Buddhism and Violence
by Roger Corless

The destruction of the World Trade Center, the partial destruction of the Pentagon, and the apparent attempt to destroy the White House by a group of suicidal terrorists on Tuesday, September 11, 2001, have left us numb, angry, unspeakably sad, and confused. How do we, as Buddhists, respond to this evil? Can we explain it? Can we heal it? In this article I offer my own reflections on the tragedy and suggest a way through our shock and grieving.

SUFFERING IS PERVASIVE
The message of Buddhism is that the universe is, in its true nature, endlessly compassionate, wise, and joyful. This optimism, however, is long term—very long term, something that fully manifests only after every sentient being has attained liberation. In the short term, or rather, for the foreseeable future, Buddhism paints a grim picture of the world. The Buddha is like a physician who tells us the good news—that we can be completely cured—only after hitting us with an honest diagnosis of the seriousness of our illness.

Before we begin to look closely at it, life seems to be a mixture of joys and sorrows, with, for most of us in a prosperous country like the USA, joys predominating. We celebrate the birth of a baby with smiles, gifts, and feasting. But if we have been born, the prognosis is bad: we will die. In his first teaching after becoming the Buddha, Shakyamuni said that birth, sickness, aging, and death are all suffering. That about covers it. As Jim Morrison of The Doors succinctly put it, no-one gets out of here alive. One of the Buddha’s first disciples was converted while attending a festival. He saw the people laughing and, thus, showing their teeth. Teeth, he realized, are the skull, visible while we are still alive and healthy. Laughter reveals that there is sadness in the very midst of happiness. We are dying every moment. The Tibetans say that as soon as we are born, Yama, the Lord of Death, begins to eat us. When he has finished his meal, we are dead.

If we take this perspective, death is still sad, and a sudden, violent death is still shocking, but it does not shake the foundations of our worldview. We live in the expectation of death. A balanced practice includes some method of reminding ourselves that death is inevitable. Tibetan Buddhism has elaborate death yogas (the best known is available in English as The Tibetan Book of the Dead) in which the practitioner visualizes the process of his or her own dying and rebirth, preparing for it, so that it may be experienced mindfully and used
GBF Committees

We always want and need interested participants, so please, JOIN IN! Call the contact person on the committee, or talk to him (or anyone on that committee) at a GBF sitting or event. This is a great practice opportunity!

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to bring about liberation. Theravada Buddhists recite verses reminding themselves of the constituent parts of the body (skin, bone, sinews, hair, blood, pus, snot, etc.) and their impermanence. Katagiri Roshi, the former teacher of the Minneapolis Zendo, used to say that life is like getting into a boat which goes out to sea and sinks. Being a Zen teacher, he then laughed uproariously.

That is the bad news. The good news is that we brought it on ourselves by our actions. That may sound like bad news, but, clearly, if a world of suffering and death is something we made, then we can unmake it. Suffering and death does not come from a vengeful God or an inscrutable fate but from three basic tendencies which we all have — attachment, aversion, and confusion, and their effects according to the law of karma.

Attachment (rāga) can also be translated as lust or greed. It starts as a feeling that if I possess a certain person, place, or thing I will be happy, and it results in the pursuit of that person, place, or thing. The pursuit takes on its own life because it is insatiable. Certain persons, places or things can bring happiness, but only limited happiness, conditioned by time, space, and circumstances. All people, places or things are conditioned, imperfect, and impermanent. We want unalloyed, perfect, eternal happiness (don’t we really, in our heart of hearts?) and since we don’t realize the conditioned nature of the object of our desire, we pursue another person, place, or thing. The insatiable nature of this pursuit is compared to drinking salty water in order to slake our thirst. It seems as if it should work, but it actually it has the opposite effect.

Aversion (dveśha), which we can also translate as hate, is the mirror image of attachment—only if we do not possess a certain person, place, or thing, we feel, will we be happy. It is insatiable for the same reason—the object of our revulsion is impermanent and so our satisfaction at getting rid of that person, place, or thing does not last.

The third tendency is moha, confusion or delusion. It is like sleep walking or being drunk. As the Chinese Buddhists say, unless we practice the Dharma we live in a dream and die drunk. In one image, confusion is seen as the root which feeds attachment and aversion. If we really understood the true nature of our objects of desire we would cut them off at the root. In another image, the three tendencies are symbolized by three animals chasing each other — a cock for attachment (you can remember that one, can’t you?), a snake for aversion and a pig for confusion. The three tendencies are called klesha in Sanskrit, a word often translated as affliction but literally meaning disturbance. The kleshas stir up and muddy the clarity of the mind. In Chinese they are called saṅdu, the three poisons, since they are what kills us, again and again.

