NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

# Talking nonviolence with the Buddhists

John Dear S.J. | Feb. 19, 2013 On the Road to Peace

Seventy-five of us gathered over the weekend at the beautiful Upaya Zen Center [1] for a powerful retreat on the themes of nonviolence and peace from Christian and Buddhist perspectives. It was inspiring to lead the retreat with my friend Roshi Joan Halifax, one of the greatest Buddhist leaders in the world. We sat in perfect Buddhist stillness for several one-hour periods of silence each day. Roshi and I presented our teachings, then we had small and large group discussions. I think everyone came away energized, if not changed.

During my session, I invited retreat attendees to reflect on the violence in their lives and the world and how they can become more nonviolent. We spent some time defining nonviolence, then I spoke about its three dimensions: being nonviolent toward ourselves; being nonviolent toward everyone we meet and know; and being part of the global grassroots movement of nonviolence.

We need to do all three at the same time, I suggested. Usually, we practice one, perhaps two of these aspects of nonviolence. We might take attentive time for prayer and our relationships, but do not involve ourselves in the movements to disarm and transform the world. Or we are overworked activists who do not take quality time for prayer and inner nonviolence or model nonviolence in our relationships. As Gandhi taught, we need to balance all three aspects of nonviolence to practice a holistic, active nonviolence, consistent with the nonviolent Jesus and the world's religious traditions.

"Ahimsa [Sanskrit for nonviolence] means avoiding injury to anything on earth in thought, word, or deed," Gandhi wrote. "One person who can express Ahimsa in life exercises a force superior to all the forces of brutality. My optimism rests on my belief in the infinite possibilities of the individual to develop nonviolence. The more you develop it in your own being, the more infectious it becomes till it overwhelms your surroundings and by and by might oversweep the world."

Roshi Joan Halifax invited us to become bodhisattvas of peace and nonviolence. The term "bodhisattva" comes from the Sanskrit, meaning "enlightened being." Generally speaking, it refers to someone of infinite compassion who seeks enlightenment for him or herself and for everyone else on earth.

Roshi defined bodhisattvas as those who have overcome fear, people of unconditional generosity, love and compassion. They are "awakening warriors" who have opened their hearts to the suffering of others. She reflected on the "six perfections of bodhisattvas": generosity, ethics, patience, effort, concentration and wisdom.

"Practice unconditional generosity," she urged. "Be responsible and accountable, and at the same time give out no fear. Give your attention so the person is seen. Welcome everything. Live with all of life."

"Don't engage in unbalanced relationships," she continued. "Engage in good, constructive language. Practice patience with yourself and others, and bear with adversity. Try to be more yes than no. Do not seek the easy solution, but be willing to stand in the mess with fierce compassion. Practice daily mindfulness, deliberate concentration. Bring forward brilliant, loving energy. Uphold your capacity for wisdom. Maintain your stability. Be a servant to all beings." I found her teachings refreshing, inspiring and exciting.

Roshi Joan knows what she is talking about. A Buddhist teacher, Zen priest, author and anthropologist, she founded the Upaya Zen Center as a Buddhist monastery and center for engaged Buddhism. She has worked in the area of death and dying for nearly 40 years and is director of the Project on Being with Dying. For the past 25 years, she has been active in environmental work and works closely with the Dalai Lama and neuroscientists on the connection between contemplative practice and the brain. She has taught in many universities, monasteries and medical centers around the world. She received her Buddhist instruction from Thich Nhat Hanh and Roshi Bernie Glassman.

"Try to develop a soft front and a strong back," she advised. "Most of us have a strong front and a soft back. We come across as harsh or selfish, but we have a weak spine, and can't stand in truth and love. Instead, create for yourself a soft front and a strong back." That requires daily sitting practice, she said.

Throughout our time, she periodically lifted up the vow of the bodhisattva: "I vow to awaken to help save all sentient beings from suffering." She invited us to practice the art of contemplation through the daily practice of sitting meditation and from there to open our hearts to "the ocean of wisdom and compassion" so we can get out and engage the world and be of service to those in need.

"The essence of nonviolence is love," Buddhist master Thich Nhat Hanh writes. "Out of love and the willingness to act selflessly, strategies, tactics, and techniques for a nonviolent struggle arise naturally. Nonviolence is not a dogma; it is a process. Other struggles may be fueled by greed, hatred, fear or ignorance, but a nonviolent one cannot use such blind sources of energy, for they will destroy those involved and also the struggle itself. Nonviolent action, born of the awareness of suffering and nurtured by love, is the most effective way to confront adversity."

The whole weekend was for me a great education and a definite renewal. I thought often of Thomas Merton, who said toward the end of his life that all Christians and Catholics need to practice a little Zen Buddhism to help us reclaim life in the present moment and the capacity to show compassion and nonviolence. Buddhism teaches us how to use the mind, to be aware of our minds, and to center them in mindful concentration. Even more basically, Buddhism teaches us how to sit still, listen to silence and breathe.

Given the rush and tumble insanity of the world, it was so helpful to get a refresher course in these practices so we can become who we are called to be: bodhisattvas of nonviolence, awakening warriors of compassion, peacemakers to our poor world.

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John Dear will lead a retreat, "Jesus the Peacemaker [2]," April 5-7 in East Stroudsburg, Pa. To see John's speaking schedule for 2013 or to invite him to speak in your church or school, go to John Dear's website [3]. One of John's essays appears in the new book *A Faith Not Worth Fighting For* [4]. His book *Lazarus, Come Forth!* [5] explores Jesus as the God of life calling humanity (in the symbol of the dead Lazarus) out of the tombs of the culture of war and death. John's talk at the 2011 Sabeel conference in Bethlehem is featured in the new book *Challenging Empire* [6]. John is profiled with Dan Berrigan and Roy Bourgeois in a new book, *Divine Rebels* [7] by Deena Guzder (Lawrence Hill Books). This book and other recent books, including *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* [8], *Put Down Your Sword* [9] and *A Persistent Peace* [10], are available

from Amazon.com.

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