

## Understanding Conflict over Land: Insights from the Buddhist Tradition

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In 2005, Doreen Massey, a postmodernist human geographer, argued that space was not a value-free, neutral side-kick of time but was rather a dynamic, constructed and imagined category that was the ‘product’ of human ‘interrelations’ and inherently political.<sup>1</sup> She built on the work of Henri Lefebvre, who argued in 1974 that space is socially produced and conditioned by power relations.<sup>2</sup> Both influenced what has been termed a ‘spatial turn’ in the humanities and the study of conflict, particularly conflict where religion is involved. Human geographers, Lily Kong and Orlando Woods, in 2016, for instance, stated that, ‘using space as a main conceptual frame for understanding religious competition, conflict and violence is not only desirable, but also essential’.<sup>3</sup>

This conference has demonstrated the truth of these insights. The land, the space of Israel/Palestine, has lain at the heart of our discussions and, although religion is not the only cause of conflict there, it is certainly not innocent, to use the phrase of a Bosnian imam, who spoke to an interreligious group I was part of in the 1990s. One reason why space is dynamic and political, and why religion is not innocent in conflict, is because both bear the burden and complexities of what I will call human imaginaries, in other words the world views, the patterns of perception held by groups and individuals, which are then projected onto and embodied within space and land.

In the last six years, I have been applying the framework of space to religious and ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka, both in the colonial and postcolonial periods. In 2018, a monograph will be published by Routledge on this.<sup>4</sup> In it, I move between the imaginaries present in Christian, Sinhala Buddhist and Tamil communities, and the conflict engendered by these imaginaries in space. I will use Sri Lanka as illustration later.

Imaginaries are expressed through language and where religion is involved, theological language, as this conference has demonstrated. What I would like to add to the discussion is a Buddhist critique of our imaginaries or our world views, a critique, I should

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<sup>1</sup> Doreen Massey, 2005. *For Space*. Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore, Washington DC: Sage: 9.

<sup>2</sup> Henri Lefebvre (transl. Donald Nicholson-Smith), 1991. *The Production of Space*. Oxford: Blackwell.

<sup>3</sup> Lily Kong & Orlando Woods, 2016. *Religion and Space: Competition, Conflict and Violence in the Contemporary World*. London & New York: Bloomsbury: 9.

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth J. Harris, 2018. *Religion, Space and Conflict in Sri Lanka; colonial and postcolonial contexts*. Abingdon & New York: Routledge.

add, that some Buddhists themselves have used to critique their own governments. But why bring Buddhist philosophy into a conference about theological language and Israel/Palestine? Perhaps I need to say a word about that first in case it could be seen as an esoteric irrelevance. The main reason is that, when faced with conflict in the world and within religions, we need wisdom not only from those traditions within which we feel comfortable but also from those that might appear truly Other, and that might discomfort us and force us into new ways of seeing. Buddhism is a tradition or a set of traditions that might do this. My own journey into Buddhism began over thirty years ago and is still continuing, through my teaching and writing, and I draw on this in what follows.<sup>5</sup> Some of what I say may make for uncomfortable reading. I do not intend to negate facts on the ground – the separation wall, the blockade of Gaza, the occupation. My intention is rather to encourage reflection on how our minds work with these facts. It may help us all to move back a little from our positions.

My Buddhist critique comes both from contemporary Buddhists and also what the Pāli texts of Theravāda or Southern Buddhism, present in countries such as Sri Lanka, Thailand, Cambodia and Myanmar, say about the mind and the realities we construct. I begin, however, with words written by the Mennonite conflict resolution specialist, John Paul Lederach, after 9/11. I will then reflect on how Buddhism can throw light on Lederach's points, before applying this to Israel/Palestine, with an illustration from Sri Lanka. Lastly, I will say something about transformation. Lederach wrote:

Always remember that realities are constructed. Conflict is, among other things, the process of building and sustaining very different perceptions and interpretations of reality. This means that we have at the same time multiple realities defined as such by those in conflict. In the aftermath of such horrific and unmerited violence [9/11] this may sound esoteric. But we must remember that this fundamental process is how we end up referring to people as fanatics, madmen, and irrational. In the process of name-calling we lost the critical capacity to understand that from within the ways they construct their views [those of Al Qaeda], it is not mad lunacy or fanaticism.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Elizabeth J. Harris, 2010. *Buddhism for a Violent World: A Christian Reflection*. London: Epworth – taken over by SCM when Epworth closed.

