

# Inner Peace – World Peace: The Buddhist Contribution

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## Introduction

The Buddhist contribution to peace in the world is regularly discussed by scholars and practitioners alike<sup>1</sup>. In the face of globalised conflict and increased militarism does Buddhism, either as a guiding philosophical principle, or a lived spirituality, actually have a role to play in creating a peaceful worldview? Or is the discussion about its stabilising influence only to be understood at the level of the individual practitioner, within whom an ‘other-worldly’ soteriology is the goal, and the wider implications for our world are but a series of karmic consequences of that individual quest?

This paper sets out to briefly address this question and to develop a view that the sociological implications of individual ‘inner peace’, can and does have a marked effect on wider societies and nations, so much so that world peace (at least from the Buddhist perspective) could be a reality and not a mere fantasy. How then is the leap from individual soteriology, born out of moral virtue, to be understood in terms of wider groups, societies/ nations? Is there a real case for suggesting that inner (peaceful), individual development, translates into a commonality within humanity? Perhaps that is to simplistic a question given cultural, historical and socio-religious backgrounds, but one nonetheless that this paper will make preliminary efforts to explore.<sup>2</sup>

## The Universality of Wholesome Action

The Buddha set out to develop an individual method of action by which to live one’s life, the focus of which is on the development of wholesome mental states<sup>3</sup> as presented with the famous injunction of the *Dhammapada*:

*“Not to do any evil; to cultivate what is wholesome;  
To purify one’s mind. This is the teaching of the Buddhas.” (Dhp183)*

Harvey (2000: 40-43) discusses in detail the nature of wholesome actions developed out of *Kusala* action which he describes as “a blameless one which is wise

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<sup>1</sup> See The Think Sangha website as part of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship <http://www.bpf.org>. The International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB), based in Bangkok and headed by peace activist Sulak Sivaraksa. The writing of the Venerable Bhikkhu Buddhadasa (portrayed by Jackson 1987) and the Venerable Phra Dhammapitaka (P.A. Payutto; 1986, 1993a, 1993b) and their followers like Phra Phaisan Visalo (1998) and Santikaro (1997). In addition the notable lineage of Ajahn Mun, Ajahn Chah and the Venerable Ajahn Sumedho (1990, 2005), all of whom have reflected the ‘inner peace - world peace’ model as exemplary to life in the modern age.

<sup>2</sup> As part of that exploration two issues are raised on a technical note: 1. The paper does not use diacritics for *Pali* or *Sanskrit* words; they do however appear in *italics* (unless they relate to names of people). The reason being, as the paper is passing through electronic sources from author to conference it would become illegible due to changes in formatting along the way, which may not support the author’s diacritic software. 2. The abbreviations of Canonical literature and commentary are as follows: A. = *Anguttara Nikaya*; D. = *Digha Nikaya*; Dhp. = *Dhammapada*; M. = *Majjhima Nikaya*; S. = *Samyutta Nikaya*; Sn. = *Sutta-nipata (The Group of Discourses, Vol I and II)*; Vin. = *Vinaya Pitaka (The Book of the Discipline)*.

<sup>3</sup> There are many canonical references to the development of wholesome mental states, see for example Walshe’s (1995) translation of the *Digha Nikaya* i.124; Nyanaponika (1975) *Anguttara Nikaya* and Thanissaro, Trans. (2002) *Further Factored Discourses of the Buddha: A translation of the Anguttara Nikaya*.

or skilful in producing an uplifting mental state and spiritual progress in the doer.” The implications for the development of the term *Kusala* are, by the time of the later Buddhist and Jain sources, generalised to mean something like wholesome or good (ibid: 43). This is confirmed by Cousins (1996:156) who sees the development of such states as leading to awakening, and carrying the perception often found in the Canonical *Abhidhamma* as meaning ‘blameless’ (1996: 137).

