

the habit of war and suffering

war and

KLOIE PICOT first went to Israel in 1990, thinking to stay six months. She stayed three years. She experienced the first intifada (Palestinian uprising 1987-1993) and the Gulf war. The longer she stayed the more confused she became: Why couldn't these biblical cousins get along? Why do they willingly cause themselves and each other to suffer so horrendously? She left Israel with no answer. She became a Buddhist and returned again in 1999, 2000 and in May this year. How do she and other Buddhists make sense of the suffering, war, and conflict that they experience?

Photos Kloie Picot

When I told my friends and family I was going to film the conflict in Israel, they thought I was crazy. Why do you want to put yourself in the middle of a war? Why do you want to be around all that suffering? Isn't life stressful enough? These questions forced me to take a deeper look. Why was I going? Why do I feel it is my duty to document the suffering in Israel? What did I hope to accomplish?

I had been drawn to this region time and again because, like a habit, it felt familiar – a habit to want suffering, a habit passed on through many life times. Before meeting the Dharma I had always felt more comfortable in unstable, chaotic environments.

I reflected on my Buddhist practice. Through the teachings I had become kinder, and I applied the antidotes to my afflicted emotions whenever I caught myself slipping. But then I was in an environment where it was easy: I lived in a Buddhist country (Taiwan), enjoyed my job, earned enough money for my needs, had supportive, like-minded friends, etc. Could I maintain this state of mind under more demanding circumstances? Perhaps I was like someone who, after years of retreat, comes out and still gets angry? I wanted to know how I would react coming out of my cave. Would I get angry, depressed, addicted to the suffering, comfortable in another war? And if it is my habit to be in war, to be in suffering, could I, in this lifetime, be a part of the solution rather than a part of the problem?

I was completely unprepared for what I saw and experienced in Israel and Palestine. In the six weeks I spent filming my documentary, I was shot at twice (rubber bullets and tanks) by Israeli soldiers, lived in curfew for days at a time, and feared that I would be arrested and deported, and my material confiscated. In Palestine I interviewed a family whose daughter was 'accidentally'



killed in a 'targeted assassination.' I asked the parents how they would feel if their surviving son became a suicide bomber. 'Proud,' they said. In the West Bank settlement I interviewed a father whose 14-year-old son was so severely beaten by Palestinians that his young face was unrecognizable. In Jenin refugee camp I filmed a street that had been leveled by tanks and bulldozers. In Jerusalem I filmed the severed limbs of 17 people blown apart by a suicide bomber.

The Buddhist principle that all suffering is due to past karma is hard to accept when one is speaking with children whose house was bombed while they were in it. It was easy to sympathize with the victims of terror but what about the aggressor? To have compassion for those causing the suffering and creating negative karma was difficult – it is much easier to feel helpless, depressed and angry.

I found anger arising and needed to retreat. Having made contact with Boaz Amichay, a Buddhist and Israeli, whose article I had read in the December 2001 issue of MANDALA, I had the opportunity to attend two retreats led by Vens. Tenzin Josh, Rita Riniker and Robina Courtin. How did Israeli Buddhists deal with living in a war zone, I wondered. I am grateful to Noga Ram, Hanna Platz and Nava Eilam who took time out of retreat to speak to me. I also spoke to author and long-term Buddhist Alex Berzin about jihad (holy war,) conflict and the importance of self-dignity.

suffering



Left, Yasser Arafat's compound in Ramallah – "Settling conflict is not easy, especially when large populations on both sides are involved." – Alex Berzin

"The Buddhist principle that all suffering is due to past karma is hard to accept when one is speaking with children whose house was bombed while they were in it" – Kloie Picot

From a young age, **Noga Ram**, a producer of a current affairs program on the government television Channel 1, had heard of people dying, losing their limbs, their friends and families. Particularly distressing was the loss of her boyfriend, who died from landmines planted in the fields of their kibbutz. "I saw pieces of him in the big trees, pieces of clothing," she recalls. "I have lived through all the wars, and I still can't get used to it. I am now 49." Death and violence is a part of our life here, she continues; that is why the need for the Dharma is so great.

In 1997, Ram took a Buddhist course at Tushita in Dharamsala, India, and returned to Israel armed with books and cassettes. But that wasn't enough. "I needed sangha here to help me to continue. Surprisingly, I met people who were also looking for other ways of viewing and reacting to our situation." This 'group' invited American nun, Ven. Thubten Chodron, to lead retreats, and they continue to invite teachers every six months. This country is very thirsty for the teachings and practices, she says, "Through the Dharma I have been able to change glasses, to see things in a different way."

Ram hopes that one day "we can teach the kids in Israel the principles of Dharma and help them realize that all the violence, killing and suffering that we see on TV and in the streets can stop."

Three friends of **Hanna Platz**, a teacher of children with disabilities, have lost children who were caught in suicide bombings. What motivates these bombers? "They do it because of the terrible situation in the camps. They grow up without toys, and their parents are so poor and blame the Israelis for everything – they see us as monsters.

"Other Arab countries promise to give [the parents] money if they send their children as suicide bombers, and children are very easy to influence."