<sup>6</sup> John Paul Lederach, 'The Challenge of Terror: A Travelling Essay', accessed on 2.12.17 from [www.mediate.com](http://www.mediate.com)

How can Buddhism help here? To me, Lederach's words sound very Buddhist. At the heart of Buddhist philosophy is the insight that much of our suffering and anguish is caused by our own minds, not just the cognitive part of our minds but also the affective part, our hearts in western vocabulary. According to Buddhism, this is true of absolutely all of us, unless we have reached enlightenment, for we are born as humans, and within Buddhist belief we have had many lives before this one, because we have not yet eradicated the poisons of greed, hatred and delusion from our hearts and minds. Or to put it another way, we are reborn in a world of suffering because our craving for existence has not been transformed into compassion and wisdom. According to the Buddhist world view, therefore, greed, hatred and delusion, rooted in egotistical craving, enfold our world and also condition the way we relate to the world from birth, unless we see that there is a problem with the way we think and act, and seek to overcome it. At the heart of this is the way in which language prioritises personal pronouns such as 'I' or 'We' and 'They'. Our contact with external objects is mediated through them. Now some readers may be thinking that in Israel/Palestine or during the Shoah, suffering is or was caused by institutional, external greed and not the greed of the victims. I agree and so do the Pāli texts, since they recognise that institutional greed can also cause suffering. My presentation, however, will focus not on this but on the individual or collective mind.

One offshoot of the position that we are born as humans because we have not eradicated greed, hatred and delusion is that what we take for reality is constructed by our minds and hearts, under the influence of this greed, hatred and delusion. Let me say more about the meaning of 'delusion'. It is present, according to Buddhism, when we do not recognise that everything in our phenomenal world is impermanent and, therefore, should not be clung to, and that this also applies to our own bodies and minds. We are also impermanent. Everything in our body and mind is constantly changing. We do not possess an *unchanging* 'I' or self that has to be pampered, protected and promoted, although Buddhism would add that we need to extend loving kindness to ourselves. Clinging to self, its space and its interests is, therefore, part of delusion in Buddhism. When this kind of delusion operates, whether through an individual 'I' or a collective 'I', objectivity and, most importantly, discernment recedes, according to Buddhism. The Buddhist path, therefore, involves practices that help us discover how our minds and hearts work in the hope that we can change.

That our realities are contextual and situated has been rediscovered in postmodernism, which has stressed the impossibility of a strictly objective stance. However, Buddhism says

more than this, in terms of what happens in a mind governed by greed, hatred and delusion. The Pāli texts present the minds and hearts of those who are not on the path to enlightenment or who are not following a truly religious path, as dis-eased. The Buddha is reported as saying that those who can escape physical disease to a great age are numerous but that those who can escape mental disease are few: ‘But, monks, those beings are hard to find in the world who can admit freedom from mental disease even for a moment, save only those in whom the *āsavas* [corruptions – sense desire, desiring eternal existence, wrong views, ignorance] are destroyed’.<sup>7</sup>

Caroline Brazier, a western convert to Buddhism and a trained psychologist has described our constructed, self-driven realities in this way:

[B]ut it should be clear from what we have seen so far [Brazier’s explanation of Buddhist philosophy] that what we are looking at in Buddhist psychology is a psychology of addiction. But to what are we addicted? For most of us, it is an addiction to self. The self we create is the source of security and comfort to which we turn when life gets difficult; and this habitual pattern of refuge is just as persistent and just as falsely based as any substance addiction.<sup>8</sup>

There is another discourse in the Pāli Canon, the *Madhupiṇḍika Sutta*,<sup>9</sup> literally the Honeyball Discourse, which mentions a term that is most relevant here. In Pāli, the word is *papañca* and it is often translated as proliferation, although I.B. Horner, a prominent western scholar of Buddhism, translated it as ‘obsessions’. *Papañca* is the proliferation of thoughts, feelings and judgements in the unenlightened mind. We all, I am sure, find that our minds sometimes run away from us, that our thoughts or our feelings race. This is *papañca*. The Honeyball Discourse declares that *papañca* is the cause of such things as taking up weapons, quarrelling, contending, disputing and slander, and that the defeat of *papañca* is the way to end such actions. So it declares:

Bhikkhus [monks], as to the source through which perceptions and notions tinged by mental proliferation [*papañca*] beset a man [person]; if nothing is found there to delight in, welcome and hold to, this is the end of the underlying tendency to

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<sup>7</sup> *Āṅguttara Nikāya* ii 143. The *Āṅguttara Nikāya* is a section of the *Sutta Piṭaka* of the Pāli Canon. This translation has been taken from the translation of F. L. Woodward for the Pali Text Society.

