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The New Holy War Between Good and Evil

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I am the twelve-year-old girl, refugee on a small boat, who throws herself into the ocean after being raped by a sea pirate. And I am the pirate, my heart not yet capable of seeing and loving.

-- Thich Nhat Hanh, "Call Me By My True Names"

THREE DAYS AFTER THE 9/11 ATTACKS, PRESIDENT BUSH DECLARED that the United States had been called to a new worldwide mission to rid the world of and two days later he re-affirmed that the U.S. government is determined to rid the world of evil-doers.

If anything is evil, the 9/11 attacks were evil. Nevertheless, such rhetoric is dangerous, because ridding the world of evil is also what Hitler and Stalin 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, gypsies, homosexuals, etc.--all the vermin who contaminated it. Stalin needed to eliminate many Russian peasants in order to establish a society of collective farms. Both of them were trying to perfect the world by getting rid of its evil elements.

In other words, one of the main causes of evil has been human attempts to eradicate evil. In more Buddhist terms, much of the world's suffering has been a result of our way of thinking about good and evil.

On the same day that Bush made his first pronouncement about ridding the world of evil, the Washington Post quoted Joshua Teitelbaum, a scholar who has studied the al-Qaeda movement: "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 opposites, of course--in fact, mirror opposites. Let's exchange a few names in that Teitelbaum quote: "George W. Bush looks at the world in very stark, black-and-white terms. For him, al-Qaeda represents the forces of evil that are threatening the Western world." What bin Laden sees as good--an Islamic jihad against an impious imperialism--Bush sees as evil. What Bush sees as good--America the defender of freedom and democracy--bin Laden sees as evil. That makes them two different versions of the same 'holy war' between 'good and evil.'

For both of them there is no neutrality: you're either with us or against us. If the world really is a battleground of good and evil forces, the evil that is in the world must be fought and defeated by any means necessary. Once something has been identified as evil, there's no more need to explain it; it is time to focus on destroying it.

Buddhism sees the world differently. Evil, like everything else, has no essence or substance of its own, being a product of impermanent conditions. Instead, Buddhism emphasizes the three roots of evil, also known as the three poisons: greed, ill will, and delusion. Karma means that actions motivated by these poisons not only hurt others but rebound upon us ("blowback").

An important aspect of our delusion is the way we get stuck in antithetical ways of thinking: not only between good and evil, but success and failure, rich and poor, and even the basic Buddhist duality between ignorance and enlightenment. Often we distinguish between such opposites because we want one rather than the other, yet psychologically as well as logically we cannot have one without the other because the meaning of each

depends upon the other. For example, if it is important for me to live a pure life (however purity is understood), then my life will be preoccupied with (avoiding) impurity. If becoming wealthy is the most important thing, then I am equally concerned about the prospect of poverty. We cannot take one lens without the other, and such spectacles often distort our experience of the world.

What does this mean for the duality of good versus evil? The interdependence of good and evil implies that we can't know what is good until we know what is evil, and we don't feel we are good unless we are fighting against that evil. We can feel secure in our own goodness only by attacking and destroying some evil outside us. St. George needed that dragon in order to be St. George. His heroic identity required it. The same is true for George W. Bush, whose presidency was going nowhere until 9/11.

That helps us understand why war can be so attractive. Wars cut through the petty problems of daily life and unite us good guys here against the bad guys over there. There is fear in that, of course, but it is also exhilarating. The meaning of life becomes clearer. We love this struggle between good (us) and evil (them), because there is something quite satisfying about it. Think of the plot of every James Bond film, not to mention thousands of other movies. The bad guys are caricatures: being ruthless and without remorse, they must be stopped by any means necessary. Because the villains like to hurt people, it's okay to hurt them. Because they like to kill people, it's okay to kill them. But what is this kind of story really teaching us? That if you want to hurt someone, it's important to demonize him or her first: to fit him or her into your good-versus-evil script. Even school bullies usually begin by looking for some petty offense (often a perceived insult) that they can use to justify their own violence. That is why the first casualty of all wars is truth: the media must "sell" some demonizing story to the public.

The end of the Cold War created a big problem for the United States, and not only for the military. What would we do without an "evil empire" to distract attention from our own institutionalized greed, ill will, and delusion? Those whose goodness depended on the U.S.S.R.'s badness felt adrift. A new enemy was needed, yet Grenada and Panama didn't really fill the shoes. The holy war on worldwide terrorism is much more promising, especially since it seems that we'll never be able to know if or when we've won.

Why do we tend to get stuck in such dualistic ways of thinking? Perhaps the most distinctive teaching of Buddhism is the connection it emphasizes between our dukkha (suffering, in the broadest sense) and our delusive sense of self. For Buddhism, the ego-self is dukkha because it's a psychological construct and therefore inherently ungrounded and insecure--hence the dis-ease or sense of lack that haunts the ego-self. This makes us susceptible to things that (we think) can provide the secure identity we crave, including belief systems that unify us into a group self. But a group self gains its own identity by distinguishing itself from an other, and it's all the better if that other is a threat, or inferior to one's own group, or (best of all!) both. That's why we love scapegoats, onto which we can project our own basic lack: "The problem with my life is him ... the problem with our society is them."

Such teachings do not mean that there is no evil in the world. If our eyes are open we see plenty of horrible things happening. For Buddhism, however, the fundamental issue is not good-fighting-against-evil, but awakening from ignorance to realize our essential interconnectedness. In place of a deluded sense of self inside that seems to be separate from the world outside, we realize that we are nondual with the world, not other than it. We manifest that interconnectedness by living compassionately.

That every one of us faces this same basic challenge has some uncomfortable implications. Compassion for those who are suffering is not quite the same as the pursuit of social justice, which takes up the cause of the oppressed against the oppressor. As Thich Nhat Hanh has put it, "...I do not think God wants us to take sides, even with the poor" (Living Buddha, Living Christ). In *Being Peace* he offers his understanding of peace-making: "If we align ourselves with one side or the other, we will lose our chance to work for peace.... Reconciliation is to understand both sides, to go to one side and describe the suffering being endured by the other side, and then to go to the other side and describe the suffering being endured by the first side. Doing only that will be a great help for peace."

Although that maybe an effective approach, a Buddhist perspective does not necessarily imply that we should respond to oppressor and oppressed in the same way. It means that we do not identify with one while rejecting the other. Like it or not, we are nondual with both.

Buddhist peace-making, to be effective, must flow out of our interconnectedness, even with people whose actions we must oppose. To label them evil is to take sides against them, which cuts off connectedness--and thereby the possibility of understanding and feeling compassion for them too. Once you do that, there's little chance for either peace or justice. Self-righteousness is self-defeating.

This means that our efforts to overcome the sufferings due to injustice must be grounded in a sense of connectedness with and compassion for not only the oppressed but also their ignorant oppressors; not just for the poor but also for the deluded rich who don't care about those who go to sleep hungry; not just for the victims of violence but also for the self-destructive perpetrators of violence.

To identify only with the oppressed is not a Buddhist solution because it actually reproduces the same basic problem: the delusion that discriminates them (the bad) from us (the good).

With thanks to Paul Knitter

In this world hatred is never appeased by hatred; hatred [vera] is always appeased by non-hatred [avera]. This is an ancient law.

--The Dhammapada

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Thich Nhat Hanh, center, arrives for a Great Chanting Ceremony at Vinh Nghiem Pagoda in Ho Chi Minh City, southern Vietnam, 2007. Hanh, who was forced to live in exile for nearly four decades, has returned to his homeland for the second time in two years. Hanh has been drawing large crowds with his calls for national reconciliation.

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