

“Nonviolence and Ethical Imagination”

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Abstract

This essay discusses the importance of nonviolence for the future of our society. In comparing nonviolence with violence, the essay identifies the following characteristics of each: Violence emerges from despair, whereas nonviolence fosters a sense of hope.

Violence arises from an attachment to the past, whereas nonviolence becomes possible when one has a vision of the future. Violence comes from a desire to dominate others, whereas nonviolence stems from a yearning to live together. Violence dehumanizes people, whereas nonviolence encompasses an effort to rehumanize the world. Violence destroys, but nonviolence enhances the sustainability of the world and life. Nonviolence is not just a principle but should be an ongoing struggle that people practice in everyday life.

Key words : violence, nonviolence, sustainability, interconnectedness, universal responsibility.

Nonviolence is the first precept and a core teaching of Buddhism. Despite the popularity of the idea, the actual concept and ways of practicing nonviolence have not been clearly developed. In the Buddhist tradition, nonviolence, or ahimsa in Sanskrit, literally means non-harming. What does it mean, though, in our context—and how can one practice it in one's daily life? Is nonviolence limited to not killing living beings? Or are there more comprehensive ways to elaborate on the idea that make it more viable in our time?

Reflecting on nonviolence inevitably leads to thinking about violence. Violence is not limited to killing or physically harming living beings. Rather, it occurs in multiple dimensions of our existence. The French philosopher Jacques Derrida emphasized different layers of violence. The first entails use of language, from stereotyping to misinformation and fake news, with which we are so familiar nowadays. The second layer of violence encompasses unfair social norms, rules and laws, and even moral codes when they are constructed by those who have power in society

and then imposed on marginalized groups. The third layer entails physical actions that we usually perceive as violence, such as sexual violence, gun violence, police brutality, war, and colonialism. How should one respond to violence, and what does responding to violence nonviolently involve?

One common but misleading idea about violence and nonviolence involves a miscalculation about their respective efficiency. People often say that nonviolence is a nice idea but impractical. However, an alternative to nonviolence does not usually accompany this criticism. “Do you have a better option for resolving the problem at hand?” I would ask. When people criticize nonviolence as being inefficient and impractical, some propose that violence would do the job, but why and how violence would be more effective than nonviolence in resolving the problem at hand is not often thought through.

Political scientists Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan researched the success of violent and nonviolent resistance in the 25 largest resistance campaigns from 1900 to 2006. They found “nonviolent resistance campaigns were nearly twice as likely to achieve full or partial success as their violent counterparts.” Among the reasons were the idea that larger and more diverse groups of people can take part in nonviolent movements, meaning it proves difficult to isolate the participants in certain nonviolent movements.

Despite this success, people mostly think that nonviolence is impractical. For many people, nonviolence might simply mean passivity, such as sitting down and letting oneself be killed in the case of war. And in certain nonviolent movements, such as the American civil rights movement of the 1960s, a certain degree of exposure to violence without countering it violently might have been necessary.

Nonviolence, however, takes various forms. It can range from reflecting on one's livelihood and diet to training armed police officers and prison inmates to practice nonviolence. One topic in moral psychology involves countering violence through proper channeling of misplaced anger. Violence often results from a lack of proper channeling of negative aspects of life. African American Buddhists offer a good example of nonviolent reactions to violence,

1) Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 7.

2) Pamela Ayo Yetunde and Cheryl A. Giles, *Black & Buddhist: What Buddhism Can Teach Us about Race, Resilience, Transformation & Freedom* (Shambhala Publications, 2020), 105.

3) The Dalai Lama, *Ethics for the New Millennium* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2001), 162.

4) Thich Nhat Hanh, *For a Future to Be Possible: Buddhist Ethics for Everyday Life* (ReadHowYouWant, 2012), 16–17.

5) Judith Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence: An Ethico-Political Bind* (New York: Verso, 2020), 23.

