GAZA
CALLING FOR A DHARMA RESPONSE
Content

Opening

Invitation
International Coalition of Dharma Teachers, Leaders, and Sangha Members 4

Opening Invocation
Maia Marie 6

Note to the Reader
Michael Krass 7

Gaza Revolution: As Western Hegemony Fails, Gaza Changes the World
Thanissara 8

Reflections from Arab/SWANA Dharma Voices

Introduction
Kareem Ghandour 13

Untitled
From Anonymous 14

What Kind of Dharma Can Face This Moment?
Yasmin Tuffaha Gutierrez 15

On Being on a Three Month Retreat from October 2023 to January 2024
Zayd Omar 16

Western Buddhist Dharma Has a Zionism Problem
Weyam Ghadbian 18

Affirming Life in the Fires of Attempted Annihilation
Sarah Sao Mai Habib 20

Articles

Gaza Sutra: How Would the Tathagata Meet This Moment?
Sharad Chari 24

Tikkun Olam: Repair the World
Bernadine Mellis 25
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>No Time for Silence</strong></td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Bhikkhu Bodhi</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Letter to Fellow Rhodes Scholars</strong></td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Kittisaro</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Neutrality is an Illusion</strong></td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Sara Shapouri</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Loving Call for Buddhist, Hindu, Jain Leaders in the US</strong></td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Kritee Kanko</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>An Open Letter to Human Beings</strong></td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Santamano Bhikkhu</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Letters</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Lindsay Alderton</em></td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Sally Bowden-Schaible</em></td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Iona Steen</em></td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Laur Sigvaldason</em></td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Jean Leonard</em></td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Alanna Birch</em></td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Nic Oestreicher</em></td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Robert Schaible</em></td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Suzanne Hudson</em></td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Derek Roguski and Lauren Elliot</em></td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Jamie Shearn Coan</em></td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Kara Nicole Spezeski</em></td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Gareth Fys-Foskett</em></td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Closing</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Closing Prayer</strong></td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Thanissara</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Resources</strong></td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Special Thanks</strong></td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Invitation: Calling in an Engaged Dharma Culture for Ceasefire & Beyond

Dear Dharma Friends,

As the unrelenting onslaught on Gaza continues, we are confronted by a world spiraling into increasing chaos. The seismic global shifts of recent months, including the possibility of a larger Middle East/global war engulfing us all, have radically reshaped our understanding of the world. Many Dharma practitioners now recognize that as a Buddhist/Dharma community, we are not equipped to address the challenges of our times. This underscores the necessity of collaboratively cultivating an informed, resilient Engaged Dharma Culture that empowers us to address the moral crises of our era.

To engage more deeply with this movement, we invite you to connect with us at Sacred Justice Coalition.

SJC is a decolonial dharma response to the genocide in Gaza and a movement for co-creating this new dharma paradigm. We are a network of sanghas from multiple Buddhist traditions. Join us to vision and co-create together. Please fill out this form to stay connected.
At present, as the world struggles to uphold humane values safeguarded by internationally recognized legal and moral standards, there is an urgency to join forces for a complete ceasefire. This further compels us to reflect on our roles as Dharma leaders and practitioners. Silence from Dharma teachers, sangha leaders, and Centers have left many feeling abandoned. In this context, there is a need to dialogue and explore how biases and other factors influence our response to Gaza, and beyond.

Bhikkhu Bodhi’s call to Buddhists in his article, "No Time for Silence," lays out the moral imperative for us to visibly respond to the devastation of Gaza. As do the words shared in Sacred Mountain Sangha’s “Calling for a Ceasefire” event. Here’s a 3-minute clip. We also offer this collaboratively made webzine, with many brave voices that seek to undo the chains of quietism while calling for engagement. Please also see a resource list (including the entire “Calling for a Ceasefire” video) at the end of this publication. This collective offering is intended to support further inquiry, dialogue and engagement.

