

~ UPASIKA DAY ~

December the 8th, 2002, Abhayagiri Monastery

WAR & PEACE

or

Non-contention with Māra

Under the Bodhi tree the Buddha's response to death, ie Māra's threats, cajolings, temptations and attempts to cause doubts, was not life-affirmation, neither did he go into deep *jhāna* and evade Māra, or blast him with a vajra bolt, or try to be reasonable and negotiate on Māra's terms, or justify himself. Instead his response was a fearless wakefulness. Almost invariably, throughout the accounts of the Buddha's meetings with Māra, as soon as he is aware of the malefactor's presence, he says: "I know you, Māra." And the game is over.

This is a myth but such tales maintain their power through their congruity with truth as we experience it. When Māra knows that the Buddha has seen the trick, the hook inside the bait, he knows his victim is not going to bite. Māra is defeated in that gesture of knowing. This suggests that the opposite to death is not birth, life-affirmation, or destruction of death, but wakefulness.

Perhaps the most meaningful way of considering the encounters between the Buddha and Māra is to regard them as depicting the arising of unwholesome, ego-based states in the mind of the Buddha; they portray the instinctual fears, doubts and desires that arise but which have no place to land there. By using the myth as a map of our own psyches, Māra also represents our own ego-death experiences (loneliness, anger, obsessiveness, greed, doubt etc.) and the Buddha's example points the way for the wisdom of our hearts to respond most skillfully: a wakeful and radical non-contention. For as soon as we contend against death we've bought into the value system and bitten the hook – when we hate and fear death, or want to swamp it with life, Māra has won, "Such a one has gone over to Māra's side and the Evil One can do with them as he likes." (S 35.115) We can perhaps run with the line for a while but sooner or later...

Non-contention is not a passivity, denial or a switching off – numbly suffering the slings and arrows as they thump into us – but a full awareness. The Buddha doesn't say "It's all yours Māra" The point is to defeat Māra BUT he is defeated by not contending against him. One of the most often quoted passages of the Dhammapada states:

"Hatred is never conquered by hatred
Only by love is it conquered.

This a law
Ancient and inexhaustible.” (Dhp 5)

Also in such passages as:
Whatever states of being there are,
of any kind, anywhere,
all are impermanent, pain-haunted
and subject to change.
One who sees this as it is
thus abandons craving for existence,
without relishing non-existence.
The remainderless fading, cessation, Nibbāna,
comes with the utter ending of all craving.
When a bhikkhu reaches Nibbāna thus, through not clinging,
Then he will have no renewal of being;
Māra has been vanquished and the battle gained,
Since one such as he has outstripped all being
(Ud 3.10)

So it is a conundrum: how can conquest be the aim if the fundamental attitude is non-contentious?

The Buddha was a warrior noble, a *kshatriya*, by birth and, like Gandhi, was definitely aiming at victory, but by non-argument – as he states in the opening passages of the *Madhu-piṇḍika Sutta*, when challenged by a cocky brahmin who is looking for a doctrinal fight: “I proclaim such a teaching that advocates not quarreling with anyone in the world” (M 18.4). At this his hapless antagonist, Daṇḍapāni, could only shake his head, wag his tongue, pucker his brow and walk off. It is through the refusal of the Buddha to argue with Daṇḍapāni, or fight Māra on his own terms that they are defeated.

Martial language and symbolism are often used in relationship to the Buddha, ergo such epithets as “*Jina* – The Conqueror,” but it is important to recognise that rather than “conquest” necessitating a fight, more accurately it means that ultimately reality has to outweigh the illusion. As Māra once expressed himself after another frustrating encounter: “you might as well poke a rock with lily stems...” (S 4.25) The rock is not doing any contending even though Māra is frustrated.

In another encounter, between the Buddha and Bharadvāja the Abusive – after the latter has fiercely criticized the Buddha for disgracing his clan and begging in the streets, the Buddha asks him: “If visitors come to your home, and you offer them some refreshments but they decline the offer, to whom does that food and drink belong?” “To

me, of course,” the aggressor replies. “Similarly,” responds the Buddha, “you offer me your anger yet I decline to accept it, therefore it still belongs to you.” (S 7.2) He is not going to pick up the gauntlet: “It’s your glove, friend, you threw it down, you can pick it up – it’s nothing to do with me, it’s your business.”

With wakefulness and a refusal to contend, conquest happens.