The relationship between action (mental, physical or verbal) and the results of action are to be understood in terms of the somewhat ambiguous designation of ‘Karmic Fruitfulness’. The nature of karma is discussed at length in the Canonical literature<sup>4</sup>. The *Nirvana* experience in the life of the *Arahat* is described by Harvey (op.cit: 43) as “the destruction of attachment, hatred and delusion.” The *Arahat* no longer has the capability of unwholesome action, and therefore fails to produce Karmic fruit. Unwholesome and wholesome moral conduct (*sila*) are said to have stopped (*M.II.* 26-7), wrong conduct has been replaced with right conduct, the non-attachment to actions is as the result of perfecting moral virtue culminating in the perfection of the factors of the Noble Eightfold Path. He/she is not constrained by ideas of what he/she *ought* to do, acting virtuously without attachment to virtue. As Harvey (ibid: 45) suggests “he is non-violent because of his destruction of attachment, hatred and delusion, not because of grasping at precepts and vows (*Vin.* I. 184).” What then of the distinction between the ‘Noble’ and the ‘ordinary’, as in right view? The limitations placed on the followers of the path are essentially mental limitations, holding the mind back from *Nirvana* in the latter, and in the former they are described as wisdom or direct insight - noble, cankerless and transcendent (ibid :45).

The distinctions are not to be misunderstood, they are not to be seen as radically different actions between the ‘ordinary’ and the ‘Noble’, but rather as Keown (1992: 8 – 14) suggests, there is a false dichotomy if seen as actions oriented to Karmic fruitfulness as the path of the laity, and actions of the Noble path as oriented towards monastics. Both types of action are to be practiced with the former sustaining and supporting the latter. Moral virtue and deep insight are, as Harvey (op.cit 46) suggests, fundamental to the goal of Buddhism, for perfection of the Noble Eightfold Path covers moral virtue and meditation as well as wisdom. All humanity is capable of aspiring to such a goal, by adopting the criteria for differentiating good and bad actions. The development of wholesome mental states is an essential aspect of that aspiration, despite non-greed, non-hatred and non-delusion being phrased as negative aspects, they are, as the *Kalama Sutta* implies, beneficial, as in order to practice wholesome action, one must understand the harmfulness of the unwholesome roots.

It is to the frailties of the human condition that the Buddha speaks. Greed, hatred and delusion are both individually and collectively debilitating for the human psyche and the effects on ‘lived experience’ of these unwholesome roots can be seen all around us in the world today. The crux of this discussion is in realising that an action of body, speech or mind requires reflection, before, during and after the act, in order to consider the likely harm to oneself, others or both. If it is unwholesome it will result in *dukkha*. The consequences of *dukkha* being, the karmically deadening unwholesome states, of greed, hatred and delusion, which result in experiences of unsatisfactoriness/suffering, agitation, stress and anxiety in this present life. (A. I.202).

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<sup>4</sup> See for example *Sn.* 520; *Sn.*790: *S.II.*82; *Dhp.* 217; *M.* II.25; *S.* IV.251; *D.I.*3.

Such harm can be spiritual or material, and self-hatred is included in this regard. The rising of unwholesome states further diminishes the wholesome ones and leads to further unwholesome activity. That which is wholesome or unwholesome is, according to Harvey (ibid: 48), “beyond the purely moral/immoral to include states of mind which, may have no direct effect on other people.” The nature of unwholesome acts of body and speech are understood in English, by the use of the term ‘morality’ or ‘ethics’, and these actions will undoubtedly affect others, and include a number of unwholesome actions. The *Majjhima Nikaya* (M. I.147) lists them as: (1) an onslaught on living beings, (2) taking what is not given, (3) sensual misconduct, (4) lying speech, (5) divisive speech, (6) harsh speech, (7) gossip, (8) covetousness, (9) ill-will and (10) wrong view. Conversely, the opposite of these is considered wholesome which does not result in harm to self and others.

There are therefore a number of crucial elements to consider in the nature of Buddhist practice towards the wholesome mental states described earlier. Good actions are good because the motivation and intention is wholesome and the fact that the result is happy karmic fruit is one factor to consider when talking of wholesome action, based on the agent’s intention and motivation. Actions rooted in non-greed, non-hatred and non-delusion can be seen as good, whether one is Buddhist or not. It is that universal principle that allows us to consider, the possibility of ways in which Buddhism can, through the ‘individual- to-society’ nexus of wholesome mental states (in addition to body and speech), offer “peace in oneself and peace in the world,” to use a famous phrase from Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh.<sup>5</sup>

### **Buddhist Solutions or Impossible Rhetoric**

The Venerable Dhammapitaka (P.A. Payutto; 1986:41) in his book *Buddhist Solutions for the Twenty-First Century*, remarks “Truly, we have developed all kinds of things in the name of civilization, including science and technology, but we have paid too little attention to the development of ourselves.” This short phrase sums up much of the discussion above, which for the reason he outlines concentrates on the development of non-violent peace loving individuals and societies based on the basic tenants of Buddhist understanding of mind, body and speech.

