

Huayan Buddhism and Nonviolence

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Abstract

Non-violence, or non-harming, is the first precept and a core teaching of Buddhism. Despite the seeming popularity of the idea, the concept and ways of practicing non-violence have not been clearly developed. Buddhist scriptures and scholarship have not provided clear and efficient responses regarding how to practice nonviolence in the face of rampant real-world violence, which results in the misunderstanding that non-violence is just an empty proposal available only to those who live in peace or those who do not have power or courage to respond to the situation at hand. I believe that the teaching of non-violence has a lot to offer today as a way to move forward in a polarized and increasingly violent society. But without a serious rethinking of the meaning of non-violence and ways to practice it, the teaching will lose its power and be considered only a dream of idealistic and idle people. This paper explores an Huayan approach to non-violence and its viability in contemporary society, drawing materials from the Hwaõm teachings of Ŭisang, the founder of Korean Huayan Buddhism, and the *Huayan jing* and other Huayan thinkers on the idea of the self and others, mutual identity, and the bodhisattva path and considers the meaning of Buddhist practice in our time.

Keywords: Non-violence, violence, individualism, bodhisattva path, mutual identity, the Indra's net

Do not kill living beings is the first precept of Buddhism. Its ramifications in our time have yet to be fully articulated. One of the most common reactions to nonviolence takes it as a nice and sometimes naïve approach to the issues at hand. This reaction argues that the world is full of violence and that responding to the rampant violence with nonviolence is not only impractical, but also self-defeating.

Several thinking gaps can be found in such a train of thought. When people say that nonviolence is a nice idea but isn't practical, their criticism rarely offers an alternative to nonviolence. Is there a better way to deal with a difficult situation? People are typically hesitant in answering this demand. Another response is to resort to violence as an alternative. People propose that violence would do the job, whereas nonviolence would be a weak position that would only allow the problem to escalate. But why and how violence would be more effective than nonviolence is not often articulated. If violence makes it possible to "win" in whatever situation is at hand, how long would that strategy be sustainable? What would happen after violence is used? Can violence simply be replaced with more sustainable methods at a certain point? What would that transition look like? These questions are not asked when people support violence as a way to handle a situation. People's assumptions that violence would be more effective than nonviolence in dealing with an immediate situation is also questionable.

Political scientists Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan researched the success of violent and nonviolent resistance in the 25 largest resistance campaigns from 1900 to 2006. They found that "nonviolent resistance campaigns were nearly twice as likely to achieve full or partial success as their violent counterparts."¹ One of the reasons for the success of the nonviolent campaigns is that more diverse groups participate in nonviolent movements, making it difficult to isolate the participants from the nonparticipants. The presence of diverse groups also indicates sustainability, since different groups participate in the movement in different forms and at different paces. Different types of participation in nonviolent movements can include altering one's livelihood, diet, or shopping style, boycotting, performing peaceful protests in the streets, and training armed police officers and prison inmates to practice nonviolence.

Despite the success rate of nonviolent movements, people mostly think of nonviolence as impractical. For many, nonviolence might simply mean passivity, like sitting down and letting oneself be killed in a war. And in certain movements, such as the

¹ Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 7.

1960s American Civil Rights Movement, a certain degree of exposure to violence without countering it violently might have been necessary.

In comparison to nonviolent movements, violent ones require certain training, and only certain groups of people can execute them. I assume that not all of those who support the efficiency of violent movements would participate in person in the violent campaigns.

When we envision making changes through nonviolence, we must understand that the practice cannot be local. It indeed requires a whole village. The fundamental Buddhist worldview holds that nothing in the world exists as a separate entity; rather, everything exists through mutual indebtedness. Nonviolent movements can model the idea of mutual interaction, since one person's nonviolent action can have escalating effects on others in the long run.

Another potential misperception in evaluating nonviolence is to limit the meaning of violence to obvious physical violence, such as war, murder, rape, beatings, and so on. Such physical harm is obvious violence. However, the range of violence in our society is far wider than that. The twentieth century French philosopher Jacques Derrida emphasized different layers of violence. The first layer of violence is performed with language, including stereotyping, categorization, and spreading misinformation and fake news, with which we are familiar nowadays. The second level of violence includes unfair social norms, rules, laws, and even moral codes when they are constructed by those who have power in a society and imposed on marginal groups. Social norms exist with an expectation of sustaining a society's shared values; laws are created to protect people from harm and violent actions. However, who are the people protected by the laws and social norms? The violence that American society has been exposed to through systemic racism, police brutality, and the politicization of the Supreme Court all reflects the violence of the legal system. The German thinker Walter Benjamin called this second layer of violence law-making and law-preserving violence in his famed essay "Toward Critique of Violence" (1921). We will come back to Benjamin's discussion shortly.

