

Applying Buddhist Insights to the Great Challenges of Peacebuilding

1) Vahidin, a Bosnian Muslim (Bosniak), welcomes a Serb family back to his city, where they lived before war destroyed the former Yugoslavia. Not many Serbs (Christian Orthodox Bosnians) have returned to the formerly mixed city of Sanski Most, where they had been engaged in a life or death struggle for ethnic dominance. Not many Bosniaks would welcome them home.

Years before, Vahidin was a young educator, meeting me for the first time when Karuna Center for Peacebuilding offered programs in Bosnia focused on inter-communal healing and reconciliation. Vahidin resisted participating in joint seminars with Serb counterparts; he recalled how his favorite teacher had betrayed the Bosniaks and actually worked in one of the death camps in neighboring Prijedor. Vahidin had lost many loved ones during the 3-year Bosnian War, became a refugee, and witnessed his entire village bombed into oblivion. Nudged into our program by the school principal, the experience of being with Serb educators changed his life.

Today Vahidin directs an NGO called Center for Peacebuilding, travels internationally to train others, and receives prizes for his service. His life story is infused with impermanence. Neighbors became enemies; teachers morphed into betrayers; homes and families were lost. Later, land was returned; former enemies became neighbors once again; his city was rebuilt.

Recognizing the truth of impermanence helped our Bosnian educator group members let go of clinging and unlocked fresh possibilities for the future. They realized that although they had been victims or members of violator communities, this was not a permanent identity. Vahidin acknowledged the mind state of hate within him, and gradually saw how it blocked his development. In the beginning of our intergroup dialogues, the Muslim and Serb educators, including Vahidin, could barely tolerate each other's presence. Over several years of group and school collaborations, their encounters grew more trusting and honest, enabling them to shed their monochromatic ethnic identities and become full and complex human beings. Milka, a Serb educator who apologized to the Muslims for her own failure to denounce the violators in her midst, now is Vahidin's close friend and work collaborator in teacher sensitization programs. Together they guide educators to provide wholesome environments where students learn to accept and safeguard their diversities.

Although group relations shifted and expanded, their struggles are far from over. The Bosnian government has done very little to rebuild its infrastructure, economy, and political processes, or to ease ethnic tensions. Most Bosnians in this formerly mixed region now live in mono-ethnic cities and villages. Returnees are seldom welcomed by a victim-turned-activist like Vahidin, who is determined to use his own transformation in the service of his country. He is now training the next generation, adapting the materials we developed a decade ago, and training others to recognize the suffering that arises from clinging to impermanent identities and to include all

Bosnians in their circle of care.

2) In December 2013, fifty-six students arrive in Kathmandu for our 5th annual CONTACT (Conflict Transformation Across Cultures) South Asia Program. They hail from Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Maldives, and Burma, include Tibetans in exile and Kashmiris from the India/Pakistan divide, with a few US participants also in attendance. As South Asians, their nations, lives, conflicts, cultures, religions, customs, climate, and crises are deeply intertwined. Bangladesh and Pakistan were carved from India; Afghanistan and Pakistan witness militias in fight and flight on both sides of that tormented and disputed boundary; Burmese, including radical monks, are violently expelling former Bangladeshis from Rakhine State; Nepal and India have an open border with Maoist cadres on both sides; Sri Lanka and India tangle over the future of Tamils living in both countries. The region suffers from dense population, water resource concerns, extensive poverty exacerbated by ethnic and caste marginalization, classism, gender discrimination, and combined histories of endless war.

These participants are in the CONTACT Program together for two weeks. In the beginning they feel tentative and wary. By the third day they are examining the prejudices and fears they carry about each other. By the last day they celebrate the intricate regional web of interdependence that binds them, understanding that none of them can survive without pulling together. Among them they speak 40 languages, yet all of them speak English and most speak Hindi, reflecting the impact of Hollywood and Bollywood. The Indians and Pakistanis, who cannot cross their own borders to meet each other, stay up all night to build relationships, promising to change the enemy-images of each other when they return home. The Afghan-Pakistani group also meets regularly to share struggles with the Taliban, the US military presence, and the various militias and factions that dominate their politics. The Bangladeshis and Burmese struggle to understand perceptions of each other and their conflict. All the women speak of their anguish, different only in degree from country to country. From that, a group arises to plan gender consciousness work regionally. Another group examines water resources and impending glacial melt with an eye toward regional cooperation. The educators in the room gather with each other to examine how history is taught in each of their countries; those in media, law, academia, religious leadership, and NGO service also plan cross-border programming. They learn to celebrate their commonality, to acknowledge the differences but strengthen the bonds. Deep friendships form; Facebook allows them to continue from home, their messages to each other flooding my inbox with hope.