He is not alone in addressing the issue of peace in the world from a Buddhist perspective<sup>6</sup>. Such is the human outpouring of sadness and despair at the conflicts which beset the world, both in terms of war and the nature of exploitation through selfish desire for pleasure and acquisition. Such is the degradation of the human condition and that of the planet that unless fundamental and radical social change

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<sup>5</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh as a Buddhist peace activist coined this phrase in his writing, and uses it as a symbol of his work. It can be found on the Community of Interbeing and Tiep Hien Order website at <http://www.interbeing.org.uk>

<sup>6</sup> Many Buddhist masters and laity alike have addressed this issue: Maha Ghosananda (1990) in Cambodia, Thich Nhat Hanh (1987, 1988, and 2001) based on his experience in Vietnam, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu (1987, 1990) HH (Tenzin Gyatso) The XIV Dalai Lama (1992, 1996, and 1999) and numerous Tibetan Buddhist leaders. Sulak Sivaraksa (1993, 1999, and 2005) in Thailand, Dr. A.T. Ariyaratne (1999), in Sri Lanka. There are also a number of scholar practitioners who have taken up the quest of offering a socially engaged Buddhist spirituality to the issue of peace in oneself and the world, including David Chappell (1996, 1999), Kenneth Kraft (1992), and Alan Senauke (1997, 1999) in the USA, Jonathan Watts (1999) and David Loy (2002) in Japan, Ken Jones (1993, 2003), Christopher Titmuss (1995) and Steven Batchelor (1994) in the UK. These are but a few of a world wide Buddhist movement for social change, but are exemplars of the deep desire to project a Buddhist perspective on issues of conflict and violence in the world.

takes place, we may already be looking at the accelerated decline of the human race.<sup>7</sup> This is an issue the Venerable Ajahn Sumedho (1990: 3-12) contemplated at the end of the ‘Cold War’, when he suggested the *rajadhammas* (virtues and duties of a wise ruler), as a way to view society. He made an important point at the time, explaining what is fundamental to change in society is in the way, in which, we as individuals, and collectives understand transcendence as (ibid: 4-5) “living within all the sensory conditions for a lifetime within the human form, but no longer being deluded by them.”

Buddhism is capable, as we have heard, of identifying the human frailties that lie at the heart of conflict, an area addressed by the Venerable Dhammapitaka (ibid: 42) twenty years ago when he wrote:

*“All forms of war, conflict, rivalry and quarrel, whether between individuals, groups or nations, whether current or in the distant past, can be traced to the same three categories of self-centred motives or tendencies, which are:*

- 1. Selfish desire for pleasures and possessions (tanha)*
- 2. Egotistical lust for dominance and power (mana)*
- 3. Clinging to view, faith or ideology (ditthi)*

*If not refined, wisely channelled or replaced by wholesome mental qualities, these three self-centred tendencies grow in people’s minds, making their behaviour a danger to society.”*

How then is it possible for Buddhism to affect worldviews where conflict and violence, anger and fear are the norm, where societies and individuals know only oppression and disadvantage, where corruption is a necessary part of existing? Is there in fact a Buddhist solution, or indeed a solution at all? What is apparent in my own research and that of others around the world is a growing movement of socially engaged Buddhists who may act as individuals or groups to promote the wholesome nature of Buddhist practice, in ways that engage with the social and political, the mundane and the transcendent. They are committed to the notion of developing ‘inner- peace’, which is seen as the catalyst to world peace. In other words their individual wholesome mental states and actions are seen as a precursor to, and prerequisite of, a sustainable peace in the world. The movement is not a worldwide uniform entity but retains a number of Buddhist values that suggest in practical terms a ground swell of Buddhist practitioners in Asia and the West (in developing and developed nations), that hold to the maxim that the development of ‘inner peace’ is the only solution to an outwardly effective world peace.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> It is not the intention of this paper to list the worsening planetary crisis, *viz-a-viz* global warming, or indeed the militarism and terrorism that besets the human race. Nor is it intended that the paper make specific reference to individual nations or continents where conflict is rife. In all parts of the world there are cases of humanity failing to live harmoniously with each other and with nature, be that as a trans-national corporation, a Government, or as individuals.

