

Role of religion in conflict and peacemaking



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• Sulak Sivaraksa is a Buddhist scholar from Thailand. He is founder and director of the Thai NGO 'Sathirakoses-Nagapradeepa Foundation'. Besides being the founder of a number of social, humanitarian, ecological and spiritual movements and organisations in Thailand, like the College SEM (Spirit in Education Movement) Sulak Sivaraksa is known as one of the fathers of INEB (International Network of Engaged Buddhists). Sulak Sivaraksa was awarded the Alternative Nobel Prize (Right Livelihood Award) in 1995. He is author of several books on the socio-political issues from the Buddhist perspective.

By looking at the recent history of conflicts in the world, there is a lot we can learn. We can find conflicts almost everywhere and no particular community or religion is an exception. It affects all of us. Every day people find themselves in conflicts, ranging from minor arguments to serious confrontations. Conflicts can flare up over back fences or national borders; over cleaning the kitchen or the toxic waste. It can involve our most intimate relationships or the briefest of interactions. When we cannot tolerate moral, religious or political differences or find ways to resolve them, conflicts become inevitable and come with great costs.

What are the effective ways of preventing unnecessary conflicts? How can we resolve conflicts that have already occurred? How can we resolve conflicts by dealing with the root causes and not just delaying them until a later point in time? I would like to look at some of these questions from a Buddhist perspective¹.

John A. McConnell, author of *Mediation and the Dharma: A Handbook for Buddhist Peacemakers* applies the four noble truths to the conflict. The first is the truth of suffering, which implies that conflict is part of the human condition. The second truth is the rise of suffering from greed, hatred and delusion. The second noble truth challenges us to be aware of the psychological roots of conflict. This is more difficult than it seems

because we don't normally experience greed, hatred and delusion as mental concepts, but as emotions. These emotions are bound to objects and people. We relate to objects as either beautiful or repulsive. Similarly in a conflict we perceive other people as selfish or contemptible. We don't clearly distinguish between observations, interpretations, feelings, desires, and assertions of identity, which shape our perceptions of others.

Once we understand the second truth we can embark on the third - the truth of cessation. We need to see that conflict despite all its pains and difficulties is an opportunity to make peace. Conflict should not be the way we live, rather it is peace that we should all be striving for. We can then proceed to the fourth noble truth, which is a way to end suffering. By understanding the existence of suffering, how it arises and how it comes to an end, we can then begin to follow the way to eliminate suffering.

In teachings of Buddha, this way is the noble eightfold path which includes Right understanding; Right thought; Right speech; Right action; Right livelihood; Right effort; Right mindfulness and Right concentration.

Right understanding means understanding the four noble truths.

Right thought means freedom from greed, hatred and ignorance.

Right speech means speaking truthfully, not gossiping or spreading rumours.

Right action means not killing, stealing or engaging in sexual misconduct.

Right livelihood means not engaging in a profession that harm others.

Right effort means overcoming unwholesome tendencies and strengthening good ones.

Right mindfulness means self-awareness of mental and physical dimensions of our experience.

Right concentration means being calm and having seeds of peace within; and developing critical self-awareness so that selfishness can be transformed into selflessness².

These teachings have important implications for peacemakers. The most significant point is that peace is essentially something we achieve by cultivating it, rather than just waiting for it to happen. Peacemaking is an active and progressive process. We cannot begin working for peace one day and achieve peace the next day. It is a goal we work towards continuously. No matter how difficult the conflict may be there are always steps we can take towards peace³.

All these teachings are important, however I believe that for peacemakers right mindfulness is particularly significant. Thich Nhat Hahn points out that mindful breathing is a mean, by which one can overcome greed, hatred and delusion that arises within oneself. Once these negative emotions overcome, metta (mercy or love) and kindness can be developed, the mind begins to blossom like a flower that is unable to resist blooming when the sun shines into its heart. Applied broadly, mindfulness can be used to overcome negative forces that undermine the wholeness of life, such as consumerism, sexism, militarism, and so on. Equipped with mindfulness, we will not fall into the trap of hating the oppressors, but would be able to use our newfound understanding to destroy oppressive systems and violent structures. Pursuing the noble eight-fold path can help us cultivate the seeds of peace. With seeds of peace within ourselves, the process of transformation into wholesome thought begins and contributes to renunciation, compassion and wisdom.

Simultaneously with the cultivation of seeds of peace within, we need to envisage and struggle for alternative solutions, relying on non-violence. Working from the grassroots and organising from the bottom up, we must endeavour to challenge the centres of power, to show that the emperor has no clothes on. As Elise Boulding has observed, 'We need images of peoples of the planet living gently but adventurously on the earth, walking the ways of peace in a future still filled with challenges. It is essential to spend time dreaming of the possible shapes of that future as it is to learn the skills of peacebuilding to maintain it...'⁴

We also need to understand the difference between peacemaking and peacekeeping. Peacekeeping does not seek to resolve the roots of

conflict. Military-led peacekeeping simply uses the violent means of ordinary conflict as an attempt to achieve peace. This might quell a conflict in the short term or reduce the magnitude of a conflict but it does not address the root of the problem.

