

The Empire Strikes Out

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*All those years we spent jubilant, seeing the trifling, cowering world from the height of our shining saddles, brawling our might across the earth as we forged an empire, I never questioned. Surely we were doing the right thing because it was the thing we could do. Surely anything we found a way to make possible was what we were destined to accomplish. It seemed so clear—our fate was to rule. That's what I thought at the time. But perhaps we were merely deafened for years by the din of our own empire-building, the shouts of battle, the clanging of swords, the cries of victory.*

— from Aeschylus, *The Persians*<sup>1</sup>

A billboard by the freeway near my home on the western edge of the American Empire reads: “Life, liberty, and the pursuit of all who threaten it—Navy.” It shows a jet fighter angling up from the deck of an aircraft carrier. Nineteen years after 1984, George Orwell’s future has arrived. The reality of 2003 is more nuanced than Orwell’s allegory, but no less disturbing. “Life, liberty, and the pursuit of all who threaten it”— this is Orwellian Newspeak — a concoction of platitudes and lies playing on our personal and national fears and insecurity. The empire is striking out with carefully calculated violence.

We live in a world gone mad with violence. Suicide bombers, nuclear weapons, chemical weapons, cluster bombs, land mines. These weapons create a river of *karma* spiraling into an uncertain future. The Russian playwright Chekhov advised, “If there is a gun hanging on the wall in the first act, it must fire in the last.” With the weapons available today, that last act is terribly close. So my question is: What is the present work of engaged Buddhists living in this world, in the heart of a new American Empire?

Empire is an old word. The Latin root *imperium* implies militarism, political domination, and complete social control. In school we learned about the Roman Empire, Byzantium, the Holy Roman Empire, the many dynasties of China, the Ottoman Empire, the Third Reich, the British Empire, the Soviet Empire, and countless others filling the dustbin of history. Along with the oppression and holy zeal common to all empires, they share another key characteristic. Empires fall. This is the First Law of Empire. Strangely, emperors, kings, generals, dictators, and presidents all seem to believe they will be the exception to this ineluctable law. Not so. The fate of empire is just as the poet Shelley conveyed in his sonnet “Ozymandias.”

"My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings:  
Look upon my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"  
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare  
The lone and level sands stretch far away.<sup>2</sup>

An old buddha said, “The thought of enlightenment is the mind that sees into impermanence.”<sup>3</sup> In the practice of buddhadharma we watch our breath come and go, we note the arising and ceasing of thoughts and feelings. The practice of Buddhism is seeing into the nature of our impermanent self. The practice of Socially Engaged Buddhism includes seeing into the impermanent nature of social systems. Systems change. Empires fall.

Armed action may trump a policy of kindness and compassion. But only for a time. Simone Weil, the French philosopher and activist explained:

Force is as pitiless to the man who possesses it, or thinks he does, as it is to its victim; the second it crushes, the first it intoxicates.<sup>4</sup>

Americans today are compelled to lend our consent to empire; to inhabit a swirling, addictive culture of blind social privilege, sexualization, consumption, fear, and delusion. We are intoxicated by force and power, so drunk with it that we cannot see ourselves, though the rest of the world sees us so clearly. We live in a postmodern stew in which American citizens are more products than protagonists. We are professional consumers to be cultivated, an audience to be delivered to multinational corporations by way of great spectacles—wars, movies, television, and sports.

America is founded and rooted in principles of individual liberation that can still point us toward freedom. But there has always been a tension in America between individualism and social justice. Businessmen and self-serving politicians turn principles on their head.

To be an engaged Buddhist, to be any kind of religious activist, means to believe that natural ethical principles will prevail. It also means removing one's consent from an empire based on suffering and exploitation. Stepping aside from privilege and opposing empire is a difficult practice. Society is the ocean in which we swim, the air we breathe. No one exists outside of society. But the dharma or "law" that describes the workings of our individual self, also applies to the structures and systems of society. Just as each of us manifests a no-self that is co-created from various elements and conditions, our cultural and social self is likewise co-created.

Shakyamuni Buddha said "I come to teach about *dukkha*, and the end of *dukkha*."<sup>5</sup> *Dukkha* implies something more than "suffering," as it is often translated. *Dukkha* is the gnawing sense that something about ourselves is lacking, incomplete, unsatisfactory, or painful. The end of *dukkha* is not that there is no more pain or discomfort in our lives. We end *dukkha* by actually accepting that things are impermanent and incomplete. No human or godly effort can make it otherwise, and that is okay. The 14<sup>th</sup> century Zen master Eihei Dogen wrote "When dharma fills your body and mind, you understand that something is missing."<sup>6</sup> When we heed the Buddha's words, we realize too that liberation has a social dimension. A vow naturally arises not to live at the expense of other beings.

