

A New Holy War against Evil? The Response of an American Buddhist

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LIKE most other Americans, I have been struggling to digest the events of September 11th. It took a while to realize how psychically numbed many of us became. In the space of a few hours, our world changed. We do not yet know what all those changes will be, or what they will mean, but the most important long-term ones may well be psychological. And, one hopes, perhaps even religious.

Americans have always understood the United States to be a special and uniquely privileged place. The Puritans viewed New England as the Promised Land. According to Herman Melville (1819–1891), “We Americans are the peculiar, chosen people.” In many parts of the globe the twentieth century has been particularly horrible, but the continental United States has been so insulated from these tragedies that we have come to think of ourselves as immune to them—although we have often contributed to them.

That confidence has been abruptly shattered. We have discovered that the borderless world of globalization allows us no refuge from the hatred and violence that continue to haunt many parts of the world—again, hatred and violence that we have been involved in.

Every death reminds us of our own, and sudden, unexpected death on such a large scale makes it harder to repress awareness of our own mortality. Our obsessions with such things as money, consumerism, and professional sports have been revealed for what they are: unworthy of all the attention we devote to them. There is something valuable to learn here, but this reality nonetheless makes us quite uncomfortable. We do not like to think about death. We usually prefer to be distracted.

Talk of vengeance and “bomb them back to the stone age” makes many people uneasy, but naturally we want to strike back. Three days after the attack President Bush declared that the United States has been called to a new worldwide mission “to rid the world of evil,” and on the following Sunday he said that the government is determined to “rid the world of evil-doers.”¹ Our land of freedom now has a responsibility to extirpate the world of its evil. We may no longer have an “evil empire” to defeat, but we have found a more sinister evil that will require a long-term, all-out war to destroy.

If anything is evil, those terrorist attacks were evil. I share that sentiment. It must be emphasized. At the same time, however, I think we need to take a close look at the rhetoric. When Bush says he wants to rid the world of evil, alarm bells go off in my mind, because that is what Hitler and Stalin also wanted to do.

I’m not defending either of those evil-doers, just explaining what they too were trying to do. What was the problem with Jews that required a “final solution”? The earth could be made pure for the Aryan race only by exterminating the Jews, the gypsies and the homosexuals—all the impure and evil vermin who contaminate it. Stalin needed to exterminate well-to-do Russian peasants in order to establish his ideal society of collective farmers. Both were trying to perfect this world by eliminating its impurities. The world can be made good only by destroying its evil elements.

Paradoxically, then, one of the main causes of evil in this world has been human attempts to eradicate evil. In more Buddhist terms, much of the world’s suffering has been a result of this dualistic way of thinking: good must exterminate evil.

On September 14th the *Washington Post* quoted Joshua Teitelbaum, a scholar who has studied a more contemporary evil-doer: “Osama bin Laden looks at the world in very stark, black-and-white terms. For him, the U.S. represents the forces of evil that are bringing corruption and domination into the Islamic world.”

What is the difference between bin Laden’s view and Bush’s? They are mirror opposites. What bin Laden sees as good—an Islamic jihad against an impious and materialistic imperialism—Bush sees as evil. What Bush sees as

¹ The first version of this Response was written on September 17, 2001, and emailed to many people on the following day. Since then, Bush has toned down his rhetoric, except for an unfortunate reference to a “crusade” against terrorism.

good—America the defender of freedom—bin Laden sees as evil. They are two different versions of the same holy-war-between-good-and-evil.

Do not misunderstand me here. I do not equate them morally, nor am I in any way trying to excuse the horrific events of September 11th. Rather, I am looking at their ways of looking at the world. From a Buddhist perspective, there is something dangerously delusive about the mirror-image views of both sides. We must understand how this black-and-white way of thinking deludes not only Islamic terrorists but also many of us, and therefore brings more suffering into the world.

This dualism of good-versus-evil is attractive because it is a simple way of looking at the world. And most of us are quite familiar with it. Although it is not unique to the Abrahamic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—it is especially important for them. It is one of the reasons why the conflicts among them have been so difficult to resolve peacefully: adherents tend to identify their own religion as good and demonize the other as evil.