Stop a moment and consider to what extent each of these afflictions was present in your mind as you watched the events of September 11, and to what extent they are still present. How did they, and how do they still, contribute to an increase in your suffering, and perhaps the suffering of others? Then, consider that these afflictions will also have been in the minds of the perpetrators. They were seeking happiness, but what was the actual result? Finally, imagine how you would act and feel, and how the perpetrators might have acted and felt, in the absence of the three kleshas. This exercise (which, when
done formally, is called an analytic meditation) will help you realize how, eventually, cyclic existence (samsara) can be deconstructed and suffering ended permanently.

THE MAP IS NOT THE TERRITORY
One of the tricks which our mind plays is identifying words with things. If we call something a cat we then assume that it really is a cat, that it has its own essence of catness by which it subsists. Whole philosophies have been built on this mistake, but we don't need to be a philosopher to believe in it. The naive, untrained mind assumes that this is the way things really are. It is not a trivial mistake. It makes us feel that we cannot change things, that we are trapped in this reality of pervasive suffering. We say, "I'm only human" and "You can't change human nature." But if we look closely at any person, place, or thing, if we really watch it, we will see that it is changing all the time. Even mountains, planets, and stars come and go. If there is change, and if, as the teaching on karma tells us, we have a hand in that change, release from suffering is possible.

Maps are very useful for finding our way, but they are not the territory. They are highly selective in what they show, and a map showing geological features will differ from a map showing population density or transportation routes. A perfectly complete map would have to be the same size as the territory, filled with all the inhabitants, and constantly changing. It would not be a map at all but a copy of the territory. Just so with words and concepts. They are models which abstract certain features from reality for certain purposes such as distinguishing an object from its background.

In times of war our maps identify blocks of people called friends and enemies. Enemies are often coalesced further into "the enemy" or just "enemy." "Heavy losses were inflicted on the enemy," the news might report. In the midst of armed conflict this abstraction can be useful, but we are in trouble if we identify the abstraction with reality. We will be unable to see the suffering of our opponent and we will miss the conditioned nature of the situation. Buddhism tells us that all sentient beings are reborn, over and over, as other sentient beings. This means that someone who is our enemy now has been our dear friend or relative in the past, and at some time in the future they will once again be our friend or relative. At the moment that the being is our enemy we may have no choice but to kill our former friend, but we will kill with regret and compassion for someone who has, as it were, become temporarily insane and does not recognize us.

Sometimes we make maps of reality by "profiling" people. Persons who look or act a certain way are suspect. In the hands of expert criminal investigators, this is a useful tool, but it needs to be kept as a tool and it should not be used by people who have not been adequately trained to use it. African Americans are all too familiar with being suspected of criminal activity solely because of their skin color. Law abiding members of society can be stopped for "driving while black." During the present crisis, some American citizens are being harassed, attacked, and even killed, under suspicion of being Muslim, Arab, or something vaguely called Middle Eastern. In the past, there have been wars between Christians and Muslims, as often as not initiated by Christians (it was a Christian, Peter the Hermit, who preached the first Crusade), and this conflict is embedded in the folk memory of persons in countries which are predominantly Christian. Anti-Muslim sentiment is a knee jerk reaction. As Buddhists, we have learned to watch our minds. Am I labeling an entire race as the enemy, or am I looking at the reality of the situation?

Many people identify "Arab" and "Muslim." Islam began in Arabia, but for many centuries Arabs have been a distinct minority within Islam. There are many more Muslims in Africa and Southeast Asia than in Arabia. On the other hand, many Arabs are Jewish or Christian. The main suspect in the terrorist attacks happens to be a Muslim from Saudi Arabia, but we should note that he belongs to an ultra-conservative group whose views are not accepted by all Saudis, and that he is in exile in a non-Arabic speaking country. Astonishingly, some people cannot distinguish between Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs, and they identify anyone with brown skin, or with a turban, as The Enemy. A Sikh man was killed recently because he was mistaken for a Muslim, and the AP wire incorrectly stated that Sikhism is "a branch of Hinduism."

