

Buddhist Wisdom to Achieve World Peace

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Abstract

The Buddhist teachings are exceptional in that they are so strongly rooted in the ideas of non-violence and compassion. It is impossible to make an honest argument in favour of conflict and violence based on the Early Buddhist Texts.

This does not mean, however, that Buddhism has a final answer to the question of World Peace. Buddhism sees that the world is inherently unstable. As a consequence, we should look to identify some basic principles to help create a more peaceful society, while remembering that the world will never be entirely peaceful.

We should look for these principles in the teachings that make Buddhism unique, of which the most important one is the idea of nonself. I will look at two ways in which this teaching can be used to promote peace.

There is no peaceful society without compassion and forgiveness. Yet true compassion and forgiveness depend on seeing the conditioned nature of human beings. The nonself teaching takes this conditionality to its logical conclusion: we are more like programmed robots than autonomous agents, in which case compassion and forgiveness is always the right response.

The nonself teaching, which implies a lack of personal identity, is also ideally placed to reduce the problem of “othering” that is such a hallmark of conflict and violence. The Buddha taught that any kind of conceit – whether superiority, inferiority, or even equality – is misplaced. By understanding this teaching properly, we can start to see all human beings, regardless of the myriad of differences that separate us, as our brothers and sisters. Not othering one another would be a big step towards peaceful coexistence.

Introduction

The idea of peace is a core Buddhist principle. Every step on the Buddhist path is a step towards peace, starting with morality and meditation, and culminating in *nibbāna*, the highest peace of all. Moreover, the Buddhist path only works within the framework of amicable and harmonious social relations. Here is a representative passage from the early Buddhist texts:

“And what is a harmonious assembly? An assembly where the monks live in harmony, appreciating each other, without quarrelling, blending like milk and water, and regarding each other with kindly eyes.

When the monks live in harmony like this, they make much merit. At that time the monks live in a holy dwelling, that is, the heart’s release by rejoicing. When they’re joyful, rapture springs up. When the mind is full of rapture, the body becomes tranquil. When the body is tranquil, they feel bliss. And when they’re blissful, the mind becomes stilled.”¹

¹ AN 3.96, <https://suttacentral.net/an3.96/en/sujato>.

This emphasis on peace is prominently on display throughout the early Buddhist scriptures.² They consistently extol harmony and friendliness as fundamental virtues for human beings to prosper. Just as important, they contain nothing that might be used to justify conflict or violence. We should expect, then, that Buddhism will be well placed to contribute to the ideal of world peace.

Before we look in greater detail at which Buddhist principles might contribute to this end, we need to briefly consider the extent to which it is even possible to achieve world peace. A realistic level of ambition will help us in prescribing the right medicine.

An important fact in this context is that Buddhism does not envision a utopian society of eternal peace.³ From a Buddhist point of view, such a society is in fact impossible. This conclusion follows from the fundamental teachings of Buddhism that everything is impermanent, unstable, and unreliable. At the time of his death, the Buddha summarised his entire teaching on the basis of this idea:

“Well then, monks, I say this to you: ‘All things fall apart. Carry on with diligence.’”
These were the Buddha’s last words.⁴

Once we acknowledge that our societies are inherently unstable, we can avoid the mistake of seeking a state of perfect peace.⁵ Instead, we should look for Buddhist principles that foster harmony and peace in a relative sense, without expecting them to provide a final solution to the problems of conflict and violence.

The Buddhist contribution to world peace

When considering what Buddhism might contribute to any particular area of life, a good place to start is with those ideas that make Buddhism unique as a spiritual teaching. It is in these areas that Buddhism can add value to the debate on social progress, including the furthering of world peace. And according to the Buddhist texts themselves, it is the teaching on nonself that sets the Buddhist teachings apart from all other spiritual paths and philosophies.⁶

We will look at two different ways in which this teaching can be used to promote world peace. The first of these is promoting harmony through compassion and forgiveness. The second is using nonself to encourage a sense of brotherhood and mutual respect among all human beings.

² *Suttas* with a message similar to that of AN3.96 include MN 31, MN 89, MN 103, MN 128, AN 3.125, AN 5.54, AN 5.78, and AN 5.156.

³ Relevant to the present context is Theodor W Adorno’s description of a utopia: “None of the abstract concepts comes closer to fulfilled utopia than that of eternal peace”, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Utopia>.

⁴ DN 16, <https://suttacentral.net/dn16/en/sujato>.

⁵ An interesting matter for discussion are the deep causes of this social instability. According to the Buddhist texts, conflict and violence can be traced back to the sense of self that affects almost all human beings (see DN 21). This topic, however, is too involved to be treated in detail in the present paper.

⁶ See, e.g., MN 11, <https://suttacentral.net/mn11/en/sujato>.

