

Introduction

by Kenneth Kraft

Buddhism has long been associated with peace and nonviolence. A carved or painted figure of a buddha meditating serenely in a cross-legged posture is widely recognized as an expression of inner and outer harmony. The cardinal precept of Buddhism is not to harm or kill, but to cherish all life. Though Buddhists have at times sought to achieve their goals by less than peaceful means, no major war has been fought in the name of Buddhism. History has recorded few Buddhist crusades or inquisitions. In 1989 the connection between Buddhism and nonviolence was heralded by the presentation of the Nobel Peace Prize to the Dalai Lama, exiled Buddhist leader of Tibet. Since Tibet's occupation by China over thirty years ago, the Dalai Lama has consistently advocated nonviolent solutions to his country's plight.

While a link between Buddhism and nonviolence is generally acknowledged, the broader implications of this double theme have rarely been explored in a substantive way. What are the origins of Buddhism's approach to nonviolence? What happens when theories of nonviolence are applied to actual situations? What resources might Buddhism have to offer those who confront violence or injustice today? Have the principal terms (such as "nonviolence," "peace," "Buddhism") been adequately defined? These and similar questions prompted the present volume. In the following essays the topic is explored from various perspectives, and the conclusions that emerge are far from uniform. For example, one contributor expresses some doubt about the centrality of nonviolence in

Buddhism. Another focuses on forms of nonviolent behavior that do not presuppose any religious base. A third argues that traditional Buddhist notions of nonviolence must be expanded greatly in light of current social conditions.

One common starting-point for Buddhist treatments of this subject is the conviction that all things, near and far, are fundamentally related. Buddhism further asserts that the distinctions we make between an individual and the universe, while provisionally useful, are ultimately illusory. From this premise it follows that a single person who experiences peace of mind, or who lives in a nonviolent manner, is contributing to the peace of the world. A few months before receiving the Nobel Prize, the Dalai Lama declared:

The question of real, lasting world peace concerns human beings, so basic human feelings are also at its roots. Through inner peace, genuine world peace can be achieved. In this the importance of individual responsibility is quite clear; an atmosphere of peace must first be created within ourselves, then gradually expanded to include our families, our communities, and ultimately the whole planet.¹

Some Buddhist teachings claim that the mind does not just affect the world, it actually creates and sustains it. According to this view, cosmic harmony is most effectively preserved through an individual's spiritual practice. Yet other Buddhists amend the notion that mind is the primary or exclusive source of peace, contending that inner serenity is fostered or impeded by external conditions. "Without freedom from want and oppression, people cannot be expected to appreciate more sublime forms of personal liberation," writes Sulak Sivaraksa in these pages. Buddhists who place importance upon social factors and social action believe that internal transformation cannot, by itself, quell the world's turbulence.

The advent of Buddhists who are concerned about world peace and other sociopolitical issues is itself a topic that invites attention. Isn't Buddhism an inwardly focused religion that gives precedence to meditation over any kind of social activity? Isn't it contradictory to speak of a "socially engaged Buddhism"? While the heart of the tradition may indeed be a solitary spiritual quest, Buddhism also displays remarkable diversity, and there is increasing recognition of the ways in which Buddhists and their institutions become involved in the world.

Both sides of this theme—engagement and disengagement—are explored in this collection of essays. According to one important strain of early Buddhist thought, nonviolence was conceived primarily in terms of abstention. As Luis Gómez demonstrates in his chapter, a monk was supposed to uphold the precept against harming other beings by carefully

avoiding certain kinds of behavior. The standards were quite high, but the point is that abstention alone was enough—there was no further injunction to extend the practice of nonviolence to some wider social realm. A more contemporary image of Buddhism's apparent unworldliness can be found in a remote monastery in the forests of southern Thailand, where the respected master Buddhadasa has been meditating and teaching for over fifty years. Depicted in Donald Swearer's essay as an exemplar of nonviolence, Buddhadasa lectures at dawn under his favorite tree, gently brushing aside the chickens that hop onto his lap.

