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# From Vulnerability to Virtuosity: Buddhist Reflections on Responding to Terrorism and Tragedy

Peter D. Hershock

East-West Center  
Asian-Studies Development Program  
Honolulu, Hawaii  
[HershocP@EastWestCenter.org](mailto:HershocP@EastWestCenter.org)

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We are all vulnerable. For many of us, both in the United States and elsewhere, it was only as the morning of September 11, 2001, unfolded with relentless and surreal force that we were stunned into a collective realization of this basic truth. We had already known, with the certainty born of firsthand experience, that we are individually liable to having accidents. We had known that we are all subject to apparently tragic turns of events—subject to the ignoble onset of illness or old age, the loss of children, the shattering of our homes. What we had not known—and fully believed—is that our entire way of life could be summarily, and perhaps sadistically, undone. What struck us on September 11 with the irresistible and irreversible force of revelation was that the common ground of our secure and sane coexistence could be torn out from beneath our feet and laid utter waste. We are all vulnerable.

Here, I want to reflect on how we—both privately and publicly—have been responding to the horrific events of September 11. The declared war on terrorism—a central part of our public response—has not ended, but has instead spread and intensified. Along with this, our “enemies” have multiplied. Parents, sons, and daughters continue to be killed, sacrificed singly or in small groups, by the dozens, or—as in Bali on October 12, 2002—by the hundreds. My intention is not to analyze the complex geopolitics of the “war on terror.” Neither is it to critically assess either specific policy decisions or their effects on the quality of daily life and civil liberties. Instead, I want to offer some general observations about terrorism and tragedy and then, from a Buddhist perspective, to begin reflecting on our broad strategies for responding to them and to the realization of our individual and collective vulnerability.

My purpose is to make clear that our prevailing strategies—especially at the public level, and in spite of their rationality and adamant realism—have been largely chimerical ones aimed at cultivating invincibility. Although they might afford short-term solutions for some aspects of the overall problem of terrorism, they are not finally sufficient or sustainable. Indeed, to the extent that they are, in their own terms, successful, they will ironically only make matters worse. In their place, we would do well to consider committing ourselves to the much longer-term aim of cultivating virtuosity—a capacity, not for unlimited control, but for freely contributing to the welfare of others.

## Some General Observations on the Meaning of Terrorism and Tragedy

In today’s media and in both popular and political discourse, the word terrorism is most often used to denote something like “irrational acts of calculated violence, consciously and callously perpetrated on innocent people.” In addition to being quite common, such a description of terrorism is also oddly inconsistent. It is hard to imagine, after all, how literally irrational acts can also (and quite necessarily) be calculated. However, aside from its liability to philosophical hair-splitting, this common view of terrorism unhelpfully diverts attention solely to the horrific actions undertaken by terrorists and away from their intentions.

Terrorism is both etymologically and literally rooted in terror. It consists of acts undertaken with brutal adherence to the dictates of rational choice, the desired outcome of

which is debilitating fear. Such acts are not undertaken in a vacuum. Terrorism marks an extreme manifestation of conflict between actors of very different scale—actors who have failed to establish any usefully shared sense of a common ground for addressing chronically troubling differences in norms and values. It is never the first response to normative tensions. Terrorism arises through the experience of utter frustration with respect to even the possibility of negotiating a mutually satisfying direction or meaning for situational transformation. Where the actors involved are of similar scales—for example, if both are well-established nation-states with clearly defined institutional structures and histories—such normative impasse has tended to result in war of either the cold or hot variety. It is only when the scale of the actors is sufficiently different for direct confrontation to not be a viable option that terrorism arises. In this case, the actor least likely to survive direct confrontation and most likely bearing galling witness to the overwriting of its own norms and values by the actor of greater scale finally feels compelled to drop the pretence of cooperation. In a rational and yet shamelessly violent attempt to further its own ends, this actor tries to produce conditions ripe for meaningful and desirable change. This is not done by directly dismantling the other's institutions, but by inoculating the other with fear.

There is thus some truth in the corollary popular association of terrorism with threats to democracy. Terrorism marks a refusal to respect widely accepted norms for intercommunal relations, and thus a refusal to participate in the consensual ordering of the relational commons. Terrorist acts aim, instead, at fostering disorder in and among nations, ethnic groups, religious communities, and so on. Because of their relatively small scale, such acts are not able to effect any direct and broad destabilization in the targeted community. In spite of their grievous consequences for those directly victimized, in strictly factual terms, acts of terrorism are strategically barren. The crashing of a plane, the sinking of a ship, the explosion of a car bomb, the destruction of an embassy building, and the loss of life associated with them—these cannot bring an entire people to its knees. Nor can they directly destabilize a targeted nation or global system of order.

Without pushing the analogy too far, terrorist acts can be seen as successfully destabilizing in much the same way that viral infections are. The tiny beings communicated into a human body by a mosquito bite or by eating spoiled food, in and of themselves, could not cause a single hair to move on that body. Once inside the body, however, and given certain conditions, they are able to so profoundly disturb the body's organic order that it collapses in malignant exhaustion lasting days or even weeks. If the infection is severe enough, the body cannot carry out any of its normal activities, take in nourishment, or effectively rest. In the worst case, destabilized and debilitated beyond the point of recovery, it succumbs and dies.

Fear violates the naturally open process of being human that is seen with such endearing evidence in babies and small children—an utter readiness to explore and literally incorporate things, to make them a part of ourselves. Fear brings about a defensive recoil from our situation—an effective closing of our borders. At the most intimately personal level, this process can be observed in what happens with infants left in a room full of strangers. As soon as the absence of mother and father is noted, infants stop exploring and playing. Crying out for their parents' return and attention, frantic at first with the sense of abandonment, they finally lapse into inconsolable sobbing. Should a nearby adult attempt to assuage the pain of separation, he or she is either rejected outright and pushed away or tolerated

with the pained indifference that comes when one thing—and one thing only—will make a difference: the restoration of parental attention. The infant's normally open consciousness has collapsed into a desolate singularity of lost presence.

