

Buddhist Meditations on Achieving Peace

Transcript

Professor Mark Owen

Thank you very much. I'll voice. Thanks for that. Yeah, I'd just like to say great pleasure to be here. Thank you very much, Liz, for inviting me. I was meant to come a couple of years ago, I think, at the meeting in Bradford, but unfortunately I was unwell. So thank you very much, Liz, for inviting me back. Trust me, it's the whole committee. The whole committee. Everybody, thank you. So Yeah, Liz has asked me to talk about peace building, which is a subject that I've been studying, I guess, for about the last 20 years on and off, really started working with Tibetan communities in Northern India, and of course, Tibet time in question, which was always being discussed. And then I sort of more formally moved into that research area. having worked with people in Liverpool, Myanmar, Thailand, Sri Lanka, several other countries. So I feel I'm here to represent those really. I mean, I don't speak for myself from a sort of particularly professional point of view, although I've been a sort of very bad Buddhist for probably about 30 years. But really it's about trying to relay some of the lessons I've learned from working with those people. in situations of conflict, really, the ones who are actually dealing with those situations of conflict. So, yeah, so I want to begin with a story, if I may. I am going to move this hopefully to discussing and making some point on the UN system towards the end. But really, Before the coup in Myanmar, the last military coup in 2021, I worked with a colleague in Myanmar for about 6 years, Professor Alan King. We worked on a range of Petersburg and projects supporting different grassroots up to fairly high level dialogue between politicians, council representatives. But one of the projects really that particularly sticks in my mind was one working with the United States Institute of Peace. And they were actually developing A Buddhism and peacebuilding curriculum. And the idea of this curriculum was to bring together Western ideas of conflict transformation, peacebuilding, and try and marry that together with Buddhist concepts and ideas. And I think one part of this project was we went to Yangon for about a week and trialled this curriculum with young Buddhist peacebuilders and activists. And it's really good lessons are learned from that process. that is going to form the sort of basis for this presentation and the kind of wisdom and lessons I want to handle today. So firstly, and I will bring it back down to these lessons later on when I'm talking about more broadly about peacebuilding, was the young peacebuilders acknowledge the importance of British philosophy teachings, a practice for peacebuilding, but also recognise the value of peacebuilding methods from outside their own religious and cultural context. As I said, I'm going to come back to these, but also I do want to try and ask you to keep them in mind. But I think it's said something really important about Buddhist ideas, traditions and the syncretic and kind of flexible nature of Buddhism as a

religion and Buddhist societies. The other thing we noted really was that facilitators and young people were really skilled and effective at synthesizing alternative peacebuilding ideas with existing religious and cultural ideas, stories and teachings. Again, I'm going to come back to this, but really it speaks to the importance of context in peacebuilding. And many of us here who have been involved with theoretically and practically in peacebuilding know that for effective and sustainable peacebuilding, context is so important. And really what was happening was these young people, as they were learning about peaceful and ideas, they were actually automatically translating them into their own context and culture. So they were imbuing these teachers with local traditions, teachings with local traditions, local stories. So they were overlaying their own religious and cultural ideas on top of this, which which actually was really the job we were meant to be doing in a much better and more effective way than we could ever do. And lastly, relationships, ideas, non-violence, interdependency, sanctity of all sensitive beings were just inherited in their understanding of peacebuilding and worldview. So that's just really noting that again, I think us as outsiders were asked to come up with this curriculum. It was me and a couple of colleagues at the United States Institute of Peace. We were sat down, we were thinking very carefully about how Buddhist ideas of interdependency or the 340s and would marry up with Geltman's idea of the conflict triangle. Actually, again, you know, this wasn't necessarily the young people, the Buddhists, the peace activists, they just did this naturally. This knowledge was in her own opinion. And actually, even to the point that sometimes they said, well, we're not really interested in Buddhist ideas, we want to learn about Western ideas. But that's how we learned about them. They were actually translating them and overlaying their own innate Buddhist cultural and religious knowledge on top of these teachings. So saying something about the nature of peace in Buddhism, I think it's quite important as an underpinning. This is a quote often attributed to the historical Buddha. Peace comes from within. Do not seek it without. However, if we look at Buddhist scripture and philosophy, there's actually a lot of teachings where, and this is probably the stereotypical idea of Buddhism, this idea of inner peace, cultivating inner peace, detachment from the material world. But actually there's plenty of teachings within Buddhism that actually relates inner peace to outer peace. This is one example, the Chakravarti Sanada Sutra where The Buddha actually gave a detailed narrative, illustrating and emphasising the direct link between poverty, social injustice, and how supportive social and community ideas were really important for the development of inner peace. So the two are intimately interrelated in Buddhism. We can't have one without the other. There's also a Buddhist concept of dependent origination. It's been mentioned already several times today that knowledge of interdependency or belief in interdependency between all different beings. And this is very much part of Buddhist traditions where the concept of dependent origination is really the understanding that we all exist in relationship with each other and we can't actually exist without that relationship. But not just between humans, coming back to our last talk. between all