It is also important to state that sometimes what is considered a non-violent mean of intervention, can actually cause a great degree of suffering. For example, trade sanctions after the first Gulf War killed more people than the bombs in the war itself .

A true nonviolent approach to resolve conflicts must be motivated by compassion or loving-kindness. It also requires wisdom. The Dalai Lama uses the term 'universal responsibility' to describe a sense of concern for the welfare of others.

Compassion and wisdom are not exclusive to the teachings of Buddhism. They are fundamental to all religions. Hence the tools for peacemaking can come out of all the major religious traditions. While they may differ in some respects they will all have a sense of loving-kindness or compassion at their root.

We can learn not just from Buddhists. The Quakers are a religious group, to whom peace work is central to their practices and beliefs. We can also learn from Christians, Muslims, Hindus and Jews who have devoted themselves to peace work. All these religious paths contain the wisdom necessary for peace. However, I wish to keep on looking at the Buddhist perspective.

Alan Senauke offers three approaches to peacemaking based on the Buddha Dharma⁶. They are Giving, Fearlessness, and Renunciation. The first, Giving, is based on generosity or *Dana*. Giving is also the first of the six parameters. Generosity is the antidote to greed. It means not coveting what others have but instead seeking to share what you have with others. Giving is not just about giving material goods. Acts of kindness even the solitary practice of Dharma can be considered a form of Generosity.

Alan Senauke also takes a look at Generosity from a point of giving direct material help to others. He writes;

'The United States (through its proxy, the United Nations) has imposed bitter sanctions on Iraq for nearly a decade. Iraq has been bombed so intensely for the last year that bombing is no

longer [a] news. 1.7 million children and old people have died for lack of medicine and food. The shops are bare, the pharmacies are empty.

What if we could have offered the people of Iraq all the food and medicine they required? What would we lose by following a policy of generosity rather than a policy of threat and violence to the innocent? What would the political effects be? What *Karmic* result would arise? Again, it would be a lot cheaper than bombing.'

Many might dismiss these kinds of ideas as naïve, but shouldn't we dare to think differently? Creating a culture of peace from a culture of war demands nothing less but a new way of thinking.

The next approach is fearlessness. In order to practice fearlessness we must first experience fear. Fear is something that arises in conflict situations. It comes from a desire to protect ourselves. We must learn how to work with it and overcome it.

There are many traditional Buddhist stories which illustrate the nature of fearlessness. One of them goes like this. A village is raided by a group of fierce warriors. The people in the village flee for their lives. The warriors come to the temple where they find a monk sitting quietly, calmly and unafraid. One of the warriors says to him, 'Do you realise that I could run my sword through you without even blinking?' The monk quickly replied, 'Do you realise I could let you run that sword through me without blinking?' The warriors bowed down to him in respect.

This is the kind of fearlessness that peacemakers need to include in their work; to never shy away from conflict but to meet it directly. Two contemporary examples are Thich Nhat Hanh and Maha Gosananda. During the Vietnam war, Thich Nhat Hanh realised he could not just stay in the monastery and meditate, while bombs were exploding around him and people were dying. He could not turn away from the suffering in the world; he had to respond to it. Similarly Maha Gosananda set out to walk across Cambodia in the middle of a civil war with only his saffron robes for protection.

The third approach is renunciation. This is also closely related to giving. It means giving of oneself to others, or perhaps more accurately, developing a sense of selflessness.

In the modern world developing a true sense of renunciation is difficult. It is difficult to

give up the comforts that we enjoy. The second precept is not stealing or not taking what belongs to others. There is such a vast gap between the rich and the poor, the haves and the have-nots. To bask in such riches, while others have nothing, is a form of stealing. This one a form of structural violence.

If we really want to make peace we must understand and address the root causes of structural violence. Very few people actively participate in killings in the modern era. Instead we are involved in killing indirectly through the products we buy and the lives we lead. Some of our taxes are used to fund the military, which participates in killings. So no matter how mindful we might be, or how well we might practice non-killing at a personal level, we live in a world that is very violent⁵.

However, with mindfulness we can start understanding structural violence and its root causes. We can then begin to work for peace and justice. Merely talking about peace is not enough, we have to engage in an active process of making peace. Peacemaking is one of the most important and essential tasks of our time.

Endnotes:

1. Conflict Prevention and Resolution: Some Thoughts from a Buddhist Perspective by Sulak Sivaraksa published by Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO) for Conflict Prevention: The Post Cold War Challenge, 1995 <http://www.unpo.org/downloads/CPreport1995.pdf>.
2. A Buddhist Approach to Meditation and Reconciliation MS p. 18, 19
3. *ibid*
4. 'Freedom Through Non-Violence' a talk delivered by Sulak Sivaraksa in Bombay in an event organised by Friends of Tibet (INDIA) on August 25, 2000. <http://www.friendsoftibet.org/sofar/speech.html>
5. *Conflict, Culture, Change* by Sulak Sivaraksa, Wisdom Publications, Somerville, MA USA 2006 p. 11
6. 'Vowing Peace in an Age of War' by Hozan Alan Senauke. An essay published in *Source of the Way* (Volume XXI, No. 1 - Fall 2002). http://www.bpf.org/html/resources_and_links/statements/senauke_peace.html

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