In the third layer, we have the physical actions we usually take as violence, such as sexual violence, gun violence, police brutality, war, and colonialism.

If we consider violence in this manner, our understanding of nonviolence also takes on a different meaning. This understanding of the nature and shape of violence would provide us with various forms of nonviolence that we can practice in our daily lives.

Another aspect of violence that we need to consider is its relationship to others. Violence is mostly done to others, and it happens when the other is less valued than the one who imposes violence. When a killing occurs, for example, the assumption must be that the object of the killing is less valuable than those who are not the target of violence and the subject who is imposing the violence. The self can use violence on itself in the case of suicide, but the logic still holds that the object of the violence – the self itself – is counted as less valuable than those who are not exposed to violence.

In sum, violence is based on a hierarchical understanding of life. The assumption that runs throughout the use of violence is that there are lives that are disposable through violence and lives that need to be preserved. An inequality in the value of different existences is a foundational assumption of the use of violence. But what is such an evaluation of life based on? Can we quantify the value of life? In the movie *Worth*, a DC attorney named Ken Feinberg receives a charge of compensation to the victims of the September 11th terrorist attack in the United States. In order to provide the compensation, he (or the government) needs to know the value of each victim, and Feinberg attempts to quantify this. If a victim was a CEO of a company, for example, the person would receive a higher compensation, than, say, a blue-collar worker. Eventually, the attorney realizes that quantifying a person's life is not possible; each individual and each life has its own story, meaning, and value.

Violence occurs with an attempt to dominate. The power asymmetry between those who harm and those who are being harmed is an essential element in the occurrence of violence.

The idea and practice of nonviolence should be based on the opposite of a hierarchical and power-driven understanding of life. Refraining from harming attests to the value that the subject assigns to others. Non-harming is an act of preservation. When one makes efforts to preserve the other, what is it that the subject tries to preserve? One might challenge this proposal with a claim that people might try to preserve someone or a certain group so that the self can benefit from the power or financial capacity of the person or group that is being preserved. Such logic does not hold because, if that is the case, the action cannot be counted as nonviolent practice, since the power or financial hierarchy would inevitably lead to violence to others. In fact, financial hierarchy are asymmetrical power structure themselves are violence. If a life is preserved in anticipation of personal benefit or benefit to a specific group, the action perpetuates violence.

Benjamin, who I referenced earlier, calls nonviolence a “divine violence” that confirms the “sanctity of existence” against the dominance of laws that are based on creating and maintaining boundaries. Benjamin keeps the word “violence” in his concept of divine violence in the sense that the status quo that elicits violence needs to be shaken and disturbed in order for the sanctity of existence to be confirmed, even when this is done nonviolently. I don’t fully support keeping the expression and concept of “violence” in “divine violence,” but the implication is well taken.

Judith Butler, the American feminist scholar, further affirms the life-confirming nature of nonviolence. Butler states in her book *The Force of Nonviolence* that “nonviolence is not an absolute principle, but the name of an ongoing struggle.”² This is an important aspect in our understanding of nonviolence, both as a concept and for practice. In discussing reasons for the success rate of nonviolent movements, we mentioned that nonviolent movements require diverse groups of people and various forms of participation. Nonviolence can also be considered as a mindset, since a nonviolent movement should entail constant and consistent efforts to declare the meaning and value of our existence.

The Buddhist teaching of non-harming, then, is directly related to radical equality, another foundational teaching of Buddhism. Compassion, as we know, is more than a sentimental association with others who are facing a conundrum. Paired with wisdom, the capacity to see through the reality of existence, Buddhist compassion is founded on the idea that all existences are equally valuable regardless of one’s status in the phenomenal world in which each being’s value is pronouncedly hierarchical. The unequal reality of the phenomenal world endorses the importance of the Buddhist teaching of Buddha nature and the identities of the Buddha (enlightened being) and sentient (unenlightened) being.

