

Non-Violence (4 of 5) Encouraging Ethical Behavior

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Gil Fronsdal

I want to start this morning with two quotes from the Buddha.

The first is, “Go forth for the welfare and happiness of the world.” This instruction from the Buddha is meant for people who can go into the world with enough personal liberation and self-knowledge that they will cause no harm. They can recognize what harm is and the impact of harm. They have freed themselves from any tendency to act in ways that are harmful to themselves or others. They can go into the world peacefully as promoters of peace.

This is a tall order, but I think that the direction the Buddha is pointing us to is to become people

who can go forth for the welfare and happiness of the world. When we do this, there's a second quote, "Among types of beneficial conduct, among the best is promoting, settling, and establishing an unethical person in ethical behavior." That's quite a statement – that the best conduct is not just being ethical yourself, and maybe not even going forth for the welfare of others just to help them. For the Buddha, the best thing you can do is establish an unethical person in ethical behavior.

I don't fully understand this statement and the implications of it, and how universally we should understand it, but I'm inspired by it: it's one thing to help another person directly and quite another to help someone who is unethical to learn to be ethical, so they don't go around harming many people. It's possible that supporting, developing, and encouraging greater ethical behavior in this life is much more beneficial in the long term.

I know that when I was a young teenager I wasn't unethical, mostly because of a lack of imagination. I wasn't an ethical person, but I had no orientation to be unethical. I thought that the idea of ethics was kind of superficial. I kind of looked down upon people who were referred to

as ethical as sometimes being hypocritical or artificially sweet.

One of the big changes for me in coming to Buddhism was developing a deep appreciation for non-harming behavior and ways of being and discovering sources within me that are the wellspring of living in a non-harming way. Part of why I'm a Buddhist teacher is to be able to convey that to people and spread the deep sense of peace that can come from this inner place that has an ethical quality. The Buddhist path of liberation is an ethical path of liberation. An enlightened person is an ethical person. There's no doubt that this is what the Buddha taught. But what does it mean to be an ethical person?

The Buddha, as I said in the previous quotation, talked about establishing an unethical person in ethical behavior. Elsewhere he talks about what's beautiful, and also what's more beautiful than beautiful. What is beautiful is being ethical oneself. What is more beautiful than that is encouraging or being a catalyst for other people to become ethical. So this call to go forth for the benefit of the world includes the call to speak up, to try to change the world, and to change how

people are. This doesn't mean to convert them to Buddhism or to a belief in religious truths of any kind, but to believe in, understand, and appreciate the value of non-harming, non-hostility, and non-greed. This means not just to believe in non-harming, but to really understand and be motivated from the inside out to live this way.

Now there's a reason why the Buddha emphasized this. He lived in a very different world than we live in. In his world, there were no elections to try to get the government that you like to run the show or fix things the way they should be fixed. There were no country-wide economic systems that needed to be changed. There was no capitalism or socialism operating and there was no way to have huge impacts on the economic systems so that they could be more equitable and more supportive. There were no nonprofits. It was a very simple world.

The main organizations back in the time of the Buddha were the kings, the monarchs, who often ruled with iron fists. They were quite comfortable with killing people on the spot if there was any disagreement. For someone to protest back then, to go and say to the king,

“You should stop the war”, that would mean off with your head. You couldn't really do it back then and there was no sense that you could do anything. But the Buddha did speak up, often in ways that were not direct.

When he talked to kings, rather than telling them directly, he would tell stories in the form of myths about how things were in the ancient world. One such myth had to do with a king who wanted to perform a big sacrifice so his kingdom could benefit in some way. In this myth, the minister who hears about this big sacrifice tells the king:

Your majesty's country is beset by thieves and is ravaged. Villages and towns are destroyed. The countryside is infested with robbers. If Your Majesty were to tax this region [i.e. tax it in order to afford a big sacrifice], that would be the wrong thing to do. Suppose Your Majesty were to think: “I will get rid of this plague of robbers by executions and imprisonments, or by confiscation, threats, and banishment.” The plague would not be properly ended. Those who survived would later harm Your Majesty's realm. So if you go around using violence to get your way, then sooner or

later the people who survived will come back and harm you. However, with the following plan, you can completely eliminate the plague. To those in the kingdom who are engaged in cultivating crops and raising cattle, let Your Majesty distribute grain and fodder. To those in trade, give capital. To those in government service, assign proper living wages. Then those people being intent on their own occupations will not harm the kingdom. Your Majesty's revenues will be great. The land will be tranquil and not beset by thieves. And the people with joy in their hearts will play with their children and will dwell in open houses, not locked up.