How understanding nonself leads to compassion and forgiveness

An important source of human conflict is revenge:

Seeking to punish, redress a grievance, or simply strike back for a perceived slight can often be a factor in the waging of war. Revenge also relates to nationalism, as the people of a country which has been wronged are motivated to fight back by pride and spirit.

Unfortunately, this can lead to an endless chain of retaliatory wars being set in motion which is very difficult to stop. Any distinction between the victim and aggressor can often become blurred, with all participants perceiving themselves as fighting a just war to right historic wrongs.

Historically, revenge has been a factor in many European wars.⁷

If revenge is a source of human conflict, it follows that forgiveness and compassion must be an important part of the solution. Forgiveness, especially, is the exact opposite of revenge, whereas true compassion is incompatible with harmful behaviour of any kind.

Compassion, of course, is fundamental to the Buddha's teachings. It emerges from an appreciation of suffering, but also, surprisingly perhaps, from a proper understanding of nonself. The Buddhist advice on overcoming anger includes the following interesting passage:

“How should you get rid of ill will for a person whose behaviour by body and speech is impure, and who doesn't get an openness and clarity of heart from time to time?

Suppose a person were traveling along a road, and they were sick, suffering, gravely ill. And it was a long way to a village, whether ahead or behind. And they didn't have any suitable food or medicine, or a competent carer, or someone to bring them within a village. Then another person traveling along the road sees them, and thinks of them with nothing but compassion, kindness, and sympathy: ‘Oh, may this person get suitable food or medicine, or a competent carer, or someone to bring them within a village. Why is that? So that they don't come to ruin right here.’

In the same way, at that time you should ignore that person's impure behaviour by speech and body, and the fact that they don't get an openness and clarity of heart from time to time, and think of them with nothing but compassion, kindness, and sympathy: ‘Oh, may this person give up bad conduct by body, speech, and mind, and develop good conduct by body, speech, and mind. Why is that? So that, when their body breaks up, after death, they're not reborn in a place of loss, a bad place, the underworld, hell.’

That's how to get rid of ill will for that person.”⁸

⁷ <https://owlcation.com/social-sciences/The-Main-Reasons-For-War>.

⁸ AN 5.162, <https://suttacentral.net/an5.162/en/sujato>.

The person described here is someone you cannot see any good qualities in, much like an enemy or anyone you might seek revenge against. The rather unexpected recommendation is that you should have sympathy and compassion for such a person, as you would for someone who is sick. The point of sickness, of course, is that it is not usually one's own fault, but the result of factors that are generally outside of our control. A normal human response to illness is therefore compassion: we see the unavoidable suffering, and we want to help alleviate it.

It is the same with an enemy or anyone with many bad qualities. Just as with an illness, bad qualities such as anger often has severe consequences. You feel bad about yourself. Your interpersonal relationships suffer. You act in ways that lead to remorse and a sense of guilt. Ultimately, anger may get you reborn in a state of dreadful suffering.⁹

Given the problems that bad qualities give rise to, it is clear that no-one really chooses to have them. If we had any real choice, we would consistently choose qualities that make us feel good, such as kindness and care. Kindness leads to a sense of personal well-being and self-worth. Kind people are generally appreciated and loved by others, with all the benefits this brings. Good personal qualities lead to good results in almost all spheres of life. Moreover, good qualities normally lead to a good rebirth.¹⁰ It is interesting, then, that although we know that kindness and compassion are the right responses in most circumstances, we are incapable of always acting in accordance with these ideals. Why is this so? It can only be because we are not free to choose them.

If we don't choose our bad qualities, it must be the case that they are conditioned into us through impersonal circumstances. This happens through our association with imperfect people, through an environment which is sometimes harsh and unforgiving, and through one's own misdirected thinking, which is in turn conditioned by past experiences.¹¹ From a Buddhist point of view, this conditioning is extremely deep, stretching back into past lives, into an unfathomable history without discoverable beginning.¹² Bad qualities is something that happens to us, not a personal choice.

This outlook is essentially what nonself is about. There is no aspect of our personality that stands firm in the face of external conditioning, no solid entity that can make decisions apart from the conditioned process itself. Because our conditioning is all we are, we cannot step out of it. We are trapped, compelled to act in accordance with these powerful forces.¹³

⁹ See, e.g., MN 129, <https://suttacentral.net/mn129/en/sujato>.

¹⁰ Again, see MN 129, <https://suttacentral.net/mn129/en/sujato>.

¹¹ See for instance AN 10.61, <https://suttacentral.net/an10.61/en/sujato>.

¹² See, e.g., SN 15.1: "Monks, transmigration has no known beginning. No first point is found of sentient beings roaming and transmigrating, shrouded by ignorance and fettered by craving." <https://suttacentral.net/sn15.1/en/sujato>.