At the public level, the experience of fear is most commonly caused by a threat to national integrity or a community's overall way of life. As with the terror-stricken infant, this leads to a closing off borders, a collapse of horizons of relevance, a desperate inattention to nuance and detail, a lashing out at suspected or real enemies, and a refusal to acknowledge any still present common good. As witnessed in the exercise of extreme political unilateralism, fear is capable of systematically undermining the basis of truly open societies and relations among them. As so poignantly stated by the Burmese democracy advocate, Aung San Suu Kyi, democracy is "freedom from fear." (1) A terrorized population—whether by a diffuse organization like al Qaeda or a repressively authoritarian central government—is incapable of undertaking and sustaining democratic processes. It is a morally paralyzed body politic in frightful danger of dissolving into autonomous and narrowly self-serving constituent parts.

The individually experienced consequences of terrorist acts are generally deemed tragic. So, I would argue, should the paralysis of the body politic that occurs when whole populations are effectively terrorized. However, to deem events and their consequences "tragic" is not simply to add an emotional intensifier to their brute factuality. It is to say of them that they should never have happened and yet could not have happened otherwise. Tragedy takes place in the peculiar world region lying at the intersection of the positive moral space of what ought to happen and the negative factual space of what could not happen—a place where the moral and the ontological come into explicit conflict. In tragedy, ought no longer implies can.

The etymology of the word itself brings this peculiar space into surprisingly sharp focus. Tragedy can be traced back to the Greek *tragoidia*—a compound word placing together goat ( *tragos* ) and song ( *oide* ). Granted that the term was very early used for a type of dramatic performance centered on the fateful interactions of human beings and the gods of Olympus, this would seem a rather strange set of roots. With a bit of imaginative license, however, a term meaning an "ode sung for a goat" would be an appropriate coining for just such a performance. The goat in question was not, it would seem, just any hillside forager, but rather a sacrificial animal offered as a way of putting right a human-divine relationship that had gone profoundly astray.

Such animals, and the human characters upon whom tragic Greek dramas pivoted, were themselves essentially innocent of wrongdoing. If anything, their only fault lay in being in precisely the wrong place at just the right time for being drafted into service as a means to the end of a reestablished cosmic harmony. Sacrificial goats and tragic heroes alike share the fortune of being subject to fates and forces lying utterly beyond their control. In tragedies, we are caught up in a current of events that we could not have anticipated—one that sweeps us inexorably along in a dramatic turn of things for the worse.

Together, terror and tragedy seem almost to force us into shrinking away from freely engaging our situation and being responsible to and for it. This seems understandable, even quite reasonable. It is not uncommon for the terrified and tragically afflicted to simply shut down in a state of shock that is usually (but not always) temporary. Often, such traumatic withdrawal is taken to be a natural and even necessary part of the healing process—a way

of consolidating our resources, regrouping, finding within ourselves the means of becoming freely whole again.

The idea that personal wholeness and a sense of sound identity might result from withdrawal and what often amounts to a refusal of intimacy is very much culturally freighted. It reveals a bias for constructing personhood in terms that are predominantly individualistic and essentialist rather than thoroughly relational. Still, even in cultures where persons are understood as complex patterns of relationship, traumatic withdrawal does occur. In such contexts, the healing process is perhaps more often understood as taking place with reintegration into the situation as a whole, rather than as something that took place inside the afflicted person during their retreat. Either way, however, it remains true that pulling back from full intimacy with our situation involves closing ourselves off in some degree from our environment and those with whom we share it. In effect, this is dramatically impoverishing. It is to cut ourselves off from others' contributions to the meaning—and not just the bare facts—of who we are and might become.

This is especially apparent in the worst cases of traumatic withdrawal, where the interruption of normal relations is nearly total. However, all instances of terror and tragic withdrawal bring about an impoverishing break in our normal pattern of sustaining relationships. When our fear is of sufficiently low intensity and where our sense of tragedy is less severe, we may more literally retreat—running out on what we perceive to be a troubling and potentially avoidable situation. Whether our escape is internal or external, however, it constitutes a manifest objection that blocks out both what is threatening and what is potentially a crucial contribution to our own welfare. Anyone who has had the experience of approaching a terrified infant or child with every intention of helping only to be pushed aside as irrelevant or threatening knows quite well the degree to which fear can block situational contribution to one's welfare. A terrified infant has eyes only for mother or father. When communities or nations close their borders in self-protective withdrawal, they become no less blinded.

Pulling away from our situation, contracting upon ourselves, has the effect of concentrating present qualities of attention and relationship. A graphic analogy can be made with the effect of reversing the spread of an indigo dye uniformly distributed in a body of water. As the reversal takes place, the colored area in the body of water becomes progressively smaller and more intensely blue. Likewise, for the terror and tragedy stricken, characteristic qualities of attention and patterns of relationship become both smaller in scope and more concentrated. Especially as fear, suspicion, and anger intensify, the potential for explosive reactions increases—the potential for lashing out in almost incandescent objection to how things are.

Terror and tragedy are thus conducive to reproducing and intensifying the conditions of conflict. The more we are subject to fear, the more there is to which we object as threatening. The more we experience ourselves as subject to intractable forces and fate, the more we are inclined to curl in upon ourselves in protective isolation and forfeit responsibility for changing the meaning of our situation and the relationships constitutive of it. Together, terror and tragedy bring about a collapse of our customary horizons for relevance, responsibility, and readiness—that is, a profound shrinking of the horizons within which we are willing and able to admit things as relevant, as our responsibility, and as rightly provocative of our readiness for fully engaged action. Ironically, such a “protective” contraction of

horizons does not finally lead toward invulnerability, but its opposite.