When I am facilitating peacebuilding programs, whether in Buddhist or non-Buddhist contexts, participants recognize interdependence, experiencing it with one another in the workshop setting and extrapolating outward. In situations where war has sundered communal ties, there is great resistance to the concept of interdependence because they, or their fellow citizens, have suffered greatly at each other's hands. But in some way "interbeing," Thich Nhat Hanh's felicitous term, comes as a relief, a first step in rebuilding what has been shattered and must exist

again for mutual survival. In a recent Karuna Center program designed to foster interfaith trust and mutuality in Sri Lanka, a Buddhist monk remarked: *“At first, we were afraid of each other’s accusations and of being blamed for the horrors of the war. Now we are friends, almost like family.”*

In our annual CONTACT Program in the US each June, one of our methods for exploring the bonds of interdependence is through revealing the prejudices and stereotypes that people have brought with them. These are written and read out anonymously. Invariably, they include negative feelings toward Muslims, Americans, blacks, gays, lesbians, Jews, fundamentalist Christians, Hindus, soldiers, women, men...a long list! We have several weeks of an intensive immersion experience to demonstrate the shifting nature of hatred and targeted identities, by which time the enemy-images they carried into the program have melted away, replaced by what feels very much like the “beloved community.” Last year, an Algerian woman confessed in tears that she had been taught all her life to hate Jews, but she loved the Jewish American sitting next to her, into whose arms she fell as she sobbed. Similarly, lesbians and gays in the group came out to their colleagues, a risky decision in a room with many Muslim and Christian participants from conservative countries, for whom this was an unsettling experience. There were several heartfelt circles over the weeks to further explore sexual identity, for those from closeted societies to meet happy and productive colleagues who happen to be gay or lesbian, and to understand that such people also exist in their countries, albeit under hidden circumstances. In resolving the dissonance between accepting new friends who happen to be gay, Jewish, Muslim, etc, or rejecting these fellow students because of one of their multiple identities, they opt for the former and become connectors in what Martin Luther King called *“an inescapable network of mutuality, tied into a single garment of destiny.”*

3) Most Rwandans reside on rural hillsides in tiny homes surrounded by banana trees. Hutus and Tutsis traditionally lived side-by-side, or even closer in intermarriage. Christianity, the Kinyarwanda language, and poverty bound them together as one people. Survival required cooperation and fostered interdependence. Historically there had been years of violence and competition for resources based on ethnic identity, but nothing prepared them for what emerged in April 1994 when hatred and brutality were unleashed, resulting in the murder of one million people in one hundred days.

Through Karuna Center’s work, I first encountered Rwandans in 1995 and our engagement has continued in the decades since. With a fierce urgency, they needed to understand themselves, to reckon with the destruction to self and others, to discern how they went so wrong. Rwandan Tutsi and Hutu participants in our programs probed the dynamics of how their conflicts emerged, escalated, and finally left them dazed, broken, and bereft. When I first met Eddie, he planned to kill 23 Hutus in revenge for 23 Tutsi relatives murdered, but he became “saved” through church involvement and now runs an NGO. Suzette fled Rwanda rather than face her rapist ever again; she also healed herself and now works in refugee service in the

US. Jean Pierre ran through the jungles of DRC for 6 months to escape assassins; he is still bewildered by the experience but on a recovery journey. There are thousands like them, and despite many problems, Rwanda has moved ahead of most postconflict countries through its carefully structured reconciliation and forgiveness processes that engage victims, violators, and families in dialogue.

The field of conflict transformation offers many erudite and insightful theories on the multiple and intertwined sources of violent conflict, but none with more clarity than the Buddhist teaching of the “three poisons” of greed, anger, and delusion. Teaching in Rwanda and elsewhere, we probe layer after layer of the roots of mass violence, examining political, economic and social injustice, historic wounds, opposing perceptions, competition for resources, toxic leadership, regional instability, militarism, and many more causes of armed conflict. It often seemed as if we excavate to the molten rocks at the earth’s center. At the core, we confront greed, anger, and delusion. Since all humans are vulnerable to such mindstates, they are completely familiar to Rwandans or any other group of participants. Recognizing the universality of these mental temptations, participants understand the role and power of the three poisons in the realm of politics, state institutions, and human relations.

