

**‘Peace as Inner Transformation: A Buddhist Perspective’ as found
in the Essays chapter in ‘The Unhindered Path by Rev John
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Overcome anger by peacefulness; overcome evil by good. Overcome
the mean by generosity and the person who lies by truth.
*The Dhammapada*¹

In considering peace from a Buddhist perspective, it is important to remember that it is, primarily, an inner disposition prior to its effective embodiment in the world as a particular course of action. Even before this can be made possible, it must initially become the fruit of spiritual realisation. This means that, in effect, any talk of peace ought to be grounded in a vision of the spirit marked by wisdom, compassion and equanimity.

Our original Buddha-nature is ... omnipresent, silent and pure; it is a
glorious and mysteriously peaceful joy.
Huang Po²

This, in turn, naturally entails the recognition and practice of *ahimsa*, a notion common to the Jains, Hindus and Buddhists which prohibits the harming of sentient beings. This has always been regarded as the cornerstone of any attempts to establish peace in the world among these traditions. Without such a foundation, any practical initiatives aimed at curtailing violence and upheaval in the world will waver, in keeping with the fickle and unstable nature of unregenerate humanity. Of course, it may be objected that it is perfectly possible to aim for peace on self-evident and purely humanitarian grounds without having recourse to religious justifications. Indeed there are numerous worthy secular endeavours that seek to restore peace in our world, albeit with limited success. Many such initiatives often involve a mix of political strategies or appeals to self-interest in order to curtail the suffering that is wrought on countless lives through the absence of peaceful solutions to conflicts around the globe.

Peace on such terms is sure to be precarious if insufficiently informed by deeper principles that involve *metanoia*, or a radical change of heart. Now this is very difficult to achieve, even for those who profess to be adherents of religion (itself the cause of many bitter conflicts) which demonstrates, precisely, why peace is so elusive in our world. This difficulty also points to our troubled constitution as human beings and the countless ‘blind passions’ that afflict it; passions that are corrosive and inimical to any genuinely communal welfare:

‘Blind passion’ is a comprehensive term descriptive of all the forces, conscious and unconscious, that propel the unenlightened person to think, feel, act and speak in such a way as to cause uneasiness, frustration, torment and pain (mentally, emotionally, spiritually and even physically) for themselves and others. While Buddhism makes a detailed and subtle analysis of blind passion, employing such terms as craving, anger, delusion, arrogance, doubt and wrong views, fundamentally it is rooted in the fierce, stubborn clinging to the ... self that constitutes the basis of our existence. When we realise the full implications of this truth about ourselves, we see that the human condition is itself nothing but blind passion. Thus, just to live, or wanting to live, as an

¹ Juan Mascaro (tr.) *The Dhammapada: The Path of Perfection*, tr. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1983), p. 68.

² John Blofeld (tr.) *The Zen teaching of Huang Po* (New York: Grove Press, 1959). p.35.

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unenlightened being is to manifest blind passion at all times, regardless of what we may appear to be. One comes to know this, however, only through the illumination of great compassion³.

Considering the matter from Buddhist first principles, it is evident enough that true peace must reflect the serenity of Nirvāna as true reality, devoid of anger, hatred and ignorance.

Nirvāna is called extinction of passions, the uncreated, peaceful happiness, eternal bliss, true reality . . . Oneness and Buddha-nature . . . it fills the hearts and minds of all beings.
Shinran⁴

It might seem an inordinate expectation to have peace in the world be contingent on the realisation of such an exalted state but, should this be a universal possibility for us, then the lasting peace which we so ardently seek would be secured by mere virtue of having attained perfect enlightenment which conquers all opposition, division and conflict. However, in an age when Buddhism sees humanity as being subject to defilement and corruption, it must seem that the prospects for lasting peace look very bleak. ‘Everything is burning’ said the Buddha, ‘burning with the fire of greed, with the fire of hatred, with the fire of delusion’ (*Samyutta Nikāya*). The quenching of this fire is only possible through a profound spiritual transformation involving the irruption of wisdom and compassion into our lives – not through mere social service or political activism but by means of a far-reaching revolution in our ordinary consciousness that comes about when we encounter the light of the Buddha.

In this day and age, when attaining Buddhahood is considered largely impossible for ordinary people, it is left to us to simply take refuge in the Dharma and allow its liberating graces to lessen the hold that ‘blind passions’ have over us in our lives. This does not, of course, lead to any kind of personal perfection but it can attenuate the grip of illusion and discontent that is so often the harbinger of disorder in the world.

Because they are deeply troubled and confused, people indulge their passions. Everyone is restlessly busy, having nothing on which to rely ... They entertain venomous thoughts, creating a widespread and dismal atmosphere of malevolence ... People are deluded by their passionate attachments, unaware of the Way, misguided and trapped by anger and enmity, and intent on gaining wealth and gratifying their desires like wolves.