sensitive beings, between all creatures, and how important that link is between all different beings. Lastly, the concept of the Bodhisattva, this is particularly in Mahayana Buddhism, where the enlightened beings or Bodhisattvas, some of you may know about this, most famous example, the Dalai Lama lineage. They're believed to be the reincarnation of the Bodhisattva or the Kirtimukha. So these are enlightened beings, but actually rather than choose to go off to Nirvana and escape that cycle of rebirth, they've actually taken the Bodhisattva vow, which is the choice to come back and reborn, be reborn on Earth in order to help all other sentient beings achieve that sense of enlightenment. So there's very much a strong tradition of within Buddhism of that sense of helping others, interdependency, interconnectivity. And I just wanted to make that point rather than I think peace within Buddhism is often seen as this abstract ideal of meditation, isolation, rejection, non-attachment. But I think within Buddhist traditions and actually certainly in the living religion, this is a very different experience for most Buddhists. And this is probably most evident in engaged Buddhism, which is a philosophy of practice, as it says there, that integrates spiritual beliefs with social action to address root causes and suffering in the world. I don't know where that's happening. Sorry about that. So yes, again, it's just a really Let me check the time. It's really to emphasize that, again, within Buddhism, there's a very strong tradition of peacebuilding, social action, action on the environment. And we have strong traditions within this, within, across all different traditions. There's kind of senses of socially engaged beliefs, peacebuilding, Buddhist peacebuilding centres. And there's a key example of the Tibetan Centre of Conflict Resolution in North India, International Networking Engaged Buddhists, Buddhist Peace Fellowship, amongst others. I mean, really, this is just to just, again, emphasise the point that there's a strong tradition of peacebuilding and conflict transformation within Buddhism. So sorry, I'm rushing through this bit because I want to get to the point at the end really. So Buddhist resources for building just a sustainable peace. So what are those traditions, ideas within Buddhism that really can support on the ground very much practical conflict transformation and peace building activities? So Buddhist concepts such as non-violence, compassion, the sanctity of all sentient beings, depending on relation, are intimately embedded in the cultural and social consciousness of Buddhists and Buddhist societies. So these are some of the things that really make working within Buddhist societies and communities really make those opportune environments, I guess, for developing peacebuilding practice. So I think within those good societies, what becomes evident when you work there on the ground is actually people have really absorbed these inherently innate ideas that are actually really fertile ground for peaceful and conflict transformation. Also, there's syncretic and adaptable nature of Buddhism. as a lived tradition, enables Buddhists to accept and take on new ideas. So again, when we're working with Buddhist communities on the ground, you can really, it's really open to first half of new ideas. I actually got sent this a couple of days ago to emphasise this by a friend. In the bottom left hand corner, World's first robot monk