All of these points are of crucial importance, and provide clear moral guidance, in this time of warmongering and escalating global conflict. The Buddha was no stranger to war and interpersonal disputes, and his wise advice relates to those domains as much as to our internal worlds. Whether it be reasonable hatred of the chattering mind, restlessness, doubts and sordid passions (quoting the Dhamma book that says “destroy greed, hatred and delusion”) or of ex-partners who have betrayed us, wielders of painful influence in our world, about whom we have absolute justification to be negative, political leaders we love to decry – when there is commitment to any such urges, the hook has sunk right in.

In his famous Simile of the Saw (M 21.20) the Buddha states that: “ Even if bandits were severing you limb from limb with a two-handed saw, if you gave rise to an attitude of hatred towards them, you would not be following my teaching.” Instead he advocates being compassionate and wishing for the welfare of the abusers. The bar is thus set dauntingly high, but the Buddha perhaps uses this deliberately extreme example to indicate that all hatred is intrinsically non-Dhammic and that loving-kindness (*mettā*) is always possible. In this respect it’s also important to recognize that *mettā* does not mean liking everything, rather it means recognizing that everything has its place in nature, it all belongs – the beautiful *and* the ugly – true benevolence is a not dwelling in aversion, a radical non-contention with all of nature.

The mistake of “loving” for “liking” can cause a lot of problems: an ancient Indian tale speaks of a cobra who becomes the disciple of a forest-dwelling rishi. Newly sworn to vegetarianism and pacivism the cobra is having a rough time, especially when the village boys find out that she will no longer strike or fight back when tormented.

One day, with ruffled scales and broken fang, she comes for an audience with the holy one. “I have tried my very best to follow your teachings faithfully but this is too much – one of those boys just picked me up by the tail, swung me around and tossed me up in a tree. This is the last straw. I take your teachings on non-violence very seriously but one more incident like this and there’s going to be trouble.”

“I deeply admire your commitment to the Path, dear one, and it’s true that I require non-violence of all my disciples, however I never told you that you couldn’t hiss.”

Thus fierceness is not necessarily equivalent to anger and to act up is not the same as to be enraged.

Similarly, we can have true kindness, acceptance of the way things are, yet not condone the attitudes expressed, as if to say: “I love you completely but your opinions are poisonous and deranged.” In the cultural language of the West “not hating” often implies a tacit approval – Noam Chomsky once vigorously defended the right of fascist politician to speak on campus. Whereas he had no sympathy for the man’s views, he also saw that to ban him from speaking was to enact the same quality of prejudice that the man was being held guilty of. To “Serve truth, defy the lie” – as is proclaimed on the hooded sweatshirts of various local Dharma Punx – is to allow the Dhamma to speak, not to start a fight.

As soon as we nibble and get the hook in, even our efforts at practicing the spiritual life can take the heart off in the opposite direction. We want to do good but we just seem to create more trouble. As it says in Ajahn Mun’s *Ballad of Liberation from the Five Khandhas*:

Wanting what’s good, without stop:
That’s the cause of suffering.
It’s a great fault: the strong fear of bad.
‘Good’ & ‘bad’ are poisons to the mind,
like foods that enflame a high fever.
The Dhamma isn’t clear
because of our basic desire for good.
Desire for good, when it’s great,
drags the mind into turbulent thought
until the mind gets inflated with evil,
and all its defilements proliferate.
The greater the error, the more they flourish,
taking one further & further away
from the genuine Dhamma

Also in the verses of the Third Zen Patriarch:
When you try to stop activity to achieve passivity
your very effort fills you with activity...

The tragedy is that we make all this noble effort: going on retreats, keeping Precepts, serving the Dhamma etc. but if we pick it up wrongly our very religiosity become an obstruction. Just as in Buddhist tradition, where over time the elder bhikkhus became the corpulent religious aristocracy and privileged priesthood that the Buddha was so vociferously trying to get beyond and counteract. This initial drift (occurring some 2000 years ago) contributed to the Mahāyāna revolution and later to

the cascade of other reforms and renewals that have occurred in the Buddhist world.