We understand that governments exist by the consent of the governed. That consent may be wholehearted, ambivalent, or begrudging but so long as it is present, a government stands. The "Declaration of Independence" says:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.— That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed...<sup>7</sup>

In this age of unthinkable weapons and dazzling technologies of death, we mistakenly believe that power rests with those who have the guns, with those who are willing to do violence by pulling a trigger or signing a document. But real power is just as our founding fathers described in their radical opposition to British Imperialism. Governments—legal or illegal—derive their "powers from the consent of the governed..." When we nonviolently deny our consent, the power rests in our hands.

The American founders also understood something about impermanence and they laid down basic rules for social change. Again from the "Declaration of Independence":

...whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.<sup>8</sup>

The noble standard "Safety and Happiness" has a parallel in the Buddha's teaching of *Metta* in the "Sutta of Lovingkindness."

May all beings be happy.  
May they be joyous and live in safety.  
All living beings, whether weak or strong,  
In high or middle or low realms of existence,  
Small or great, visible or invisible, near or far, born or to be born,  
May all beings be happy.  
Let no one deceive another, nor despise any being in any state;  
let none by anger or hatred wish harm to another.<sup>9</sup>

We can play around with the word “state.” “State” is a condition or manner of being. In Buddhism, mind-states determine our thoughts, words, and actions which in turn create *karma* and its fruits. In a worldly sense “state” means position or rank or class. It also means a polity or nation. America’s leaders point their fingers at an “axis of evil” states. As far as they are concerned, it is just fine to despise Iraq, Iran, and North Korea. They add other enemies like Cuba, Syria, and even France (without whom there would never have been a United States). Despising these states and the people who live in them goes against the spiritual reality that all beings are Buddha, all beings are God. They may as well be pointing at themselves. We people and act against them at peril of our own moral life. The complicated laws of *karma* promise nothing but suffering as a result. The gift of a Buddhist understanding of the world is that *karma* is not fate. It can always be transformed. Each of us, individuals who create one great body of humankind, take responsibility for this transformation.

### Next Steps

This essay is a political plea. I mean politics as an extension of social relations, an expression of impermanent human systems. Systems are fluid and ever-changing. So are our political expressions. I have always considered myself an internationalist, and will continue to be so. My heart goes out to people around the world trying to free themselves from oppression. But as an internationalist, the case I am trying to make now is that engaged Buddhists and other faith-based activists from the United States must apply ourselves centrally to transformation at home. This is our main chance to help the whole world.

We have three central tasks as we confront the American Empire and begin to dismantle it.

1. The first task is to educate ourselves in each others’ spiritual traditions, in the inspiring teachings of nonviolence, in the true history of the United States, in the vast body of radical political theory, and in current realities. It is important that we educate ourselves from the point of view of others, the disenfranchised. We must listen to their stories as told in their own voices. From this sea of thought and wisdom, each of us must find our own understandings and paths. We are not the first to have explored paths of social change. And even the word “we” is conditional. There is no one America. We stand on the shoulders of giants. We can study them—their successes and failure. Then, along with our friends and allies, we can test our understandings in the crucible of action.
2. The second task is to involve ourselves in electoral politics as never before. Democracy in America is a flawed vessel. And yet there is a noble history to it and there is still room for choice, despite the dismaying character of the most of the men (and some women) who seek office. Our focus has to be regime change in Washington. Not that we should be without compassion for George Bush, Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, et al. As much as I oppose their actions and policies, when I see them on television, I see sentient beings, not so different from you or me. They may be trying to do what is best, but to many of us they seem to be swimming in delusion, willing to drag us along with them out into stormy waters. Their motivations are a worrisome mystery to me, but I long for their awakening. Until then, I wish to help them along to peaceful days back on the ranch in Crawford, Texas, or wherever it may be that each of them is at ease and where the world is safe from their caprices and greed.

We can work for presidential candidates who will move the debate in the direction of wisdom, compassion and ethics. In the end, he or she may not win nomination, but they will have changed the substance of our national dialogue for those who end up running for office.

We have several other courses to follow as the election approaches. First is to get all possible voters to register and to come out and vote. Nearly half of all potential voters stay home on Election Day. Although the electoral choices may not be ideal, as bodhisattvas, we take the fate of all beings in our own hands. And so we must vote and enable others to do so.

We can advocate for campaign reform. Money and influence distort democracy in terrible ways. Again and again our representatives sidestep reform legislation. Along with campaign reform we recognize that the voter fraud we saw in the Florida presidential election is nothing new. Our representatives need to know we are watching them and that we want an electoral system that is not for sale.