<sup>8</sup> Caroline Brazier, 2003. *Buddhist Psychology: Liberate your Mind: Embrace Life*. London: Robinson: 33.

<sup>9</sup> *Madhupiṇḍika Sutta, Majjhima Nikāya* I 108-114. Translations of most discourses in the *Majjhima Nikāya* can be found on the website: [www.accesstoinsight.org](http://www.accesstoinsight.org)

lust, of the underlying tendency to aversion, of the underlying tendency to views, of the underlying tendency to doubt, of the underlying tendency to conceit, of the underlying tendency to desire for being, of the underlying tendency to ignorance; this is the end of resorting to rods and weapons, of quarrels, brawls, disputes, recrimination, malice, and false speech...<sup>10</sup>

According to the Buddhist scholar monk, Bhikkhu Ñāṇānanda, *papañca* is a spreading out of concepts that occurs in the last stages of our mental processes of cognition, when our thoughts and feelings run riot. He then adds a most interesting point based on the grammatical structure of the Pāli. When this proliferation happens, he argues, we become the victims of our own mental and linguistic constructions. So, drawing from the *Madhupiṇḍika Sutta*, he writes:

Like the legendary resurrected tiger which devoured the magician who restored it to life out of its skeletal bones, the concepts and linguistic conventions overwhelm the worldling who evolved them. At the final and crucial stage of sense-perception, the concepts are, as it were, invested with an objective character.<sup>11</sup>

His evidence is the description in the *Sutta* of what arises in the mind when the senses engage with sense objects and I quote from what is said about visual consciousness:

Dependent on the eye and forms [external objects], eye-consciousness arises. The meeting of the three is contact. With contact as condition, there is feeling. What one feels, that one perceives. What one perceives, that one thinks about. What one thinks about, that one mentally proliferates [*papañca*]. With what one has mentally proliferated as the source, perceptions and notions tinged by mental proliferations beset a man with respect to past, future, and present forms cognizable to the eye.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> The translation is taken from: Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi's translation for Wisdom Publications. See also Elizabeth J Harris, 1994. *Violence and Disruption in Society: A Study of the Early Buddhist Texts*. Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society: 27-30.

<sup>11</sup> Bhikkhu Ñāṇānanda, 1971. *Concept and Reality in Early Buddhist Thought*. Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society: 6, quoted in Harris, *Violence and Disruption in Society*: 29.

<sup>12</sup> Majjhima Nikāya I 111-112, using the translation of Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi for Wisdom Publications.

It is the Pāli word translated as ‘beset’ that Ñāṇānanda concentrates on, since it implies a reversal of the usual process of thought. The thoughts take on a life of their own and ‘beset’ the thinker, namely make the thinker the victim. If we use the image of the resurrected tiger seriously, this kind of proliferation can kill us in some way – can destroy us and our communities.

In 1994, in an academic piece on what the Pāli texts say about violence and disruption in society, I wrote that this analysis was of immense significance in understanding ‘how certain negative and destructive tendencies can grow in society’.<sup>13</sup> Ñāṇānanda emphasises that *papañca* happens in the unenlightened mind, by arguing that it works through craving, conceit (the tendency to measure yourself up against others) and views that flow from egocentric consciousness. He also emphasizes, as I have done, that language reinforces this, by creating a dualism between subject and object in the individual or collective mind: ‘I like this’, ‘I want to be rid of this’, ‘We like this’.

In 1994, I imagined what a proliferation could look like and it went something like this:

I feel aversion. I am right to feel aversion. Therefore, the object is inherently worthy of aversion.....So the object must threaten me and others. Therefore, the object must be got rid of.... I cannot survive unless this object is annihilated from my sphere of vision and feeling....It is my duty to annihilate this for my sake and the sake of others.<sup>14</sup>

In this sequence, ‘I feel aversion’ to whatever object is in the mind’s eye comes first. It is a feeling that is contingent on experience, on conditioning, on personal likes and dislikes. The proliferation that happens in the mind then universalizes the feeling and transforms it into an empirically verifiable conviction, fuelled by a kind of righteous anger, and then a duty to act. ‘Aversion’ here could be replaced by fear, jealousy, a feeling of being threatened and so on. Another person, however, might not see the object as worthy of aversion at all and might construct a completely different argument, which would eventually take over the mind in a similar way.

In 2010, I wrote this:

The concept of *papañca* has helped me to see that humans can become the victims of themselves when they are unaware that the first steps of their argument or thought

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<sup>13</sup> Harris, *Violence and Disruption in Society*: 29.