¹³ This does not imply fatalism. Although our past conditioning determines who we are at any particular time, we are also continuously affected by new conditioning, such as coming into contact with Buddhist teachings. Our trajectory into the future is not fixed.

Much of this is experienced as ingrained habits. Particular people may tend to upset us. Certain patterns of speech may irritate us, again and again. Desire arises for the same things, in clearly recognisable patterns. And when these emotional reactions are strong, we will often act unskillfully. We have a powerful momentum from the past that makes us head in a certain direction. In the short run there is nothing much we can do about these habits, except restrain our worst impulses.¹⁴

If this is so, then a person with bad qualities is someone who is incapable of doing what will bring them real happiness because their conditioning compels them to act against their own best interest. Moreover, because of the power of mental defilements to distort perception,¹⁵ they even think they are acting for their own benefit when in fact they are doing the opposite. They are deeply deluded, walking in darkness.¹⁶ Deep down they may be aware of this, but they are incapable of acting otherwise because the conditioning is so overpowering. They are driven by forces they neither see nor understand, forces over which they have little or no control. Yet they still have to face the bad karmic consequences of their unskillful actions.

It is in this context that forgiveness and compassion are not only possible, but the only sensible response, even towards the most immoral among us. We all want contentment, peace, and happiness. Yet the reality is that bad qualities warp our outlook to make us think we are acting to achieve these positive outcomes when in fact we are heading in the opposite direction. Anger, for instance, often compels us to act in unskillful ways even though the long-term consequences are remorse and guilt. And if someone is acting for their own harm while deludedly thinking they are doing the opposite, how can we not have compassion for them? How can we not forgive? They have no idea of the consequences of what they are doing. Compassion arises from seeing this blindness in our fellow humans, a blindness most of us share to some degree. As the saying goes, “To understand all is to forgive all.”

There is, however, one huge obstacle to achieving this sort of comprehensive compassion and forgiveness: our deeply ingrained sense of self. It *feels* to us as if we are the authors of our own lives. It feels as if we are making autonomous decisions. Our intuition tells us powerfully that we are responsible for our own choices, good and bad. But in his famous discourse on the Characteristics of Nonself, the Buddha declares this to be an illusion.¹⁷ We do not, in fact, choose our choices. Our will is not free, but firmly tied to our conditioning.

The consequence of this outlook is that compassion and forgiveness are the rational responses to conflict or acts of violence. Compassion and forgiveness move us in the direction of peace.

¹⁴ Deep change of our unskillful habits takes time, usually a long time.

¹⁵ See for instance SN 46.40, <https://suttacentral.net/sn46.40/en/sujato>.

¹⁶ The *suttas* use the expression *andhakaraṇā acakkhukaraṇā*, “creating darkness, creating blindness”, e.g. at AN 3.71, <https://suttacentral.net/an3.71/en/sujato>.

¹⁷ SN 22.59, <https://suttacentral.net/sn22.59/en/sujato>.

How understanding nonself leads to greater brotherhood

According to the Othering & Belonging Institute at the University of California at Berkeley, a major cause of conflict is “othering”:

The problem of the twenty-first century is the problem of “othering.” In a world beset by seemingly intractable and overwhelming challenges, virtually every global, national, and regional conflict is wrapped within or organized around one or more dimension of group-based difference. Othering undergirds territorial disputes, sectarian violence, military conflict, the spread of disease, hunger and food insecurity, and even climate change.¹⁸

The idea of nonself has deep implication for how we relate to people who seem different from us, and it is therefore well-placed to help reduce the problem of othering. An especially powerful teaching in this regard is the Buddha’s exhortation to abandon all forms of conceit:

“Monks, there are three kinds of conceit. What three? One is conceited, thinking that ‘I’m better’ or ‘I’m equal’ or ‘I’m worse’. These are the three kinds of conceit.

The noble eightfold path should be developed for the direct knowledge, complete understanding, finishing, and giving up of these three kinds of conceit.”¹⁹

Here the conceit “I am equal” stands out as especially Buddhist. So, what does it mean? It means that there is no real yardstick by which we can compare ourselves to others.

Comparison requires some sort of stable, personal characteristic that may be related to a similarly stable characteristic in someone else. Yet you may be upset one moment, only to be full of kindness the next. You may be driven by defilements to act immorally, but then soon afterwards act motivated by loving kindness. Which one is the real you? If a human being is nothing but an impermanent and ever-changing bundle of physical and mental phenomena, as the nonself view suggests, on what basis can comparison be made? The idea of equality – so cherished in much of the modern world – makes no sense when personal qualities may change so rapidly.²⁰

It is not too difficult to relate to this idea of continuous change, especially on the psychological level. Over longer periods of time, however, external circumstances, too, may change significantly. Some people start out poor and end up rich, whereas others do the opposite. You may be born in one country, but end up as a citizen of another. Your status goes up and down, depending on how your social markers change over time. You may even be born as one gender and die as another. So who are you? The truth is that we are all of those things and none of them at the same time. The nonself outlook implies that we are fluid,

¹⁸ <http://www.otheringandbelonging.org/the-problem-of-othering>.

