

Resistance, Refuge and Stopping the War

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Like many of us, I've been thinking a lot about what it means to resist. We're witnessing mass resistance, individual resistance, Facebook resistance, hashtag and twitter resistance. Resistance at every level. People are taking action, people who may never have even thought of themselves as political.

And I've been wondering what my own relationship to resistance is— as a response to injustice, harmful policies, harsh speech.

What does it mean to resist? Do Buddhists, for example, even resist? We spend so much time NOT resisting, we spend so much time accepting, “being with” things as they are, letting go. We have a reputation of rarely being opposition to anything. The language of Buddhism is all about letting go.

So what does it mean to be awake to a world that is in pain, that's suffering from delusion and division and feels like it is moving more and more in that direction?

What is it like to be a part of and practice in a country that feels divided and antagonistic? What is it like to practice in the face of policies and actions that are harmful and destructive right now?

This isn't going to be a talk about politics. But what it will be about is Resistance and Refuge & showing up.

The word resistance comes from the Latin word Resistere, and it has the sense of “Taking A Stand” and “enduring” (as in not giving up). And it's this sense of resistance that is very helpful for me. The idea of standing up: Standing up **for**, standing up **to**.

The path of Buddhism is often described as a bird with two wings, one wing is Wisdom and the other is Compassion. The bird needs both wings to fly. We practice to see deeply into the nature of reality and this develops wisdom, and the more deeply we look the more our heart is uncovered and compassion arises.

George Yancy, an Africana Studies professor at Emory University, writing in the New York Times before the election (Dear White America, 2015) said “We don’t talk much about the urgency of Love these days, especially within the public sphere. Much of our discourse is about revenge, name-calling, hate, and divisiveness. I have yet to hear it from our presidential hopefuls, or our political pundits. I don’t mean the Hollywood type of love, **but the scary kind, the kind that risks not being reciprocated, the kind that refuses to flee in the face of danger.**”

“Love that refuses to flee in the face of danger.” Love that stands up. Love that endures.

We learn in Buddhism, and other wisdom traditions, that we are experiencing what **appears** to be a separate, individual, limited life, but really we are part of an endlessly unfolding interconnected whole.

Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote: *“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny....Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”*

The Dalai Lama said very similarly, *“We must recognize that the suffering of one person or one nation is the suffering of humanity.”*

This is a teaching that’s very much part of Buddhism, and it’s part of the Unitarian Universalist 7 principles, too: *“UU acknowledges that reality consists of a complex and interconnected web of relationships. Actions taken seemingly in isolation can still have far-reaching effects, and responsible behavior includes being mindful of these potential consequences.”*

This is a shared wisdom. So what do we do with this knowledge? First of all we need to be awake to it. We may think, “yeah, that makes sense, theoretically” or “wouldn’t it be nice if that was true”...(that we’re all connected, that we’re all interdependent)

But the more we practice, and the more the sense of separation falls away, the more our natural kindness and compassion arises. The more we know that this is true: That no one is free until we are all free. This is the Bodhisattva vow. This is the wish we make at the end of almost every Buddhist meeting, “may all beings be free, without exception.”

The more we experience this interconnectedness, the more we will be called, *internally*, to take a stand *externally*.

So that's what I hope we'll explore this morning: How do we Resist in the sense of Standing Up? How do we reconcile this with our spiritual practice of letting go? And how do we take care of ourselves in the process? How do we show compassion to ourselves as we stand up.

THE BUDDHA AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

So when we look at the Buddha's own life, what do we see?

He lived in a time of absolute rulers, kings and monarchs.

Yet his own organization of monastics was organized along very democratic lines. He also didn't designate a personal successor, rather intentionally leaving the teachings as his successor. Problems within the community were talked out within the community with all the monks or nuns having a voice.

He came from a time of castes and slavery and super-sharp social divisions.

Yet he allowed people from every background or caste join his order. He states that classes and castes are artificial barriers created by society. This was pretty radical.

He came from a time when women were deprived of their power and not even allowed to perform rituals in the dominant religion.