6) Sallie B. King, “Thich Nhat Hanh, Nonviolence and Skillful Means” (paper presentation; Buddhism and Nonviolence Conference; American University; Washington, D.C.: October 6, 2022).

encapsulated in their slogan “Sitting together so we can stand together.” In response to transgenerational trauma and anger caused by centuries of racism in American society, they practice meditation to control their anger, heal their trauma, and challenge social discrimination in a nonviolent way.

When we envision making changes through nonviolence, we must understand that the practice cannot be local. It indeed requires a village. The fundamental Buddhist worldview holds that nothing in the world exists as a separate entity but instead exists through mutual indebtedness. Like a spider web, one’s existence is possible because of relationship at all levels. Biologically, one is indebted to one’s parents for one’s existence; physically, one must consume various nutrients to survive; mentally, one learns the accumulated wisdom of the human species and develops ideas that generate meaning and value regarding one’s existence. This world of networks does not deny one’s existence as a distinctive individual, but the uniqueness of one’s existence does not resemble an isolated island or a fragmented entity—rather, the entire network of beings, both animated and inanimate, make it possible.

In this context, the Dalai Lama proposes that we should all develop “a sense of universal responsibility” since one’s existence is possible because of one’s indebtedness to innumerable things in the world. Even though one might acknowledge this idea of interdependence, the call for universal responsibility might feel daunting. However, the Dalai Lama added that each of us should do as much as we can for the benefit of other beings. To a similar effect, Thich Nhat Hanh once said, “If we want to head north, we can use the North Star to guide us, but it is impossible to arrive at the North Star. Our effort is only to proceed in that direction.” Nonviolent movements and practices should entail an incessant effort to achieve a peaceful and less violent world. In this sense, Judith Butler, American philosopher, states, “nonviolence is not an absolute principle, but the name of an ongoing struggle.” This is an important aspect of any peace movement, since like life itself, a nonviolence movement or peace movement is not something that can be done in one event or as one project, but should entail constant

and consistent efforts to declare the meaning and value of our existence.

As Sallie King, a scholar of engaged Buddhism, notes, American society rarely offers time to think deeply about nonviolence while it teaches students and the general public in detail about various wars throughout history. Nonviolence in the American civil rights movement does not get as much attention as it deserves. Except in international relations and non-Western religions, nonviolence rarely enters students’ curriculums in American higher education. King observes, “The general public’s lack of knowledge about the power of nonviolence, its admirable success rate, and the wide variety of its tools and methods itself contributes to a situation that increases the likelihood of violence.”

At the end of the day, we need to ask why nonviolence should be valued more than its opposite. I propose that we consider the different natures and goals that each brings to us. Violence emerges from despair, and nonviolence is motivated by and fosters a sense of hope. Violence arises from an attachment to the past, whereas nonviolence becomes possible when one has a vision of the future. One might say that when colonized people use violence, they do so for the sake of a liberated future. But what kind of world would the postcolonial activists envision? Would they want a future tainted by violence? I assume not. Violence comes from a desire to dominate others, whereas nonviolence stems from a yearning to live together. Violence dehumanizes people, whereas nonviolence, even with its seemingly soft or weak power, encompasses an effort to rehumanize the world. Violence destroys, but nonviolence enhances the sustainability of the world and life.

When we approach violence and nonviolence with an awareness of these characteristics, understanding and practicing nonviolence might not seem completely beyond the scope of possibility, nor would nonviolence appear an idealistic and impractical proposal. Our aloofness toward nonviolence in our daily lives might then give way to a practice of living together for the sake of the future, however minor our first steps may be. As the disciplined nonviolence advocate claims, nonviolence is an action that triggers our ethical imagination and encourages us

to make the world a bit more peaceful, as it helps us move one step closer to a world of coexistence with others.

Receiving Date: December 5, 2022

Reviewing Date: December 12, 2022

Reporting Date of Article Appearance: December 19, 2022