## The Trouble with Terror and Tragedy: A Buddhist Perspective

These general points can be sharpened by appealing to a broadly Buddhist perspective on terror and tragedy as particular expressions of trouble or suffering ( *dukkha* ). During his years as a teacher traveling throughout north India, the Buddha was often asked what was distinctive about his teachings and how they compared with other current systems of thought and practice, both secular and sacred. Often, he would claim that his was a simple teaching, comprising only four basic insights or truths: this, our present situation, is troubled; trouble arises because of particular patterns of relationship; these patterns can be dissolved; and, there is a way or practice for doing so. The thousands of pages of recorded talks and conversations attributed to the Buddha can be seen as extended, audience-specific variations on these four insights.<sup>2</sup>

The first of these so-called noble truths does not cry out for immediate, intuitive affirmation. In fact, the specific phrasing used by the Buddha that “all this is troubled/troubling ( *dukkha* )” defies either purely subjective or purely objective understanding. The word *dukkha* itself covers a great deal of semantic territory, referring to a state of affairs like that experienced when riding in a cart with wheels that have had their axle holes drilled off-center. No matter how smooth the road apparently is, the ride is always unexpectedly bumpy.

Although it is often translated by the English word suffering, *dukkha*'s range of meaning is much broader and not necessarily so resolutely psychological. This is crucial in making sense of the claim that “all this is *dukkha*.” If understood in purely subjective terms, it is at least some of the time not true at all. Just after eating a fine meal, after watching a son or daughter graduate with honors, after making passionately satisfying love—in what sense can we say that such situations are troubled or evidence suffering? Likewise, in purely objective terms, it is hard to see in what way having your dreams come true could be troubling.

By using the indexical term *this* in framing his first noble truth, the Buddha effectively insisted that we resist the tendency to believe that if I am okay then you must be okay. It is an injunction to discern how it is that, in our present situation, whatever it is and no matter how pleasantly we may be disposed within it, there are troubling currents. While the fast-food burger just consumed does put an end to the minor suffering of hunger pains, the situation looks rather different from the perspective of the cow slaughtered to make the beef patty or to the subsistence farmers in Central America whose lands have been converted to cattle grazing to meet the needs of the global economy.

It is also to insist that trouble or suffering is always unique. It may arise through a general, interlocking set of conditions, similar for all sentient beings. However, like fingerprints arising through analogously general sets of causal conditions, each actual instance of suffering or trouble is finally unlike any other. The importance of this realization is that while it is possible—and often very instructive—to craft universal solutions for human suffering and conflict, they can only solve equally universal problems. Our own sufferings



and troubles, unfortunately, are always particular. We never suffer from the untimely loss of a family member, but—to take a particularly tragic example—from the utterly senseless shooting of our fifteen-year-old daughter by a pathologically confused classmate as she went from math class to history. Because no two instances of human suffering or trouble are precisely identical, truly workable solutions must be improvised.

The Buddha referred to his teachings as a Middle Path, stating that “is and is-not are the twin barbs on which all humankind is impaled.”<sup>3</sup> Failing to realize and respond in accord with the interdependence obtaining among things is the root condition for all trouble, suffering, and conflict. The second, third, and fourth truths provide general guidance in deepening our capacity to skillfully redress this failing. The primary teaching device for deepening insight into interdependence is the twelve-fold chain of interdependent origination, of which three links are traditionally regarded as crucial: ignorance, habit formations, and craving desires. In keeping with the Buddha’s description of his transforming insight into interdependence as like coming across a “long lost city, overgrown by dense jungle,”<sup>4</sup> ignorance, habit formations, and craving desires can be seen as the root, trunk, and fruit of *dukkha*.

In a Buddhist sense, ignorance is closely linked with the so-called conceit that “I am”—the conceit that we are each independently existing beings. The English word existence derives from Latin roots meaning to “stand apart from” and neatly captures the arrogance inherent to claims of independence. We can consistently imagine ourselves to exist in a literal sense as fully autonomous individuals only through ignoring our common ground. By excluding the middle between what I am and what I am-not, it is possible to experience my separateness from others as a “natural” fact. However, insofar as trouble or suffering arises through particular patterns of interdependent relationships, it is also to ignore the sources or origin of trouble or suffering. In short, it is to render ourselves vulnerable. To the extent that we experience ourselves as existing in this literal sense, trouble will always seem to take us by surprise.

Especially in Mahayana Buddhist traditions, insight into the interdependence among all things entails insight into their emptiness. Far from being a nihilistic insight into the ultimate vacuity of all things, the Buddhist realization of emptiness is a realization of the mutual relevance of all things—the constitutive or creative nature of differences.<sup>5</sup> Mere coexistence, regardless of how secure it may be, effectively involves a denial of emptiness. It means ignoring the ongoing and dynamic presence of differences that truly make a difference. It is the collapse of the space within which each thing contributes to the welfare of all others. At the same time, it is birth into an inherently tragic space in which there is no clear correlation between our efforts and actions and their ultimately experienced consequences. In such a space, we find it increasingly easy to believe that nothing really makes a difference—in particular, we do not and perhaps cannot really make a difference.