Yet he ordained women as monastics, and established the order of nuns; and he encouraged lay women just as much as lay men to practice and follow his teachings.

He came from the warrior class, the Kshatriyas

Yet he taught that there is no such thing as a just war, that there are only losers in war. He preached non-violence as a universal message. He even went into the battlefield to prevent the outbreak of war.

He was born into a society with a powerful, culturally dominant religion.

Yet he was not afraid to offer teachings that were very much at odds with that religion and even radically opposed to it.

When you think about all the ways that he went against the stream, it's remarkable that he had such a long teaching career — he taught for 45 years. And people did try and kill him. But the Buddha was not afraid to question and resist, didn't allow himself to be caught in the powerful stream of culture. He wasn't afraid to take action based on wisdom, compassion and the goal of reducing suffering in the world.

K. Sri Dhammananda (Sri Lankan 1919 - 2006) monk and teacher: “The thrust of the Buddha Dhamma is not directed to the creation of new political institutions and establishing political arrangements. Basically, it seeks to approach the problems of society by reforming **the individuals** constituting that society and by suggesting some general principles through which the society can be guided towards greater humanism, improved welfare of its members, and more equitable sharing of resources.

Dalai Lama: “It is not enough to be compassionate we must act.” If we are really developing compassion from our spiritual practice, it can't be just internal.

In the Eightfold Path, the path of liberation that the Buddha taught, (Wise View, Intention, Speech, Action, Livelihood, Effort, Mindfulness & Concentration), more than a third of this path (Wise Speech, Action and Livelihood) calls us to look at how we interact in the world. These are the moral and ethical underpinnings of our spiritual growth.

This is not about who is the right leader, what is the right party, whose politics are best, this is about doing no harm, treating all beings with compassion. And knowing that all beings suffer under the burden of greed, hatred and delusion.

So I don't look at this in terms of Us vs. Them. “They are wrong therefore they are the enemy.” Rather, I believe, the practice leads us to stand up for what we know is right and not against any one.

STOPPING THE WAR

As Dhammananda pointed out we work to change the collective by reaching the individual. Retraining our minds and hearts — starting with ourselves. We can transform the heart and mind into a refuge — from which we can take a stand, and from which we can take wise action.

Stopping the war starts with ourselves. Within each of us.

Jack Kornfield talks about this in his book “A Path With a Heart”:

“Genuine spiritual practice requires us to learn how to stop the war. This is a first step, but actually must be practiced over and over until it becomes our way of being. The inner stillness of a person who truly “is peace” brings peace to the whole interconnected web of life, both inner and outer. To stop the war, we need to begin with ourselves.”

And he also writes: “....how ... do we find our own place in a complex political world and find a way towards peace? Our first task is to make our own heart a zone of peace. Instead of becoming entangled in an embattled bitterness or cynicism that exists externally, we need to begin to heal those qualities within ourselves. We have to face our own suffering, our own fear, and transform them into compassion. Only then can we become ready to offer genuine help to the outside world.”

This certainly is not saying that it is all internal, not by any means, but that the internal practice informs and energizes the external practice. It’s a necessary foundation, it’s a vital foundation.

We are all in this together. No matter how stark the differences seem, we are the same, and we all have the potential for awakening without exception, and to assist in the awakening of others by our own inner transformation and **ACTING** from a transformed heart when the time is right. When wisdom tells us it’s right.

So Buddhists take refuge in wisdom and compassion — our shared capacity for awakening. Buddha nature. This is what we mean when we say “I take refuge in the Buddha”

We take refuge in the *dharma* meaning Wisdom, teachings, the truth of being.

And the *sangha*, people who support us and support each other in the process of transformation, the community of people who are seeking to lessen their own suffering and the suffering of others — not just in this room or rooms like this but all over the world — it's a huge sangha of people working to lessen suffering.

And right now we are seeing a sleeping giant of compassion awaken and stand up!