*Sūtra on the Buddha of Infinite Life*⁵.

The transcendent perspective afforded by our contact with nirvanic reality can, through contemplation and faith, steep us in the Buddhist virtues. This is none other than our encounter with the Absolute:

³ *The Collected Works of Shinran*, tr. Dennis Hirota, Hisao Inagaki, Michio Tokunaga and Ryushin Uryuzu (Kyoto: Jōdo Shinshū Hongwanji-ha, 1997), Vol.II, p.172.

⁴ *The Collected Works of Shinran*, tr. Dennis Hirota, Hisao Inagaki, Michio Tokunaga and Ryushin Uryuzu (Kyoto: Jōdo Shinshū Hongwanji-ha, 1997), Vol.I, p.461.

⁵ Hisao Inagaki (tr.), *The Three Pure Land Sūtras* (Kyoto: Nagata Bunshodo, 2000), p.286.

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We are told that Nirvana is permanent, stable, imperishable, immovable, ageless, deathless and unborn; that it is power, bliss and happiness, the secure refuge, the shelter and the place of unassailable safety; that it is the real Truth and the supreme Reality; that it is the Good, the supreme goal and the one and only consummation of our life — the eternal, hidden and incomprehensible Peace.

Edward Conze⁶

In a sense, we need to become channels for this spiritual force in order that our hearts may be transformed. Without this, no lasting peace of any kind is possible seeing as the outer world of human affairs can only be a reflection of what is taking place within us. In the absence of a revealed religious law in Buddhism — such as we find in some of the Semitic traditions — the Mahāyāna, for example, advocates observance of the ‘Six Perfections’, or *pāramitās*, as the basis of spiritual and ethical endeavour. These comprise: *dāna* (generosity, giving of oneself); *śīla* (virtue, morality, discipline, proper conduct); *kṣānti* (patience, tolerance, forbearance, acceptance, endurance); *vīrya* (energy, diligence, vigour, effort); *dhyāna* (contemplation, concentration) and; *prajñā* (wisdom, insight).

Many of those who adhere to a religiously fundamentalist mind-set appear to lack an adequate understanding of the basic tenets of their faith or willfully ignore them for ideological reasons. This can only be addressed effectively by a proper presentation of the teachings in a balanced and nuanced manner. The contradictions and betrayals one often finds in fundamentalist thought often reflect a lack of intellectual depth and sophistication or an insistence on simplistic solutions in the face of complex problems. This might be understandable if the motive was compassion or *ahimsa* but, almost always, these aberrations are impelled by a disturbed religious psyche and therefore quite pernicious.

The Buddhist faith has sometimes been criticised for being too flexible when it comes to its doctrinal pronouncements; a fact which has spawned a plethora of different schools and teachings which often appear to contradict each other. While this bewildering variety of perspectives can seem confusing to newcomers, it may also be considered as one of its hidden strengths and the reason why Buddhism has largely avoided religious conflicts on the scale seen in some other faiths⁷. Traditionally, the Buddha is said to have given ‘84,000’ different teachings in response to the almost limitless variety of human needs, temperaments and understanding yet with always the same objective in mind:

The Buddha aspires to benefit sentient beings by giving them ... a great realm of ultimate purity, peace and sustenance.

⁶ Edward Conze, *Buddhism: Its Essence and Development* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), p.40.

⁷ Nevertheless, one cannot overlook the serious episodes of violent behaviour that have afflicted Buddhism throughout its history. Recent examples include the attacks against Muslims undertaken at the behest of nationalist monks in Thailand (2004), Burma (2013) and Sri Lanka (2014). In 1998, thousands of monks of the Chogyé Buddhist order in South Korea fought each other in protracted pitched battles, vying for control of the order’s considerable wealth and property. In the 1970s, ethnic *Lao Buddhist* monks actively supported militant *violence* directed against the country’s *communists*. One can also point to the support given by a number of prominent Buddhist authorities for Japan’s militarisation during the second world war as well as the assassination plot, known as ‘The League of Blood’ incident in 1932, which was led by a Buddhist monk. Numerous violent episodes have also been documented in the history of Tibetan Buddhism where competing sects have engaged in brutal clashes and summary executions over hundreds of years.

