

San Francisco psychologist and Buddhist practitioner JOHN WELWOOD uses the five *skandhas* to explain why it is so hard to turn the other cheek when terrorism strikes. He talked to Nancy Patton.

# revenge is far from sweet



It is appropriate and important for spiritual leaders like the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh to remind us that a violent response to violence just leads to more violence, and creates more bad karma. We certainly know this is true for us as individuals. Yet how do we deal with a government's decision to wage war on our behalf?

A government can only act on the basis of the consciousness of its own citizens. If, as polls indicated, 90 percent of the US population supported a war of retaliation, how could the government

not take that course? Martin Luther King once said in a prayer, "Forgive us for being the most violent nation on earth." It seems that the karma of our country doesn't allow much room for considering peaceful options.

Looking at my own response to the attacks in New York and Washington, I found myself sharing the general sense of foreboding, while wondering what I could do individually. The vengeance stirred up by the US press and politicians, and the refusal to look at what we have done in the world to provoke this





level of aggression, was very disturbing. It seemed as though we had not evolved beyond 'an eye for an eye,' which, as Gandhi reminds us, just leaves the whole world blind.

At first I thought about peace marches or writing articles about why war was not the best way of dealing with terrorism. But then I saw that my own grievance against the war makers on both sides was part of the same cycle of war. In other words, the terrorists had a grievance against the American government, which in turn had one against the terrorists – and I had a grievance against both of them for espousing and practicing violence. I was doing exactly what they were doing: making people who irritated or threatened me into the bad 'other' over there with whom 'self' over here was struggling. Basically, there is only one war going on in the world, and that is the war between self and other.

Grievance against other fits with the Buddhist theory of the five *skandhas*, also known as the five aggregates or 'heaps.' When Buddha taught them, he heaped up five piles of grains to represent the constituents of ego consciousness: form, feeling, perception/impulse, concept and consciousness. In more contemporary terms, I sometimes call these: fixation, judgment, reactivity, storytelling, and going to the movies.

The skandhas start out with the fixation on self over here and other over there. This leads to attraction or aversion (feeling) and then the skandha of reactivity (perception/impulse) – reacting with a strategy of grasping or rejection. So how does war unfold? First we fixate on someone as the bad other (a terrorist, for example), leading to an immediate feeling of aversion and then quickly moving into a reaction of opposition. The fourth skandha, which I call storytelling (concept), involves solidifying some righteous grievance to justify our reaction: on a governmental level we say, "they are evil, we are good, they want to destroy freedom, and we are the protectors of freedom." This hardens the sense of other as the enemy and justifies a violent response, leading to the fifth skandha, the state of consciousness, which in this case becomes war hysteria. In the current mind-movie generated by the terrorist attacks, as Michael Lerner puts it: "We live in a world based in fear and filled with suspicion, where we must constantly defend ourselves from the dangers lurking at every turn."

So how can we change this script and end the cycle of war? We have to start by looking at the whole nature of grievance, how we create and maintain it, and how acting on it creates a counter-grievance against us, leading to aggression coming back at us. All the aggression between people is based on these cycles of grievance.

Let's look at grievance psychologically: The roots of any

grievance we have against people, the world, or circumstances that upset us can be traced back in our personal history. Given that most parents are not enlightened, they are bound to hurt their children, who often wind up not knowing if they are lovable. Therefore the child forms defenses, which harden over time. The ego identity forms around a grievance against other – the other who frustrated me, hurt me, controlled me, abandoned me, didn't recognize, respect, or respond to me.

Later in life we project a generalized image of the bad other onto whatever frustrates and threatens us: certain types of people, ethnic groups, nations, our intimate partner, the other gender, and even to life itself when it seems unkind. Along with this image of the bad other – the one who doesn't give me the love I need – there is a corresponding sense of bad self – the one who is at fault for not being loved. Thus hatred toward self and hatred toward other go hand in hand. And this is the seed of war – punishing the bad other for not recognizing my goodness, not seeing me, not responding to me, not loving me as I am, thereby causing me to hate myself.

While September 11 was still fresh, and the level of fear and outrage was high, I worked on grievance with a class I was teaching. I asked people to look at a stressful situation in their lives and see what they were bracing against (aversion) and how they were struggling with something they saw as the bad other (reactivity). For some it was a work-related situation, for others it was the terrorists, our government's response, the world situation, or the whole *samsaric* mess.