There would seem to be no experience more liable to generate depression, frustration, and anger. Such emotions, though surely “functional” and “natural” in terms of evolutionary science, have been the object of consistent and careful critical regard in Buddhist traditions. As situational energies—that is, as expressions of both force and direction—they reflect a breakdown of consensual meaning. They stand as evidence of a basic normative conflict—a failure to realize patterns of relationship that are experienced by all involved as mutually beneficial and conducive to meaningful and sustainable situational (and not

just merely individual) welfare. When subject to the kind of contraction and concentration mentioned above, such emotions are sources of explosive internal conflict. But to extend the dye analogy, their situational concentration is no less problematic or potentially explosive: whether the dyes (Pali: *kilesa* ; Sanskrit: *kleśa* ) of anger and hatred are concentrated through fearful recoil from a situation or in conflicting and adamant expressions of existence within it, the result is an intensification of qualities of relationship or interdependence that are profoundly divisive and conducive to suffering.

The practices summarized in the fourth noble truth or Eightfold Path provide a systematic method for actively breaking down the conceit of existence and a skillful realization of the interdependence of all things. It is a path toward dramatically enhancing our capacity for improvising shifts in the direction of our situation away from trouble, conflict, and suffering, toward their sustained and meaningful resolution. Traditionally, this path has been represented as having three dimensions corresponding to the three crucial links in the pattern of conditions giving rise to trouble or suffering—their specific contraries or antidotes. These are the cultivation of wisdom, attentive virtuosity, and moral clarity.<sup>6</sup>

From a Buddhist perspective, although they are in many ways unique, terror and tragedy are nevertheless instances of the broader problem of *dukkha* . As with all forms of trouble or suffering, they arise through patterns of relationship that have gone awry. Terrorism and the tragedies resulting from it have their roots specifically in conflicted patterns of change and violent objections to them. In this way, they differ in distinctive ways from the kinds of suffering that are rooted, for example, in the compulsive satisfaction of lust.

Three primary, sponsoring conditions of conflict and violence were frequently identified in the Buddha's discourses. The first is claiming that "this is true, all else is false"—asserting, in effect, that reality does not admit of second (or third) opinions and that the admission of multiple meanings or diverse perspectives on a given matter is an admission of ignorance if not evil in the broad sense of the term.<sup>7</sup> The world is not ambiguous. It is not an ongoing, shared improvisation. Things are truly either this or that. In between, and in any act of combination, there is only falsehood.

The second key condition has to do with strategies for resolving the kinds of difference that arise when two or more parties take opposing stands on matters of fact and meaning. Conflict and violence ensue whenever such differences are resolved in ways that lead to some winning while others lose.<sup>8</sup> Victory confirms the existence of disparate selves—those vindicated by the conflict and those vanquished. It refracts patterns of interdependence into apparent patterns of independence and dependence. Victory is thus conducive to anger, hatred, jealousy, and dejection. The defeated live in pain, in fear, and all too often in hope of revenge.

Finally, the Buddha identified disparaging and extolling individuals as conducive to conflict and as blocking access to and movement on the Middle Path. In the *Aranavibhanga Sutta* , for example, he instructs a group of students to avoid making such claims as "all those who practice in such and such a way have entered onto a wrongful path" and "all those who practice in such and such a way have entered onto a rightful path."<sup>9</sup> Both claims, apparently offering concrete examples of wrong and right conduct, implicitly establish sets of practices and practitioners as pairs of opposites. This seems to be a very clear way of making a useful distinction. Nevertheless, in actuality, "anger, confusion and dishonesty arise when things are set in pairs as opposites."<sup>10</sup> His alternative is to talk about practices in



terms of patterns of relationship and to identify which patterns are conducive to suffering, vexation, despair, and feverishness, and which are conducive to their dissolution. This not only undercuts the tendency to talk about individual people as “good” and “right” or “evil” and “wrong,” it also undercuts the association of good and ill consequences with such individuals. Instead, the stress is placed on how qualities of relationship vary according to different practices.

If ignorance of the interdependence among all things is the root of suffering or trouble, then relational contraction—the “natural” response to fear and to the tragically unanticipated and uncontrollable turn of events for the worse—is a mistake. It is the hardened trunk and branches of suffering—the consolidation of rigid and habitual patterns of attention and relationship. Securing our own existence, to the extent that it succeeds, is literally to place ourselves in want because it marks a denial of the emptiness or mutual relevance of all things. To the degree that we effectively stand apart from others, they cannot nourish us. Existence is thus inseparable from the experience of craving desires.

Closing borders—personal or national—fosters conditions for continued and intensifying trouble and suffering. Importantly, this is true even if it leads to apparent victory. Likewise, it is not skillful to talk of mounting a “war on terrorism” and aiming to destroy the individual people, groups, and national bodies constituting a global “axis of evil.” Thus specifying “enemy” practices and peoples may be appealing in many ways, but it generates only more anger, confusion, and despair. Its ultimate fruit is not truly sustainable peace, but rather still more intense and extensive conflict.

## A Buddhist Alternative

The general outlines of a Buddhist alternative can be sketched by looking at the core Buddhist practices associated with cultivating wisdom, attentive virtuosity, and moral clarity.

Broadly speaking, Buddhist wisdom consists of skillful insight into how things have come to be as they have, and implies a keenly attuned capacity for revising the meaning of situations that have gone astray. Among the teachings most closely associated with cultivating wisdom in virtually all Buddhist traditions is the teaching of the three marks: for the purpose of dissolving the conditions of suffering, one should see all things as troubled, impermanent, and without any abiding self or essence.

Although it is often represented as “deconstructive” in nature, the teaching of the three marks is carefully phrased as an injunction to practices that bring about profoundly constructive insights, especially when undertaken systematically. For our present purposes, perhaps the most crucial is the realization that no situation—regardless of how hopelessly conflicted it appears to be—is finally intractable. Indeed, seeing all things as impermanent is to see that change is always already taking place. The question is not whether change

is possible, but in what direction should it proceed? Because there are no such things as permanent selves or essences, all situations are open to meaningful revision or redirection. Finally, seeing all things as troubled is to resist the tendency to believe that if things are okay for me or for us, then they must be okay for everyone. It is also an exercise in refusing to see the end of conflict as a state of affairs arrived at once-and-for-all. Dissolving the conditions of suffering or conflict is not a one-time affair, but an ongoing, always improvised activity. Thus, especially in the Mahayana Buddhist traditions in which a strongly social sensibility is expressed, wisdom is associated with the development of unlimited upaya or skillful means.