Understandably, Buddhism often appears to promote personal transformation at the expense of social concern. A recent study reiterates the accepted view: "What unifying element there is in Buddhism, Mahayana and non-Mahayana, is provided by the monks and their adherence to the monastic rule."² In China, countless generations of Confucianists accused Buddhists of withdrawing from the world out of selfishness. Wang Yang-ming (1472–1529) charged that Buddhists were "afraid of the troubles involved in the relationships between father and son, ruler and subject, and husband and wife; therefore [they] escape from these relationships."³ In Japan, Buddhism is commonly faulted for becoming too subservient to the state. Assessing Buddhism during the Tokugawa era (1603–1867), a modern Japanese historian concluded:

With the establishment of [Tokugawa] feudal organization, Buddhist circles capitulated to secular power, willingly fulfilled the task of safeguarding the status quo, and gave up all of their noteworthy social functions.⁴

D. T. Suzuki, ordinarily a defender of Zen, did not exalt its role in the sociopolitical realm: "[Zen] may be found wedded to anarchism or fascism, communism or democracy . . . or any political or economic dogmatism."⁵ Most Western scholars have also tended to perceive Buddhism as world-denying, passive, or socially inept. Max Weber was one of the first to declare that Buddhist devotees carry the "asocial character of genuine mysticism . . . to its maximum."⁶

Yet there are other specialists, including several of the contributors to this volume, who have begun to question such interpretations. Instead they perceive in Buddhism a creative tension between withdrawal and involvement, an underlying synonymity between work on oneself and work on behalf of others. Evidence supporting this viewpoint is found in doctrine, in practice, in legend, and in history. Thus the preeminent virtues in Theravada Buddhism are self-restraint *and* generosity; in Mahayana Buddhism, the highest goals are wisdom *and* compassion.

It is noteworthy, in this regard, that the story of the Buddha's spiritual journey climaxes with his enlightenment but does not end there. Even as

he was savoring the blissful state that followed his awakening, he was approached (in the traditional account) by a delegation of gods, who begged him to give up his private ecstasy so he could share his awakening with those who still suffered. This encounter and its outcome, however legendary, make the point that spiritual maturity includes the ability to actualize transcendent insight in daily life. The Buddha is said to have wandered across northern India for forty years, tirelessly teaching the Dharma. His decision to arise from his seat under the Bo tree and go out into the world can be considered the first step of a socially engaged Buddhism. The Buddha's discourses, which had revolutionary force in the society of his time, include countless passages dealing with "this-worldly" topics such as politics, good government, poverty, crime, war, peace, and ecology.⁷

When Buddhism is no longer assumed to be world-rejecting, several aspects of the tradition acquire new significance. For example, Robert Thurman argues in his chapter on Tibet that the Buddhist monastic community (the Sangha) represents a consciously planned social movement, a "nonviolent army of peace." The great Indian king Aśoka (third century B.C.E.), who figures in several of the essays, apparently sought to demonstrate that an entire country could be ruled in accord with Buddhist principles. By promoting nonviolent domestic and foreign policies, Aśoka extended the doctrine of nonviolence to include the notion of social harmony. Even Nāgārjuna (second century C.E.), the great Buddhist dialectician, is said to have outlined the kind of society that would accord with Buddhism's basic tenets.⁸

Among the contemporary figures who personify Buddhism's active dimensions is the Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh, who gained international recognition for his efforts to end the Vietnam War. Today Nhat Hanh is working creatively with Buddhists and non-Buddhists throughout North America and Europe, teaching new ways of "being peace." He maintains that individual serenity should not be sought in isolation from the world:

The peace we seek cannot be our personal possession. We need to find an inner peace which makes it possible for us to become one with those who suffer, and to do something to help our brothers and sisters, which is to say, ourselves. . . . This peace is not a barricade which separates you from the world. On the contrary, this kind of peace brings you into the world and empowers you to undertake whatever you want to do to try to help.⁹

A socially engaged Buddhism raises many questions that will continue to stimulate discussion and reflection. For instance, is it necessary to prove that engagement was an integral feature of original Buddhism, or is it enough to demonstrate that it can be derived naturally from Buddhism's

past? What are the differences between Buddhist-inspired activism and activism that arises from other religious or secular belief-systems? A number of challenging practical issues also emerge: Is it possible to become involved without becoming attached? Must one be partially or fully enlightened before one can act in the world with true wisdom and compassion? Such topics are of particular concern to Buddhism's new adherents in the West, as Cynthia Eller shows in her comparison of Buddhist and Christian social ethics.

Another question that often arises is whether a person who embraces nonviolence is entitled to resort to violence in extreme situations—such as self-defense, defense of innocent people, or defense of one's country. Different answers are found in the various streams of the Buddhist tradition. Though certain scriptural passages contend that a Buddhist “must not hate any being and cannot kill a living creature even in thought,”¹⁰ one influential sutra states that in order to protect the truth of Buddhism it may be necessary to bear arms and ignore the moral code.¹¹ The *Jātaka* tales depict saintly figures who calmly allow themselves to be hacked to pieces, yet other canonical sources advise kings to mobilize their troops against invaders. Certain schools refrain from addressing such issues theoretically; instead they claim that people who have trained themselves to live each day consciously and nonviolently will intuitively know how to react in a given situation.

