

שלום shalom! a letter from jerusalem

By Boaz Amichay

Are things in Israel really as bad as they appear on CNN? I started writing a letter some weeks ago in response to questions from my Dharma friends and teachers worldwide. But then came September 11. Within a second the whole world became a battle zone, and I felt there was not that much I could tell those friends who used to think they were protected and secure.

But maybe things are still a little bit different here. After all, how many of you get the chance to meditate on love and compassion with the background “music” of gunfire and combat helicopters?

If you have been to FPMT centers like Tushita or Kopan in Asia, chances are you have met many young Israelis attending the courses. They tend to ask many questions, argue and have a hard time keeping quiet. Sometimes it seems as if they came to convert the lamas to Judaism!

Many of those young people come to Tushita straight from army service, after years of living in a violent land, having to deal with very difficult emotional situations. In seven years of living in and near Tushita, I have witnessed how difficult it is for many of them to digest and accept the teaching on compassion, on bodhichitta. Where the concept of bodhichitta might sound fantastic to any newcomer to Buddhism, to an Israeli it translates immediately to very practical questions: “So what do I have to do next time I’m facing a terrorist?” “So what am I supposed to feel for those who try to kick me out of my country?” The Tibetan example of giving up your homeland with almost no resistance does not encourage most Israelis, who feel they are facing a similar situation.

The last year of bloody conflict has sharpened such questions and made answering them a critical prerequisite for engaging in any spiritual practice. After all, what’s the point of meditating, if it does not touch your everyday experience of fear, terror, hatred etc.?

to serve or not to serve

Army service was the first thing I had to deal with after returning to Israel in 1997 from living in India, Nepal and Thailand. Each Israeli male up to the age of 40 has to do thirty to forty-five days of army service every year on top of their

three-year service at the age of 18. It was more complex for me as I was an officer in the army and had already served six full years. My best friends were in the army, and the unit I served in was waiting for me to return. I was invited to an interview with one of my friends, who in the meantime had become my commander.

What to do? Israel does not really give her citizens an option – you do the army service, refuse and go to jail, or sell a psychologist some story. I decided that I could not serve in the army, no matter what – and yet I couldn’t sell a story either. Choosing to be completely frank, I explained to my friend, and then to fifty others during the course of a year, that as a Buddhist I have a vow against killing and could not participate in any combat activity. I turned up to the final committee with my backpack, ready for jail.

Surprisingly the committee accepted my arguments. I became the third Israeli ever to be released from army service on grounds of conscience, apart from the ultra-orthodox Jews.

This is my very personal perspective on the issue. There are different ways of looking at the situation. A dear friend and serious practitioner comes to Israel only once every two years or so, but each time goes straight to his army unit to do his service. He strongly feels that this is his way of partaking in the national responsibility of defending his country and his family, and that he can not expect somebody else to do that job for him.

in the face of crisis

After some years of developing expectations of a brotherly relationship with our Palestinian neighbors and of a peaceful solution to the conflict, the violence that started in 2000 caught many of us unprepared. For a moment it seemed that those who said that the Arabs would always want to ‘throw us into the sea’ were right, and that we were wrong to believe in peace and justice.

We increased our efforts in organizing Dharma courses, as we felt there was never a greater need. We were disappointed that some of our Dharma friends declined to come to Israel because of the situation. This has raised some doubts in people’s minds: “What is the value of Dharma teachings if you are afraid to come and teach in difficult situations? Where is the brotherly universal responsibility in the face of crisis?”

Four years preciously, Ven. Thubten Chodron had given the first Tibetan Buddhist course in Israel. Following her visit, a small group of Tibetan Buddhist practitioners was formed, and courses organized a few times a year. Although the numbers attending are not high enough to fill the national stadium, we are happy with the activity, and appreciative of the effort of teachers like Anila Rita, Ven. Josh, Jimi Neal and others. This year Anila Rita traveled all over Israel in two months meeting more than 5,000 people in courses, workshops and private talks – an overwhelming response.

The questions people asked in recent courses were no different from those asked elsewhere in the world, nor were the discussions any different from those held in Tushita, Kopan, etc. The difficult Israeli situation only came to the fore in private discussions, or in small groups, where people could express themselves more freely, and in Hebrew!

How do you hold on to values like bodhichitta, universal responsibility, fearlessness and non-attachment to security in the face of war and terror? How do you practice seeing everybody as your mother when you look in the eyes of a young man wearing 20kg of explosives who wishes to explode himself and take as many children as possible with him to heaven? These were questions asked.

How can we be part of a country controlling and suppressing the lives of two million people? What if our country decides democratically to continue to kill and starve those who might be suspected of being an “enemy”? How do you do your Vajrasattva session at night, purifying your little, white lies of the day, when your brothers are shooting others? What is the meaning of universal responsibility here? What is the mechanism of collective karma?

Many Dharma friends think that now is not the time to sit and meditate, that this is the time for action. But what sort of action? In the face of such incredible hatred, when the hand stretched for peace might be hiding a knife, it seems that we stick to our meditation cushions not knowing what else to do.

Some choose to get involved in political or social-change movements. I have done some of that myself. Yet I realized that whenever I got involved politically, I would lose my calm, my ability to see the other person, even my mere attempt to see the whole picture. Convincing people, winning their hearts, making news headlines was, very soon, all that I cared about.

Many people deal with the stress by reducing their contact with the media, choosing not to know more than they have to. It is common to hear people say, “I haven’t heard the news in days,” or “I haven’t seen a paper in ages.”

Is this a “dharmic” way of dealing with things? There are many ways to look at it. One thing’s for sure – if you stay tuned to CNN, etc., you quickly lose your perspective and get sucked into the middle of the storm. We should try to keep our hearts

and ears open to the human voice that comes without the mediation of the media.

Nowadays I concentrate on generating the one thing most needed now in our troubled area – compassion. To deal with pressing and frightening questions with a calm mind and open heart is truly amazing.

When people come to me, I personally find that being able to talk about compassion in the midst of the worse possible scenarios is a wonderful gift. As my political power to change the world is doubtful at the moment, I use this gift given to me by my teachers and Dharma friends to be an advocate of compassion in the battlefield.

The most difficult practice is being compassionate towards our leaders, who seem so blind, ignorant, cruel and unjust. Many times I find sending metta to any terrorist much easier than sending it to my prime minister! So when I compliment myself on being the ‘great compassionate one,’ I have to remind myself that ‘all beings’ includes those elected by myself, or my friends, to lead this troubled country. If I make a place in my heart for the ignorance and hatred that clouds the terrorists’



minds, maybe I can also make a place for the same things that affect our leaders’ minds. If I can manage that, I might start working on accepting the ignorance and hatred that clouds my own mind!

While writing these lines, my brother calls from the West Bank to say that he is OK, not to worry when I hear the news about more deadly incidents there. My parents call from New York to say that they are OK, not to worry when I hear about the plane crash [in Queens November 12]. I pray that one of my Palestinian friends, who decided to run away from the war here to the safety of Queens, is OK. In such a crazy world, what else can you do besides take care of the only thing which is really under your jurisdiction – your mind and heart? And sometimes, if you can, smile. ☸

Boaz Amichay was born in Jerusalem in 1966. He undertakes Sanskrit and Tibetan Studies in the Hebrew University, Jerusalem. He and his wife Liora have two children, Suf and Eden.

If you wish to connect with the Dharma in Israel, please contact Boaz at bamichay@hotmail.com