From the foregoing, it should be clear that Buddhist wisdom rests on a capacity for increasingly flexible and subtly attuned responsiveness. Training for insight into the interdependence of all things has thus always been strongly associated with meditative discipline or attention training. At times—as in the Chan Buddhist tradition—they have even been claimed inseparable. In much the same way that stretching and yoga are most effective in developing a supple body when practiced intensely and with unwavering commitment, Buddhist meditation and attention training are said to build a capacity for clearly focused and concentrated awareness that results in supple and finely attuned qualities of relationship. That is, meditative discipline and attention training undermine the habit formations that constrain our capacity for situational response, while at the same time building a capacity for situational attunement.

Attention implies attending or a capacity for caring response to the needs of the situation. Indeed, because consciousness is understood in Buddhist terms as a quality of relationship between a sensing being and a sensed environment—and not, that is, as a property of an individual organism—meditative discipline and attention training are best understood as directed toward the realization of relational virtuosity. Thus, truly enlightening beings are said to demonstrate unlimited skill-in-means in responding to the needs of the situations in which they find themselves. To return to the metaphor of the neglected city of interdependence overgrown by dense forest, attentive virtuosity clears the great highways connecting the city with all other parts of the realm—in Buddhist tradition: the four immeasurables, or divine forms of abiding, known as compassion, loving kindness, equanimity, and joy in the good fortune of others.<sup>11</sup>

A capacity for flexible and profoundly attuned attention is, of course, no guarantee an ability to respond to a given situation in such a way that the conflicts and suffering that trouble it are fully resolved. Even with a detailed understanding of how things have come to be as they have, it is often not clear in which direction things must move in order to meaningfully resolve the trouble or suffering they evidence. This is especially true when the problem is not choosing between something “good” and something “bad,” but rather among a complex array of functionally competing “goods.” In the absence of moral clarity, even the most keenly attuned person may fail to respond when and as needed.

This is true because the world in which we find ourselves as sentient beings is not merely the neatly factual world studied by physical scientists, but a world that is irreducibly karmic or dramatic in nature. Moral clarity arises with skillful appreciation of karma—that is, an appreciation of the meticulous consonance between our values and intentions and the topography of our lived experience. According to the Buddhist teaching of karma, every event is at once an outcome and an opportunity—the dramatic consequence of prior

intentional activity and an occasion for creatively revising the meaning of the situation into which it has led us. Although the signal practice associated with moral clarity is the making and keeping of vows, it is clear—particularly in Mahayana Buddhist sutras—that, far from constraining relational capacity, vows consolidate our potential for relational virtuosity. Vows mark the realization of unwavering dramatic commitment—an unshakeable sense of direction without which dramatic or moral innovation is effectively blind. Moral clarity is the basis of any fully sustained revision of the meaning of our situation, redirecting it from further crisis and conflict toward their continuous and creative resolution.

The general Buddhist pattern of skillfully responding to trouble—be it an unanticipated crisis or an all-too-familiar chronic difficulty—can be seen as a systematic relinquishing of our present horizons for relevance, responsibility, and readiness, whatever these may be. More positively phrased, it consists of developing the kind of appreciative and contributory virtuosity needed in order to fully accord with our situation, and respond to it as needed. In Buddhist terms, this involves changing the heading of our situation—its dramatic movement—from *samsara* to *nirvana*: from trouble and suffering toward their ongoing and meaningful resolution. This is not a transition from a deplorable or troubling state of affairs to one that is desirable and free of trouble—a transition from a hell to a heaven. Rather, it is an active and necessarily improvised process of continuously and skillfully reorienting the pattern of relationships in which we find ourselves. Buddhist liberation does not mean being free, but relating freely.

## Some Specific Implications

This suggests a major difference between a Buddhist response to terrorism and tragedy and those that recently have dominated American public discourse especially. The difference can be brought into clear focus by examining the relationship between the prevailing notion that freedom involves something like doing what we want, more or less when and as we want—that is, exerting control in the management of our experience—and the ease with which we resort to violent solutions to violence, both actual and threatened.

The logic of responding to violence with violence has much in common with that of fighting fire with fire. It is possible, for example, to stop a forest fire from spreading by carrying out a controlled burning of all vegetation at some encircling remove from the outer perimeter of the forest fire. If this controlled burn is executed in a thorough and timely fashion, when the outer perimeter of the forest fire reaches this encircling band of already burned terrain, there will be no further fuel for it to consume. The forest fire is effectively forced to simply burn itself out. Likewise, ending violence through violence is feasible so long as the original source of violence can be effectively identified and isolated, and if a controlled “burn” can be executed—that is, if the source of violence can be prevented from drawing in new “fuel” or recruits, arms, and weapons.

Problems with this strategy become immediately apparent as soon as the condition in question—whether fire or violence—can no longer be effectively contained. If there are too many individual fires raging, perimeter burns simply hasten the speed with which the middle ground between blazes is consumed, spawning ever-larger scale fires in a combus-tive avalanche. At a certain point, fighting fire with fire would result in planetary conflagra-

tion. If we are not yet at precisely this point in the war on terrorism, its possibility has at least become undeniable.