One commendable response to an imminent attack is illustrated in a Zen anecdote:

When a rebel army swept into a town in Korea, all the monks of the Zen temple fled except for the abbot. The general came into the temple and was annoyed that the abbot did not receive him with respect. “Don't you know,” he shouted, “that you are looking at a man who can run you through without blinking?” “And you,” replied the abbot strongly, “are looking at a man who can be run through without blinking!” The general stared at him, then made a bow and retired.¹²

A similar confrontation that occurred recently in Burma is recounted in Chapter I. But for most of us, to puzzle over such uncommon scenarios is to leap too quickly to abstract speculation. Ordinarily, no clear-cut boundary separates nonviolent and violent behavior, and it is impossible to adhere to an absolute standard (we kill tiny beings whenever we boil water). Thus the ideal of nonviolence is more a direction than a fixed position.

Many Buddhists recognize that a kind of violence is sometimes necessary to prevent a greater violence. The Dalai Lama tells a story about two monks sitting beside a rain-swollen river, waiting for an evening ferry. A man who is quite drunk suddenly steps off the bank and begins to wade into the strong current, oblivious to the danger. One of the monks runs

over and tries to pull him back, but the drunken man resists violently, until the monk's only recourse is to knock the man out. In such a case, comments the Dalai Lama, the monk who sat still and did nothing behaved more violently than the monk who subdued the drunk by force. Because motive and intention play a critical role, certain formulations can become a slippery slope. A compassionate person may even be compelled to kill someone, wrote Asaṅga in the fourth century C.E., if that is the only way to save the lives of many others.¹³ In highly charged situations that may lead to killing, only those with the spiritual development of a buddha are deemed capable of deliberately abrogating the principle of nonviolence; the Dalai Lama declines to put himself in that category.¹⁴

A feature that originally set Buddhism apart from Hinduism, and that still characterizes it in several cultures, is an expressed opposition to the slaughter of animals. Rather than making a sharp distinction between humans and animals, Buddhism groups them together as "sentient beings," subject equally to birth and death, pain and fear. According to the doctrine of karma, people can be reborn as animals, and animals can be reborn as people, so one's past or future relatives might turn up in the most unlikely places. Hence the adoption of vegetarianism by certain Buddhists. Asian Buddhists ceremonially liberate animals in captivity, buying them from breeders or pet stores and releasing them back to their natural environments. (An American Zen center celebrates Thanksgiving by freeing turkeys.) Christopher Chapple notes in his essay that Buddhists are beginning to express concern about the treatment of animals in other contemporary contexts, including laboratory experiments.

In cases such as the treatment of animals in scientific research, classic Buddhist tenets are being applied to situations that differ greatly from the contexts in which those tenets were originally conceived. The Buddhist creed of nonviolence that once functioned as a personal moral code for monks in ancient India is now expected to provide guidelines for dealing with complex social and political dilemmas. Though such leaps may seem dubious from certain scholarly or religious standpoints, they are earnestly being attempted nonetheless. Graphic reminders of the discrepancies between ancient and modern worldviews are furnished by the traditional stories cited in these pages. An elephant sacrifices himself for a rabbit, a human prince sacrifices himself for a tigress, a merchant has an inexhaustible rice pot, a celestial savior is reconstituted from a thousand fragments, and so on. Here such accounts are examined principally for their doctrinal implications, though that is only one of the perspectives from which they can be viewed. Whatever complexities have been engendered by changing historical conditions, certain fundamental principles have remained constant for Buddhist believers.

A significant Buddhist interpretation of nonviolence concerns the ap-

plication of that ideal to daily life. Nonviolence is not some exalted regimen that can be practiced only by a monk or a master; it also pertains to the way one interacts with a child, vacuums a carpet, or waits in line. Besides the more obvious forms of violence, whenever we separate ourselves from a given situation (for example, through inattentiveness, negative judgments, or impatience), we “kill” something valuable. However subtle it may be, such violence actually leaves victims in its wake: people, things, one’s own composure, the moment itself. According to Buddhist reckoning, these small-scale incidences of violence accumulate relentlessly, are multiplied on a social level, and become a source of the large-scale violence that can sweep down upon us so suddenly. In contrast, any act performed with full awareness, any gesture that fosters happiness in another person, is credited as an expression of nonviolence. One need not wait until war is declared and bullets are flying to work for peace, Buddhism teaches. A more constant and equally urgent battle must be waged each day against the forces of one’s own anger, carelessness, and self-absorption.

