

Thought for the Day – Vishvapani

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9 July 2006

When the weather's this hot it's easy to understand the Buddha's description of Enlightenment as a cool cave, a refuge from the searing heat of the day, while 'nirvana' means blowing out a flame. It's the flame of desire: the drives that propel us to destructive reactions and lead to suffering.

Perhaps it's impertinent for a Buddhist to comment on the events unfolding in the Middle East. But as we watch this complex, intractable, anguishing conflict spread with apparently inexorable logic, I want to share the Buddha's perspective, which is timeless and yet psychologically acute.

The Buddha reflected on how suffering arises and concluded that while there's a pattern of events from which escape seems impossible, nothing is inevitable. What happens is affected by external conditions – which we can't control – but also by our own responses. When we experience pain we usually respond with anger. That leads to violence, which causes pain for someone else. Then comes their anger and their violence, and the cycle continues.

But we don't see things that way at the time. At each stage we believe our reaction to be natural and justified. Each side in the present conflict feels they've been hurt and each is applying a long-prepared strategy designed for such circumstances. Israeli actions have been accused of being disproportionate but – as with the actions of their opponents – there is a rationale. Each side is doing what they believe will lead to happiness, security and eventually peace. Even bombing civilians or firing rockets at cities are, in the end, attempts to find happiness and avoid suffering. But tragedy ensues when a strategy produces the opposite result to what was intended – when our skewed ideas of what will bring peace create endless conflict.

The Buddha said '*Hatred is not overcome by hatred*'. For him, conflict is never inevitable because human beings always have the capacity to choose, if only we can find the space to reflect before our pain turns into anger. In circumstances as fraught and political as those of the Middle East, such sentiments may seem like wishful thinking. But I believe they express an important truth – an alternative that offers a reference point, like a cool cave in scorching weather. The antagonists will need great calm and forbearance, but after half a century in which conflict has replicated itself, it's surely time for old strategies, old reactions to be radically reviewed.

2 August 2006

Metaphors are not Reality

When I first heard as a child that Europe was divided by an iron curtain I imagined a huge wall of steel behind which everything was in shadow – and also freezing cold, which was why people said there was a cold war. And when I heard the terms left- and right-wing, I imagined all the politicians standing in a long line according to their views, and shuffling about when someone switched policies.

These metaphors simplified the truth into an image, and when Tony Blair argued this week that the terms 'left' and 'right' are outmoded, he was suggesting that the image no longer matches reality. Rather, he said, we need pragmatic solutions that may cut across 'tribal' party lines, and be guided not by ideology but by underlying values.

There's nothing wrong with metaphors, but it helps to notice how they mold our thinking. When we speak of 'progress', we imagine humanity moving in space. When we speak of moral 'sickness', we think of the mind as if it were a body. But we easily forget that these are images, not realities, and the ideas that develop around them can be a trap. Some historians argue that American policy in Vietnam was governed by the image of falling dominoes. If one falls they all will, they thought, forgetting that dominoes and countries work in different ways.

Religion, especially, often understands life through images. There are ideas as well, but these are usually embedded in stories and myths. The question for the Buddha was how we respond to them. They may point us towards the truth, but if we're driven by a need for certainty we'll fix them into dogmas and religious institutions that become ends in themselves. He described his own teaching as a raft. It's useful – in fact essential – for crossing a stream on the journey to wisdom; but once you reach the other shore and know the truth for yourself, the raft can be left behind. Words, ideas and images are not reality. Tribal politics is another kind of dogmatism that tells you where to line up on the left-right spectrum. But you can't get away from metaphors. Tony Blair proposed a new distinction between those open to global economic change and those closed to it. That's another image that implies other assumptions and value judgments. To get at the truth for ourselves we need to see past political and religious rhetoric, and then do something much harder: look honestly at the biases underpinning our own beliefs.

18 November 2006

Good Morning. This week started with remembrance of war and each day we've heard stories that turn on clashes of religion and culture from Iraq to university campuses. The modern world's inter-connections are forcing people together as never before. Traditional lifestyles have been transplanted to modern cities; religious believers are encountering secular societies; and tensions are exacerbated by ethnic rivalries, inequalities of wealth and differing national interests.

How can we live together in this complex world, and how can religion cease to be part of the problem? As a Buddhist what strikes me as important in the clash of ideologies is not so much the content of our differing beliefs, as the emotions and attitudes that underlie them.

This is as true for Buddhism as for other faiths. It's easy for Buddhists, like western liberals, to feel indignant about fundamentalism and argue that the exclusive claims of theistic religions lead to conflict. Buddhism is indeed a liberal faith, and Buddhists sometimes claim that no wars have been fought in its name. Yet in World War 2, Japan's Imperial forces were cheered by the country's Buddhist establishment, who declared that the war effort was a fight for the Buddha.

