In This Violent World Can We Live in Peace and Harmony?¹
by Ron Epstein

“If we could read the secret history of our enemies, we should find in each man’s life sorrow and suffering enough to disarm all hostility.” Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882)

The environmental, social, and economic challenges that we face on a planetary level are daunting, to say the least, and in all of human history, unprecedented. The planet could well become uninhabitable in the space of a few generations. We are facing global climate change, world-wide pollution of air, water and soil, population increases beyond what the planet can sustain, irreversible damage from new technologies both military and civilian, ever increasing gaps between the rich and poor, and corporate takeover of the governments of the United States and the other Western democracies. This is where we find ourselves a decade after the end of the world’s most violent century, during which more people and more animals were killed than in all other previous centuries combined.

Never before has there been such a widespread human numbing to violent death. Cutting edge technologies of war and violence both amplify negative human emotions and deaden empathetic sensibilities. For increasing numbers of people, there has become effectively no difference in personal experience between blowing people up in a computer video game and, from an airbase thousands of miles away, controlling military drones in Afghanistan or Pakistan and launching their weapons to blow up real people on the ground.

Although democracy on the national and state levels is on life support, life-support is better than dead. Violent revolution, whether from the extreme right or the extreme left, doesn’t solve anything and leads to more violence. Unfortunately, increasing numbers of Americans on both the right and the left, by no means all of them so-called extremists, feel that violence against our government is justified. In my own neighborhood, gates and fortified fences are rapidly proliferating, and I often hear the sound of gunfire as neighbors hone their shooting skills.

The US homicide rate … is still among the highest in the industrialized world…. In 2004, there were 5.5 homicides for every 100,000 persons, roughly three times as high as Canada (1.9) and six times as high as Germany (0.9)…. New Orleans’ average per capita homicide rate of 52 murders per 100,000 people

¹ Based on a talk given at the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas on April 9, 2011 at a forum for visiting Humboldt University students entitled ‘Peaceful Living in a Violent World’.
overall (1980–2009) ranks highest among major U.S. cities. Most industrialized countries had homicide rates below the 2.5 mark.\(^2\)

We have a choice. We can deal with the serious problems that we are facing by opening our hearts to our neighbors in need. Or we can become increasingly paranoid, put up more fences and arm ourselves with the most lethal weapons we can find.

The teachings of the main world religions about violence are not monolithic; each tradition is composed of many strands. The West is heir to the holy war traditions of the three Abrahamic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Although those strands tend to dominate in this age of warfare, we must not neglect the strands in each that represent minority traditions which put primary value on the quest for inner and outer peace. Regardless of our personal religious commitment or lack of it, for the sake of the planet we need to nourish those peaceful and wholesome minority traditions and to encourage those who are working to move mainstream traditions away from the religious justification of violence.

Although in certain times and places, Buddhists too have looked for justification for their own violent actions, they could never find it directly in the teachings of the Buddha. When the warrior chieftain Yodhjiva asked the Buddha about warriors killed in battle being reborn in heaven, his answer was unequivocal:

> When a warrior strives and exerts himself in battle, his mind is already seized, debased, and misdirected by the thought: 'May these beings be struck down or slaughtered or annihilated or destroyed. May they not exist.' If others then strike him down and slay him while he is thus striving and exerting himself in battle, then with the breakup of the body, after death, he is reborn in the hell called the realm of those slain in battle. But if he holds such a view as this: 'When a warrior strives and exerts himself in battle, if others then strike him down and slay him while he is striving and exerting himself in battle, then with the breakup of the body, after death, he is reborn in the company of devas [gods] slain in battle,' that is his wrong view. Now, there are two destinations for a person with wrong view, I tell you: either hell or the animal womb.\(^3\)

We should note that the Buddha says: “When a warrior strives and exerts himself in battle, his mind is already seized, debased, and misdirected by the thought: 'May these beings be struck down or slaughtered or annihilated or destroyed. May they not exist.'”

\(^2\) Wikipedia ‘Crime in the United States.’

\(^3\) *Yodhajiva Sutta: To Yodhajiva (The Warrior)* translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu
All the violence in our world starts in the minds of sentient beings. Greed, anger and ignorance are the basis of domestic violence, street violence, media violence, terrorism and war. They all start with mental phenomena that snowball into harmful speech and action. The most effective point of control is when they are still newborn intentions arising in our minds. When they have already matured into intentional actions, they are much more difficult to counter.

Consciously or unconsciously, we broadcast our states of mind, whether wholesome or unwholesome, to those around us. When we are around someone who is angry, their anger resonates with the anger in our embodied minds and tends to arouse it. When we are around someone whose mind is calm and at peace, it becomes easier for us also to be peaceful.

People often argue that violence and killing cannot be avoided. It is our duty, they rightly say, to protect the nation and all the communities within it from those who would harm them. Yet righteous anger, even when it does not lead to physical violence, is still anger, and anger and hatred evoke in their targets the reaction of more anger and hatred. From a Buddhist perspective, when we kill the enemy, he or she is just reborn with renewed hatred for us for having killed them. In the long run the only truly effective means of protecting ourselves, our communities, and our country is to change people’s hearts and minds, so that they turn from violence to peace, a process that starts within but is catalyzed by contact with those who are truly peaceful and who live in harmony with all.

It is inevitable that the changes taking place today in our world will lead to most of us being forced to do with less and less, and in some cases to undergo significant hardships. We have several choices: we can grab and hoard as much as we can and protect it with walls and weaponry, we can gnash our teeth and lament our fate, or we can count our blessings and turn the situation to our advantage by looking to monastic communities for inspiration. Knowing that satisfying material cravings does not bring true happiness, monastics purposely strive to make do with the minimum amounts of food, drink, clothing and shelter that they need to survive, and thus embrace a simple ascetic lifestyle. That is the foundation for their learning to live with peace in their hearts and in harmony with those in their communities, even in the midst of this violent world.