But to stand for something, to resist (what our wisdom and our heart know is causing suffering) does not mean that we need to make enemies. We can stand up to greed, hatred and delusion **WITHOUT** personalizing them.

These forces exist in human experience and they probably always will, so to personalize them makes it seem like if only we got rid of that person, or that group people...then the problem would be solved. But this isn't about persons....this is about awakening **together** from delusion.

And this is why I'm not making jokes this morning, this is why I'm not rolling my eyes, this is why I'm not directing my resistance, or my capacity to stand up, to a person or a group of people...because on some level I think that's too easy.

I have to stand up **for** and I have to stand up **to** myself, I have to stand up for and to my friends, for and to my communities, for and to my country — because all of us are touched by the conditioning of Greed, Hatred and Delusion — what the Buddha called the three poisons. But he **NEVER** said that they **ARE** me, or **you**, or **anyone**.

When we personalize the suffering in the world and assign blame to individuals and groups—we just perpetuate the war, we just perpetuate the violence.

RESISTANCE

Jigme Khyentse Rinpoche (b. 1964),

“The underlying sense of uneasiness that we have now is actually a good thing: it is the expression of our sensitivity. Those who go through life without feeling ill at ease are unconscious. The uneasy feeling caused by our awareness holds tremendous potential for transformation. It is a treasure of energy that we can grasp with both hands and use to build something better. Indifference doesn't lead anywhere.”

When we come face to face with injustice and harm. We will likely experience the energy of anger.

Anger is motivating, it can help bring change **if** we recognize it and hold it with enough equanimity to allow us to take wise action. It's a wake up call, but it isn't the vehicle.

Anger is a reaction to pain and I think it's also informed by a wisdom — the wisdom that there is an alternative, *that it doesn't have to be this way*. So can the energy be directed at looking at and resisting the conditioning, the delusion, the harm and not the person or people?

As humans we all have the seeds of fear, tribalism, brutality. Thich Nhat Hanh, famously recognized this in his poem “Please Call me by my true names”... In which he pointed out that he is both the victim and the oppressor. And this is true of all of us. This is true of human nature.

Sometimes this can feel a little weak, like a spiritual bypass, because most of us can see people in the world who are behaving much worse than we are. And they are, but that's not to say that we don't share the same conditioning, that those seeds aren't present for all of us.

But when we see them as BEING what they are **doing**, we miss the point of interdependence. That your pain is my pain, my delusion is your delusion and one person's liberation is everyone's liberation.

And the fact that we are in this together is actually really empowering. When you contemplate it, it means that our actions, intentions and practice on an individual level have power to reach beyond our own personal limited experience. We actually have power to create change.

Dr. King again, “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality....Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”

Tara Brach, a nationally known Buddhist Teacher and author based in Washington, DC, wrote a book called *Radical Acceptance* and it was published soon after the 2003 US invasion of Iraq.

And she was asked on her book tour, “How can acceptance and activism go together?” and if we only feed the energy of compassion, “will we ignore the wrongdoing in the world.” “If we don’t feel outrage — how will we stand up to injustice? How will we stop wars...”.

So in an article in the *Huffington Post* she wrote,

“I often responded with my own story. In the weeks before the invasion, I read the newspapers with an increasing sense of agitation. I couldn’t stop thinking about the men in our administration who were responsible for what seemed an inevitable next step in the global escalation of violence. Just seeing their pictures in the paper would arouse huge waves of anger and hostility.

Then I became increasingly aware of how creating an enemy in my mind was yet another form of violence. So I decided to start a newspaper meditation. I’d look at the headlines, read a bit, and then stop. In that pause I would witness my thoughts and allow myself to acknowledge my growing outrage. Then I’d investigate, letting the feelings express themselves fully. Almost every day, as I’d open to anger and feel its full force, it would unfold into fear— for our world. And as I stayed in direct contact with the fear, it would unfold into grief— for all the suffering and loss. And the grief would unfold into caring about all those beings who were bound to suffer from our warlike actions. My country was feeding the aggressive wolf, and the pain of that was heartbreaking.