It is difficult to turn the other cheek when we view the world through these spectacles, because this rationalizes the opposite principle: an eye for an eye. If the world is a battleground of good and evil forces, the evil that is in the world must be defeated by any means necessary.

The secularization of the modern West did not eliminate this tendency. In some ways it has intensified it, because we can no longer rely on a supernatural resolution. We have to depend upon ourselves to bring about the final victory of good over evil—as Hitler and Stalin tried to do. It is unclear how much help bin Laden and Bush expect from God.

Why do I emphasize this dualism? The basic problem with this way of understanding conflict is that it tends to preclude thought, because it is so simplistic. It keeps us from looking deeper, from trying to discover causes. Once something has been identified as evil, there is no more need to explain it; it is time to focus on fighting against it. This is where I think Buddhism has something important to contribute.

On September 11th a great evil destroyed the lives of many people in New York and Washington. How can we understand that? We should resist the notion that there is nothing more to understand. In our grief we are tempted to project and see all the sources of that evil as outside us, in order to preserve our own sense of being pure and innocent. Such a reaction is very reassuring: we do not need to do anything different, except to attack that evil outside us, and to become more vigilant at home. But the truth of our own situation is not so simple.

Buddhism emphasizes the *three roots of evil*, also known as the three poisons: greed, ill will and delusion. The Abrahamic religions emphasize the struggle between good and evil because for them the basic issue depends on our will: which side are we on? In contrast, Buddhism emphasizes ignorance and enlightenment because the basic issue depends on our self-knowledge: do we really understand what motivates us?

Buddhism also emphasizes that every effect has its web of causes and conditions. This is the doctrine of interdependent origination. It is also the law of karma. One way to summarize the essential Buddhist teaching is that we suffer, and cause others to suffer, because of greed, ill will and delusion. Karma implies that when our actions are motivated by these roots of evil, their negative consequences tend to rebound back upon us. That is true for everyone. The Buddhist solution to this cycle of suffering does not involve responding to greed with greed, responding to ill will with ill will, or responding to delusion with delusion. The Buddhist solution to suffering involves transforming our greed into generosity, our ill will into loving-kindness, and our delusions into wisdom.

What do these Buddhist teachings imply about the situation we now find ourselves in?

We cannot focus only on the second root of evil, the hatred and violence that were vented in New York and Washington. The three roots are intertwined. Ill will cannot be separated from greed and delusion. This requires us to ask what may be the most fundamental question of all: *why* do so many people in the Middle East, in particular, hate us so much? What have we done to encourage their hatred? Americans think of America as defending freedom and justice, but obviously that is not the way they perceive us. Are they just misinformed, then, or is it we Americans who have been misinformed about America's role in the world? Or both?

Does anybody think that we can send the USS New Jersey to lob Volkswagen-sized shells into Lebanese villages—Reagan, 1983—or loose 'smart bombs' on civilians seeking shelter in a Baghdad bunker—Bush, 1991—or fire cruise missiles on a Sudanese pharmaceutical factory—Clinton, 1999—and not receive, someday, our share in kind?²

² Micah Sifry, an Afghani scholar, in an email article widely circulated after the September 11th attacks.

In particular, how much of our foreign policy in the Middle East has been motivated by our love of freedom and democracy, and how much has been motivated by our need—our greed—for its oil? (How did “our” oil get into “their” oil-wells?) If our main priority has been securing oil supplies, does it mean that our petroleum-based economy is one of the causes of last week’s attack?

Finally, Buddhist teachings suggest that we focus on the role of delusion in creating this situation. Delusion has a special meaning in Buddhism. The fundamental delusion is our sense of separation from the world we are “in,” including our alienation from other people. Insofar as we feel separate from others, we are more inclined to manipulate them to get what we want. This naturally breeds resentment—both from others, who do not like to be used, and within ourselves, when we do not get what we want. . . . Isn’t this also true collectively?

