

# Healing or Harming?

SUTTA  
STUDIES

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A question that has been coming up a lot lately in various discussions is this: "According to the teaching of the Buddha, is violence ever justified?" The short answer is "No." But in a longer answer that probes more carefully some of the practical dimensions of the human condition, there may be grounds for modifying this position.

Perhaps the situation is not dissimilar from the two levels of truth found articulated in Buddhist philosophy, whereby something can be conventionally true but, when viewed from a higher perspective, can be seen as ultimately an illusion. The conventional level is appropriate for a certain realm of discourse and shared experience, but breaks down on a closer level of scrutiny. The ultimate level may be theoretically true and more accurate, but not very useful for the coarser mode of discourse and experience at which we so often operate. Neither perspective entirely falsifies the other—they co-exist.

The principle example of these two levels of truth has to do with persons or beings. Even the Buddha used reflexive pronouns like "my" body or feelings, or even "myself," and referred to others quite conventionally by name, clan, occupation, and so forth. From the perspective of ultimate truth, as the Abhidhamma and the Mahayana traditions so usefully inform us, the notion of persons' or 'self' or 'being' is illusory.

I would like to suggest, in looking to the Buddhist tradition for guidance in the midst of current world affairs, that a similar two-level way of understanding may be appropriate in the ethical realm: Ultimately, all violence will only plant the seeds of further violence, which will have to work its way out eventually. This truth, I believe, is unassailable. But conventionally, this does not necessarily mean that we, as householders with responsibility for the safekeeping of our families and friends, can and should never make use of violence. What is appropriate for a monk or nun, grounded as they are in the ultimate perspective and working towards liberation in this lifetime, might not be the same as what is appropriate for householders, ministers or kings, who participate in a more practical reality.

A crucial thing to recognize, in my opinion, is the thoroughly psychological perspective of early Buddhism. The Buddha seems to be much more concerned with the quality of one's mind at any given moment than by the outward actions and even the consequences of those actions in the physical sphere. This is a perspective so different from ours in the mainstream west that it is very difficult for us to appreciate.

For example, in the *Jivaka Sutta* (M 55) the Buddha holds a monk harmless for eating meat that may have been given to him in his begging bowl by a layperson. If his mind is filled with loving kindness before, during and after the meal, there is no mechanism by means of which unwholesome karma is produced. On the contrary, if anyone orders the killing of an animal for the sake of the monks' meal, five distinct ways are specified in which unwholesome karma is produced. The point is that it is intention that creates karma, and it is always the intention of the act that determines its karmic quality.

The Samana (=Wanderers) movement sweeping India at the time of the Buddha, which both shaped the Buddha's thinking and to which he contributed greatly, was very much about this fundamental change of perspective. Instead of viewing things externally and physically, the emphasis shifted to viewing them internally and psychologically. Instead of "What action should I perform in the world in this particular situation?" the question became "What inner attitude should I hold in response to this particular situation?" The action will follow from the inner stance. Perhaps this shift in perspective could use some explanation.

Both ritualistic brahmins and secular materialists in India were arguing what might perhaps be considered a sort of primitive behaviorism. For the brahmins, human understanding and well-being was a matter of conducting certain rites that called upon various deities to intervene and protect human endeavor. What was important was that the ritual was done, and that it was done precisely according to traditional directions. For the materialists, who ignored anything in the inner life that went deeper than the

gratification of the senses and who denied the workings of ethics, rebirth and liberation, emphasis was placed upon external actions that resulted in pleasure, power, prestige and wealth.

The Samana movement (led by Upanishadic sages, Ajivikas, Yogis, Jains, Buddhists and others), with its roots in the very ancient Indus civilization, drew attention to the inner landscape of the human mind and body, to the world of personal experience, in which intentions, desires, states of consciousness and insight into one's own motivations became the focus. This was a radical transformation of perspective, and one that Western civilization has taken a long time to catch up with.

As an example of this transition, we can look at the *Upali Sutta* (M 56), which records a conversation between the Buddha and a less progressive Jain follower about the creation of unwholesome karma. Both parties recognize that action can be either physical, verbal or mental, but disagree on the relative impact of each. The Jain argues that physical action is the most reprehensible for the performance and perpetration of evil actions, and not so much the verbal or mental action. "What does the trivial mental [action] count for in comparison with the gross bodily [action]?" The Buddha, on the other hand, points out the primacy of mental action in a number of ways, in the sense that even verbal and physical action are guided by—and even performed by—acts of mental will or volition. As he puts it elsewhere, "Intention is action, I declare; having intended, one acts—either bodily, verbally or mentally." (A 6:63)

All this is offered as a way of re-contextualizing the opening question. From the perspective of the Buddhist tradition, it is not so much a matter of "What acts are justified or not in this situation?" but rather "With what intention is one abiding in this very moment? What motives are guiding my response here and now?" Notice that this immediately shifts the issue from a conceptual analysis of right and wrong, from thinking about appropriate and inappropriate behavior, to becoming aware of one's personal and intimate intentional relationship to the mo-



ment. This is the practice of introspective awareness; it is both the heart of the revolution that took place in ancient India, and the heart of the Buddhist meditative enterprise.

Once we frame the issue this way, the answers begin to become more apparent. In short, the Buddhists would say that anything rooted in attachment, aversion or confusion (aka greed, hatred and delusion) will contribute to more of the same. In the words of the discourses, "This leads to my own affliction, to the affliction of others, and to the affliction of both. It obstructs wisdom, causes difficulties, and leads away from awakening." (M 19) Conversely, any intentional stance, and ultimately any action, that is rooted in generosity, kindness or wisdom (aka non-greed, non-hatred and non-delusion) will contribute positively to any outcome. How do we apply this to the present situation?