Our eagerness to destroy the “wrong” in our minds creates more of the same pain and darkness. Just as in the attitude of wanting to destroy evil in the world, that righteous indignation which says “I’m right, you’re wrong,” results in the creation of Orwell’s pigs: we become the very thing we are opposing. Another example is Dostoyevsky’s grand inquisitor: when the Messiah returns to mediaeval Spain, we end up imprisoning him so that he won’t disturb the progress of the religion. We end up suppressing the very thing that we’re trying to do. Torquemada thought he was doing the right thing – that’s the painful irony – there is good intention and faithfulness to a system, but that contention against “bad, wrong, shouldn’t be” is actually destructive to the system’s originating spirit.

As Solzhynitsyn once mused, it would be so easy if evil was an absolute and we could just isolate it and wipe it out but, as the Buddha also pointed out, there is no such thing as absolute evil. According to Buddhist myth Mahā-Mogallāna was Māra in 37 previous lives. This to say that this great saint, fully enlightened and a chief disciple of the Buddha, had been Satan 37 times over. Or in the example of Aṅgulimāla: here is a mass murderer who became a disciple of the Buddha and an arahant. And not only an arahant but also protector of expectant mothers and their babies. It is a beautiful irony that still, 2500 years later, his verses are chanted to impart such blessings to pregnant women.

This indicates that we can’t get so lost that it’s irremediable. Even if we think that this is all just fairy stories, even the symbol alone is immensely powerful – it hints that not only the situation workable, but one can end up as saint, a benevolent radiant presence in the universe, helping to liberate many other beings. When we line up our concerns about “My mind, with its fears, insecurities, lusts etc.” or even being destructive tyrant like Stalin, against being Māra 37 times, the degrees of unskillfulness are incomparable. It therefore implies that no karmic entanglement is inescapable – so there’s hope for all of us!

But what are we to do when things ARE wrong!!! At time of writing [Dec 5th] the drums of war are being vigorously pounded. Soon perhaps that sorrowful war will be well under way. Here is contention on the grossest scale – what to do? Already hundreds of thousands of people around the world have taken to the streets in protest – there are reports of a single million-strong march in Florence, that crucible of the Renaissance. Non-violent protest, civil disobedience and other kinds of useful mischief – fine old American traditions one and all – are fully valid means of expressing the Dhamma. Non-contention is not submissiveness, capitulation or passivity. The Buddha is famous for having forestalled a war between the Koliyans and the Sākyans over water rights to the Rohiṇī River. (Attadaṇḍa Sutta, SN 935-954; Phandana Jat. (475))

So, how to encounter Māra without being swept along by or fighting against those forces? Firstly we can use the principle of non-contention as a flag to indicate the arising of habits of contention – “It shouldn’t be this way – I’m all wrong...” – to reflect instead: “Oh, contention, look at that” – we respond with waking up, knowing and transcending.

It is as if we invite the Buddha into the picture. And when Buddha wisdom knows that state what do we do: move forward? back? be still? In each moment intuitive wisdom guides the heart: “Act now,” “shut up,” “do not enter, wrong way” – the heart knows what to do. Sometimes Māra screams, demands reaction, the bait is very tasty, compelling, but with the same aplomb, the Buddha never picks it up. There is utter poise: “I know what this is; I know you Māra.” Passion is there but we’re not sucked in; the motive to be mindful is there but we’re not identified with it. This means a complete acceptance of the way things are but in same breath making efforts to cultivate wholesomeness and restrain unwholesomeness – i.e. right efforts are being made but not with a dualistic attitude. We work to establish wholesome objects of concentration, let go of anger, cultivate mettā, karunā etc. but it is all embraced in environment of nongrasping and noncontention.

All it takes is the gesture of waking up. We respond to the death clamp on the heart, to ego-death with wakefulness – in that moment the heart is freed. This is the gesture of the Buddha. When it meets with unwholesomeness we don’t allow the heart to impute an otherness that then needs to be destroyed. Indeed, more than just tolerating such negative qualities by observing them from a remote pseudo-supramundane vantage point, the Buddha advocates a sharing of blessings with the evil as well as the good: “May all beings receive the blessing of my life, may they soon attain the threefold bliss and realize the Deathless...” Yes, Saddam, Osama, George and Dick as well as our miscreant ex-partners and poisonous mindstates – piling reasonable hatred upon them only multiplies the causes of pain and confusion.

The fundamental gesture of Buddha is that of being faithful to Reality: pure presence and absolute non-contention. And that gesture can produce a miraculous responsive effect: when the Buddha breaks back into the void the universe bursts into bloom – “the response and the Way are entwined mysteriously” – and the action or stillness that springs forth from that gesture will intrinsically embody the very best that can be done.

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