<sup>14</sup> Harris, *Violence and Disruption in Society*: 30.

process might be rooted in selfishness or subjective thoughts, ‘I do not like this’ or ‘I cannot live without this.’ If Nānānanda is right, such thoughts, when they have proliferated, can lead to war, genocide and torture, with the perpetrator unaware of the full horror of what has been unleashed or that his or her thought processes were not based on reason but were flawed from the beginning. The ‘reality’ that was perceived was a constructed reality, which then took on a life of its own.<sup>15</sup>

In my working experience, I have visited or lived in a number of countries in conflict, most particularly the Balkans, Israel/Palestine and Sri Lanka. In the light of this, Nānānanda simply makes sense to me. It was this kind of argument that Lederach was applying in the quote I gave at the beginning, when he sought to throw light on how an Other can be demonised, or that a Buddhist academic and activist, David Loy, used, similarly after 9/11, when he declared that Al Qaeda and George Bush were different sides of the same coin. They were both victims of constructed realities that did not correspond to the realities seen by other people. Bush’s ‘axis of evil’ and Al Qaeda’s hatred of the West were similar in that they were non-nuanced and based on faulty first principles – principles that had more to do with fear, greed, hatred and delusion than empirical fact.

What I am trying to say is that these insights about the working of the individual or collective mind, driven by vocabulary centred on the ‘I’ or the ‘We’, can be applied to many situations of conflict. I hesitate to make explicit how they could apply to Israel/Palestine. Yet, let me try. In the Israel/Palestine situation, the majority of Palestinians and Israelis start from different premises, driven by their particular experiences and their sense of self and collective identity. Sometimes this is informed by religious texts. Christians outside the conflict are no less conditioned, both by their experience of the situation on the ground and their different readings of the Bible, for instance whether they draw on the theme of justice for the dispossessed or restoration of the Jewish people to the land. Further thoughts then proliferate from these points of departure with the danger that the thinkers become the victims of their thought processes. Different constructed realities and different affective responses emerge underpinned by different sets of premises about identity and/or theology and/or politics. These can diverge so greatly that dialogue between them can be almost impossible, unless those who see that there is a problem can influence others or encourage a process of empathy and respectful listening.

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<sup>15</sup> Elizabeth J Harris, 2010. *Buddhism for a Violent World: A Christian Reflection*. London: SCM: 122.

So in the last part of this presentation, I would like to concentrate on what Buddhism says about transcending our constructed realities and I again draw on what I wrote in 1994 on what the Buddhist texts say about violence and disruption in society. Within the section on ‘Can Violent Tendencies be Eradicated?’ in this publication, I first pointed out that there is an optimism at the heart of Buddhism, expressed in the conviction that humans are makers of their own futures. Yet, there is no concept in Buddhism of a worldly utopia, a new heaven and a new earth. According to Buddhism, this world will always be shot through with greed, hatred and delusion and we will always be blind, unless we see there is a problem and seek to overcome our greeds and hatreds. As one verse of the Dhammapada, a popular text containing short proverb-like sayings, declares:

The world has become blind;

Few see here.

A few go to heaven

Like a bird released from a net (Dhammapada v. 174)<sup>16</sup>

The reason for this, as I have tried to show, is that our perceptions, and our abilities to see and hear, are conditioned by what is happening in our minds, most particularly by the thought patterns that we have built up through experience and nurture since childhood – and further back if we take the Buddhist belief in other lives into account. According to more than one Buddhist text, this blindness is reinforced because we almost instinctively consort with people who make us happy, by agreeing with what we say and not challenging our world views.<sup>17</sup> True change cannot come if we are nourished only by these types of friends, the texts add; biased perceptions are simply reinforced. New insights cannot grow. Yet, there are nevertheless examples in Buddhist narrative of conflictual situations being turned around through people being exposed to another way of being.

One narrative from the Pāli texts concerns a serial killer, Aṅgulimāla who terrorises and depopulates villages. The Buddha goes out to meet him, against the advice of local people. Aṅgulimāla, according to the story, decides to follow his usual course of killing intruders into his territory. The Buddha, however, uses his psychic powers – and Buddhas are endowed

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<sup>16</sup> The translation is by K.R. Norman for The Pali Text Society.

<sup>17</sup> See *Sunakkhatta Sutta*, *Majjhima Nikāya* ii 252-261 and the *Cūḷapunnama Sutta*, *Majjhima Nikāya* iii 20-24.

with numerous of these - to ensure that Aṅgulimāla cannot catch up with him, however hard he tries. The Buddha then talks to Aṅgulimāla about walking and standing still. This slaps the murderer so hard that he is forced to see that the path he had been following was futile. Another important element in the narrative is visual: the contrast between Aṅgulimāla, wearing a necklace of fingers from the hands of his victims, and the Buddha, peaceful, unafraid and serene, in simple robes made from scraps of dyed cloth. The upshot is that Aṅgulimāla completely changes and becomes a revered Buddhist monk, who gains enlightenment.

