
Zen Buddhism and Violence

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The use of violence, which is far too often justified by ideological and religious motives, leads us to think about violence in general and the relationship between Buddhism and violence.

Violence is the use of physical or psychological force to restrain or dominate in order to harm or cause death. It is expressed through physical blows and injuries but also through verbal or psychological pressure which cause suffering.

The Buddha's teachings are based on an understanding of the different aspects of suffering, its causes and its cures. This teaching regards suffering as the sign of something abnormal which needs to be fixed. Suffering, caused by seemingly inevitable circumstances such as birth, disease, old age, and death, occurs mostly because of our non-accepting attitude towards impermanence. Suffering can thus be alleviated by letting go of our Ego and through the practice of the Way, the process may be facilitated.

Suffering provoked by human behavior

When it comes to violence, we are dealing with a cause of suffering provoked by human behavior. So called "natural" violence does not exist. Natural disasters like tidal waves, earthquakes, floods, forest fires seem to be the expression of extreme violence. We sometimes speak of these happenings by saying that the elements have unleashed themselves and gone wild. However, these phenomena are not created through any intention to cause harm and they cannot be avoided through any form of instant awareness. Carnivorous animals kill to eat, but we cannot accuse predators of violence. They are simply satisfying an instinctive and natural need.

From the awakened point of view of the Buddha and those following his teachings, human violence is connected to mistakes, illusions called bonnos or mind poisons which the practice of the Way can resolve. Even the well-known serial killer Angulimala was rid of his violence by the Buddha, because it stemmed from the Machiavellian advice of his master which turned him into a murderer. Whereas the king ordered his army to go and eliminate Angulimala, the Buddha had a different plan – he converted him and turned him into a highly compassionate monk. According to this famous example, Zen Buddhism teaches that all beings are Buddha nature and thus can change their erroneous behavior through a non-violent education based on confidence in this nature and its potential for positive change.

No separation

The origins of the Buddha's teachings are in his awakening to the true nature of his existence: as a being without any independent substance, without an ego separated from other existences. It is this total interdependence which can awaken everyone, who through sitting in zazen and turning their vision inwards, discovers that there is no separation from the outer world. We breathe the air and are made of the elements belonging to the entire universe. Our ego is a making of the mind, enabling us to have an identity, but it mustn't keep us from recognizing the ultimate reality of our existence as being in total unity with all beings. When we

discover this unity, our capacity for empathy grows and it becomes no longer possible for us to deliberately make other sentient beings suffer or to act violently.

The precepts encourage non-violence

Since our behavioral conditioning often leads us to betray this awakening, the Buddha's precepts are there to guide us back to a more correct attitude. These precepts encourage non-violence and respectfulness towards others: « do not kill, do not steal, do not lie, do not sexually abuse others (which is often translated as 'sex without love', implying the notion of faithfulness), do not belittle others, consider ourselves as superior or be arrogant, do not become angry". These are all recommendations for non-violent behavior. Even the precept of not getting drunk or high on drugs is a piece of advice for not being violent towards oneself.

They are not really taboos: the precepts are the expression of the Buddha's wisdom and compassion, or in other words, his awakening. When we ourselves become awakened, the precepts become less useful simply because we observe them naturally. The idea is not that « I mustn't kill », but in fact, I actually am no longer able to do it. And instead, I will protect all living beings by taking care of them and helping them to liberate themselves from the causes of their suffering. Stealing or taking what does not belong to me and depriving someone else of it is a type of violence, as is exploiting someone else's work.

The practice of zazen encourages us to share more with others and practice giving, fuse. Just as the unjust appropriation of certain property and material things may be the initial cause of conflicts generating violence, learning to give is a way to cease violent behavior. Reconciliation between humans has always begun by giving something.

In order to stop violence from threatening the future of life on earth, self-centeredness and greed need to be let go of, because of their disastrous effects on the environment. For example, competition for ownership of sources of water, energy and raw materials has been a cause of war and will remain so in the near future. However, greed which causes violence is due to a lack of spiritual realization. Being attached to material things, along with the thirst for power, are delusional attempts to compensate for the lack of spiritual awakening. In fact, a feeling of not being wealthy and/or powerful, as well as a lack of love, is very likely at the base of a lot of violent behavior. Hence, child abuse is often committed by violent adults who were themselves abused as children, and the cycle goes on and on from generation to generation. The Buddha said: « hatred is not destroyed by more hatred. Hatred is destroyed by love, it is the eternal law. »

Obviously, this love is "true love", dedicated to the benevolence towards one's loved ones, and not solely "passion-orientated" love, which, like all forms of passion, too often generates violence. I am mentioning this to avoid any ambiguity about the word love. Actually, in Zen teachings, to express this idea, we prefer the words « benevolence and compassion", which are in fact the best antidotes against violence.

You just have to open your eyes

Paradoxically, most religions preach universal love and yet are often simultaneously at the root of violence, emanating from intolerance, which itself, emanates from blind faith. And religious faith is often blind: « I believe because it's absurd » said Pascal. That which can be seen doesn't

require faith or a rational demonstration proving its existence; you just have to open your eyes in order to understand, as the Buddha suggests. And that's why Buddhists have never had to resort to using violence to convert people. They strive to help others open their eyes. Unfortunately, there have been Buddhists participating in war; however, their activity was absolutely not based on Buddhist religion; there have never been any Buddhist crusades or inquisitions. Japanese Buddhists supported the imperialist war led by their country because it was a matter of life or death, for themselves and for their temples as well. This shows once more that attachment is the cause of a great deal of suffering.

As fear of death is a source of great suffering for humans beings, it is often what leads them to a spiritual path. That is how samurais, then followed by others practicing martial arts, embraced the practice of Zen Buddhism. The teachings they received from their Zen masters did not incite them to practice violence but instead to respect all beings regardless of whether they were perceived as enemies or friends. This orientation was accentuated in martial arts which then became an art of self-control and respect for the adversary, considered as a partner.

Truly letting go of the ego occurs naturally

Sometimes though, Zen practice becomes a battle fought between oneself and one's own ego. Certain Rinzai Zen masters sometimes teach that the ego should be abandoned through ascetic practice, including dying while sitting on a zafu. Even if this expression is meant to be symbolic, Soto Zen and particularly Dogen's Zen loathed all forms of violence, including the practice of screaming and striking with a stick, which certain masters frequently used in educating their disciples. Truly letting go of the ego occurs naturally by awakening one's true Self to its Buddha nature. This is realized through perceiving the vacuity of our makings of our mental constructions and letting go of exclusively dualistic and discriminating thought.

It is not a question of sacrifice. It is self-realization, which includes the realization of others in the vast Zen mind.

If phenomena in life sometimes seem violent to us, this is because it is difficult for us to understand and accept the two Dharma seals - fundamental truths realized by the Buddha - impermanence and non-being or absence of any form of substance independent from all other existence and the interdependence of all existence. Not accepting this is at the core of all suffering, which disappears when one is finally able to say « yes » to reality as it is. This acceptance becomes the great door of awakening and nirvana, the way to harmony and non-violence.