Tracing the causes of mass violence through conflict analysis, getting a handle on all that went wrong, helped the Rwandans as it helps others. Knowledge and insight matters: if participants recognize the extent and the consequences of their frenzied behavior, perhaps they will not respond the same way to war-fever next time. One does not have to be schooled in Buddhism to benefit from these Dharma teachings. Rwandans, South Asians, Bosnians, and many others in our programs gain equally from insights into the universality of interdependence, impermanence, and the three poisons of greed, anger, and delusion.

“Greed runs very deep in our consciousness,” writes Joseph Goldstein. Desire, grasping, and envy appear individually and within identity or political groups. Neighbors covet the land or wealth of others; dictators crave power enough to start a war; rich and poor alike experience fear that there is not enough. Societies desire more natural resources and yearn for privileges for their ethnic, racial, religious, or national groups. Nations wish to redeem lost images of former glory and to feel more secure and respected. In today’s context, unexamined greed and desire for profit can precipitate utter devastation to our environment and all that lives within it. Mindfulness aids the capacity to recognize the arrival of desire, fear, grasping, and jealousy, providing a path to tame these unskillful mental formations. Consciousness-raising encounters with members of groups designated as “other” help participants overcome identity-based competition and envy. Inter-group peacebuilding encounters encourage awareness and facilitate positive relationships between groups in conflict.

Anger may manifest as passionate indignation about conditions of cruelty and injustice that stimulate bold and righteous action. More often, however, anger burns

as the hot fire of revenge, the desire to harm those who have harmed us, and as a response to humiliation and shame. Cycles of unbridled resentment, rage, and fury cause chaos that results in further repeated sequences of anger-based revenge, leaving none in peace. The genocide in Rwanda is a study of revenge and fury for past grievances (as are the horrors of Sudan/South Sudan, the turbulence in Egypt and Syria, and the Indian/Pakistani fight for Kashmir). Hatred may be described as a particularly virulent manifestation of anger. Expressing itself as prejudice, it leads to the behavior of discrimination and results in oppression of others.

In Rwanda at the time of the genocide, a steady barrage of media fomented greed, anger, hatred, and the delusion of separateness, leading to a frenzy of killing. Hutus were commanded to seek revenge for past grievances and to put an end to cycles of competition and revenge by a “final solution,” eliminating the Tutsi minority. After a murderous 100 days, when the Rwandan Patriotic Front, a Tutsi-led army of exiles from Uganda, stopped the genocide, Rwanda lay in waste. In the 20 years since, the government has organized a vast array of programs to repair both the infrastructure and the human dimensions of harm. My involvement has been a miniscule part of the great efforts by both the national government and international NGO community. Because of what Rwanda has accomplished, despite many obstacles and criticisms, each year we bring participants in the CONTACT Graduate Certificate Program to Rwanda to study postconflict peacebuilding. They meet many like Eddie, Suzette, and Jean Pierre who have found ways to engage with former “enemies,” observe their home-grown truth and reconciliation process, visit work camps where former genocide prisoners rebuild Rwanda, and witness inter-group dialogue programs where former victims and violators recount their genocide memories and create a modicum of trust to move on toward the future.

In hearts that are not blocked by fear, compassion arises. Wholesome roots of generosity, loving-kindness, and wisdom have room to develop. Anger, hatred, greed, envy, competition, and resentment can be noticed, better managed, and slowly dissolved. In a more conscious world, ruthless leaders would be exposed rather than followed, and dehumanization would be named before causing destruction. Peacebuilding is a lifetime process, as is Dharma practice, and unfortunately the clouds of war accumulate at least as quickly as hearts and minds heal their wounds. Nonetheless, the insights of peacebuilding and Dharma, spread now by global media, create new possibilities for an interdependent future, awakening critical masses of citizens to the necessity of personal and structural transformation. Hopefully, this hard-won wisdom of Nelson Mandela may encourage us forward: *“I always knew that deep down in every heart there is mercy and generosity. No one is born hating another person. People are taught to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than hate.”*

Bio:

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