We also invite you to visit Sacred Mountain Sangha, which collaborates with Dharma groups and centers to present dharma offerings through our Awakening Activism events that are currently focused on a Ceasefire in Gaza and beyond, including wider systemic change.

In the spirit of compassion, join us as we explore building together a cross-sangha Dharma Culture that can more fully meet the unprecedented challenges of these times.

In solidarity,
Sacred Justice Coalition in collaboration with Sacred Mountain Sangha, and an International Coalition of Dharma Teachers, Leaders, and Sangha Members

Please note, the texts below reflect the different spellings in UK and US English. Also, for context, most of the articles and letters were submitted at the end of 2023 and early in 2024.
Opening Invocation

MAIA MARIE

Adapted from input during “Awakening Activism Collective Forum Focusing on a Ceasefire in Gaza”

Inviting us to settle, connect with our bodies and hearts, connecting with the felt sense as the rush of words and impressions move through us.

Gratitude to all the ancestors, our blood ancestors, the ancestors of liberation, the poets, the storytellers, all we have called in. Gratitude to the Buddhas and bodhisattvas of the ten directions past, present, and future. Gratitude to the waters, to the mountains, to all the wild ones, to the Earth. Gratitude, dear ones, for witnessing us, witnessing our hearts, our struggles to find our way to truth in the name of justice, in the name of cultivating peace.

May we each find the medicine that is here for us, the medicine that waters that in our hearts which longs to be expressed and acted upon. And may we bring these intentions into the world with our words and our actions as offerings to each other. And may we weave together and form a net, a blanket that can reach across the oceans and lands. That can cover the lands of Palestine, Israel, the people of Gaza.

May these words and intentions and heartfelt offerings connect with all of those around the world that are calling for justice, for peace, for an end to this terrible violence. May it form a wave. And may the end of this violence, may the nurturing of a new path, a new story, the sacred vision of a home and belonging for all, may this be so, may it be so, may it be so.
Note to the Reader

MICHAEL KRASS

What you are about to read is a collection of articles, letters, and statements from the collective global sangha made up of current and former monastics, Dharma leaders, teachers, and Sangha members from all over the world. In the spirit of Kalyāṇa-mittatā, these reflections are offered to Dharma spaces struggling to hold important conversations about what is happening now, specifically in Gaza, as well as Dharma leaders who have chosen to declare neutrality in the face of an unarguably grave humanitarian crisis. Our belief is that the ongoing violence in Palestine is in direct opposition to the Buddha’s teachings in all traditions, and it must end now. We cannot, in the spirit of the Bodhisattva, close our hearts and retreat to our practices as our fellow humans are starving and experiencing the horrors of bombs and bullets.

We see this is not as a political issue, rather, a moral and humane one, which impels us as Buddhist practitioners to call for the promotion of compassionate action for peace in Israel/Palestine. This is achieved first and foremost through breaking our silence skillfully and taking refuge in the Dharma as our guide through difficult and uncomfortable situations. This is our invitation to deepen our collective inquiry and join together in shared exploration. These efforts cannot wait. We cannot turn away. Time is not on our side as the children of Gaza cry out for help.

To support us in this endeavor, this zine shares the voices of SWANA Dharma practitioners united with voices of Jewish and diverse ancestral lines embodied through Dharma teachers and sacred lineage holders. It is offered in the spirit of awakening the hearts of fellow dharma centers, leaders, and friends on the path. Please consider our invitation to boldly witness together and to hold and engage the pain and damage that is a consequence of lack of action, meaningful discussion and response, through not allowing or inviting into our collective dharma awareness and practice the violence happening in Gaza right now. It is our sincere hope that you receive these offerings, and that together, we collectively contribute to the global call for a ceasefire. Let us engage, support, and foster a collaborative global initiative towards a nonviolent future.
Gaza Revolution: As Western Hegemony Fails, Gaza Changes the World

THANISSARA

“*The depth of horror surpasses our ability to describe it.*”