Much has been made of the “new terrorism” that has been made possible by global telecommunications, travel, and electronic banking. It is a form of terrorism freed from specific locality and rendered effectively global in nature. While it is possible to contain terrorism by identifying and either imprisoning or otherwise disabling all actual (and potential) terrorists, this cannot be done without building what amount to prison walls around the general population as well. That this is no imaginary danger has become sadly evident in light of the virtual absence of outcry regarding the Bush administration’s new bureau of Homeland Security and its endorsement of a comprehensive electronic surveillance system capable of tracking the electronically mediated activities of every resident of the United States.

The logic of fighting violence with violence is not itself an isolated occurrence. On the contrary, it is a particularly visible instance of a much broader strategy for managing our individual and communal experience through the exercise of control. As a strategic value, control is perhaps the most widely disseminated in human history. It lies at the core of a technological lineage that can be traced back at least to the agricultural revolution that began several thousand years ago in a variety of locales around the planet. For reasons that are perhaps best described as cultural, during the fourteenth through seventeenth centuries European branches of this lineage were grafted together with emerging intellectual traditions in scientific thinking to create conditions under which the value of control began a geometric rise into broad societal prominence. This development has yielded an unprecedented capacity for controlling our lived environment, the incidence and spread of disease, and the content of daily experience. Not incidentally, it also made both possible and practical the rise of democratic institutions and the erosion of hereditary status and power. Indeed, it is arguably due in large part to the broad and rising prominence of the value of control in Renaissance Europe that the Western conception of freedom came to be framed in the oppositional pairing of free will and determinism—a move that, in global historical terms, has been quite uncommon.

As suggested by the attempt to control fire with fire, however, there is an inherent ironic potential in the value of control. This has gone largely unnoticed in the West, partly because the presence of control as a background value in the critical tool chest introduces a degree of blinding circularity into the critical process, and partly because this process is itself played as a kind of finite game with very clear temporal constraints and horizons of relevance, and focused on producing determinate results. Making use of the Buddhist critical concept of karma sheds a strikingly different light on control. Again, the teaching of karma invites attending to the consonance between the topography of our ongoing experience and the pattern of our own values and intentions. A basic insight resulting from this practice is that patterns of value and intention are in complex feedback with patterns of experience—a sort of chicken-and-egg relationship in which neither can be claimed fully foundational or original in the strict sense.

The karma of control can be verbally expressed by something like the following: the better we get at controlling our circumstances, the more we find ourselves in situations both open to and in need of control. Continued appeal to control as a means of managing our experience and circumstances leads to their factual transformation in ways that are

anything but trivial. The more completely we are able to exert control—that is, to get what we want, pretty much as and when we want it—the more highly controlled (and in need of control) our circumstances must be. However, the most highly controlled environment is not a paradise. It is a high-security prison. The kind of freedom implied by the exercise of control is thus self-defeating.<sup>12</sup>

In addition, a subtler alteration takes place as the ironic potential of control matures. In a world in which change and novelty are ineradicable, the increasing exercise of control must, at some scale, correspond with increasing ignorance of our situation and its meaning as a whole. Control promotes experiential solipsism, a self-justifying closed-mindedness without which it would become quite apparent that controlling our experiential circumstances not only subjects others to control, but us as well. Since control cannot truly be shared, its successful exercise depends on being able to keep the playing field as much out of level as possible and sloped to our own advantage. Alas, the steeper the slope of the playing field, the harder it is to negotiate or exit. Control becomes not just increasingly possible, but necessary, just to keep from falling.

Against the immediate “goods” offered by a strategy of control, Buddhism recommends the karmically sustainable strategy of developing appreciative and contributory virtuosity. If appreciation is taken to mean both sympathetic understanding and a process of increasing value, the better we get at appreciating our situation, the more fully we will find ourselves attuned with it and the more valuably we will find ourselves situated. The better we get at contributing to our situation, the more we will find ourselves in a position to contribute to it. This, however, can only be possible if we effectively have more and more to contribute. Contribution is, in this sense, self-enriching. Moreover, because contribution pivots on making a meaningful difference, not simply doing anything at all under the circumstances, as contributory karma matures, we find ourselves increasingly in a position to make a meaningful difference.

Responding to threats and acts of terrorism by going to war against them and their perpetrators suggests that the struggle with violence can be played as a finite game in which one side will, in some reasonably short time, fully and conclusively win while the other just as fully and conclusively loses. It is also to imagine that the sources of violence—highly rational and yet utterly uncaring in the case of global terrorist activity—can be locally contained and kept from growing without at the same time containing us and keeping us from growing.

The challenge of the Buddhist alternative is that it requires exercising the sort of courage needed to more fully understand and value the perspective of the terrorist—at least to the point of being able to contribute to their circumstances in ways that they themselves appreciate and value. This is not a matter of giving “the enemy” what they want. It is a matter of cutting through the pattern among our horizons of relevance, responsibility, and readiness that opposes them to us and leads both sides of the opposition to identify the other as “the enemy.” It is the challenge of finding truly shared common ground.

There is no simple prescription for how to do this. It is a process that must be improvised, on the spot, in full awareness of all the unique specificities of the moment. At the same time, the general principle holds that any sustainable solution—at least from a Buddhist perspective—will enhance our shared realization of interdependence, if not



intimacy with one another. A major shortcoming of the softer side of the public response to terrorism has been to offer, for example, aid and assistance that is not desired and that expressly disregards differences that truly make a difference. Such so-called contributions aim to promote others' welfare by eliminating their differences from us. However, helping others to become like us blatantly and shamelessly ignores the fact our mutual opposition is rooted in the fact that they do not like us and what we represent. No truly meaningful and sustainable solution can be based on insisting that we are all the same or all equal. The first is a patent falsehood and the second an appealing but inconsistently written fiction: We are all equal—especially those of us living in the developed West or the United States.

