

# Nonviolence (1 of 5) Non-harming is the Essence of the Dharma

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**Gil Fronsdal**

I feel that it is phenomenally important to learn the meditation we just did. Maybe it's not something that people who are beginners in meditation would focus on, but sooner or later, if we really want to be free, we have to be free even when we're uncomfortable. Even when things are not what we prefer them to be.

If we want to be able to care for the world well and wisely, we need to learn how to be comfortable with the discomforts of the world so our reactivity doesn't override our ability to see, think, or care clearly. It's a phenomenal skill to learn and this week it will be the focus.

I know some of you have a deep need for relief, relaxation, or calm in the middle of your storm. You're always welcome to practice as you see fit. This week I'd like to help us explore the full benefit of this practice that comes when we know how to practice with what's difficult.

Part of the reason for this is that I want to talk about the central Buddhist teaching on nonviolence and non-harming. An ancient teaching in Buddhism is that the primary characteristic of the Dharma is non-harming. Non-harming is a very challenging state. In order to be able to live wisely with dedication to nonviolence, it's important to be able to be wise about the challenges that our life brings us in a world where there is so much violence.

Non-harming begins by knowing how to be present for tremendous difficulties without being pulled into our reactivity, fear, anger, distress, alarm, and all the things that we get caught in. If we get caught in those things and act from them then we're probably not going to act with much wisdom. We're probably not going to act in ways that lead to everyone's long-term benefit.

In the teachings of the Buddha, there's a phenomenal emphasis on non-harming. You see the importance of it

scattered throughout the teachings. It's so fundamental that it's what brought me to the Dharma.

I came to the Dharma during the Vietnam War. I was of draft age and there was a lottery for the draft. When I turned 18, it was possible that I would be called into the military and sent to Vietnam to fight. I was a dedicated pacifist and certainly incapable of picking up a rifle and fighting and killing other people. I assumed that I would figure out some way to be a conscientious objector or some other way to avoid going to fight.

Among those of us in the first year of college, most of us were at draft age. We had a lot of conversations about war and violence. I was on the end of the spectrum that was dedicated to finding nonviolent ways of dealing with conflict. I had to defend it and stand up for it.

As I looked at myself with this dedication, the way that I was, I could see that there was a problem. There was a gap between the deep beliefs that came out of who I was and more superficial beliefs. This deep belief I had about nonviolence was not that you should be passive and do nothing. It was a belief that when there is conflict or war, a person who is dedicated to nonviolence is a non-violent warrior who responds directly in some way to stop the violence.

There are lots of phenomenal examples in the 20th century of people who've done this, and examples where it didn't work. I was inspired by the examples that did work. The problem I had was I was afraid of dying. I believed that I should be a non-violent warrior but my fear of potential death and harm got in the way. I didn't feel good about this gap and I felt I had to address it.

In my teenage years, I picked up the idea that Buddhist practice would address this fear. If the time came for me to be involved in nonviolent civil disobedience, I would be prepared for it. That was the beginning of my interest in Buddhism. It took a few more years before I started practicing regularly. I was very attracted then to Buddhism's teachings emphasizing non-violence.

I knew that just being dedicated to nonviolence was not enough - there had to be wisdom about how to practice it. I came across a three-volume book by an academic, Gene Sharp, called, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*. He was a scholar of nonviolence around the world and studied its different manifestations and techniques. I felt it was not enough to be dedicated to non-violence. Addressing the world this way is a sophisticated strategy, so I studied his book and was interested in learning more.

As I got involved in Buddhism, I got pulled into the world of practice and became confident that this practice

would make people better able to live in the world in a nonviolent way. I always wanted to address it more so I did some workshops on the topic of Buddhist teachings on nonviolence. It has always been a strong current that I've wanted to address, so I'm going to take this week to talk about it a bit.

First I want to say that peace is not the absence of conflict. Conflict is an inevitable part of human life. However, peace is knowing how to work with conflict, differences, and disagreements in such a way that we try to benefit both sides of the conflict. This might sound naive or ridiculous. But if we don't educate ourselves, if we don't prepare for nonviolent action, it is not something we can simply jump into, as if we can get out of bed today and address the violence in the world non-violently. It takes years of dedication, practice, and learning.

I'm originally from Norway where there is mandatory military service for a year. There is an option for being a conscientious objector, in which case a person has to serve two years doing some kind of community service, like working in a hospital as a hospital aide. All the men (back then it was the men) had to do some kind of service for the country whether it was military, being a conscientious objector, or some other way.

Some of the conscientious objectors objected to this because at that time there was a feeling that Russia was a threat. World War II was not so far in the past and the Cold War was happening. Some of the non-violent, conscientious objectors wanted to have training equivalent to military training in nonviolent strategies so that they could be prepared to actively engage in nonviolent ways if the country was invaded.

Martin Luther King Jr.'s phenomenal civil rights movement that was dedicated to nonviolence didn't just wake up in the morning and practice nonviolence. They prepared the nonviolent protesters. There was preparation and training to be ready for what they did. Some of those protesters died or were severely hurt but probably fewer people got hurt that way than if there'd been a violent attempt to try to rectify the injustice that existed.

Somehow we justify violence, almost as if it's okay to die if we are fighting, but it's not okay to die if we're nonviolent. Peace is learning how to be with conflict so that it supports both people. I'll talk more about this in the course of the week and I hope you stay for this week.

I hope that your desire for pleasure, delightful meditations, deep states of calm, and inspiring teachings about joy and love don't cause you to be

disinterested in learning how to be with conflict, and how to be wise about it. Being with our discomforts in life is a phenomenally important part of Dharma practice.

There are many quotes from the Buddha about this kind of thing and I'll read some of them in the course of the week. I want to read this one as we end today:

*The strong seek the best for themselves and for others. Understanding other people's anger, they cultivate calm and stillness and thus they heal both themselves and others. Those who call this "weakness" do not understand the Dharma.*

That's in Chapter 11 of the Connected Discourses. I'll talk more about this in the course of the week. This topic is also a response to the horrendous violence that's going on in the world right now – as well as violence that's a continuation of what's been going on in the world for thousands of years in one place or another.

Thank you for being part of this. This is a very important part of who I am and what I want to teach, and so I appreciate the chance to do it. Thank you.