Finally we can work for a candidate who can win, even if we have to compromise some of our beliefs. Each of us can do our best to save the world from another four years of lies, sweetheart deals, and war. Rather than clinging to a personal system of unrealizable beliefs, we can choose the path that will do the least harm.

3. The third task is to align ourselves with the Buddha's precepts and all the world's ethical teachings. The Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh expresses the First Grave Precept this way.

Aware of the suffering caused by the destruction of life, I vow to cultivate compassion and learn ways to protect lives of people, animals, plants, and minerals. I am determined not to kill, not to let others kill, and not to condone any killing in the world, in my thinking, and in my way of life.<sup>10</sup>

We cultivate active nonviolence to fulfill this vow. Aligning ourselves with not killing means standing in opposition to war as a method of conflict resolution. The deeper dimension of nonviolence is non-separation between oneself and one's opponents. The Gospel of Matthew says, "...love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them that spitefully use you."<sup>11</sup> In a sermon on this text Martin Luther King wrote, "...seek only to defeat evil systems. Individuals who happen to be caught up in that system, you love, but you seek to defeat the system."<sup>12</sup> The system of American Empire distorts the lives of people all around the world. It steals their labors and resources. It does so with our consent. Our leaders, elected or otherwise, have the same capabilities for good and ill as ourselves. And so we must choose to withdraw our consent by risking our hearts, our bodies, and our privilege. Aligning with the precept of not killing is at the same time aligning with the offering of life to all. It is leaping into the great unknown.

I leave precise strategies and tactics for other times and other forums. Strategies and actions will arise out of our communities, and out of the countless local and global struggles that affect all of us. But they don't just pop out of the ground like blades of grass. In order to effect change we have to do our thinking and acting in concert, as one being with one mind. This means building alternative institutions and structures. In his recent book, *The Unconquerable World*, Jonathan Schell succinctly describes this process in the context of modern social transformation.

In the hands of the Eastern European activists, the idea of civil society underwent further development. It was turned into a rival—almost an alternative—to government. Their new rule of thumb was to act not *against* the government but *for* society—and then to defend the accomplishments.<sup>13</sup>

This is like the Wobblies' prescription to "build the structure of the new society within the shell of the old."<sup>14</sup> Vaclav Havel calls such a strategy "living in truth," which echoes Gandhi's Satyagraha,

### **Two Models of Engagement—"What is our Salt March?"**

I lead a mediation program at a Federal prison for women in Dublin, California. At FCI-Dublin there have always been political prisoners along with women swept up in a variety of crimes and misdemeanors. Among the "politicals" are women convicted of distributing medical marijuana, smashing missile warheads with hammers, breaking other political prisoners out of prison. Some of these women take up meditation on their own, where each woman is trying to come to grips with her suffering to cultivate equanimity in the face of the hazards and hassles of prison life, and the injustices of a society where "we are all doing time."

Lately there have been three women in the meditation group sentenced for civil disobedience at the U.S. Army's Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation, in Columbus, Georgia—formerly the School of the Americas, a combat training school for Latin American soldiers. Its graduates are consistently involved in human rights atrocities and coups, including the El Mozote Massacre of over 900 civilians and last year's failed coup in Venezuela. The school's training manuals, published by the Pentagon, taught techniques of torture, extortion and execution.

In November of 2002, more than ten thousand protesters met peacefully at Fort Benning, GA to underscore the U.S. government's double standard on terrorism and to close the School of the Americas.<sup>15</sup> Three women in my group at the prison camp—a former West Point graduate, a radical grandmother, and a young activist—were among a hundred who knowingly violated federal law by crossing a barbed wire fence and entering the military base in an act of nonviolent civil disobedience. Eighty-six of them, including Catholic nuns, priests, veterans, union organizers, professors and students were convicted on federal charges, many of them receiving prison sentences of three to six months.

One morning I asked what they thought Americans should do in opposition to an American Empire. They threw the question back to me. "What is our Salt March?" referring to Gandhi's 1930 march in opposition to the British colonial power's salt tax. It was an act of civil disobedience that galvanized an Indian independence movement by placing the iniquity and violence of the British in clear relief. These women, themselves in prison for acts of conscience, like myself and many others

are looking for the pivotal moment that can turn the conscience of our nation. We must keep looking. I invite all of us to take up this question with joy, creativity and determination. A visionary act, our own Salt March, has the power to turn history.

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Sixty years ago a group of young friends in Germany shared tastes in art, religion, and political principles. Their eyes were open to the horrors and lies of the Nazi government. Calling themselves the “White Rose,” they wrote, published, and secretly distributed a series of seven leaflets describing the shame of life in the Third Reich, and advocating what they called “passive resistance” — what we now call active nonviolence — to stop the crimes of this regime. In the first of seven leaflets, they wrote:

Nothing is so unworthy of a civilized nation as allowing itself to be governed without opposition by an irresponsible clique that has yielded to base instinct....Do not forget that every people deserves the regime it is willing to endure!