Any viable solution must, in short, not only respect diversity, but also further enhance it. Diversity consists of patterns of complexly meaningful interdependence by means of which each member of a situation (such as an ecosystem or the global political order) contributes to the welfare of all others. Conserving diversity means, then, exercising the kind of creativity needed to insure that no member of a situation is seen as being without anything valuable to offer to the situation. Support can, and must be mutual. Taking the attitude of the “teacher culture” or the “global peacekeeper” is to arrogantly refuse participation in the realization of diversity. Instead, it is to convert potentials for ongoing mutual contribution into secure but relationally barren coexistence. From a Buddhist perspective, this is a recipe for further and intensifying dukkha, trouble, or suffering.

The personal challenge of the Buddhist perspective is no less great than that posed to the prevailing public response to terrorism. The teaching of karma suggests that the experience of tragedy is itself part of a karmic process in which our values and intentions play an unrelenting and active role. Although the phrase “what goes around, comes around” has been used to popularize something like the notion of karma, the Buddhist teaching would be rendered better by “whatever we intentionally project comes back, again and again, until we stop projecting it in the same way and for the same reasons.” We are not determined by our karma. Rather, we are given opportunity—again and again, without fail—to alter how and why we do things as we do. The operation of karma insures that we are always in a position to revise the meaning of the events into which we find ourselves drawn. In a literal sense, there are no such things as tragedies because there is no entirely objective set of causes or any transcendently scripted fate to which we are hopelessly subject. The Buddhist cosmos is not one created at some distant moment in the past and playing out inexorably ever since; it is being continuously co-created, moment by dramatic moment.

For those experiencing tragedy in association with September 11 and its aftermath, there is little solace in entertaining the realization of such co-creativity. Even if such a realization were to ease present suffering, it will not return the dead among the living. Given that, it is very easy to seek and celebrate retribution. In a world of distinct causes and effects, where events are determined by clearly defined inputs or influences, the mechanics of blame would mirror the structure of responsibility already present and given in the world. However, in a world that arises through horizonless patterns of mutual conditioning or interdependence, identifying who or what is to blame for a particular occurrence is always an assertion of ignorance. Retribution, in the strict sense, is not a viable Buddhist option.

Moreover, retributive justice reflects the general strategy of exercising control over our circumstances and over the possibility of particular experiences within them—a strategy that in karmic terms can only result in moral bankruptcy. At the same time, it requires



us to substantially fail in living up to the full meaning and directive of tragedy—the challenge of positively weaving into our own lives and those of our communities the “sacrifice” of beloved innocents as a sadly necessary bridge toward realizing a meaningful revision of our relationships with those who have become our “opponents.” The classical tragic hero was represented as being sacrificed to the end of restoring cosmic balance. Present day tragic heroes—thousands of them around the world—are perhaps better seen as having been offered up to the end of revising our situation in such a way as to realize a wholly new and sustainable balance.

The nature of things is such that this will not, and indeed could not, be a static equilibrium—a solution arrived at once-and-for-all. Instead, and at best, it can only be an appropriate and virtuosic expression of grace—a balancing of things at once exquisite and fleeting. Such is the karma of contribution. Intentionally responding to tragedy with virtuosity born of wisdom, attentive mastery, and moral clarity will open further opportunity for still greater virtuosity.

In the world of the arts, especially the performing arts, this has been a mainstay of creative development. The virtuoso performances of today’s masters do not bring the history of music or dance to an end. Instead, they establish new horizons for creative mastery that it is the privilege of succeeded generations to dissolve and extend. In the art world, the idea of a utopian masterwork—a perfect and thus final expression of the art in question—would be greeted with skepticism and then horror.

We would do well to learn from this sequence. Holding up perfection as an unattainable ideal can be rhetorically astute. It can generate intense commitment to overcoming present limitations, to exceeding current capabilities. But the claim that perfection could be (or worse yet, has already been) attained—that is not only liable rhetorically to devolve into dogmatism, it is creatively repugnant. It announces the end of striving with diligence; the eternal return come full circle and thus full stop—the end of history and hence of meaning as well.

We are thus forced to reflect carefully on the nature of freedom—whether it is best conceived as a state of affairs in which we are able to exert control over our circumstances, managing our experience in the resolute expression of our ultimate autonomy, or if it is best conceived in adverbial terms as a relational quality. In a world that is as complexly interdependent as our own, conceiving of freedom in terms of a right to exercise autonomy has ironic consequences not unlike those of the value of control. Universally exercised autonomy could be realized on the basis of complete and universal agreement about how things are and should be—that is, given the absence of any and all differences that could make (for each and any of us) a real difference.

This, however, would be a deplorable state of affairs because it would amount to dramatic entropy—the absence of the kinds of difference that allow meaningful change to take place. Universal autonomy could also be exercised if such conditions were met virtually rather than actually—that is, if our individual choices failed to make a difference because we are all effectively isolated from the experiential consequences of one another’s choices. Such a world is not yet realized, but its possibility is evident in the operation of the mass media and its ability to offer highly individualized control over experience in such a way that the asymmetry of control is virtually corrected. The solipsism that would ensue from such control being exercised without interruption—the vision of E.M. Forster

in his prescient, 1930s novella, *The Machine Stops*<sup>13</sup>—is finally no less deplorable than that of factually eliminating meaningful differences. Either way, real negotiations of shared meaning and the dramatic intimacy of deep emotions would cease.