It's so painful to read this ancient admonition when we have a million children or more in Gaza who cannot go outside, cannot play in the streets now, who are hearing constant bombing all around them, children who are dying. What are those children going to grow up to be? The ones that survive are going to be scarred.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, when I was teaching, I met elderly people who had gone through World War II, not just as children, but also as adults. They'd seen and experienced

horrific things in the bombings of London, the bombings of Dresden, the Holocaust, and the concentration camps.

What struck me was the horror of it, and how long the effects lasted for people. It impacted them even when they were just toddlers and couldn't speak. Being carried into shelters with bombing around them seemed to have affected them for their whole lives. When they come on these retreats they have to deal with the deep conditions that they grew up with. We need to be more careful. We need to plan for a better future.

When the Buddha says to establish unethical people in ethical behavior, he is calling for difficult work. I'll read the quote a little more exactly:

So what is beautiful? Abstaining from killing, abstaining from taking what is not given, abstaining from sexual misconduct, abstaining from speaking falsely, abstaining from speaking divisively, abstaining from speaking harshly, abstaining from speaking pointlessly, abstaining from being avaricious, abstaining from hostility, abstaining from wrong view. And what is more beautiful than

*beautiful? What is better than beautiful?
Abstaining from killing and prompting others
to abstain from killing, abstaining from taking
what is not given and prompting others to
abstain from taking what is not given,
abstaining... and so forth. All of these.*

The Buddha wants to live in a very different world from one where people live in opposition to each other. To do what the Buddha is saying is really difficult. In a sense, it's easier to be in opposition. It's harder to approach people in such a way that you prompt them to change how they live. Is it possible? Is it realistic? Is it unreasonable to do this given the level of pain and challenge and violence that we live in? Certainly, the Buddha prefers advocacy like this over oppositional behaviors.

He wants people to avoid unhealthy, unethical divisive speech. He calls this “speech which divides those who are united and stirs up those who are already divided spoken by a person who loves factionalism, delights in factionalism, enjoys factionalism, speaks to create factions.” For people who want to abstain from divisive speech, the Buddha emphasizes creating and perpetuating social unity, uniting those who are

divided, supporting those who are already united, and speaking to create harmony.

So this is an explicit call to make a difference in the world, to heal social discord and divisiveness, to not shy away from the challenging work of uniting those who are divided:

Engaged in three actions are those acting for the welfare of many people, the happiness of many people, and the benefit, welfare, and happiness of many people. What three? They prompt them in physical acts of concord, verbal acts of concord, mental acts of concord.

The Buddha was not trying to change social institutions because there were none back then in the way that we understand them. But the Buddha lived in a world where people had personal connections. That's where information traveled, for the most part, because there was no writing, no TV or radio. It all happened orally when people connected to each other. The world of human connectivity, how we connect to each other, was a rich world where social change could occur.

In a sense, we've come closer to that in our modern world, where the phenomenal degree of social media and communication that we've never had before is widespread. This is a world where hostility is being promoted. This is a world where perhaps we can find a way to promote peace.

I'm very happy that we can use YouTube for the 7 am sittings. I don't know all that goes on on YouTube, but I've heard that a good part of it is not so good. Some people have suggested we shouldn't be here, that it is somehow unethical even to be using YouTube. But for me, this is a platform in which to try to encourage all of us, myself included, to live a more ethical life, a life of not harming. Not just a life of being peaceful and de-stressed, but a life of being social change agents for the better.

So we do the very difficult work of creating concord and unity. Even if we might disagree with others, we are all committed to avoiding causing harm and we encourage others to do that. This is what's more beautiful than beautiful.

Thank you.