

Peace Is a Verb as Well as a Noun, the Path as Well as the Goal

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Presentation given at the 2013 Workshop on Transforming Humiliation and Violent Conflict,
Columbia University, New York City, December 5-6, 2013

This past August I had a wonderful experience speaking to a high school history class at Burriss Lab School in Muncie, Indiana. Their teacher, Karen Avery, had her students read my book, *The Spiritual Power of Nonviolence: Interfaith Understanding for a Future without War*, and work through the study guide I prepared. Her students were very well prepared for my “Meet the Author” visit. We had a meaningful discussion on many complex topics related to peace and nonviolence.

One point I always emphasize in my efforts to change people’s minds about nonviolence, is that peace is not a static state or condition. We must stop thinking dualistically about peace VS violence and instead, understand that building peace is an unfolding process. As I said to the students, “Peace should be thought of as a verb, as well as a noun.” Or as Mahatma Gandhi explained, peace is the path as well as the goal.

To often when we speak about nonviolence, we find ourselves merely “preaching to the choir.” My personal goal is to reach people who are *not in the choir*. When I was condemned by David Horowitz in 2004 as one of the “101 most dangerous academics in America,” I realized that people generally do not understand what Peace Studies as an academic discipline is all about.

There are many ways to define Peace Education. One definition I frequently use is “the study of conflict resolution through nonviolent means.” Here, resolution includes reconciliation, which seeks not merely to resolve conflict but also to restore friendship and working relationships between conflicting parties.

Another definition is “the study of how to minimize the impact of the Law of Unintended Consequences.” Whenever we act out of anger or revenge, we evoke strong

emotions and hostilities that tend to result in consequences that merely inflame the conflict, making the situation worse.

The field of peace education requires that we broaden the way we look at violence. Initially, most people think of violence as action intended to cause physical harm. This definition of *physical violence* is certainly self-explanatory. Many times we forget, however, that violence can be solely of a psychological nature.

Psychological violence is present when a person is experiencing emotional hostility, threats, intimidation, name-calling, verbal abuse, or forms of passive aggression. This type of violence is the easiest to participate in and the most difficult to restrict because intimidation, name-calling and verbal abuse are usually protected as free speech. Bullying, which is a serious problem in schools, can take the form of psychological violence. In addition, domestic violence within a family may not always be physically abusive, yet it can be as traumatic and psychologically debilitating to its victims. Psychological violence can have a more lasting impact than physical violence. As it says in the Indian Epic, *The Mahabharata*, "The wounds inflicted by weapons may close with time; scalds may heal gradually; but wounds inflicted by words remain painful as long as one lives."

Another type of violence is known as *structural violence*. This occurs when a political, social, or economic structure disenfranchises a certain group of people by depriving them of their basic needs or denying them equal opportunity. A political system that does not have laws against child labor, for example, tolerates structural violence when businesses and corporations employ underage children. Child laborers suffer impaired physical, emotional, and social growth. Children caught in systems that use underage labor are often denied access to education and, subsequently, access to a better life in adulthood. Structural violence also occurs in societies and organizations that restrict the rights of women. Historically, this has been the case in countries and religious institutions where women cannot attain the same economic, educational, and leadership opportunities available to men.

Recently, we have seen incidences of structural violence in the attempt by the Texas legislature to redraw congregational districts to prevent Latino voters from holding a majority. In addition, many recipients of food stamps in the United States actually have

low-paying jobs and are part of the working poor.

In the discipline of peace studies, we further broaden the definition of structural violence to include hunger, the lack of health care, inadequate housing and the denial of fundamental human rights.

Some theorists argue that psychological and structural violence are ultimately the root causes of all conflict. For this reason, many peace and justice organizations sponsor programs that fight poverty, hunger, hate speech, and various forms of human and environmental exploitation. Regardless of the country or the politico-economic system, and it is the obligation of us all to publicly expose violence in all its forms and with the goal of initiating reforms. To practice nonviolence, we must do so psychologically and structurally as well as physically.

An important concept in Gandhi's philosophy is *tapasya*. This term comes from the Sanskrit word *tapas*, meaning austerity. It is the discipline whereby one conserves or restrains anger. Often our initial autonomic response when thrown into a conflict is to become angry and feel threatened. This gives rise to what is called the "fight or flight response," which is an adaptive defense mechanism humans inherited over millions of years of biological evolution.

