, you would not want to harm the baby. If you ever received a newborn baby in your arms, you would do everything you could to avoid harming them. I think the care and tenderness with which most people would hold that baby – not wanting to harm it in any way, being very gentle – is phenomenal. That's just built into our system. For many of us, that's what we do. And that sensitivity can be spread and developed towards all beings everywhere.

Then the question becomes: what about when terrible things are happening? Maybe someone violently attacks you or your family or even kills them. Shouldn't you be able to kill them back? Shouldn't you be able to defend yourself? I have a problem with this kind of rationale that pushes back around the value of non-violence, because it suggests that the choice is between being violent or non-violent.

But there's another possibility. The choice can be between being violent and developing oneself to be skillfully non-violent. This involves taking the time to train ourselves in non-violent forms of communication and non-violent forms of behavior so that we can defend ourselves without having to resort to violence.

Many years ago a woman who lived in Palo Alto came to me. Palo Alto was a relatively comfortable and safe town, even back then. There were some dangers. She told me she was thinking of getting a gun to make herself safe. She asked me for my thoughts.

I did not want to be in a position to decide whether she should or shouldn't get a gun. But I did tell her that I thought it was very sad to get a gun first. Before that, there are a lot of self-defense trainings a person can do that don't require a gun. Maybe those forms of self-defense don't work 100% of the time, but neither does a gun. It is possible to be well trained in non-violent forms of self-defense, or self-defense that includes striking out in order to escape from someone. We don't have to resort to guns.

On a larger scale, it takes time and effort for a country to avoid war when defending itself. It takes a lot of preparation to set up sophisticated non-violent forms of defense. To live in a world where we don't have to resort to violence takes decades of planning.

The first time I gave a talk about the Buddhist teachings on non-violence was in the early 1990s during the first Gulf War. Periodically war happens again and again. War has been a part of my whole life. I've never really been in a war zone but I could see the country at war at a little bit of a distance. Once I saw a mortar explode. My mother experienced violence during World War II. My parents-in-law were Jews in the concentration camps in Germany. They barely survived. And they lost their parents in the camps.

The Vietnam War was huge as I was growing up in the early '60s. In first and second grades we had to do ridiculous duck-and-cover drills in school, which were supposed to protect us from the nuclear holocaust that was supposed to happen when the Russians and Americans went into nuclear war with each other.

The violence that had a huge impact on me personally – that shaped and changed me – was the Israeli bombing of the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon in 1982. I read about that and saw pictures of it when I was deep in meditation practice doing Zen retreats. The wish to respond to the world with non-violence and to make a better world for all of us was one of the reasons I wanted to become a Buddhist teacher. I wanted to learn to respond to the suffering we have in a way that provided alternatives to violence.

But you can't close the gate of the corral once the horse has gotten free. That doesn't help. To begin thinking about non-violence when the violence is already in full bloom doesn't work. There has to be lots of planning and preparation for non-violence ahead of time. Non-violence takes time, preparation, and even struggle.

One thing I've seen is that sometimes violence and violent speech can have an immediate effect. Sometimes they stop what's happening. We might get what we want, but the repercussions and the consequences we have to deal with for years afterward are not taken into account. They are very expensive and very difficult. With non-violence, the difficulties come ahead of time, before the problem. If you find a non-violent way of dealing with a problem, there aren't the same repercussions, nor the after-effects of cleaning up the repercussions.

People suffer for generations when there is war. The children experience it, and their children experience it. My children knew their grandparents who survived the Nazi concentration camps. It had a big impact on them. They were born many, many years after World War II, but it still affects them. It affects me.

People in the United States are still dealing with the repercussions of the Civil War. People are still dealing with the repercussions of World War I. All these things go on and on.

Violence is an easy solution when it is the obvious solution for immediate survival. Non-violence is a fantastic solution provided it's done in a sophisticated and caring way – where we do the work upfront and don't have the cleanup cost afterward.

When you go back and look at the Buddha's teachings, you see that over and over again he emphasizes non-harming. This is a central feature of what he's teaching and what he's getting across.

I'll read a couple of things before we end.

One who neither kills nor gets others to kill, neither conquers nor gets others to conquer, with goodwill for all beings, has no hostility for anyone at all.

In the *Dhammapada*, the Buddha says:

Victory gives birth to hate. The defeated sleep tormented. Giving up both victory and defeat, the peaceful sleep delighted.

All tremble at violence. All fear death.

Having likened others to yourself, don't kill or cause others to kill.

All tremble at violence. Life is dear to all. Having likened others to yourself, don't kill or cause others to kill.

Just as you want to live, just as you don't want to be harmed, so others don't want to be killed, don't want to be harmed. Care for them instead.

So we ourselves are an instrument that can discern and feel both the negative costs of violent and harmful action and the tremendous benefit from action that is non-harming, beneficial, and caring toward others.

May we choose the latter.

Thank you.