Aṅgulimāla-type stories, of course, also exist in the Christian, Jewish and Muslim traditions. It is one way that Buddhism and the abrahamic religions suggest that change can come, namely through encounters that cause a flash of insight in the mind, when the individuals concerned, the perpetrators of violence, realise the evil present in their previous thought and action. The other ways are more mundane and hard and, in Buddhism, concern the kind of education that meets people where they are and leads them gradually to new patterns of thought, or the individual practice of meditation, through which knowledge of the mind arises. Again I could give numerous examples from the Pāli texts but will restrict myself to one.

In the *Dantabhūmi Sutta*, literally the Discourse on the Tamed Stage, a novice monk speaks to a prince about the spiritual ideals of non-attachment to sense pleasures and one-pointedness of mind. The prince declares both of these to be impossible to attain. The novice, bewildered at his failure, goes to the Buddha, who says that such advanced teaching could not have been understood by a prince, who was given to sensual pleasures and self-seeking. The novice should have started at a less advanced point, meeting the prince where he was, and he gives the illustration of the training of an elephant for use by a warrior king. A trainer would never introduce an untrained elephant into a war situation and expect the animal to withstand blows of the sword. Training for warfare has to be done gradually, beginning with kind words, rewards and a gradual discipline.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, the discourse suggests, if a teacher wishes to encourage change in an individual or group, he or she should do it gradually, with compassion, starting where the listeners are.

Again, how can these insights about transformation be applied to the context this conference has addressed, such as the existence of different theologies of the land and different representations of ground realities, in other words, of different imaginaries? First,

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<sup>18</sup> *Dantabhūmi Sutta, Majjhima Nikāya* iii 128-137.

they teach us that our imaginaries are tenacious. Human communities do not change them easily, since we instinctively seek out the ‘facts’ and experiences that reinforce them, and are unwilling to be challenged by alternative perspectives. In fact, if other points of view are presented with absolute starkness, the result can be total shut down, denial or defensiveness, because these new points of view cannot be related in any way to the home world view or imaginary. I saw this happen again and again in Sri Lanka, amongst nationalist Buddhists, who pictured themselves as the victims of a terrorism that was the most vicious in the world, namely that of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). When outsiders argued that the Tamils were the main victims, not of the LTTE but of the state and nationalist Buddhists, anger and a refusal to engage resulted, because there was no touching point between the two imaginaries. There was no pathway, without new, concrete experience, along which the holder of one view could move with integrity to the other. This scenario can be contrasted with the workshops that were organised in Sinhala Buddhist villages during the war by some Non-Governmental Organisations, for instance the National Peace Council. These took a gradual approach, encouraging the villagers to compare their own experience with that of the Tamils in the North, presented to them by Tamils. The result was not ‘This cannot be true’ but ‘We never knew!’, ‘We never knew that they experience the same fear as we do’. Here, bringing Sinhala villagers to a more empathetic position about the ethnic conflict was a gradual process of encouraging them to change the root perceptions from which their world view proliferated and flowed. It involved encouraging them to have a wider understanding of victimhood in the Sri Lanka context.

I would suggest that theological imaginaries are subject to the same principles. Theological thought patterns and vocabularies are also subject to what the Buddhist tradition would call *papañca* – proliferations rooted in premises that are perceived to represent uncomplicated theological truth. When one vocabulary meets another, unless there is some kind of meeting point through which both can be interrogated, there will be little meeting of minds.

So, in conclusion I have argued that ‘space’ or land is dynamic and political because it bears the burdens of our human imaginaries, informed variously by our theologies and our perceptions of self. I have suggested that the Buddhist insight that our realities are constructed can throw light on this. And I have gone further than this by drawing out the relevance of the further Buddhist insight that, when our realities are constructed through greed, hatred and delusion, we can become the victims of our thoughts through the process of proliferation. We can be deceived into thinking that our judgements and our convictions are

absolutely justified, when, in fact, they can be rooted in false premises, informed by our particular imaginary. I ended, however, on a positive note by stressing that dialogue and education that meets people where they are, perhaps stressing common meeting points, can lead to change. My hope is that such meeting points can be found within the conflicting constructed 'realities' and theologies that surround Israel/Palestine.