

Keep A Small Flame Burning

Using Buddhist teachings to manage grief during times of great turmoil

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The following conversation with Stephen Fulder took place shortly after the Hamas attacks on Saturday Oct. 7 and before the Israeli reprisals and the promised invasion of Gaza by Israeli ground forces. While firm numbers of casualties are still uncertain, thousands of Israelis and Palestinians have been killed in this conflict. At publication time, the humanitarian crisis in Gaza is still unfolding.

As the founder and senior teacher of the Israel Insight Society (Tovana), a leading organization teaching mindfulness, Vipassana, and dharma in Israel and beyond, Stephen Fulder has been called upon by numerous organizations over the past few weeks to deliver wisdom and insight during a time of great uncertainty. While his ecologically minded home village of over 1,000 inhabitants is usually teeming with young people, today that is not the case. Many, including Fulder's own family, have fled to safer regions following the Hamas attack on Saturday, October 7th and subsequent Israeli retaliation that has left thousands dead.

With war at his doorstep and rage flaring across the political spectrum, Fulder is remarkably calm and composed. As a Buddhist author, teacher, and practitioner, he is involved with peace work in the Middle East. He was a founding member of MiddleWay, an organization that used to hold peace walks across the country. Fulder talked with Tricycle about the role of the Engaged Buddhist during times of political strife, how to generate compassion when it seems like the last thing the mind wants to do, and why some of the Buddha's last words remain more relevant today than ever before.

Are there Buddhist passages or sutras [Pali, suttas] you turn to in times of despair, confusion, and fear? I personally don't turn to passages to shift my inner world because I move straight into practice, but I think some really important Buddhist texts can help all of us. I'll mention one or two.

One sutra is a discourse of the Buddha close to his death, when he told his monks, "be an island to yourself." "Be an island to yourself" is a beautiful statement on autonomy despite the stormy seas. What's important in that text is that [when the Buddha was asked], "OK, how do you do that," he told his monks, "Go back to your basic truth." When there's a breath, there's just breathing; when there is seeing, there's just seeing; when there's thinking, there's just thinking; go back to some basics of our life experience. That truth will ground you in times of crisis and despair.

A second group of sutras that might be relevant are the Angulimala Sutra and the story of Patacara. Both of those talk about a situation of extreme violence. In the case of Angulimala, he killed a large number of people, and in the case of Patacara, she lost all her family in sudden accidents. Both tell us in such a beautiful way that karma can shift radically, that there's nothing

fixed in stone, that there's somewhere bigger than us that can take us in another direction, and we just need to be open to it.

The third set of sutras remind us of nonduality like the Heart Sutra. They tell us, "What you feel as solid is also empty." The Heart Sutra expresses the emptiness of form and feeling, and perception and samskaras (formations) as constructions in the mind and consciousness. It's such a beautiful reminder that if we see what's happening now as being transparent, empty, and passing, [we can shift into] a totally different perspective.

What do you see as an Engaged Buddhist's role during times of war and crisis? All Buddhism is engaged. There isn't such a thing as nonengaged Buddhism. It's an oxymoron. Maybe we need to change the word Buddhism to Buddhist practice, or Buddhist-inspired practice. Then it has to be engaged, because it's about our meeting with the world and in the world and our embodiment [of] the world, and what that means. I've done years of Engaged Buddhist work with Palestinians and Israelis, and I've often been asked, "What's the point?" One point is to keep a small flame burning that shows another way of doing things, like a candle that brings a little light into total darkness. You don't know where it will go, but that's what you can do.

But today, in this critical situation, where people are dying as we speak and there's huge destruction and rage, Engaged Buddhism may need to be different. It might need to be a kind of first aid, bringing qualities of kindness, love, and care to replace fear. It may need deep listening. Or demonstrating that equanimity and steadiness are possible.

How do we process anger without losing our goodwill, and without diminishing the imperative nature of the outrage? Sometimes, we need righteous anger against injustice and cruelty. It's needed at times by people who have no other tools. But it's our responsibility to replace righteous anger with more effective and helpful Buddhist tools. There are better ways of dealing with violence, oppression, and injustice.

One way is more trust, our readiness to meet and see the other, putting ourselves in the other's shoes. For example, people often report that they go on a demonstration, but are full of anger against the right wing and the far right who are creating so much destruction and fear. How can they be in a demonstration and call for change from a place of deep compassion and joy within? It can come from feeling the energy of being together with others, and acting from trust. This doesn't mean that we assume that things are going to be better because we are demonstrating—it means we are ready to see things as they are. We wish to make a change here, but not on the basis of trying to control or fight the demons. It's a different use of energy, of joy and kindness, but still a source of action.