UNICEF, March 25, 2024

Since most of the contributions in this zine were written, the relentless attacks on the people of Gaza have increased exponentially. Seven months in, the whole world has witnessed the destruction of Gaza through a daily litany of horrific social media posts. The sheer scale of atrocities committed has stunned populations everywhere. In a finger snap, eyes have been opened to the historic injustice visited on the Palestinians, the West’s culpability in the genocide of Gaza, its failure to force a ceasefire, and its inability to hold Israel accountable. All of which has ignited global resistance to the Western world “order.” The horrors of Gaza and its multiple impacts should concern us all. We are at the cusp of the collapse of the myth of Western civilization, which since the end of World War Two has been driven by the imperial interests of the U.S. Into the void rushes an alliance of nation-states...
who have no love for the West. Many have no love for democracy or human rights either. Though at this stage, US-oriented democracy and its human rights are severely weakened. The rise of a gerontocracy in a U.S. intent on handing down a world hard to survive within has rendered America’s ideals a charade.

These seismic political shifts are fueling a deadly competition for domination. Beyond the acquisition of Palestinian land by Israel and Western powers, there is a battle to shape a narrative that minimizes, hides, and normalizes genocide. Amidst this, the devastation in Gaza exposes the erosion of previously acknowledged international moral and legal norms, which now highlights the fast-diminishing protections that have, until now, worked to uplift and guard humane values and rights around the world. Alongside, as the looming specter of climate breakdown and mass extinction haunts our waking nights, rather than uniting, we find ourselves increasingly divided.

In this tumultuous era, as familiar pillars of belief crumble and cherished truths give way to fear and uncertainty, where do we turn? Can our Dharma culture rise to meet this challenge? Do we even possess the ability to explore such questions? Currently, for the most part, it appears not. Gaza has revealed that, as Dharma practitioners, we lack a resilient, open, transparent, equitable, and collaborative Dharma culture to unite us. We also lack ways to voice a strong, collective moral objection to the travesty and peril of a world pushed into free fall. Moreover, we lack a collaborative vision to navigate our way through these challenges.

A good place to start is by drawing inspiration from the Buddha, who intervened in several wars, even in the face of genocidal threats. His efforts, while not always successful, validate and set a precedent for the moral obligation to act. As do numerous spiritual movements and religious institutions throughout history which, even in the face of danger, took moral stands to uphold humane values.

Given this premise, at the least, as Dharma practitioners, we must advocate for a ceasefire. Furthermore, a moral outcry against the unaccountable transfer of billions of dollars for AI-targeted weapons unleashed on defenseless people should easily fall within the purview of the Dharma. Similarly, applying political pressure to transition from mass violence to internationally diplomatic negotiated solutions, as in South Africa and Northern Ireland, aligns with the principles of justice, fairness, and compassion that the Dharma espouses.

Gaza has uncovered numerous hidden truths, leaving many people feeling disoriented and overwhelmed. How do we navigate this moment? Aaron Bushnell’s final words paint a stark reality: chaos and oppression enforced through extreme violence are becoming the norm. Many of us resonate with his truth and
feel compelled to resist. Recognizing this, it is imperative to oppose the unchecked brutality of late-stage colonial capitalism fuelling the ongoing destabilization of a world driven by Eurocentric imperialism. We must unite and mobilize for change. To do so, we need to fully understand the reality of our current situation.

The grim reality of our current landscape is starkly illuminated by the cruel slaughter and devastation of Palestinian life in Gaza. Israel's blatant act of genocide and desecration is tragic, marking its loss of humanity and soul. For the people of Israel, lost in the spell of entitlement and revenge and enclosed in a wall of silence, the moment of awakening to the magnitude of their actions will be momentous.

The impact on Palestinians is unfathomable. The depth of loss, shattered lives, bodies, severed limbs, destroyed families, extreme torture, starvation, disease, and unimaginable suffering is beyond comprehension. Imprinted into the cycles of trauma already stemming from the Shoah (holocaust) and the Nakba (violent ethnic cleansing of Palestinians) is now forged an indelible, profound and terrible karmic momentum of pain that will run into many future generations.