I asked people to look into their struggle with other and see what kind of grievance (storytelling) was contained in it. I asked them to state that grievance in one sentence. Some of the results: "You don't see me. You don't care about me. You don't value who I am. You are more interested in yourself than in me. You aren't there for me. I can't trust you. You just want to control me. You want to use me for your own ends." All of these boiled down to one grievance: "You don't love me for who I am." That's the grievance we all carry around in one form or another.

Next I asked people to look at that grievance and honestly see, "Am I ready to let go of this?" This means, "Am I ready to forgive?" Not one person was ready to let it go! That's true of most of us. If we were ready to let it go, we would have done so already.

The first step in forgiving is to make the grievance conscious. Then we can see that we are holding on and start to examine why we are not ready to let it go. I asked people to look at what purpose it served to hold onto the grievance, what it did for them.

People saw that holding onto their grievance against other actually made them safer – because if I have a solid grievance against you, then I don't have to open up to you any more, I

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don't have to be vulnerable, I don't have to let myself want your love. I don't have to put myself in the situation that originally hurt me. So hardening around my grievance provides a good defense. It helps me feel tough. It's like, "I'll show you that you can't mess with me. I'll show you I'm someone to be reckoned with." We can see why it's hard to let it go, for that would mean that our whole identity would start to fall apart. Thus grievance maintains the self-other split, the whole basis of sam-saric consciousness.

Seeing that most people carry some grievance against the bad other in their heart helps us understand why governments go to war so quickly. Governments and nations only play out the most gross, vivid, dramatic form of what most individuals are also experiencing in their own way. If we aren't ready to give up our own grievances, how can we complain about anyone else going to war, since we are harboring the seeds of war inside us as well?

In this way, times of war can be a tremendously valuable mirror. We can take all the feelings that come up, all our responses to what is going on, all the injustices, all the violence and terror and look at what our own part in that is and how all those dynamics are playing out inside us as well.

That's the only way we can start to create real peace in the world. That's the work we have to do as Buddhist practitioners and as people who care about peace. It's not until enough citizens of a nation start to evolve to a higher level of consciousness that we can expect the government to do so.

A further step in extinguishing the seeds of war we carry inside us is to address the deep pain we feel about not feeling loved as we are. Ultimately, we can only find that pure, unconditional love through opening to the absolute, unconditional source of love, which is our essential being or buddha nature. In Buddhist terms, this is absolute bodhichitta. This is the ultimate and only source of love that will fully satisfy us, because ordinary human love is always imperfect, always relative. Of course a little bit of buddha nature shines through everybody, so glimpses of unconditional love do come through to us from our parents and other people, but the only continuous, fully reliable and steady source of that is absolute bodhichitta.

In the Buddhist tradition, we might find that ultimate, all-embracing love coming from the bodhisattvas or from our teacher. But we also need to be able to open our channels to receive this love. That is one function of devotion – to open up the channels to receive the flow of absolute love, which is the source of all blessings.

Knowing we are loved in that absolute sense is the only way we are going to be able to overcome our grievance against other, which leads to war. I don't think it works to admonish people to be compassionate and loving. People often cannot love generously if they themselves do not feel loved at their core. Then trying to love others can make them feel worse about themselves. They feel, "I should be compassionate; I should be a bodhisattva, and I'm not able to, therefore this proves that I really am a bad person."

Receiving pure love from the absolute source connects us with the love and compassion that is our true nature. This is what self-love actually means. When we no longer hate ourselves, then we don't have to blame and hate others for making us feel so bad. So if we want to bring peace to the world, we need to love ourselves: to know that we are loved, to discover that our nature is love, and to feel the joy and beauty of that. Then the separate, alienated self-sense starts to soften, and we no longer have any motivation or impetus to go to war. ☸

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John Welwood, Ph.D., is a psychotherapist, teacher, and leading figure in bringing Eastern and Western psychology together. His work emphasizes psychological work in a spiritual context. His books include the best-selling *Journey of the Heart: The Path of Conscious Love*, *Love and Awakening*, *Ordinary Magic* and most recently, *Toward a Psychology of Awakening: Buddhism, Psychotherapy and the Path of Personal and Spiritual Transformation* (Shambhala, 2000). The latter book is now out in paperback. For information on his workshops and trainings, call (415) 381-6077.

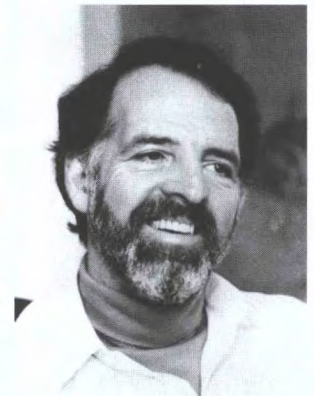



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