The eighth-century Chinese lay Huayan Buddhist thinker Li Tongxuan (635-730) explains this point as follows:

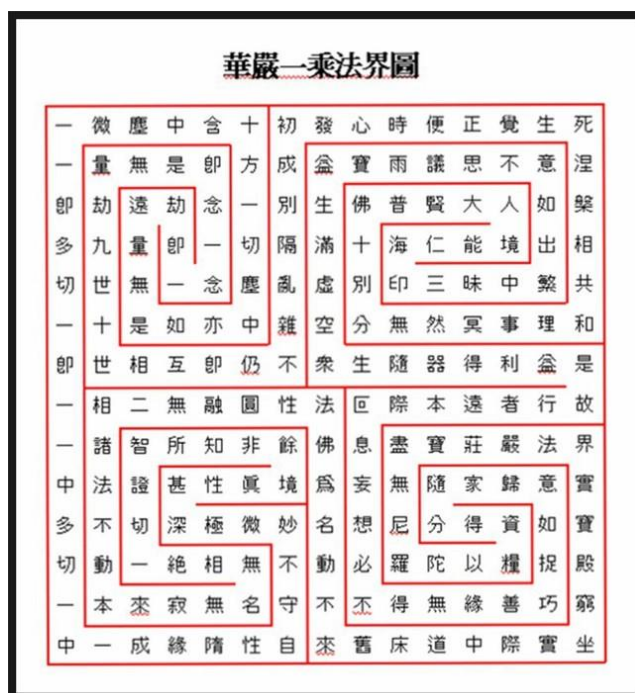
Between the mind of the Tathāgata [the Buddha] and that of all the sentient beings, there is originally no difference. . . . They are both one mind and one wisdom. All the Buddhas, with the wisdom in the mind of sentient beings, attain the correct enlightenment. All sentient beings are confused about the wisdom of all the Buddhas and make themselves sentient beings.³

² Judith Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence: An Ethico-Political Bind* (New York: Verso, 2020), 23.

³ Li Tongxuan, *Xin Huayanjing lun (Exposition of the New Huayan Sūtra 新華嚴經論)*, T. 36.1739.853c. 以如來心與一切眾生心本不異故。是一心一智慧故。……一切諸佛以一切眾生心智慧而成正覺。一切眾生迷諸佛智慧而作眾生。

On the one hand, the radical equality that this passage endorses, which is also the foundation of East Asian Huayan and Chan Buddhism, sounds absurd. How can the best possible version of human beings be the same as the average or even not-too-enviable version of ourselves? On the other hand, the foundational thesis of the Buddhist worldview of dependent co-arising, which holds that things exist through causes and conditions and not through the permanent independent essence of a being, underscores the equality of all beings. Equality in this sense is an endorsement of the value of life or existence, as we discussed before, and non-harming should be understood in this context: that is, the preservation of life for its own value, rather than as a mere precept of not-killing.

Ŭisang (義湘, 625–702), who is credited as the founder of Korean Hwaōm (Chinese, Huayan) Buddhism, created a diagram with 210 Chinese characters a work titled *Diagram of the Dharma Realm of the One Vehicle of the Hwaōm* (*Hwaōm ilsŭng pŏpkye* to 華嚴一乘法界圖), also known as the *Ocean Seal Chart* (*Haeindo* 海印圖), through which he explains the core Huayan Buddhist teachings. A disciple of Zhiyan (智儼, 602–668), the alleged second patriarch of Huayan Buddhism, Ŭisang succinctly demonstrates in the *Ocean Seal Chart* the teachings and practices of Huayan Buddhism and their benefits to sentient beings. Ŭisang also offers his own annotations to the chart, which can be divided into two sections involving comprehensive analysis of the chart and more detailed explanation of its meanings.



The *Ocean Seal Chart* begins with the character *fa* (法), representing the dharma, and as one follows the meandering squares, one eventually ends up at *fo* (佛), representing the Buddha, which is located right below *fa* (the dharma). The beginning and ending points are side by side, making the chart an inclusive one world, which can be understood as a symbolic statement of the concept of one dharma world. There is no outside in the dharma world, since everything is interconnected through causality, as depicted in Indra's Net. The idea that there is no outside means there is no inside either. The polarization of the inside and outside, which forms the basic structure of hierarchical power relationships, is eliminated in this manner.

At the core of Ūisang's teachings about this chart, which also form a core part of Huayan teachings, is the following statement: "In the one is many, and in the many is one; one is many and many are one; a particle of dust contains the entire world."⁴ Like Li Tongxuan's declaration of the identity of the Buddha and sentient beings, Ūisang's passages in which two polar concepts of one and many are conceived and declared as the same may seem counterintuitive. However, the idea of radical equality and inclusion is a demand of the practitioners of Buddhism, precisely because the phenomenal world defies such vision and functions through the logic of hierarchy and inequity. The description of the ultimate reality of the world, which holds that "a particle of dust contains the entire universe," obviously is not the phenomenal reality in which sentient beings lead their lives, and in which each being struggles to gain an upper hand over others, which inevitably leads to committing violence. The Buddha said the elimination of suffering as the goal of his teaching because the world in which sentient beings live is full of violence, and the violence is structural and, in a way, imbedded in the way the world functions, which inevitably causes suffering.