Such deep agony and enduring wounds need solace and compassionate listening, which can be offered in carefully guided affinity groups. These spaces allow for the collective processing of grief, rage, and overwhelm. Many Dharma communities have the capacity to provide these much-needed spaces for healing and support.

Dharma spaces can also offer much needed encouragement. Even in the face of extreme horrors and insurmountable obstacles, as humans, we possess the capacity for great evolutionary leaps. As Dharma practitioners, we have been endowed with an extraordinary inheritance; an invaluable gift bestowed by the Buddha: the diamond-like adamantine jewel of the Dharma.
We are trained as healers and spiritual guides, delving into the depths of the mind and heart to purify and transform the poisons of greed, hatred, and delusion. Our practices revolve around kindness and compassion, drawing inspiration from the Bodhisattva Vows. Following the Buddha’s teachings, we can easily invoke protection through chanting, mantra practice, ritual, ceremonies, and the sharing of blessings for the welfare of all.

We also possess profound tools to dismantle internal systems of oppression, which we must now apply to external systems of oppression just as the Buddha did. As his disciples, it is our sacred duty to engage in both internal and external work towards mutual liberation.

Drawing inspiration from the remarkable examples set by the Buddha and the great change-makers who uplifted the welfare of all, we invite you to take some time out, perhaps with a cup of tea, to explore the offerings below. Within these pages, you will encounter voices often erased and overlooked alongside reflections challenging how we use meditation to bypass, perhaps claiming neutrality while in actuality defending our unexamined biases. We also hope to find inspiration together, sparking a deeper inquiry to motivate a collaborative endeavor focused on building a robust Engaged Dharma Culture that can galvanize impactful actions in these harrowing times.

The pace of change in the world is accelerating, with Gaza catalyzing a revolutionary impulse. The facade of Western hegemony has been shattered, revealing its true nature to people from all walks of life. Across the globe, citizens reject the cruelty inflicted on Gaza, especially when done in their name. This pivotal moment calls for active engagement from us as Dharma practitioners. We must summon courage and do what we can to meet the urgency of this moment. Eighteen more children (14,500+ to date) were just murdered in Rafah. Hundreds of desecrated bodies, children and the elderly also, are being unearthed in Khan Younis Hospital. As the genocide of Gaza continues, silence is no longer an option.

Instead, we have the opportunity to create a more unified Dharma culture to meet our times. We can envision heartening alternatives to the systems driving the world towards collapse—a vision that manifests our highest aspirations. Just as the Buddha did, we have the chance to forge a radically different path. Let us seize the moment and take up this task. If not now, then when?
Gaza Revolution: As Western Hegemony Fails, Gaza Changes the World

THANISSARA

UNICEF, March 25, 2024

Since many of the contributions in this zine f

change in the world is accelerating, with Gaza catalyzing a revolutionary impulse. The facade of W eastern hegemony has been shattered, revealing its tr

true nature to people from all walks of life. Across the globe, citizens reject the cruelty inýicted on Gaza, especially when done in their name. This pivotal moment calls for active engagement from us as Dharma practitioners. We must summon courage and contribute everything we can to meet the urgency of this moment. Silence is no longer an option. Instead, we have the opportunity to collaboratively build a more uniüed Dharma culture capable of meeting the challenges of our time. We can also envision alternatives to the systems driving the world towards collapse—a vision that manifests our highest aspirations. Just like the Buddha did, we have the chance to forge a radically diûerent path. Let us seize the moment and take up this task. If not now, then when?

Reüections from Arab/SW ANA Dharma Voices

*South west, Asia, North Africa
a decolonial term for the Middle East

Artwork: Kareem Ghandour
Introduction

KAREEM GHANDOUR

“Don’t teach us about equanimity while they bomb hospitals!”