Buddhism teaches us that no sentient being is intrinsically evil. In an emergency, we may need to identify specific persons as harmful and take appropriate action but we do not need to go to the lengths of a caller on KQED's Forum who said, "All those Arabs, those Muslims, those Afghans, we oughta nuke 'em!"

AN EVIL DEITY
Buddhism recognizes that evil comes both from within our minds and from external sources — the workings of karma, and attack by the evil deity Mara.
The fruiting of karma is the most general reason offered by Buddhism as to why "good things happen to bad people." We may be good now, but we have not always been good. In the past, we have acted unskillfully, and those actions are now bearing fruit as pain, opposition, and, perhaps, violent death. Since the "me" who acted unskillfully in the past is not the same as the "me" of today, we are not to blame for our present suffering, but since the "me" of today is a product of the "me" of the past, we take responsibility for those actions and experience the consequences, as it were entering into our own inheritance. Realizing this, we have an explanation for misfortune and sudden reversals in our lives, and we can generate compassion for ourselves, both now, in the past, and in the future.

Mara is identified as the deity ruling over the realm of sense (kamadhatu), the realm in which beings are born with physical sense faculties. There are many deities in the universe as Buddhism understands it. They are powerful, but they are not omnipotent, omniscient, or immortal. (See my article in the September 2001 issue of this newsletter for more details.) The Buddha, as far as we can tell, believed in their existence and took them seriously. Mara was a special problem for him. On a number of occasions, Mara tried to prevent Shakyamuni from becoming the Buddha, and thus escaping from cyclic existence and teaching others how to escape. Mara, it is said, feeds on the three kleshas or poisons, and it is in his own interest to keep us agitated and troubled by our desires. As a high deity, he is very smart, and he appears in many disguises. Sometimes he appears as a wrathful ogre, sometimes as a charming young man. Sometimes he sends his terrifying army or his voluptuous

daughters to do his bidding.
Sometimes he just clouds our minds.
In these ways, he tries to keep the wheel of attachment, aversion, and confusion turning. The three poisons themselves can be seen as abstract forms of Mara. In general, any hurtful thought, word or deed, anything which deflects us from the work of liberating ourselves and other beings from the cycle of suffering, can be called a mara (with a small "m").

As you ponder the events of September 11, do you feel that there was a brilliant, but perverted, intelligence at work? You might call this Mara. Do you find hateful and cunning thoughts in yourself? These are the maras. When we put a name and a face on evil, it is easier to deal with it. As Carl Jung used to say, get it out there, put it on paper.

THE WAY OUT
So, where is the joy in all this? In the midst of tragedy, there is no joy, but if we can see a way out, there is hope, and the expectation of joy. The triple practice — ethical conduct, meditation, and study of the Dharma — will lead us out and help us to lead others out. This is standard Buddhism and we only need to apply it to the present situation. We can take His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hanh, and Venerable Somdech Preah Maha Ghosananda as role models.

Over the course of more than forty years, the Dalai Lama has witnessed the destruction of hundreds of temples in his country, the torture and death of many thousands of his people, and the attempt to wipe out Tibetan culture and replace it with Han Chinese culture. The United Nations has called it genocide. In all of this, as far as I am aware, he has never once referred to China as the enemy. He has consistently regarded
the officials, soldiers, and citizens of the People’s Republic of China as suffering sentient beings searching, like all sentient beings, for happiness. He has counseled his compatriots to do the same, and repeatedly asked them to practice non-violent resistance and not to resort to vengeance. He has said that there are no absolutes in Buddhism but if there were to be an absolute it would be compassion, and he has called this “the pillar of world peace.”

Thich Nhat Hanh lived in Vietnam during the war years and wrote about non-violent reaction to the battle. He teaches the interdependence of all beings, friend and foe alike, under the rubric of interbeing. In one of his most famous poems he identifies himself with a girl who is raped and also with those who raped her.

Venerable Maha Ghosananda, Supreme Patriarch of Cambodia, is not quite as well known in the west as the Dalai Lama, but his tireless work for justice and peace in the face of oppression is legendary in Asia. He survived the Pol Pot regime, under which many of his fellow monks were killed. He has organized marches for peace, some of them across minefields and in between lines of soldiers shooting at each other. He helped a Khmer Rouge man (an “enemy”) to build a temple. I will end with a quotation from him.