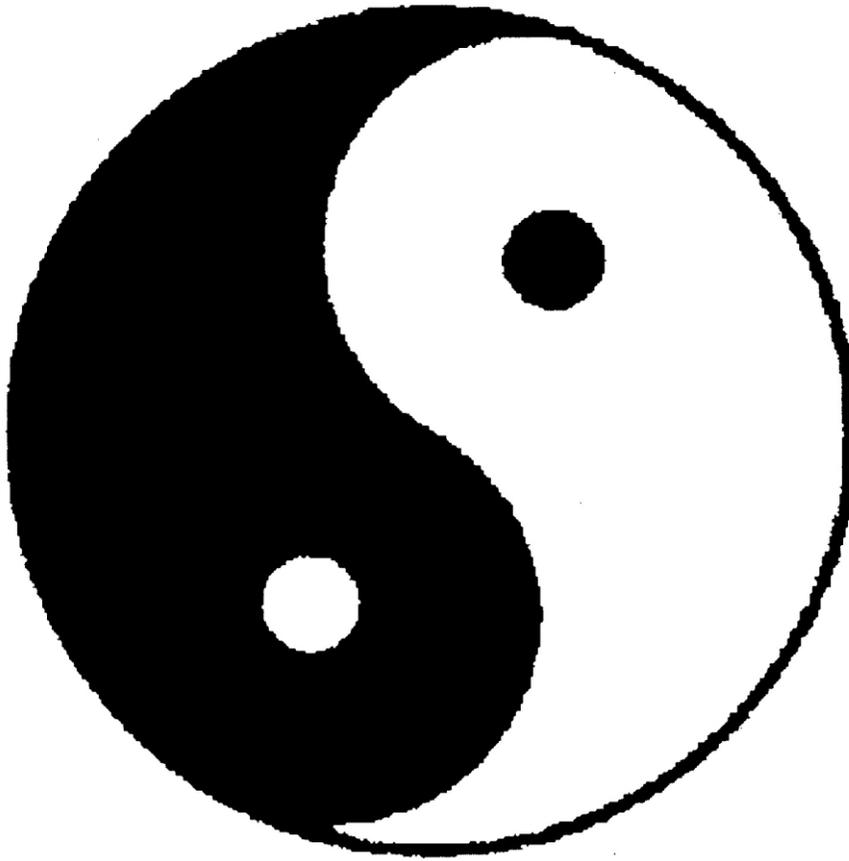
When we as modern humans allow the fight or flight response to take hold of our behavior, the conflict we are confronting is usually inflamed. *Tapasya* enables a person to subdue this autonomic defense mechanism so that reason prevails and one does not act irresponsibly out of anger or fear.

Unfortunately, *tapasya* is often misunderstood as being a condition of anger repression. On the contrary, the power of *tapasya* is actually *drawn* from a person's anger, which is then transformed into a positive force. This transformation of anger is what enables a person to experience the spiritual power of nonviolence. Theologian Walter Wink, in his book *The Powers That Be*, concisely explains the role anger should play: "[People] need to be energized by their anger. Then they can freely renounce violence for a nonviolent alternative that transforms the energy of their anger into a dynamic and resolute love."

It can be said that *tapasya* is a practice akin to meditation. When we truthfully

acknowledge and prayerfully reflect on our anger, the negative energy generating the anger is soon transformed and rechanneled into positive action that is more likely to succeed. Our energy is then directed not with vengeance toward individuals, but constructively toward issues and unjust systems. During the practice of tapasya, we are temporarily nonresponsive until an epiphany occurs. This epiphany comes as an insight or realization that reveals to us an effective, positive, nonviolent response. In this context, nonviolent conflict resolution is not a zero-sum game where one side wins and the other side loses (i.e., $+ 1 + -1 = 0$). Rather, a course is undertaken where both sides gain and reap the benefit of resolving the conflict.

The primary symbol of Taoism is known as the yin-yang. This symbol depicts complementary opposite values coexisting in a condition of mutual give-and-take.



People in Western cultures frequently ascribe good and evil to the white and black sides of this image, but such values are not part of the Taoist interpretation. Rather, the yin or black side represents mystery, intuition, and the female principle while the yang or white portion symbolizes clarity, intellect, and the stereotypical masculine side of life. The large dots of opposing color in each side of the symbol reveal that the complementary opposites are inseparable and are forever interdependent. This prevents the Taoist duality from being interpreted and applied simplistically. According to the Tao Te Ching, one is to “keep the strength of a man, but keep a woman’s care.” One must therefore learn to balance the yin and the yang within oneself and facilitate their complimentary flow in creation.

If we think of peace as the absence of war or violence, we are defining peace in the

negative. But there are also ways to define peace as a positive condition where there exists a sustained and developing collaborative relationship. Norwegian peace researcher, Johan Galtung, has referred to such a cooperative state as *positive peace*. Positive peace serves as a deterrent to hostile speech and action as the parties benefiting from the condition of positive peace do not want to jeopardize the benefits they are gaining from the relationship.

Two countries that establish a productive trade relationship or support student and faculty educational exchange programs, for example, are engaged in a form of positive peace-building. The United States, England, France, Belgium, Germany, Japan, South Korea, India, Australia, and Saudi Arabia are some examples of countries that have actively engaged in economic, educational, and cultural peace-building over the past sixty years. In addition, positive peace efforts are supported through the distribution of humanitarian aid such as occurred in response to the 2004 Asian tsunami and the devastating earthquakes that occurred in Haiti and Chile in 2010.

I like to close my presentations on peace education with the following quote from the Tao Te Ching, which poetically summarizes the concept of positive peace.

There is a saying among soldiers:

I dare not make the first move but would rather play the guest;

I dare not advance an inch but would rather withdraw a foot.

This is called marching without appearing to move,

Rolling up your sleeves without showing your arm,

Capturing the enemy without attacking,

Being armed without weapons.

—Tao Te Ching (ch. 79)

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