devotes himself to Buddhism, which has is, I guess, one example of that ability to adapt. So the relative authority and influence of religious leadership are still within Buddhist communities and societies. Religious leadership is still influential. Again, this goes from high level religious leaders, bands with communities, grassroots leaders. You can really sense, even for young people within communities, the religious leadership and what religious leaders say Buddhist has an influence on people's behaviour and attitudes. One of the examples of this I suggest is Tibetan Buddhist communities and spent quite a long time with the inspect of these communities in India. It's actually really startling what an influence the Dalai Lama and actually other senior religious leaders have on even young Buddhist attitudes and behaviours. Several times I've had conversations with young Buddhists to say, yes, you know, we will actually turn to violence against China's occupation. And there's a number of stories about training camps that have been set up in northeast India. Buddhist insurgencies being prepared to vet insurgencies against China. But actually, as long as the His Holiness alarm is alive, we'll never turn to violence because he's asked us not to. So I think you can see this within Buddhist communities across South East Asia, but there's still a very strong sense that religious authority and influence does have an influence on people's daily lives. The next point is religion is not distinct from other facets of life, politics, social ideas, conceptions of peace. economic systems, justice, etc. It's an inherent and indivisible element which informs people's worldviews. So again, this point has peace-building practitioners and seeing this on the ground is the fact that actually, when you work with religious actors and influential religious actors, They are also accessible and have relationships with other actors within society. So they can be really powerful tools for influencing other parts of political systems. Economics, okay. I can see, sorry, I'll come into it.

Speaker 2

This is hard code. When I'm waiting in the wings, they know to stop talking.

Professor Mark Owen

Yeah, So I've got two really quick sides. Sorry, I've kind of slightly brushed through this. I think the point I have to make.

Speaker 2

May I just say, please finish in those two minutes, and then if you're just going to be available for questions, we'll give maybe the public Q&A on this because our next presentation is actually being live streamed from South Africa. So we have to be quite careful about our timing on that. So please finish, catch your breath, and then don't go away during tea time. I'm sure there are going to be people that are like to speak with you.

Professor Mark Owen

Thank you. So just to summarize really before I finish saying something briefly about UN systems. So the Buddhist context maybe like this is a quote from someone called Sutta Anand who was an engaged Buddhist peaceful activist and professor. The Buddhist context may look conducive to peacemaking at first, but it can easily generate a high degree of frustration. Like all lived religions, But if they're embedded in complex social, cultural, economic context, we can't determine how Buddhists are likely to act or their attitudes for peace or violence from abstract scriptures. Of course, they're influenced highly within their context, whether that be religious leaders or their own social economic conditions. So therefore, self-evidently, wars and violence are no less prevalent unfortunately in Buddhist countries than in many other countries throughout the world. That said, I think for the reasons I've tried to suggest in terms of leadership, adaptability, etc., I think Buddhist countries and Buddhist societies and communities, in my experience, are really fertile ground for peacebuilding ideas, that their ability to absorb different ideas, adapt them, transfer them into their own cultural and religious context, act on them with religious leaders, networks. So there's huge potential, I think. There's many studies, I haven't added them on here, that really show that Buddhist communities are highly, have high potential for peace building. understand the context and the ways in which different Buddhist teachings and traditions manifest. So really coming back to that idea of context, linking it up with the initial workshop I was talking about, the reason why that was so successful and I think the peacebuilding activists and young people made that peacebuilding curriculum so good was decisive because of this, because as we were learning about it and developing it, was really all about their own context. They automatically translated and embedded it within their own traditions, ideas, stories, songs even. So it wasn't an abstract idea of what British peacebuilding might be able to achieve in terms of the four noble truths or the three poisons. It is very much rooted within context. So I think like many of us here today, we've all had some experience of working with the UN systems. I myself have worked with UNICEF, UN Genocide Prevention on a guide for religious and traditional actors on preventing hate speech. We work with UNICEF on hate speech programme actually. I think someone mentioned earlier about the UN should engage more with religious leaders and actors. In my experience, there's a lot of that going on at the moment. Almost every UN agency has got an initiative where they're engaging with religious leaders. What I would say, I think, and actually UN Environment Programme as well, we've been involved with in advising on the conference there. I think what I would say is that it's being done to ad hoc because UN agencies, they don't know who's doing what. I think it's done on a very abstract level in terms of it's normally about gathering a group of senior religious leaders in a room, asking them what they think about faith and then drawing it up into a set of guidelines. whereas actual real effective peace-working work happens on the ground, like I said, in grasslands contacts with people doing the work

and relating it to their own context. So, yeah, I think there's actually plenty of work going on within the UN that needs to be improved in a much more joined-up way. So, thank you very much for listening. That was a very quick overview.