

Peaceful Mind, Mindful of Peace

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What is peace? Is it simply the absence of war and conflict? If that is the case, then promoting peace is easy. All we have to do is prevent the conditions that lead to war. Sure, that is still a lot of work, but it is not difficult. A lot of the peacemaking efforts that we can see around the world are based on this idea. If we can prevent war from happening, then what is left must be peace. Even if the people living in that "peace" are starving and riddled with preventable diseases, even if they live in constant fear for their lives from government agents and common criminals, well, at least their government has not declared war on anyone.

Or is peace something in its own right? Is it perhaps something that can be developed without reference to its polar opposite? Is peace purely a situation that refers to a relationship, a state of affairs between you and me, or is it also something within ourselves, a specific state of mind that will naturally lead to peace in our relationships?

The *Dhammapada* tells us, right in its opening chapter, that hatred does not stop because of more hatred. Instead, hatred only stops when it is displaced by love. By analogy, we can therefore say that there can never be a "war to end all wars". War only breeds further war, even if it is a more subtle kind. Only when it is replaced by peace does war fade out of the picture. Peace, therefore, is not the opposite of war. It is a different set of factors that negates war. Think of it this way: water is not the opposite of fire, but can extinguish it. Fire is not the opposite of water, but can evaporate it. Water and fire affect each other in so many ways, but each exists, for now, as a temporary bundle of factors with its own reality. You can define fire without mentioning water; you can describe water without referring to fire.

So, if you and I are at peace, we cannot be at war. Now the question arises, can I be at peace with you if I am in a state of war within? Oh, I can pretend that I am, but that is just changing the open war into a covert one, a Cold War between you and me. Only if both of us are at peace within our own minds can we be at peace with one another. If even the slightest bit of inner war remains within one of us, there will be war. Not necessarily the violent war of blows and bullets, but at the very least, the war of innuendo, of sarcasm, of wittiness at other people's expense, of thinking highly of ourselves compared to the other. Yes, it is an improvement over physical violence, but it is not yet peace.

What is this inner war that leads to the outer war? In Buddhist terms, it is a contradiction between the way things are and the way we want them to be. Everything is impermanent: I want them to last forever just as they are now. Everything is impersonal and insubstantial: I really want my "soul" to be real and substantial. All is unsatisfactory: Never mind that, let's have some fun!

We really want things to be different than they are, and we are disappointed time and time again. And those "things" include you and even me. I want you to be different. I want myself to be different. And the universe, which cares absolutely nothing at all about my wishes, just keeps on going as it was going to anyway. Never mind that, though. If things don't go the way I want them to, I will simply refuse to see them. In psychology, this is called Cognitive Dissonance. The genius of the Buddha was to see just how deep this refusal to see what is right there in front of us goes, just how much it colours every thought we have. We are at war with the way things really are, at war with reality itself. Small wonder, then, that I am at war with you!

But suppose I could, somehow, learn to see reality as it is. Suppose I could stop wishing that things were fundamentally different. Then at least I would be at peace. And I might show you how to do

the same. Then there would be peace between us.

No doubt you see where this is leading to. True peace is only possible between two perfectly enlightened beings. Peace is the natural habitat of Buddhas. The rest of us are at war.

Perfectly enlightened beings tend to be a little thin on the ground at the moment. This is, after all, the Kali Yuga. So, where does that leave us, the imperfectly unenlightened beings?

Taking one step at a time, that's where it leaves us. Breathing in, breathing out. Putting one foot in front of the other. When sitting, just sit; when eating, just eat; when writing article for CDI, just write the damn article. There is a little peace in that, a small, temporary armistice. string the little pieces of peace together, and somewhere in the far future they will outnumber the moments of war. And permanent, everlasting, universal peace? Put such thoughts from your mind. Take the next step. Breathe in, breathe out...