

Through a Glass, Darkly: Towards a Buddhist Perspective on Israel & Palestine

Alan Senauke, April 2002

Each time I speak about the conflict in Israel and Palestine I seem to get it wrong. And silence will not do either. This is what Zen Buddhist practitioners call a koan. The challenge of a koan is to embody and present one's truth in a way that is neither self-centered nor dualistic, even in the face of ambiguity. No koan could be more urgent than the mutual destruction we are called on to witness daily in the Holy Land.

An ancient Chinese text says, "If you create an understanding of holiness, you will succumb to all errors." Another old Zen adage explains "There is nowhere in the world to spit." Our Buddhist understanding is that the whole world is a holy land, and all the people in it. This is also the dharma meaning of our ancestor Bodhidharma's words, "Vast emptiness, nothing holy." The soil of the Holy Land has been baptized in blood countless times in the name of power and religion. Great volumes of blood have been spilled. Has this blood poisoned minds, or sanctified lives? What is truly holy?

In his First Letter to the Corinthians, Paul writes: "For now we see as through a glass, darkly." Our limited view hinders clear vision. Self-centered attachment to views is the source of suffering. Self-centeredness causes us as individuals to live at the expense of others. That extends to a kind of cultural or national self-centeredness, where individual suffering manifests as distorted social policies. As people and as nations we find ourselves out of harmony with the Buddha's first grave precept and the Bible's sixth commandment-do not kill. We pray that our brother and sister Israelis and Palestinians will widen their views and forsake violence in all forms-military, paramilitary, and suicide bombing. Violence naturally flows from people scarred by greed, hatred, and delusion, who then create national entities poisoned by these hungers and fears. Buddhist social analyst David Loy suggests we see this conflict "not as a holy war between good and evil, but as a tragic cycle of reciprocal violence and hatred fuelled by a vicious cycle of escalating fear on both sides. Israelis fear that they will never be able to live at peace, believing that Palestinians are determined to destroy them. Palestinians, impoverished by Israeli control over their own communities and dominated by its U.S.-supplied military, strike back in the only way they can."

As Buddhists here in the West, we need first to understand how our own sight is clouded. We can try to put ourselves in the place of Israelis and Palestinians. Even though it is an impossible task, we must try to imagine ourselves in their conditions. It seems we are so many miles away, and yet our lives and the fate of Israelis and Palestinians are connected, in ways that go beyond violence, armed struggle, and the oxy-moronic "War on Terrorism."

At the center of Buddhist practice is to understand the subtle workings of cause and effect-karma and its fruits. When one sees the workings of karma, the natural response is one of repentance, vow, and renewal. The liturgy of repentance goes like this.

All my ancient twisted karma
From beginningless greed, hatred, and delusion
Born of body, speech, and mind,
I now fully avow

We can trace these troubles back across the walls of time. Cain slew Abel. Ishmael and Isaac vied for the affections of the Patriarch Abraham. Palestine was the elusive prize sought in bloody Crusades that forged a European identity. A succession of empires—Ottoman, British, French, and others—ruled with a heavy hand, often oppressing local cultures. Then we come to the last six decades, an age of Holocaust, ethnic hatred, oil politics, and neo-colonialism.

Karma is rooted in beginningless greed, hatred, and delusion. But in our own memory and in the memory of our parents, the U.S. turned away potential victims of the holocaust, sending them back to perish. Allied Forces failed to bomb railroad tracks leading to the death camps. These were anti-Semitic acts, policies that put little value on Jewish lives. U.S. support for the creation of Israel at the expense of indigenous Palestinians, who were uprooted from their land in 1948, then again in 1967, was motivated not by kindness, but by politics that were an extension of these same anti-Semitic policies. Our continuing support, helping Israel to build the fourth largest military force in the world serves a double purpose. It has created a client state for the implementation of U.S. policy, and it keeps the Arab nations at each others' and Israel's throat. This, in turn keeps U.S. oil prices low, preventing oil producing nations from making common economic purpose in confronting the world's largest oil consuming nation.

There are surely some people of good will on the American diplomatic team, but my sense is that the United States is too compromised historically and too self-interested to play an active role in peacemaking or keeping. Although the U.S. bills itself as the one remaining superpower, our leaders fail to understand that economic and military power is not equivalent to moral authority. In fact, power tends to undermine such authority in even the most principled men and women.

This is a highly condensed and un-nuanced kind of history. The effect of this history is to create a mind of victimization. Every side can point to ancient and recent wounds as justification for present acts. This is much like the dynamic of an abusive family, where wounds are nurtured and transmitted from generation to generation, forging chains of suffering out of fear and anger. Verses 3-5 of the Dhammapada speak to this.

He insulted me, hit me, beat me, robbed me
for those who brood on this, hostility isn't stilled.
He insulted me, hit me, beat me, robbed me
for those who don't brood on this, hostility is stilled.
Hostilities are not stilled through hostilities, regardless.
Hostilities are stilled through non-hostility:
This, an unending truth.

I offer this perspective as no more than a partial truth. But I encourage you to do your own investigation of history and karma. Each of us must take responsibility for our actions and those done by our nation in our name. We take up the age old practice of repentance and renewal, and learn not to see ourselves as victims.