I do not question that loving one’s oppressors — Cambodians loving the Khmer Rouge — may be the most difficult attitude to achieve. But it is a law of the universe that retaliation, hatred, and revenge only continue the cycle and never stop it. Reconciliation does not mean that we surrender rights and conditions. It means that we see ourselves in the opponent — for what is the opponent but a being in ignorance, and we ourselves are also ignorant of many things. Therefore, only loving kindness and right mindfulness can free us. (From his essay “The Human Family” in Buddhist Peacework, page 152f.)

FURTHER READING


Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that. Hate multiplies hate, violence multiplies violence, and toughness multiplies toughness in a descending spiral of destruction . . . The chain reaction of evil — hate begetting hate, wars producing more wars — must be broken, or we shall be plunged into the darkness of annihilation.
— Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

I am part and parcel of the whole and cannot find God apart from the rest of humanity.
— Mahandas Gandhi

My religion is simple. My religion is kindness.
— His Holiness the Dalai Lama

Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed.
— Dwight D. Eisenhower

Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.
— Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

In separateness lies the world’s great misery; in compassion lies the world’s true strength.
— the Buddha
Letter from Bhutan
by Sean Hargins

Sean Hargins is working for the World Wildlife Foundation Fund (WWF) in Bhutan on a biodiversity project. While he is there he plans to develop a model of Bhutanese policy/culture/spirituality in relation to the environment. He is also a practicing Buddhist. He sent the following email:

Today has been a day of mourning in Bhutan. His Majesty declared a "no work" day for the entire country in order to pay respect to the tragedy that has hit the American people.

All of the American Nationals were invited to a special butter lamp ceremony at the Dzongka (a huge beautiful monastery that also houses the state offices) to recognize the suffering that this act of terrorism has caused.

It was all very official, and I had to borrow a coat and tie from my Bhutanese friend from Berkeley. There are around eight Americans here. As we entered the room, our name was read, and we each shook hands with His Majesty the King.

Next in line were the four queens (all of whom are sisters and very beautiful, sophisticated, classy ladies — true royalty). Each queen shook our hands and spoke words of sorrow and comfort to us.

Then each of us was handed an oil stick that acted as a match. We all approached a table with over a hundred butter lamps (candles) and began lighting them. While this was going on, there were around one hundred monks in the center of the room chanting Buddhist prayers in unison to bring peace and comfort to those families affected. As I lit my butter lamp, I chanted my prayer, "Sangye cho dang gued du kee sdu shtu ebi O," with each butter lamp. (People seemed surprised that I knew this. Thanks, Stephen G!) The atmosphere was heavy and sacred.

After the lamps were lit, we all sat down behind the monks. I ended up sitting one person away from the King, who spoke to the diplomat next to me about the situation and his efforts to contact the American government to give his condolences. As we sat and listened to the monks fill the room with their prayers, I took off my mala (the yellow beaded bracelet I wear) and began counting beads and praying. One by one I went through each of the those affected: the pilots, the passengers, the office workers, the fire fighters and police officers, the families, the friends, the terrorists, etc.

As I focused on the pain, I drew in a breath, visualized the black smoke of suffering entering my body, and then exhaled the white light of divine compassion. Soon streams of tears were flowing down my face as I confronted the hatred, hurt, fear, and suffering that this situation makes evident. I also chanted my own prayers. My heart was so open — it contained the whole of the situation and in that place I was overwhelmed with sorrow.

After the monks had finished, the king once again shook our hands and expressed his sorrow. He pointed to my bracelet, which he has seen me counting on, and he asked if I were a Buddhist. I smiled between my tears and said, "Yes, sir, I am." He nodded with deep eyes and moved onto the next person.

When the ceremony had ended, all the Americans gathered at a local restaurant. Words were spoken, and a moment of silence was held.

I have been truly touched by the Royal Government of Bhutan and His Majesty the King, for creating such a ceremony as described above. Bhutan does not have official relations with America. Nevertheless, the King was so dismayed over this act of violence that he wanted to create a space on this day for those few Americans who serve his country to gather and mourn for their countrymen.

This truly is a wonderful country with lots of integrity.

Fall Retreat
by Harv Whitten

The paved road ends, and then the gravel road. That turns to dirt and soon Vajrapani is there, a cozy nest of cabins and a Tibetan-styled meeting hall in a beautiful redwood grove. Such beauty! Peacocks, rabbits, jays, deer. It's rustic but comfortable with delicious food and a great staff. The meeting room and shrine were colorful and detailed: a beautiful place to sit.