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Zonkaku⁸

This diversity does not suggest that there is no ‘bedrock’ in its teachings but, rather, that there are a core set of key insights which subtly tie together the variegated threads of the Dharma. Adherence to them is not necessarily insisted upon as a dogmatic requirement but is a natural outcome of reflecting on the truths of human existence. This latitude in belief acts as a foil to fundamentalism in that it reveals the incompleteness or relativity of any single doctrinal standpoint, while stressing that each one is perfectly adequate as a vehicle for emancipation. In this way, the range of teachings available in Buddhism can be seen as complementary rather than competing, thus removing the sclerotic tendency to form fixed and definitive views on spiritual matters – a major source of religious conflict.

This means that we ought to acknowledge that any doctrinal formulation is only an approximation of a reality that transcends it and which must always remain an ineffable experience of the spirit. Doing so does not belittle the teachings as being only ‘half-true’, so to speak, such as to vitiate their efficacy. On the contrary, this is assured by their having emerged from the realm of truth and light revealed to the Buddha in his enlightenment experience.

The Buddha regards universal existence with detached Wisdom and impartial Compassion. The aim of his teaching and method is liberation from all partial and illusory viewpoints, coloured by desire and aversion, into a state of peace and well-being.
Harold Stewart⁹

When awakened to Nirvāṇa, the Buddha recognised the truth of human existence coupled with a liberating awareness granted by such truth. Any articulation of this sublime vision is, inevitably, a descent from a perfect apprehension of a non-verbal wholeness to a more fragmentary and imperfect recourse to everyday language; language which, nevertheless, points to the source of its meaning and – if rightly apprehended – to the same unitive experience that forms the fount of all doctrine.

Accordingly, the Buddhist solution to the problem of fundamentalism, from which other traditions may gain a useful perspective, is to see dogma as supple and diaphanous; something that still captures the profoundest insights of a spiritual tradition but which, nonetheless, does not fix them into a rigid or inflexible posture. This enables us to see the symbolic and allegorical nature of sacred texts rather than being bound by a suffocating literalism that confuses truth with a ‘dead letter’. Such an approach admittedly contains risks for those to whom such a balance is either too elusive or an outright threat to ‘black and white’ doctrinairism. This, in turn, can provoke either an arrogant and overly self-assured fundamentalism that is fatal to the spiritual life or to a type of vague sentimentalism lacking in both insight and rigour; both of which may lead to a loss of belief altogether through having been starved of genuine contact with the living sources of religion.

⁸ Alfred Bloom (ed.), *The Shin Buddhist Classical Tradition: A Reader in Pure Land Teaching (Volume 1)* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2013), p.119.

⁹ Harold Stewart, *By the Old Walls of Kyoto: A Year’s Cycle of Landscape Poems with Prose Commentaries* (New York: Weatherhill, 1981), p.152.

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Given the irreconcilable positions of the secular and religious outlooks, it is difficult to effect any kind of harmony at a spiritual level. However, there are insights furnished by some Eastern traditions that ought to lend themselves to universal acceptance; for example, the notion of *ahimsa*, as has already been mentioned. Non-believers would argue that religions do not have a monopoly on this concept (which, indeed, they have often flouted) but, nevertheless, it is an important point of convergence given that the most egregious manifestations of religious intolerance have been widespread violence and harm done to others. Both from a secular point of view and a spiritual one, it is difficult to dispute the primacy of *ahimsa* as a preliminary step in securing a united response against the destructive forces of terrorism and nihilism.

It is important to explain why the truth of *ahimsa* goes to the heart of the difference between a sacred and a profane attitude to reality. In Mahāyāna Buddhism (and of course one sees this in other traditions as well), the empirical world around us, and the sentient beings that form a central part of it, are a manifestation of the highest reality considered as either Nirvāna or the Dharma-Body.

In light of the above, this reality and the world must stand in a relationship of non-duality. As a further consequence, this entails that each manifested entity (natural, animal or human) is strictly interdependent with all others, regardless of how evident this may be to our ordinary perception. Therefore, in causing harm to others, we injure ourselves as we are thereby inflicting pain and suffering on the whole which then recoils upon us as an integral part of that whole. Similarly – though less obviously – any harm we do to ourselves can also be correspondingly detrimental to other beings. Such a scission in the fabric of the world – while unavoidable given its imperfection and impermanence – can deny us the beneficent influence of Nirvāna which aims to unify all beings and save them from the acute perils of pain and ignorance.

May I, and other aspirants, behold the Buddha, acquire the eye of non-defilement, be born in the Land of Peace and Bliss, and realise the supreme enlightenment.
Shan-tao¹⁰

This account of the metaphysical basis for compassion and the accompanying attitude of *ahimsa*, to which it gives rise, is evidently a deeper explanation than what a merely secular view is able to provide. This does not mean that the latter cannot be sincerely felt and passionately defended but it does suggest that a more profound understanding of why *ahimsa* must be true is usually absent. To be fair, however, many religious defenders of this perspective themselves often fail to comprehend it properly or, worse, pervert it for less than spiritual motives.