Such, however, is the world into which we are ushering ourselves in asserting the intelligibility of the “end of history” described by Francis Fukuyama<sup>14</sup> or of the current administration’s missionary unilateralism in its declaration of a “war on terror” and the existence of a global “axis of evil.” The alternative to such a world is to deepen our intimacy with our situation and with one another—to increase our appreciation of differences that matter. The cost of doing otherwise—of institutionalizing a policy of refused interdependence—is historically evident in the national fortunes of, for example, Myanmar and North Korea. These very different states have shared the strategy of carefully securing their borders against “influences” from the rest of the world. In both cases, the refusal of freely embraced and enacted interdependence has led to a nominal independence that amounts to forced deprivation and dependence. Although the internal resources of the United States far exceed those of either Myanmar or North Korea, and although it is unlikely that interchange across its borders could ever be forced into such utter collapse as in these unabashedly authoritarian regimes, the long-term consequences would not be fundamentally dissimilar. Functionally closed countries, like functionally closed persons, may age—that is, they may last. However, they will not truly grow or mature. If studies on animals reared in social isolation are any indication, the finite game of inviolable security ends in depression, madness, and death for communities no less than for individuals.

## Concluding Remarks

A Buddhist alternative to prevailing responses to terror and tragedy centers on critically evaluating—in karmic terms—whether a given pattern of response is both skillful and sustainable. As environmental science and the study of complex ecosystems has made undeniable, solutions that work in the short run do not necessarily work over the long term. And as evidence from the history of technology makes clear, even solutions that prove to be increasingly effective often do so on the basis of producing conditions that render them increasingly important and finally necessary. Both sets of examples confound the common presumption that it is feasible and often both sensible and imperative to separate our ends from the means employed in realizing them.

The Buddhist teachings of interdependence, the three marks, and karma constitute a systematic refutation of the presuppositions underlying the separation of ends and means. More importantly, they afford a viable path for bringing ends and means into ever-greater accord—reducing the gap between what is valued as ideal and what is undertaken as actual practice. Failing to do so is to fail to address our ignorance of the interdependence of all things: a failure to redress the root conditions of conflict, trouble, and suffering.

At the most general level, a Buddhist response to terror and tragedy proceeds from the realization that all states of affairs and fixed identities are either convenient fictions or functions of thoughtless ignorance. Any sustainable corrective to the arising of terror and tragedy must grow out of a commitment to revising the quality and meaning of relationships—our individual and communal patterns of interdependence. But what specifically

does this mean? What is a Buddhist answer to presumed threat of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction? What is a Buddhist response to the continued nuclear program of North Korea, or the rise of anti-American sentiment in the Muslim world and widely professed sympathy there for acts of terror against the United States?

Admissions of co-responsibility for the conditions that have precipitated such sentiments are, perhaps, all well and good. But what concrete steps can be taken to secure our way of life and the lives of our children? Yes, we should not respond out of ignorance, habit formations, and craving desires. Yes, we should cultivate wisdom, attentive mastery, and moral clarity to insure that we respond with virtuosity in whatever situations we find ourselves. But what use are such ethical generalities when confronted with defiance and belligerence or with values so far from and contrary to our own that reconciliation seems flatly impossible?

There can be no prescriptive answers to such questions. Or rather, prescriptive answers are possible, but they will not prove to be both skillful and sustainable. In a world characterized by impermanence, emptiness, and interdependence, any skillful and sustainable responses to conflict, terror, and tragedy must take place on the ground and in real time, not in the purposeful no-man's land of abstraction or ahead of time. In such a world, it is possible to prescriptively recommend avoiding certain strategies for problem solving. It is possible to identify, in advance, what will not work. But there is no similar possibility of asserting—with certainty and concrete specificity—what will work.

Given this, our lack of clarity about what exactly to do begins to appear very helpful. The realization that we are in doubt—literally, of two minds—is simple and incontrovertible evidence that we do not know what to do. Truly understanding this actively frees us to do instead those things about which we have no doubts. The default position when we are in ethical straits—when we do not know what is best, under the circumstances, as a response to a troubling situation where competing goods are in play—is not to wait, or to deliberate further, but to undertake more intensive training for virtuosity. Much as the basic training for different sports or arts often bears little direct resemblance to the final expression of athletic or aesthetic virtuosity, training for appreciative and contributory virtuosity may seem strangely distant from the relational dynamics of situations to which we must eventually respond. But this does not diminish the effectiveness of such training and its practical necessity.

The kinds of opportunity each of us is provided for demonstrating appreciative and contributory virtuosity will vary according to our karma. These can be very different for the artist and the politician, for the public intellectual and the classroom teacher, for the soldier and the religious leader. What does not vary is that the outcome of our responses to opportunity will meticulously reflect the values, intentions, and relational quality we bring to our situation. The challenge, for each of us, is at all times and in all places to relate with virtuosity. Only in liberating relationships can we truly be present freely.

## Endnotes

1 Aung San Suu Kyi, *Freedom from Fear: and other writings* edited Michael Aris, New York: Penguin, 1991.

2 See, for example, Samyutta Nikaya LVI.11, Majjhima Nikaya 141, Digha Nikaya 22.18.

3 Samyutta Nikaya V.752-53

4 Samyutta Nikaya II.105

5 See, for example, Nagarjunas Mulamadhyamakakarika 24.14

6 See, for example, Digha Nikaya 16.2.5

7 See, for example, Sutta Nipata IV.8, IV.11, and IV.13

8 Dhammapada 201

9 Majjhima Nikaya 139.6ff

10 Sutta Nipata , IV.11.7

11 See, for example, Majjhima Nikaya 7 and 40

12 For a full discussion of the karma and relational effects of control-biased technologies see Peter D. Hershock, *Reinventing the Wheel: A Buddhist Response to the Information Age* , Albany: SUNY Press, 1999.

13 E. M. Forster, *The Machine Stops and Other Stories* , London: Andre Deutsch, 1997.

14 Fukuyama, Francis. *The End of History and the Last Man*, The Free Press, New York: 1992.