By the Buddha's standards, the way in which these leaders had understood his teachings distorted them. A group of spiritual seekers once asked the Buddha how to decide between competing religious claims. He replied, 'Don't believe something because it's part of a tradition, because others believe it, or because it's found in a holy book. And it isn't enough that something sounds convincing, or that you're used to thinking in that way, or even that you've worked it out through reason.'

The test the Buddha proposed was whether a teaching promotes the welfare and happiness of oneself and others. Beliefs that do so, he suggested, spring from kindness and a deep understanding of life. What matters is not whether one believes in God, or life after death, or the Buddha's Enlightenment, but the inner needs that are met by that belief. That may be a need for certainty that's born of fear, or a desire for freedom that accepts life's unknowability and interconnectedness.

Whatever religious tradition asks us to think, in the end, our beliefs are our own, and their character is established by how we hold them. Buddhists, like followers of other faiths, have sometimes been led by an inappropriate attachment to tradition to promote it in ways that create suffering. Religion often teaches that people should serve the ideals it upholds; what we need are religions that truly serve people.

25 November 2006

Good Morning. Like many of my generation, my introduction to political activism came with the huge CND rallies of the 1980s. Hundreds of thousands of us gathered in Hyde Park to oppose American cruise missiles and Margaret Thatcher's decision to develop Trident. Scientists had set the doomsday clock – which measures the imminent danger of nuclear war – at three minutes to midnight, and my friends and I were truly frightened that an accident or miscalculation would end our young lives.

Armageddon never came, the cold war ended, and as the threat of nuclear conflict has apparently receded, our emotions have cooled. A number of those I heard addressing the crowds in Hyde Park are now members of the cabinet that this week announced its unanimous decision to replace Trident.

Now that the doomsday clock stands only at seven minutes to midnight, opposition to Trident is likely to be less urgent, but the case for replacing it is also weaker. Advocates of a British deterrent can no longer argue that it stands between us and a Soviet invasion, and they're saying nothing about how these weapons might actually be used. Instead we hear that they underpin our global influence and that disarmament would be seen as weakness.

This time around, there will, at least, be a national debate and a parliamentary vote before the decision on Trident is taken. I hope this debate will include discussion of what national security really means. The Buddha argued that a nation's strength ultimately derives, not from military power, but from the strength of its civil society.

In the Buddha's lifetime, the independent tribal republics of northern India were gradually conquered by aggressive new empires. When the ruler of one rising power planned to invade one of the last republics, he asked the Buddha if he would succeed.

The Buddha replied, *'So long as the republic's citizens have frequent, well attended, harmonious gatherings and respect their laws and traditions, they can expect to flourish, not to decline.'*

This is an early argument that democracy and civil society are more powerful in the long term than military might. The nuclear arms race may have bankrupted the Soviet Union but it was also defeated by dissidents, by movements like Solidarity and by the disillusionment of its citizens.

As teenagers, my friends and I were alienated from mainstream British politics by the fact that our government had weapons that could kill millions of people and, under certain circumstances, was willing to use them. For us, as, I think, for the Buddha, nuclear weapons make our society weaker and, in the end, make our nation less secure.

2 December 2006

If you visit the poorer districts of almost any Indian city, amid the crowded shacks you'll often see statues of an unlikely looking deity. He's a portly, middle-aged man with thick glasses and receding hair, stiffly dressed in a western business suit. He stands a little awkwardly, holding a book in one hand and pointing upwards.

His name is Dr. Ambedkar, and though he's little known in the West, next week millions of Indians will mark the fiftieth anniversary of his death. His followers call themselves 'dalits', which means 'oppressed', but we know them as 'untouchables' – the 150 million people considered impure under the caste system. For thousands of years they've been denied education and confined to jobs like digging latrines.

I recently spent a month with Indian dalits and witnessed their continuing veneration of Dr Ambedkar. Born an 'untouchable', he became India's first law minister and shaped its constitution – that's the book he carries. It outlawed discrimination on the basis of caste,

and gave dalits equal rights. One man told me, "*For centuries we were treated worse than animals. Dr Ambedkar showed us that we are human beings.*"

Despite these reforms, caste discrimination still runs deep. Dalits remain poorer and worse educated than caste Hindus and most are shut out of the new, modernizing hi-tech India. But Ambedkar's influence continues to guide the dalits' struggle in surprising ways. His great insight was that in so traditional a country, political change was not enough. He saw that caste discrimination sprang from the deeply held belief that inequality was preordained and sacred. Social reforms would only succeed if they created structures that encouraged people to see one another as equals.

Ambedkar thought that, properly understood, democracy offers a source of moral depth. It challenges us to overcome prejudice and undertake the profound practice of seeing one another as fellow human beings.

That sounds limited only if we limit our idea of what it means to be human, and Ambedkar found in Buddhism a vision of the unbounded potential of human life. Dr Ambedkar encouraged dalits to believe in themselves and to undertake the responsibilities of citizenship. Society's problems, he argued, come from the mind and, as he said, "what the mind created the mind can overcome." In India that message is still revolutionary, and it resonates with our own debates between secularists and traditionalists, and our own search for a moral compass.