That said, common ground is still possible based on a shared understanding of *ahimsa* as an indispensable principle of peace-building in our broken world. While the reasons for accepting the imperative to avoid harming others may not always be the same, a unanimous agreement as to the necessity of such a principle is surely possible among people of good will, discernment and sensitivity, regardless of religious belief.

¹⁰ Alfred Bloom (ed.), *The Shin Buddhist Classical Tradition: A Reader in Pure Land Teaching (Volume 2)* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2014), p.24.

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It remains a challenge for religions to be a catalyst in the promotion of peace and harmony when they have often been responsible for much hatred and conflict. Yet, as already mentioned, concepts such as the harmony of all beings in the Absolute and the interconnectedness of reality can serve as a means to have traditional spirituality and ethics contribute to a deeper grasp of our existential plight. They also suggest ways in which the many horrors of fundamentalist violence can be attenuated through a penetrating awareness of the twin Buddhist virtues of wisdom and compassion – the only true and enduring remedy for conflict borne of ‘blind passion’.

In suggesting the above, one must not be carried away by a false sense of optimism. While some of these suggested solutions are correct in principle, their effective realisation appears to be an objective well out of reach. A number of religions prescribe to the idea that we are living in a period of spiritual degradation the likes of which are arguably unprecedented. For the Hindus, we are in the midst of the ‘Age of Kali’ and many Buddhists consider that we find ourselves in the ‘Decadent Age of the Dharma’:

At the horrible time of the end, men will be malevolent, false, wicked and obtuse and they will imagine that they have reached perfection when it will be nothing of the sort.

*Lotus Sutra*¹¹

Conflict and turmoil are seen as an inherent aspect of such an age and, as distressing as such developments are, they are to be expected and one ought not to anticipate dramatic improvements any time soon. While our ability to collectively redress this crisis may be seriously limited, we can at least aim at working on our own inner spiritual disposition (and helping others to do so) without which nothing positive can emerge in world affairs. The state of disorder that we see around us everywhere is a refection of a toxic or damaged consciousness which only a spiritual form of awakening can ameliorate. Failing such a possibility in this life, Buddhism and other faiths exhort us to seek solace in the prospect of an eschatological resolution to the evils that can never be fully overcome in our fractured existence.

This world is a place full of disagreeable affairs, stealing, war, anger, hunger, desire. But the other shore is Nirvāna, beyond karma; it is true peace, freedom and happiness so, naturally, we look for the Other Shore ... In this world, we cannot obtain true freedom – there are always obstructions. Our life is temporary, not permanent, and we do not have true peace.
Hozen Seki¹²

While the secular world may not accept this diagnosis, it needs to keep an open mind as to the validity of this truth, especially given the worsening deterioration in our moral and social ambience. The solution to this impasse can never be a political one alone – ultimately, it must be buttressed by a spiritual dimension. Politics can certainly deliver on compromises or half-measures but the underlying impetus has to be an ethical orientation that is illumined through

¹¹ John Paraskevopoulos (ed.) *The Fragrance of Light: A Journey Into Buddhist Wisdom* (Sophia Perennis, 2015), p.32.

¹² Hozen Seki, *The Great Natural Way* (New York: American Buddhist Academy, 1976), p.73.

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an encounter with a transcendent order of reality, on which every genuine value is based. Even at this level, sectarian differences should not preclude the attempt to seek an essential shared understanding. It is therefore important to look beyond certain doctrinal differences to a vision that is truly communal and to which all the great faiths can assent – a joint attempt to affirm peace in the world that is none other than a peace that reflects, for Buddhists at least, the beatitude of Nirvāṇa that lies at the heart of reality and which seeks to bring all beings to the highest good.

Whether we can ascend to such an exalted realisation remains highly uncertain. If we prove that we are unable to do so, what can be assured is the slow but inevitable disintegration of human dignity and the abandonment of its most noble ideals.

Wherever the Buddha comes to stay, there is no state, town or village that is not blessed by his virtues. The whole country reposes in peace and harmony. The sun and the moon shine with pure brilliance; winds rise and rains fall at the right time. There is no calamity or epidemic and so the country becomes wealthy, and its people enjoy peace. Soldiers and weapons become useless; and people esteem virtue, practice benevolence and diligently cultivate courteous modesty.’ . . . The Buddha continued, ‘But after I have departed from this world, my teaching will gradually decline and people will fall prey to flattery and deceit, and commit various evils.’

*Sūtra on the Buddha of Immeasurable Life*¹³

¹³ Hisao Inagaki (tr.), *The Three Pure Land Sūtras* (Kyoto: Nagata Bunshodo, 2000), p.304.

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