Sitting with the feelings that arose in my newspaper meditation left me raw and tender. **It reminded me that under my anger and fear was caring about life. And it motivated me to act, not from an anger that focused on an enemy, but from caring.”**

So this a question I ask myself often, an internal and external practice: Can I stop the war? Without an enemy there is no war, without an enemy we are in this together. Without an enemy I take a stand, but not against you or them, but against all suffering, all injustice, all harm.

And I think that that can be the wise response, the “appropriate response” of a compassionate heart, and the very opposite of resisting life itself.

OUR CHOICE AND TAKING CARE OF OURSELVES

This practice of Standing Up takes strength of heart — what we call courage. It takes compassion — suffering *with*, not artificially separating ourselves not just because our life circumstances may allow us to do that. And it takes wisdom — knowing the path that is right for us.

It also takes practice. Developing our capacity to be aware, developing our capacity to feel and to love. Creating a zone of peace in our heart. A zone of peace from which to respond.

How or whether you choose to resist will be up to you. What you take a stand on will be up to you. We can be guided by where our hearts are most open — where do we feel called by our own capacity to feel? Where does our heart quiver and tremble most? Where do we have the opportunity in our life to act?

What suffering is most alive for us? Is it a form of social injustice: racism, gender discrimination, homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia, religious intolerance, poverty?

Is it the immediacy of policies and practices of our government that are causing harm and suffering right now? Is it the erosion of tolerance and kindness in our public discourse and relations? Is it war? Is it the struggles facing children, elders, the differently-abled? Is it the environment? Is it how non-human beings are enslaved, abused and robbed of their lives?

Maybe it's several of these areas, so then what are our capacities? Maybe we have a great deal of internal strength built up and a lot of freedom in our lives to act — or maybe we are only beginning to develop these qualities. And wherever we are right now on this journey is absolutely ok, absolutely where we need to be.

As we reach out, as we stretch our capacity, can we also also keep one hand on our heart?

Can we be compassionate toward ourselves as well?

Our ability to reach out is related to and balanced by our ability to reach in.

Can we create a refuge for our tender heart as we act in the world — a wellspring of strength that we can draw from when we're called to stand up.

There is the refuge of Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha: The capacity to awaken, wisdom and the strength and power of community. And there is no one-size-fits-all with this. Some of us may need to step back, unplug for a week or a month to strengthen that inner refuge, and others of us may find we have way more within than we ever knew.

I want to talk briefly about Self-compassion practice. As we resist, as we STAND UP....this is more important than ever. This is not only the hand on the heart, but the hand on our back. The hand that has our back, supporting us as we take a stand.

1. The first step is mindfulness or awareness that it may be difficult, discouraging or exhausting at times. That this is difficult. Saying to myself, "This is a moment of suffering"

2. The second step is accepting or acknowledging the universal nature of suffering: That we all suffer. Knowing and accepting that "Suffering is part of life." That it's universal, it's not personal.

3. The third I step is bringing a sense of care and concern to our own experience: "May I be kind to myself in this moment."

4. And the fourth step is setting an intention to act on that care & concern, "May I give myself the compassion I need."

"May I give myself the compassion I need as I stand up."

This is a moment of suffering

Suffering is part of life

May I be kind to myself in this moment

May I or how can I give myself the compassion I need as I stand up.

Even as our practice ripples out to touch all lives, it can be our personal practice to ask, “What does it mean for me Stand Up?” What does that look like in my life? Where am I called? Where does my heart quiver and tremble.

What does it mean to act from what George Yancy calls the “scary kind of love” **the kind that refuses to flee in the face of danger.**”

And where do I find refuge and support as I stand up?

I take refuge in the Buddha — The possibility of a life informed by wisdom, compassion and enlightened action, and the capacity for me and ALL beings to awaken.

I take refuge in the Dharma — In what’s true, the truth of being, the way of wisdom and compassion.

I take refuge in the Sangha — In the support of community that holds the intention to awaken together, and leaves no one out.

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