A recent retreat on death and acceptance gave Platz a whole different perspective on death and dying. "It was very helpful because I was not just swept away by the emotions of revenge and hatred." At the very least, she says, "the teachings have [helped me] to cope with the almost daily violence we have here, and to move out of the feeling of always being the victim, into a more objective view." Where before Platz had this feeling of hatred and powerlessness over the whole situation and its perpetrators, she now tries to "listen more and speak with people about their situation and their views. I am better able to differentiate between the leaders and the people; I have more compassion towards the powerlessness of the Palestinians' situation, too." Looking deeper into the origin of the conflict, she sees all kinds of possibilities. "I used to think we had to react with force and show the

[Palestinians] our strength.” Since learning about the Tibetans and the way His Holiness the Dalai Lama has chosen to deal with the Chinese government and people, Platz realizes that “the show of force is adding to the problem, not the solution.”

Eventually [the violence] has to finish, she says. “We have leaders who grew up in this conflict, who cannot solve the problem in a peaceful way. Only children who grow up in a different way with a different mentality will be able to solve this conflict, and hopefully one day will build the peaceful state all Israelis, and I am sure Palestinians, want. We must realize that it is not us, it is not them, it is we, and we have to do it together.”

I interviewed Israelis and Palestinians who are steadfastly working for peace. Members of “Peace Now,” an Israeli organization, told me that since the second intifada [which broke out in September 2000,] and the break down of the Oslo Peace Accords, many of their members have been shunned and attacked by their own people. Similarly, in Palestine you could be considered a collaborator or traitor if you even question the actions of the Palestinian authority, or make peaceful demonstrations.

Many Israelis who are against violence and for peace fight against their own side, according to psychiatrist **Nava Eilam**. “We say we are to blame for everything – an easy view to have because we occupy the land, and we hear about, or read about the violence we take against the Palestinians every day. But I think this view is no better than that which blames Palestinians for everything – we are still taking sides, and this gives no possibility for a future solution.” The main point “is to see that both sides are very violent, and the cycle of violence and revenge only feeds the other to commit acts of violence and revenge, so it just keeps going on, and both sides can claim the victim and blame each other. So blaming your own side is no better than blaming the other side.”

It was rare for me to have a conversation with people with no political or religious content. In Tel Aviv I spoke with **Yosi Losse**, a Buddhist who for religious reasons has started proceedings to exempt him from doing the compulsory military service that all Israeli men from 20 to 55 are required to do. “Look, at 18 or 19 we are just children,” he explains. “We have just finished high school, we are given two months of basic training, we are given a gun, then we are given the right to use it to kill our ‘enemies.’”

In Nablus, while buying videotapes, I discussed suicide bombers with a merchant. Did he really believe, I asked him, that martyr bombers (as they are referred to in Palestine,) who carry out jihad, would go to heaven to find 72 virgins waiting for them? “Yes,” he replied. Do you think then, I asked him, that an Israeli soldier, by killing Palestinians in defense of his country, would also go to heaven for his actions? He looked at me in complete horror. “No!” he said.

Another view of the Islamic teachings of jihad was offered by **Alex Berzin**, who says this holy war is not against an external enemy but is actually an internal process – the struggle

to live up to the ethical standards and values of one’s religion.

I asked Berzin about past lives and rebirth. From a Buddhist point of view, he said, people who were involved in conflict and fighting in previous lives could be reborn in a situation where they may continue to be in conflict. “They have the habit of trying to solve disagreements with violent solutions.”

Settling a conflict is not easy, especially when large populations on both sides are involved, he said. “You are never going to find a solution to satisfy everyone. The best way for both sides is to try to have an understanding of each other and the complexity involved. One has to have an open mind and want a solution! If one sees oneself as good and the other as evil there can be no mutually acceptable resolution. What must be acknowledged is the negative and positive things that have been done, then you can meet on an equal basis.”

Through acknowledging each other’s positive qualities, Berzin continues, a sense of ‘self dignity’ can be established, and on that basis one can act in an ethical way. Here the role of religious and political leaders who embody positive ethical values is very important. “If you look at the Tibetans, they are facing quite a hopeless situation. They have been trying to gain more autonomy from the oppression and occupation of the Chinese for decades now. What keeps them from becoming depressed or sorry for themselves is their leader, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, who embodies all the ethical values and ideals of non-violence and non-hatred. They have an example of someone they can try to be like.”

In the long run, security interests [in Israel] will be better served by adopting peaceful means of resolving disputes. As **Ven. Tenzin Josh** told me, “you can’t kill all your enemies, there will always be another one.”

I intend to return to the region and continue my documentary. Once finished, I will show it to high school and university students in Israel, Palestine and the rest of the world. Perhaps by showing the pain and suffering that both sides are experiencing, this documentary will be a stepping stone for the younger generation to demand from their political and religious leaders a method of solving disputes that do not require military intervention. I am also applying to various schools in the West Bank and Israel to teach English. ☸

Kloe Picot has traveled for over 20 years, and took up video documentaries as a way of sharing her experiences with others. She has produced documentaries about Mongolia and Taiwan, and is now editing her experiences of Israel and Palestine. Picot currently supports herself as an English teacher in Taiwan. She can be contacted at email palisreal@yahoo.com



Israeli Buddhists, here with Ven. Tenzin Josh, make sense of living in a war zone