An essayist in *The New Yorker* magazine recently observed that nonviolence “ranks as one of the few great modern discoveries.”¹⁵ At first, this remark may appear short-sighted: Jainism and Buddhism have stressed nonviolence for millennia, and the Sermon on the Mount was not preached last Sunday. Yet the point is well taken. The twentieth century has witnessed Gandhi’s nonviolent expulsion of the British Raj in India, Martin Luther King’s nonviolent civil rights movement in the United States, and the nonviolent reversals of Communist party power in Europe and the Soviet Union. Though we tend to associate the concept of nonviolence with ancient Asian thought, some of the most notable instances of nonviolent political action have occurred in the West during this century.

Gene Sharp argues in his essay that the political potential of this “modern” discovery has yet to be fully appreciated. He believes that it may be possible to train entire populations to resist invaders or oppressors without resorting to violence, even if no one embraces pacifism philosophically or religiously. While recent events in Europe and elsewhere seem to lend credence to such assertions, important questions remain. What about someone like Hitler, or the Chinese hardliners who ordered the tanks into Tiananmen Square, or a belligerent Saddam Hussein? Are nonviolent methods effective only if one is dealing with an opponent who has a conscience? If a nonviolent movement attains a specific end (such as the removal of a dictator), has it triumphed? Or is the conversion of an entire society to a nonviolent way of life the one true measure of success? Without denying the philosophical issues involved, Sharp contends that nonviolent action must also be studied empirically, and he has been instrumental in developing a new field of research based on this approach.

These are subjects that tend to yield paradoxical conclusions. If strug-

gle is inherent in growth and creativity, then nonviolence cannot mean the complete eradication of conflict. When a child gleefully smashes a tower of blocks, can that act of destruction also be considered a form of creation? In order for something to live, something else must usually die, so the precept to cherish all life may, from certain perspectives, imply a reverence for death as well. Yet Buddhists who recognize such paradoxes are nonetheless moved to alleviate suffering and promote peace. Poet Gary Snyder, a long-time student of Zen, reflects:

I'm still trying to understand, as I always will be, the many levels of the meaning of the first Buddhist precept: not to be harmful, not to harm. . . . We mustn't be dualistic even about war and peace, or about warlikeness and peacefulness. Peace contains war, war contains peace. In any situation, in any place, in any condition, even in the battle right in the middle of the war, you must appreciate and be grateful for the little bit of nonviolence or a little bit of less harmfulness or intelligent nonharmfulness that might be practiced there. And we must be alert in a parallel way in the realm of peace to the kinds of aggression that take place.¹⁶

Notes

1. The Dalai Lama, Address in San Jose, Costa Rica, June 1989, *Buddhist Peace Fellowship Newsletter* (Fall 1989), 4.
2. Paul Williams, *Mahāyāna Buddhism* (London: Routledge, 1989), 4.
3. Fung Yu-lan, *A History of Chinese Philosophy*, vol. 2 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 610–11.
4. Ienaga Saburo, "Japan's Modernization and Buddhism," in *Contemporary Religions in Japan* (International Institute for the Study of Religions, Tokyo) 6:1 (March 1965).
5. D. T. Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 63.
6. Max Weber, *The Religion of India*, trans. Hans H. Gerth and Don Martindale (New York: The Free Press, 1958), 213.
7. See, for example, Walpola Rahula, "The Social Teachings of the Buddha," in Fred Eppsteiner, ed., *The Path of Compassion: Writings on Socially Engaged Buddhism* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1988), 103–110; and Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, "Early Buddhist Views on Nature," in Allan Hunt Badiner, *Dharma Gaia* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1990), 8–13.
8. Robert A. F. Thurman, "Nagarjuna's Guidelines for Buddhist Social Activism," in Eppsteiner, *The Path of Compassion*, 120–44.
9. Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Sun My Heart* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1988), 127–28.

10. *Daśabhūmika Sūtra*, in Har Dayal, *The Bodhisattva Doctrine in Buddhist Sanskrit Literature* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, and Co., 1931), 199.
11. *Mahāparinirvāna Sūtra*, in Williams, *Mahāyāna Buddhism*, 161.
12. Trevor Leggett, *The Tiger's Cave* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977), 160.
13. Mark Tatz, trans., *Asaṅga's Chapter on Ethics with the Commentary of Tsong-Kha-Pa, The Basic Path to Awakening, the Complete Bodhisattva*, by Bodhisattva Yogacarabhumi (Lewiston/Queenston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1986), 70–72.
14. Catherine Ingram, *In the Footsteps of Gandhi: Conversations with Spiritual Social Activists* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1990), 13.
15. "Talk of the Town," *The New Yorker*, 12 December 1983, 43.
16. Gary Snyder, et al., "The Warrior and the Militarist: A Discussion," in *The Sun* 125 (April 1986), 19.