Have you been working on generating compassion and helping others to generate compassion over the past week? I have to say something personal. When the invasion of Hamas first happened on Saturday morning, I heard about it quite early in the morning. When I realized there was so much killing going on for two days, I didn't want to talk to anybody. I had no interest in being in a public situation. My heart was heavy, a deep heaviness inside, a pain. All I

could do was spend two days quietly beaming compassion. I needed this sense of quiet, holding in my heart the pain of others, and just letting it move into compassion. Sometimes, we need to make sure that we have space for this, that we give space to our compassion. It's quite difficult to call up compassion in an automatic way in the middle of difficulty and crisis. After the first two days, I started to give lots of Zoom meetings.

A second [point to consider] is not to try too hard to be abstract about compassion. Sometimes, it needs a very specific address. I remember a Mahatma Gandhi quote that says that if you're not sure what to do, "think of the poorest and weakest person you have seen and ask if the step you are contemplating will be of any use to him." If [general compassion feels too] abstract, go to someone specific. Often, it can be [for] ourselves. For example, if we don't feel compassion in our hearts, we can feel compassion that we don't feel compassionate. That's also a source of compassion. Or if we hear blame and anger and rage, it can trigger sadness which moves to compassion.

What are some Buddhist tools that we can use to create a more balanced and productive dialogue? For dialogue, firstly, I think you need to go into [the other person's] shoes. Shantideva in the Bodhicharyavatara says it's sacred to go into someone else's shoes. The main tool here is listening, deep listening. The dialogue needs to really feel the other, giving respect to the other, a sense that the other is valuable, and a precious human being. Sometimes, dialogue is impossible. We can't expect it to work all the time. Today, I met a woman in a local town. I felt pain in my heart when I heard [her call for violence]. I felt the impossibility of changing that view. I hadn't the power to change that view. But I could do two things. I could express compassion to her. Secondly, I could ask some questions. I said, "This war in Gaza is the fourth or fifth time [this violence has] been going round. Every few years, it happens again. So if there is more violence and punishment and destruction and death, isn't that [just] preparing the ground for the next one?" I also mentioned that there are children growing up now under the bombs [and seeing death], and they will grow up to be violent, because that's the language that they learn. So I asked her, "What are the consequences of this view?"

There's a very nice sutra about that. The Buddha said, if someone has strong views and strong hate or anger, you can't really talk to them or change anything. But never forget the power of equanimity. Your equanimity can help. And equanimity is one of the [tools] that you can bring into a dialogue, to show that it's possible to stand, to be an island [onto yourself], [to] be steady, and [to] show another way. The other side [also] needs to feel safe. [To have a balanced dialogue you need to create a] safe space [through] friendliness and equanimity and kindness and a sense that we are equal. Then dialogue can start. One direction of dialogue that works is to share pain. Because sharing our personal pain and difficulty is, I would say, a deep place of honesty and listening, where something radically changes; you can't really be an enemy anymore if you're listening to each other's pain.

As Buddhists, how do we combat violence? And are there any particular passages or sutras or anecdotes from the canons about Buddha's penchant for nonviolence that you'd like to call on during times like these? From the Dhammapada: "For not by hatred do hatreds cease at any

time in this place, they only cease with nonhatred, this truth is surely eternal.” I think that’s the core sentence, the core teaching here. It’s very simple and very direct. In a way, it’s what I said to that woman that I mentioned just now—that more violence doesn’t solve the problem. And any of the Buddha’s teachings that teach on causes and conditions would be in that realm [as well]. Because one of the problems is that if you’re acting from instant reactivity, it doesn’t give space to understand causes and conditions, pratīyasamutpāda, dependent arising, that things happen because of the conditions. The conditions create the result. What are the conditions that you’re creating now? This is not a question that’s asked by politicians very often. They’re just reacting and responding, often emotionally, sometimes increasing anxiety and fear. So anything that helps us to see causes and conditions here, pratīyasamutpāda, I consider to be very helpful.

What steps can everyone take to support their own personal healing and integration at this moment? Firstly, we really do need to forgive ourselves. If we feel anger and blame and primal emotions like that, we need to not blame ourselves, because we’re beings born in these bodies. Survival mind is very strong, and samsara is very strong. So do not take it personally but say, this is the nature of things. This is what’s arrived in my existence right now.

Secondly, remember all the joy and well-being that we’ve experienced in our life, all the practice we’ve done in our life, which is needed now. We can remember: I’ve experienced joy in myself and my tissues and my breath and my being. And here it is, again, I’m going to go reconnect with the joy that I already know.

And one final point, as much as we can connect with our ultimate nature, our buddhanature, we also connect with perfection. We are fundamentally perfect. Life hasn’t made a mistake; Dzogchen, the Natural Great Perfection, says it beautifully, that in the ultimate place, there aren’t mistakes. There is completion, perfection, if we look at things inclusively, in a nonpersonal way. The nature of existence is bigger than us, we need to allow life to take us, to have a life point of view instead of a personal point of view. That gives a lot of healing and support from a more nondual and ultimate place.