We see through a glass, darkly, but there are beams of light and hope that reach our eyes. They shine apart from the flash of bombs and the flare of burning homes. There are many ordinary and extraordinary people in Israel and Palestine, and in Europe and the U.S. who believe in the work of inner disarmament, bringing their faith and courage forward for the sake of peace.

Each Friday for 18 months now, a small group of Israelis and Palestinians, Jews, Muslims, and Christians have been meeting in a narrow Jerusalem courtyard overlooking the Western Wall and Al-Aqsa mosque. They sit in a circle, practicing peace. Before them is the Temple Mount and the great mosques. Around them are young women and men of the Israeli border police, tough but not unfriendly, and on guard, with their automatic rifles at ready. I have sat in this circle among friends. It seems at once ordinary, powerful, and not enough. One wishes this circle might magically grow and link hands around all of Jerusalem. A friend, Eliyahu, writes: *"In a time when many in our circle feel deeply challenged to do something positive, silence and shared prayer seems to be the most powerful contributions we can offer at this most unforgiving time."*

At least forty peace activists—French, German, Italian, Canadian, as well as Israeli and Palestinian—walked into Arafat's compound while it was under attack. They remain there, bearing witness, protecting life, and risking their lives for the sake of peace. Other nonviolent activists are quietly taken up residence in the principle towns of the West Bank and in Jenin, Aida and Al-Azza, besieged Palestinian Refugee Camps.

As of April 15, more than four hundred Israel Army "refuseniks" (<http://www.couragetorefuse.org>) have vowed not to continue to serve in the occupation. Thirty-nine of them have been imprisoned. Their petition reads:

"We, combat officers and soldiers who have served the State of Israel for long weeks every year, in spite of the dear cost to our personal lives, have been on reserve duty all over the Occupied Territories, and were issued commands and directives that had nothing to do with the security of our country, and that had the sole purpose of perpetuating our control over the Palestinian people. We, whose eyes have seen the bloody toll this Occupation exacts from both sides. We, who sensed how the commands issued to us in the Territories, destroy all the values we had absorbed while growing up in this country. We, who understand now that the price of Occupation is the loss of IDF's (Israeli Defense Force's) human character and the corruption of the entire Israeli society. We, who know that the Territories are not Israel, and that all settlements are bound to be evacuated in the end.

"We hereby declare that we shall not continue to fight this War of the Settlements. We shall not continue to fight beyond the 1967 borders in order to dominate, expel, starve and humiliate an entire people. We hereby declare that we shall continue serving in the Israel Defense Forces in any mission that serves Israel's defense. The missions of occupation and oppression do not serve this purpose, and we shall take no part in them."

In the U.S., Women in Black, and (in places like Santa Barbara, California) Communities in Black weekly sit in silent witness to the destruction and loss of life on both sides. This loose-knit network of nonviolent activists (<http://www.womeninblack.net>) started in Israel in 1988 by women seeking peace between Israel and Palestine and an end to Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. This movement has become worldwide, including women and families caught in many wars and conflicts. In their mission statement Women in Black write:

"Our silence is visible. We invite women to stand with us, reflect about themselves and women who have been raped, tortured or killed in concentration camps, women who have disappeared, whose loved ones have disappeared or have been killed, whose homes have been demolished. We wear black as a symbol to mourn for all victims of war, to mourn the destruction of people, nature and the fabric of life."

These are a few models for bearing witness and healing. They are not a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Solutions are varied and difficult to enact, and we must find our own way, with a willingness to make mistakes. We must speak to our leaders and say what we think. We can engage in dialogue with Muslim and Jewish friends, keeping heart and mind open to all points of view, seeing the particular sufferings that move us all.

There are numerous approaches and obstacles, and many of us have read, talked, and argued until the small hours of many nights. The most I am willing to say here is that I believe in a two-state solution that would recognize autonomous states of Israel and Palestine within the pre-1967 boundaries, with nonviolent protocols for the resolution of political, economic, and religious conflicts. But it is really those two peoples themselves who must find their own path to peace and justice. I hope that the peoples of the region can themselves find a way to communicate directly and leave their duplicitous and demagogic leaders behind them. These leaders—Sharon and Arafat at this point in time—have done little more than bring death to each other's people and to themselves. My heart sinks each time I see them posturing for the cameras.

We seek peace and justice for Israel and Palestine. We return to our koan. Conventionally, peace is understood at the cessation of armed violence. Conventionally, justice is identified with punishment. Such an understanding of peace and justice pulls in two directions. The peace and justice we speak of here is one thing, one direction. As I said earlier, it is simply not living at the expense of another.

"For now we see as through a glass, darkly." As long as we live in this suffering world we must try to see each other. Take away the glass itself and look at your brother or sister eye to eye. We can do this in silence, without words or actions. When we sit this way, face to face, it is very difficult to depersonalize our opponent, to reduce him or her to a bitter rhetorical flourish. There is simply no way to avoid the clear fact of our shared humanity. By virtue of causes and conditions, past wounds and present fear, there will always be people who will not accept peace. Dogen Zenji wrote, "The mind of a sentient being is difficult to change." Still we practice to be the peace we envision. This is Buddha's peace and God's peace. This is something we can do, irrespective of Sharon, Arafat, Bush, and others. This may be our most precious offering. From there we can proceed to words and actions.

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