Earlier, we discussed the three layers of violence—linguistic violence, violence within social norms and laws, and physical violence—which in fact form the totality of the infrastructure of human existence. The question is not whether we can completely eliminate violence in human society, but how we can constantly raise awareness of the multifaceted existence of violence and destabilize it.

The Buddhist concept of the self as no-self, and the Huayan idea of the identity of one and many, provide a way of teaching people how to avoid violence as much as

⁴ Ūisang, "Seal-Diagram Symbolizing the Dharma Realm of the One Vehicle of the *Avatamsaka*" in *Han'guk Pulgyo chōnsō* (HPC), vol. 2, 1a–8b, 11 (cf. the recension in the *Taishō* Buddhist canon: T45.1887.711a1–716a16).

possible, thereby reducing actions that cause suffering. As discussed earlier, the logic of violence is the logic of individualism. The logic of violence also draws from a logic of hierarchical understanding of the values of lives. The radical equality presented in Huayan Buddhism serves as a warning that when one imposes harm on the assumed others, the harm is also done to the self.

In Buddhist ethics, recommendable and non-recommendable actions are defined as *kusala* (wholesome) and *akusala* (unwholesome). The former refers to actions that are conducive to eliminating suffering for others and oneself, and the latter, to those that can cause suffering for others and oneself. If one's actions result in harming others, the others on whom the harm was enacted are the victims of those actions, but the perpetrators cannot remain completely free from such results in the sense that the negative and violent actions leave negative emotions and impressions on them that will affect their later actions. Thus, the perpetrators themselves are also victims of the harm done to others.

This reality, however, is not always immediately apparent in our daily activities. Perpetrators might think they can escape the consequences of their negative behavior. And others might think there is no justice in the world when a perpetrator seems to avoid facing repercussions for their harmful actions. One of the teachings of Buddhism, which usually is not well recognized, is to have patience. Even when one boils a pot of water to make a cup of tea, one needs to wait until the boiling process runs its course—hence, the English expression, “A watched pot never boils.” When one is rushing to get a certain result without letting things run their course, one will find it very difficult to get what they want. In the U.S., there is now a meditation or mindfulness training practice of watching water boil, which stands in opposition to the idea that “A watched pot never boils.” Through this practice, one witnesses the whole process of how things evolve, watching water come to a boil as time passes by, and by focusing on the water and noticing the changes in it, one undergoes moments of reflection about oneself. Even with a pot of hot water, one needs this much patience, reinforcing the idea that things evolve at their own pace and nobody can witness the entire scope of how the process will unfold. From our individual vantage point, we see only a superficial picture of the situation at hand. Hence, patience and consistent effort form an inevitable part of Buddhist practice. Practicing nonviolence requires the same patience and persistence. Earlier, I cited Butler's warning that nonviolence is not just a principle but should be an ongoing struggle, as this point affirms.

Buddhism also has its own irony in this requirement of patience in practice. Huayan Buddhism holds, as expressed by Ūisang in his *Ocean Seal Chart*, “The moment one arouses the mind [of practice] is the moment one attains complete awakening” (初發心時便正覺). Attaining the final enlightenment will require a long period of practice. But without first resolving to practice the Buddha’s teachings, one cannot get there; also, the moment one determines to practice Buddhism, one must have already awakened. The idea inherent in this statement is sometimes misunderstood to be saying that within this first moment, everything is done, since the person has already attained the perfect awakening, and therefore no further practice is required. Such an interpretation is the result of a mindset that views the world and life as an accumulation of fragmented and self-sufficient individual entities. Instead, this statement is actually saying that at the moment of this decision, the person who arouses their mind for Buddhist practice and bodhicitta (the mind of the bodhisattva) must have undergone some awakening, since if not, that person would not raise their mind to do this. However, as important as the first arousal of the bodhisattva’s mind is the practice of doing this constantly and consistently.

Huayan Buddhism knows this well and presents fifty-two different stages of perfecting one’s practice. Hence, on the one hand, Huayan Buddhism claims that the moment one arouses the bodhisattva mind for the first time is the moment of one’s awakening; on the other, this bodhisattva mind needs to be refined, and maintained persistently, by going through different stages of practice.