¹⁹ SN 45.162, <https://suttacentral.net/sn45.162/en/sujato>.

²⁰ It may seem as if this is a contradiction to what I have said just above about forgiving people with bad qualities. The point is that, although personal qualities may change rapidly from moment to moment, certain personality traits tend to be more dominant. For some people these dominant qualities are mostly bad, for others mostly good.

forever morphing from one set of qualities into another. Nothing is inherent, yet all possibilities are latent, just waiting for the right conditions to materialise.

Even so, within a single lifetime we can normally expect only so much change. The genetic heritage from our parents will put limits on our physical and psychological makeup, and the environment we grow up in will leave an imprint on us that will affect us for the rest of our life. Such limits, however, are much reduced when we take account of the Buddhist teaching of rebirth. This is what the early Buddhist texts have to say:

“Monks, transmigration has no known beginning. No first point is found of sentient beings roaming and transmigrating, shrouded by ignorance and fettered by craving. It’s not easy to find a sentient being who in all this long time has not previously been your mother ... your father ... your brother ... your sister ... your son ... your daughter.”²¹

This means that during our repeated rebirths we have been reborn into all kinds of families, in all kinds of cultures and societies. And unless we make an end of our *samsāric* existence, we can expect the same in the future. So, again, who exactly are we? Are we the poor, illiterate African woman striving to feed her children? Are we the wealthy businessman working on Wall Street? Are we the Buddhist nun from Taiwan? Are we the mentally ill, homeless person, sleeping under a bridge? We are all of these at the same time because we have been there before and will potentially be there again in the future. The seeds exist within each one of us. It’s just a matter of time before they ripen.

So when we meet someone who may appear to be very different from us, instead of “othering” them, we should see ourselves in that person. They are already inside of us, just waiting to emerge. When you see yourself in others – no matter who they are – you make a human connection. You can no longer dismiss them, ignore them, or discriminate against them. Why? Because doing so would be to dismiss, ignore, or discriminate against yourself. You understand in a deep sense that we are all brothers and sisters. Everyone is worthy of consideration, respect, and love. Othering is no longer an option.²²

In a deep sense it could be said that we are, after all, equal. We are equal in the sense that we are all changing, moving through *samsāric* existence, experiencing the problems of life. We are equal in this ceaseless changeability, everyone having experienced all possible human predicaments. If we cultivate these perceptions, we can develop the idea of brotherhood combined with a profound feeling of compassion for all humanity. We are all brothers and sisters on this difficult journey together. By reducing othering, we will by necessity create a more peaceful world.

²¹ SN 15.14-19, <https://suttacentral.net/sn15.14/en/sujato>.

²² The problem of othering is also expressed in the *suttas*, e.g. at DN 27. It is shown to lead to the decline of society.

Is the world ready for the teaching on nonself?

But even if all the above is true, is the world at large ready to accept such a typically Buddhist teaching? The fortunate reality is that the idea of nonself is already gaining ground outside of Buddhist circles. In recent centuries leading philosophers and psychologists have embraced this teaching, often arriving at their conclusions through independent methods of enquiry. Here, for instance, is David Hume in his own words:

For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception. . . . [people] are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement.²³

This sounds remarkably Buddhist. To the extent that this “bundle theory” or similar ideas are accepted in modern discourse, now may be a good time for a wider presentation of the connection between nonself, on the one hand, and forgiveness, compassion, and brotherhood on the other. The fact that people are so susceptible to conditioning gives rise to hope. The spreading of these ideas may hasten the slow process of moving towards a more peaceful world.

Conclusion

The Buddhist outlook is in many ways unique, especially so the idea of nonself. Understood correctly, an appreciation of nonself leads to forgiveness and compassion, both of which are profound antidotes to conflict and violence. In addition, an acceptance of nonself leads to brotherhood, non-discrimination, and mutual respect among all human beings.

Encouragingly, the idea of nonself has much in common with modern secular ideas, which means that the world may be ready to listen to the Buddhist message. The time may be ripe to apply Buddhist teachings to help us all move towards a more peaceful world. If one thing seems certain, it is that the world needs all the help it can get!

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Abbreviations

AN	Aṅguttara Nikāya
DN	Dīgha Nikāya
MN	Majjhima Nikāya
SN	Saṃyutta Nikāya

²³ [Http://www.yorku.ca/blogan/hume_pi](http://www.yorku.ca/blogan/hume_pi).

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