Ten of us made it for the Fall Retreat. Jim Wilson served as our great teacher and friend, and Lee Robbins was the super coordinator and detail man. Jim's theme for the retreat was Compassion and its many flowerings and manifestations in sutras and practice. Jim involved us all effortlessly and sweetly in discussion and questions, and the charm and kindness of the weekend stood in sharp contrast to the noise and confusion of the larger Bay area.

If you haven't been there, the Vajrapani accommodations are simple but quite enough. It's a little like camping out, but the dorm beds are comfortable and the facilities simple: enough for all. Being together was such a highlight, the sittings together and walking meditations adaptable for all practitioners. There were good ceremonies and some good structured events for sharing. I personally found it the perfect place to see the interconnection of everything, the giant redwoods breathing the same air that we do, the birds singing with the same air we use, the song linking all of us in a giant sea of air breathing in, breathing out, almost visible as a haze that includes all of us, without exception, who depend on air. The silence helped us to reflect, to lose our sense of talk and chatter, to let our own compassion and kindness arise, and especially to feel gratitude for being there in a beautiful surrounding with such good folks.

There were good breaks to take longer walks into the hills, or along the gorge, and into our own hearts, to strengthen the contact and identity with the witness, the reality that is our eternal wonder at being all of it. We are one with all that breathes.

A special treat for me was to sleep in the very bed that H.H. The Dalai Lama slept in several years ago. Bodhi svaha!
GBF Calendar
San Francisco/Bay Area Events

Sittings, followed by a talk or discussion, are held every Sunday between 10:30 AM and 12 NOON at the San Francisco Buddhist Center, 37 Bartlett Street (near 21st St between Mission and Valencia). MUNI: 14 Mission or 49 Van Ness-Mission, alight at 21st St, walk 1 block. BART: 24th and Mission, walk 3 blocks. Parking: on street (meters free on Sundays) or in adjacent New Mission Bartlett Garage (75¢ first hour, then $1 per hour, $5 max.) The Center is handicapped accessible.

The October GBF speakers are as follows:

October 7: No Sitting
October 14: Eugene Cash
October 21: Jim Wilson
October 28: Open Discussion

Eugene Cash has practiced meditation since 1981. He leads weekly sittting groups in San Francisco and meditation retreats nationwide. His teaching is influenced by many streams of the vipassana tradition as well as the Zen school of Buddhism. He is also a teacher in training in the Ridhwon School with A.H. Almaas. As a psychotherapist he has worked extensively with those who are ill, the dying, and the bereaved.

Next Steering Committee Meeting
Thursday, October 11, 2001, 7:30 p.m., at the home of Lee Robbins.

East Bay Sitting
1st & 3rd Thursday of each month, 7:30-9:00. Half-hour sitting followed by tea and discussion.

Local Dharma Centers
A list of local Dharma centers is available on our website and as a handout at our Sunday sittings. We encourage members to explore what these Dharma centers can offer to their practice.

GBF Needs Volunteer Hosts
GBF needs you to contribute your services to the Sangha as a Host for Sunday morning sittings. Sign up to help provide a hospitable setting for our members to come together. Call Justin Hecht

GBF Homeless Project
If you are able to volunteer your time to the Hamilton Family Center on the second Saturday of any month, please contact Clint Seiter

GBF Thrift Store Donations Earn
Money for GBF
GBF members can donate their quality cast-offs to the Community Thrift Store (CTS) and GBF will receive a quarterly check based on the volume of items sold. This is a great way to support our Sangha, and the community. So far this year we have received over $800 through members’ generosity. Bring your extra clothing and other items to CTS at 623 Valencia St between 10am and 5pm, any day of the week. The donation door is around the corner on Sycamore Alley (parallel to and between 17th and 18th) between Valencia and Mission. Tell the worker you are donating to GBF. Our ID number is 40.

GBF Website
www.gaybuddhist.org
By the power and truth of this practice,
may all beings have happiness
and the causes of happiness,
may all be free from sorrow
and the causes of sorrow,
may all never be separated from the sacred happiness
which is without sorrow,
and may all live in equanimity,
without too much attachment
or too much aversion,
and live believing in the equality of all that lives.

–GBF Dedication of Merit