In the *Huayan jing*, Sudhona’s journey of meeting fifty-three dharma friends and teachers serves as a powerful demonstration of the ongoing journey required to move along the bodhisattva path—the journey of perfecting oneself and helping others. Ūisang explains in the later section of the *Ocean Seal Chart* how the practice of Huayan teaching will benefit sentient beings, who will each receive benefits according to their capacity.

Ūisang ends the chart by defining the Buddha as “that which is originally without motion.” This obviously does not mean that the Buddha is motionless. What remains unchanging is the wisdom of the Buddha. Li Tongxuan has also emphasized the concept of the Buddha of the Unmoving Wisdom (不動智佛), which Chinul has discussed in his work on Hwaŏm Buddhism as well. The Buddha’s wisdom, which is the wisdom of the sentient being, does not change depending on external situations or the status of a being. Furthermore, this unchanging wisdom does not essentialize any element, since the wisdom itself is empty.

Western scholarship on Buddhism has criticized Buddhist meditation as a personal and private activity, since cultivation inevitably occurs at the individual level; hence, some of my students claim that Buddhism is an individualistic religion. In the Buddhist worldview, which sees beings in the context of mutual connectedness, an individual's meditation practice, or practice of compassion, cannot occur only within the secluded realm of an individual. In a symbolic way, the *Lotus Sūtra*, one of the seminal texts in Mahāyāna Buddhism, describes a scene in which the ray from the Buddha's forehead spreads throughout the world. This seemingly mystical image does not have to be read in that manner; instead, it is an indication of how one person's awakening inevitably has an influence on others.

Compassion and the practice of nonviolence should also be conceived to that effect. A compassionate action via taking another's suffering as one's own cannot be an isolated event. Instead, it necessarily has social and political meaning, however roundabout the impact of this meaning might be.

One example that shows a direct relationship between meditation and its social dimensions is various engaged Buddhist movements in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In American Buddhism, the recent development in African American Buddhism reveals an important aspect regarding meditation and its social dimensions. In response to the transgenerational trauma and anger caused by centuries of racism in American society, African American Buddhists practice meditation. This allows them to control their anger, heal their trauma, and challenge social discrimination in a nonviolent way. African American practitioners describe their practice in a succinct way in their slogan: "Sitting together so we can stand together."⁵

As Sallie King, a scholar of engaged Buddhism, notes, American society rarely offers time to think deeply about nonviolence, while it teaches students and the general public in detail about various wars throughout history. The use of nonviolence in the American Civil Rights Movement does not get as much attention as it deserves. In American higher education, except in courses in international relations and non-Western religions, nonviolence rarely enters students' curriculums. King observes, "The general public's lack of knowledge about the power of nonviolence, its admirable success rate, and the wide variety of its tools and methods itself contributes to a situation that increases

⁵ Pamela Ayo Yetunde and Cheryl A. Giles, *Black & Buddhist: What Buddhism Can Teach Us about Race, Resilience, Transformation & Freedom* (Shambhala Publications, 2020), 105.

the likelihood of violence.”⁶ Education of the general public and oneself about the nature of compassion and nonviolence and their social dimensions could be one of the first steps to creating a more socially just society in a nonviolent way.

More and more scientists, especially those in clinical science and neuroscience are interested in mindfulness which they apply to the treatment of their patients. Allow me to end this article with an anecdote. Recently I participated in a conference where scholars of humanities, social sciences, clinical and neuro-scientists share their ideas and application of mindfulness and meditation. In my own panel was a neuroscientist who is an expert of autism. I shared with him my power point slides for the presentation in advance and later after my presentation he showed me that he had underlined a passage in one of my slides, which reads: “Paired with wisdom, the capacity to see through the reality of existence, Buddhist compassion is founded on the idea that all existences are equally valuable regardless of one’s status in the phenomenal world in which each being’s value is pronouncedly hierarchical.” He said, he treats autistic children; aren’t they equal like other beings? I said of course. The world might look at people of disability from different perspectives and based on the view from the center, they might discriminate them, committing violence against them. Buddhist teachings provide the foundational idea of the radical equality of all beings, and the practice of the radical equality demands nothing other than the practice of nonviolence in our daily lives.

⁶ Sallie B. King, “Thich Nhat Hanh, Nonviolence and Skillful Means” (paper presentation; Buddhism and Nonviolence Conference; American University; Washington, D.C.; October 6, 2022).