The case against hatred of any kind is clearly articulated by the Buddha and his followers in unequivocal terms: "Hatreds are never appeased by further hatred. Only by non-hatred are they appeased. This is always true" (*Dhammapada* 5). And in even more graphic terms: "Bhikkhus, even if bandits were to sever you savagely limb by limb with a two-handed saw, he who gave rise to a mind of hate towards them would not be carrying out my teaching." (*Kakacupama Sutta*, M 21) We have heard of this attitude being modeled magnificently by certain Tibetan Buddhist prisoners under Chinese oppression, and is, I believe, the answer that any monk or nun needs to give—from the perspective of ultimate truth—to questions of violent action in response even to horrific criminal acts.

But the story I would like to focus on here has to do with something that emerged in a discussion with a worldly person, the prince Abhaya of Rajagaha. The conversation had to do with the Buddha's use of speech. The prince recognized that a person's always telling the truth was bound to injure others from time to time, if only because of their own delusions and attachment to views. Is there some basic incompatibility inherent in the Buddha hurting someone's feelings by speaking the truth to them? Here is the Buddha's response, from the *Abhayarajakumara Sutta* (M 58):

Now on that occasion a young tender infant was lying prone on Prince Abhaya's lap. Then the Blessed One said to Prince Abhaya: "What do you think, prince? If, while you or your nurse were not attending to him, this child were to put a stick or a pebble in his mouth, what would you do to him?"

"Venerable sir, I would take it out. If I could not take it out at once, I would take his head in my left hand, and crooking a finger of my right hand, I would take it out even if it meant drawing blood. Why is that? Because I have compassion for the child."

So too, prince, [with the speech of the Tathagata]:

Such speech as the Tathagata knows to be true [or untrue], correct [or incorrect], but unbeneficial, and which is welcome and agreeable to others [or which is unwelcome and disagreeable to others]: such speech the Tathagata does not utter.

Such speech as the Tathagata knows to be true, correct, and beneficial, and which is welcome and agreeable to others [or which is unwelcome and disagreeable to others]: the Tathagata knows the time to use such speech.

The last section is an attempt to simplify what is drawn out in more detail in the text. Essentially it is saying that the Buddha (Tathagata) will never utter speech that is unbeneficial, even if it is true and correct, and certainly not just because it is welcome and agreeable to others. By the same token, he will speak up if what he has to say is beneficial, i.e. it will help a person progress on the path—even (and this is the point) if it will be disagreeable to others and cause them distress. In other words, the harm one might cause in many cases must be weighed against the good one might do. As the matter is stated in the *Kinti Sutta* (M 103): "It is a mere trifle that the other person will be hurt, but it is a much greater thing that I can make that person emerge from the unwholesome and establish him in the wholesome."

I find the image of the Prince Abhaya extracting the obstruction from the throat of the infant to be a compelling one. Here the sentiment is translated from speech into action. Certain actions may be uncomfortable, may cause some distress, and may even go so far as to draw blood—but if they are done in the context of trying to heal or rescue someone from a far greater harm, it is appropriate action. The same message is given in another story found in the *Devadaha Sutta* (M 101):

**Friend, suppose a man were wounded by an arrow thickly smeared with poison, and because of this he felt painful, racking, piercing feelings.**

**Then his friends and companions, kinsmen and relatives, brought a surgeon. The surgeon would cut around the opening of the wound with a knife, probe for the arrow with a probe, pull out the arrow, and apply a medicinal cauterizer to the opening of the wound, and at each step the man would feel painful, racking, piercing feelings.**

**Then on a later occasion, when the wound was healed and covered with skin, the man would be well and happy, independent, master of himself, able to go where he likes.**

Here again we find an image of short term suffering deliberately inflicted for a long term good. In both cases the motivation is compassion, a sincere wish for the infant or the man to be healed, safe, and free from suffering. The experience of "painful, racking, piercing feelings" might be the same in two different circumstances,

but it makes a world of difference whether they are inflicted by an enemy trying to torture a person or a physician trying to heal him. The crucial difference is the quality of intention.

So let us return to the question at hand: "According to the teaching of the Buddha, is violence ever justified?" It depends entirely upon the quality of intention. If we can—honestly!—be motivated by compassion for the well-being of the world, or of our Islamic brethren, or of the people of Afghanistan, then perhaps the use of some force in extracting the obstruction or pulling out the poison arrow of violent extremism can be seen, not only as justified, but even as entirely appropriate. It might accomplish great healing.

Having said this, however, the practice now requires of us a sincere and truthful self-examination. If our motivation is entirely our own security at the expense of others, then the focus is too narrow. Because of the interdependence of self and other, wisdom encourages us to seek a broader outlook that encompasses the well-being "of ourselves, of others and of both ourselves and others."

The question then becomes one of skill. There is a big difference between the careful probing of a wise physician or a caring parent, and the ham-handed pounding of a person in the throes of anger, hatred or revenge. As we know, the forces of delusion, led by their marshal, self-interest, are very strong in human beings; we need to be scrupulously on guard against the three unwholesome roots. It may be relatively clear that a response motivated by greed or hatred is inherently unskillful, but the influence of delusion is far more subtle. The argument that violence can sometimes be justified can easily turn into a slippery slope. Moreover, we can easily forget the ultimate perspective, that any violence we may undertake, even with compassionate intent, will surely result in more violent consequences—for ourselves and others.

As always, inquiry following Buddhist principles leads back to the core issue of developing wisdom. The principle tool for this is a calm, steady and powerful mind, rooted firmly in an attitude of kindness, generosity and non-attachment, inquiring deeply and honestly into the interdependence of causes and conditions unfolding around us in a world that embraces far, far more than simply what is "me" or "mine." May we all, collectively, have the wisdom to be skillful—now more than ever.