On February 18, 1943 White Rose members were arrested at the University of Munich while distributing their writing. Three leaders were executed by guillotine on February 22. In a handful of weeks and months other members of the White Rose were hunted down and put to death. Leader Hans Scholl’s last words were shouted from the executioner’s platform: “Long live freedom!”<sup>16</sup>

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America will not become a new Reich. Our traditions of independence and democracy will hopefully prevent that. But our deepest values are at risk. In faith and solidarity we have to reject a political and economic philosophy advocating “Life, liberty, and the pursuit of all who threaten it.” So long as we consent to an administration that stole a national election, that prides itself on overwhelming military superiority against others, that cuts secret deals lining the pockets of elites, and that abrogates civil rights we have struggled for over so many years, we will suffer as citizens and as a nation. Imperial dinosaurs will rule the roost. An American Empire, unchecked, will cause great suffering and destruction wherever it sets foot. It may even, unthinkingly, light a spark that sets the whole world aflame.

As followers of the Buddha Way, we vow to save all sentient beings from suffering. Therefore we must withdraw our consent from the “coalition of the willing.” Our power resides in the precept of not harming life and in the heart of compassion. As Americans we value the principles raised in our nation’s founding, the same principles raised in the active witness of Martin Luther King, Jr. As citizens of the world we stand with the most oppressed and vow not to further their oppression. In doing so we honor the young Germans of the White Rose. And we bring to mind the nonviolent power of Gandhi, Thich Nhat Hanh, Aung San Suu Kyi, Vaclav Havel, Ken Saro-Wiwa, and countless women and men whose names we have yet to learn. We vow to live like them. We invoke the bodhisattva as described in the *Vimalakirti Sutra*:

During the short aeons of swords,  
They meditate on love,  
Introducing to nonviolence  
Hundreds of millions of living beings.<sup>17</sup>

This is the work of bodhisattvas...our work. If we do our work well, the empire will strike out gracefully, walking back to the bench with dignity. The game of life will continue. May we be worthy and determined to accomplish peace and liberation for all.

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- <sup>1</sup> Aeschylus, *The Persians*, a new adaptation written by Ellen McLaughlin.
- <sup>2</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, "Ozymandias," (1818).
- <sup>3</sup> Eihei Dogen, from "Guidelines for Studying the Way" in *Moon in a Dewdrop*, ed. by Kazuaki Tanahashi, (North Point Press, 1985), 31.
- <sup>4</sup> Simone Weil, *The Iliad or the Poem of Force*, (Pendle Hill Publications, 1990).
- <sup>5</sup> *Samyutta Nikaya* XXII.86, Anuradha Sutta.
- <sup>6</sup> Eihei Dogen, from "Actualizing the Fundamental Point" in *Moon in a Dewdrop*, ed. by Kazuaki Tanahashi, (North Point Press, 1985), 70.
- <sup>7</sup> "The Declaration of Independence." For text and graphic reproduction see <[www.archives.gov/exhibit\\_hall/charters\\_of\\_freedom/declaration/declaration.html](http://www.archives.gov/exhibit_hall/charters_of_freedom/declaration/declaration.html)>.
- <sup>8</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>9</sup> *Sutta Nipata* I.8, "Karaniya Metta Sutta".
- <sup>10</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *For A Future To Be Possible*, (Parallax Press, 1993), 13.
- <sup>11</sup> *The New Testament*, "Matthew" 5:43-48.
- <sup>12</sup> Martin Luther King Jr., "Loving Your Enemies," a sermon delivered at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, Montgomery, Alabama on November 17, 1957.
- <sup>13</sup> Jonathan Schell, *The Unconquerable World*, (Metropolitan Books, 2003), 194.
- <sup>14</sup> For information on the Industrial Workers of the World, the I.W.W., see <[www.iww.org](http://www.iww.org)>, also <[www.questia.com/Index.jsp?CRID=industrial\\_workers\\_of\\_the\\_world&OFFID=se1](http://www.questia.com/Index.jsp?CRID=industrial_workers_of_the_world&OFFID=se1)>.
- <sup>15</sup> For information on School of the Americas Watch, see <[www.soaw.org/new](http://www.soaw.org/new)>.
- <sup>16</sup> For information on the White Rose, see <[www.jlrweb.com/whiterose](http://www.jlrweb.com/whiterose)>.
- <sup>17</sup> *The Holy Teaching of Vimalakirti*, trans. by Robert A. F. Thurman, (The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976) 70.

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