Delusion becomes wisdom when we realize that “no one is an island.” We are interdependent because we are all part of each other, different facets of the same jewel we call the earth. This world is not a collection of objects but a community of subjects. That interdependence means we cannot avoid responsibility for each other. This is true not only for the residents of lower Manhattan, as I write uniting together in response to this catastrophe, but for all the people in the world, however deluded they may be. Yes, including the terrorists who did these heinous acts and those who support them.

Christians sometimes distinguish the sinner from the sin. This attitude is also quite Buddhist. I don not know how greedy bin Laden or the Taliban leaders are, but they seem to be extreme examples of how ill will and delusion can overwhelm the mind. Nevertheless, they still have Buddha-nature, which means they still have the capacity to awaken and transform their ill will and delusions into loving-kindness and wisdom. They still have the capacity to understand how evil their actions have been, and to try to atone for them. We all know that such an awakening is unlikely to occur, and in fact bin Laden and most of the Taliban leaders may well be dead by the time you read these words. That fate, however, is not something for us as Buddhists to celebrate, but will be another time to mourn, in this case the karmic consequences for themselves of their ignorance and deadly hatred. As deluded sentient beings they too deserve and certainly need our *metta*. Insofar as we aspire to be *bodhisattvas*, we must realize that, however horrific their actions may be, bin Laden and the Taliban are not separate from us.

Do not misunderstand me here. Those responsible for the attacks must be

caught and brought to justice. That is our responsibility to all those who have suffered, and that is also our responsibility to the deluded and hate-full terrorists, who must be stopped. Those who intend other terrorist actions must also be stopped. If, however, we want to stop this cycle of hatred and violence, we must realize that our responsibility is much broader than that.

Realizing our interdependence and mutual responsibility for each other implies something more. When we try to *live* this interdependence, it is called love. Love is more than a feeling, it is a mode of being in the world. In Buddhism we talk mostly about compassion, generosity, and loving-kindness, but they all reflect this mode of being. Such love is sometimes mocked as weak and ineffectual, yet it can be very powerful, as Gandhi showed. And it embodies a deep wisdom about how the cycle of hatred and violence works and about how that cycle can be ended. An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind, but there is an alternative. Twenty-five hundred years ago, the Buddha said:

“He abused me, he beat me, he defeated me, he robbed me”—
for those who harbour such thoughts hatred will never cease.

“He abused me, he beat me, he defeated me, he robbed me”—
for those who do not harbour such thoughts hatred will cease.

In this world hatred is never appeased by hatred; hatred is always appeased by love. This is an ancient law. (*Dhammapada*, 3–5)

Of course, this insight is not unique to Buddhism. After all, it was not the Buddha who gave us the image of turning the other cheek. In the Abrahamic religions the tradition of a holy war between good and evil coexists with this “ancient law” about the power of love. That does not mean all the world’s religions have emphasized this law to the same extent. In fact, I wonder if this is one way to measure the maturity of a religion, or at least its continuing relevance for us today: how much the liberative truth of this law is acknowledged and encouraged. I do not know enough about Islam to compare, but in the cases of Buddhism and Christianity, for example, it is the times when this truth has not been emphasized that these two religions have been most subverted by secular rulers and nationalistic fervor.

So where does that leave us today? We find ourselves at a turning point. A lust for vengeance and violent retaliation is rising, fanned by a leader caught up in his own rhetoric of a holy war to purify the world of evil. Please consider: does the previous sentence describe bin Laden, or President Bush?

Many people now want retaliation and vengeance—well, let us remember that that is what the terrorists wanted. If we pursue the path of large-scale violence, bin Laden’s holy war and Bush’s holy war will become two sides of the same war.

No one can foresee all the consequences of such a war. They are likely to spin out of control and take on a life of their own. However, one sobering effect is clearly implied by the “ancient law”: massive retaliation by the United States in the Middle East will spawn a new generation of suicidal terrorists, eager to do their part in this holy war.

But widespread violence is not the only possibility. If this time of crisis encourages us to see through the rhetoric of a war to exterminate evil, and if we begin to understand the intertwined roots of this evil, including our own responsibility, then perhaps something good may yet come out of this great tragedy.