<sup>8</sup> Of the many and varied socially engaged Buddhist activities in caring and service or activism in peacemaking, environmental or human rights too many to mention here. There lives are underpinned by the fundamental effort to develop wholesome mental states as the strength with which ‘inner peace’ is attainable. Despite those that would critique engaged Buddhists as missing the boat for the shore and taking their eye off the ultimate goal of *Nirvana*, there are equally as many who would agree that a pragmatic approach to life based on the teachings of the Buddha, demands of the practitioner a certain amount of acceptance for the way things are. It is in that ‘empowerment through acceptance’ that many find a way to act out a Buddhist life where all things are possible, including working in society for world peace.

This brings us back to the injunction of the Venerable Dhammapitaka of twenty years ago, when he counselled three areas of self-centeredness that were adding to the conflict in the world (as outlined above). These same areas of selfish desire for pleasure and possessions, egotistical lust for power and clinging to view, faith or ideology have been addressed by Kraft (1992), Loy (2002), Jones (2003), King (2005) and Henry (2006), to name but a few. All are advocates of a socially engaged Buddhism, and whereas the activity for social change formed a prominent part of the Venerable Dhammapitaka's (1986) work *On Peace*, there were at the time few, outside Buddhist Asia who were prepared to devote their lives to social change from the Buddhist perspective. There is however, in 2006, a growing sense of the usefulness and positive effects, those Buddhists engaged in social change for the benefit of the many can have. The influence of the *Bodhisattva* in the world is for many a living reality.

This phenomenon is not a new idea born out of a combination of Asian traditional practice and Western political thought, nor is it a traditionalist vision of Buddhism as other-worldly or world denying, but rather it should be seen as a 'reflexive tradition', suggested by Walliss (2002) and Mellor (1993) who advocate the necessity for religions to move away from the dichotomous debates, where tradition is seen as polemical to modernity. There is, in discussing the distinctions, no need to see tradition verses modernity as binary opposites, but rather as reflexive traditions where the nature of the post modern or late modern society is only applicable to the twenty-first century practitioner, because it necessitates recourse to tradition as fundamental to understanding itself in late modernity. In that sense it has the validity and authenticity necessary to offer practical solutions for change, albeit they are a radical departure from other forms of social and political endeavour. Ajahn Sumedho (1990) pointed out in his description of a *rajadhammas* society, where the virtues in leadership at any level, individual or state, would be seen as a far cry from globalised, capitalist, market driven systems that the world has become used too. Both the Venerable Dhammapitaka and Sumedho now (unlike twenty years ago), have an activist Buddhist audience with which to express their views, and if the strength of a Buddhist socially engaged movement is to be taken seriously, they will find Buddhists around the globe taking positive action towards the development of 'inner-peace' clearly with the intention of using wholesome action as the founding principle, of what Jones (2003) refers to as the 'inner-work', in order to strive relentlessly for peace in the world.

Many would argue that the task is greater than any one religion or social group, and most would agree. However the engaged Buddhist view is that the acceptance of the way it is, the suchness, or thusness (as it is described in the Zen and Ch'an traditions), develops a sense of 'empowerment through acceptance'. With the efforts of a committed Buddhist, intent on inner peace and personal and social transformation many may see the 'underdeveloped self' develop in ways that are beneficial to world peace, at a personal and collective level, through the practical application of *Buddhadhamma*.

The essential message is not that all Buddhists should be socially engaged, for what is that but another label. It is however a useful designation in striving for change, in a world where movements often are heard and individuals largely are not. Not all Buddhists however, would want to overtly take up the activist route for the cause of peace in the world. That is not at issue here, but rather that there are those who are, and for them, like the *Arahat*, who dwells in virtue but does not identify with it, they dwell in the ideals of a peaceful world, but are not attached to it, seeing

it as not-self like everything else. The universality of Buddhist practice in developing the wholesome nature of humanity is based on the ability of Buddhists to develop the inner peaceful world, with which one can wisely deal with the outer physical world. Success in this endeavour as human beings will become apparent, as those with inner peace generate happiness in the human condition. Living in peace generates peaceful aspects in all causal conditions, as they live in peace with all sentient life.

The venerable Dhammapitaka asserted in 1986 that education for the promotion of peace, was, and is fundamental to developing a peaceful world. It begins with the individual, in whom suffering and enjoyment go hand in glove. If inner-peace equals world peace, solutions of great importance to humanity can be found. The shift from 1986 to today is in the realisation of many in the world that there is no longer time to talk of developing peace, but time to act, and those who are acting grow stronger each day. Only time will reflect if it were too few too late, but for the vast numbers in Western societies, coming to learn and understand meditation as a tool for personal freedom and change, the signs, at least in my own part of the world are encouraging.

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