Three months into this genocide, dear friends and I responded to the call for mobilising a global online sangha for people from SWANA and Muslim backgrounds. Our first gathering of the SWANA+ Sangha was a profound historical moment of bringing together so many of us from across the globe into a virtual dharma space. Coming together in our grief and rage has been a deep refuge and space of sanity.

Since moving to the west over a decade ago, I have painfully treaded the moral dissonance and ethical complicity that most Arabs and Palestinians come to find in spiritual communities. The wisdom teachings offered to Palestinians are often encouragements to listen, to grow understanding and to extend compassion for the other side, while our realities and experiences are shut down and silenced for the comfort of the centered majority.

The strained push to resume business as usual is now cracking and Dharma teachers can no longer escape the discomfort of meeting these realities as everything around us collapses. As our sangha member Weyam Ghadbian once spoke into the circle; “we don’t want to hear you teach us about equanimity as they bomb hospitals.” We also cannot abide by teachers who bypass the reality of living in a country actively funding a genocide.

Many of us feel betrayed and disillusioned by these ethical failures of dharma institutions and teachers to meet this moment with integrity. The amplification of racist and dehumanising stances has led some of us to leave trusted sanghas to seek and build new community spaces for our healing and perseverance (sumood).

We are co-creating a new dharma culture and paradigm in global solidarity. The following is a collection of reflections from members of the SWANA+ Sangha from this time.
As an Arab American, I have been overwhelmed with grief and rage as we continue to witness the ongoing genocide in Gaza. I have felt extremely disappointed by the deafening silence and the ‘we don’t take sides’ response from teachers I once respected and Sangha communities I have been a part of. This silence has led me to withdraw from communities that until October 7th seemed to be safe spaces for me but no longer feel like places I can bring my authentic pain. How do we not take sides when the issue is genocide?

While I am grateful for the rare voices who are speaking up about Gaza, I have also felt disappointed by the response of teachers who have finally broken their silence, but who have spoken about the current situation in ways that I feel profoundly minimize, deny, and erase much of the current reality and history of violent settler colonialism and occupation that the Palestinian people have been living with for the past 75 years.
What kind of dharma can face this moment?

YASMIN TUFFAHA GUTIERREZ

As a Palestinian, I have always struggled with the many expressions and interpretations of dharma that I’ve heard from teachers belonging to dominant culture identities, as I hear them share about their privileged lived experiences and first world problems, such as anecdotes about feeling frustration and anger while being caught in traffic. You don’t need to look around for very long to find many more substantive things to be angry about. So it didn’t come as a surprise to me to see these same “teachers” be unwilling to have hard conversations, and take leadership in a time like this.

The teachers I have listened to have not taken the time and effort to engage and form responses over the last six months. And it’s become very clear that the eightfold path they are on looks very different to the one that I try to be on.

Even sanghas claiming values of equity and inclusion have not done more than the bare minimum to address the reality of living in a country actively funding a genocide. These failures made me feel like I have no place in this and don’t want a place in such communities.

This eventually led me to stopping practising completely and questioning the limited capacity of this practice being presented to us. Something must be wrong with Buddhism if this is the end result we have, and I frequently find myself battling with the question, is there at all a dharma for Palestinian people? And especially Palestinian people in Palestine?

With so much grief and trauma to process for months and years, I gradually felt myself called to practice again, thanks in no small part to spiritual friendships, the kalyanamitra that the Buddha said can sustain one’s entire practice. As well, thanks to the gift of finding and co-creating new sanghas — with those spiritual friends — that are supportive, meaningful and don’t add more harm and oppression.

Ameen
On Being on a Three Month Retreat from October 2023 to January 2024

ZAYD OMAR

Artwork: Kareem Ghandour- Bloodied
Ramadan new moon

I flew out to a 3 month rains-retreat just a few days after the beginning of the brutal bombardment on Gaza in October. I am Palestinian American and I considered cancelling my flight and plans so I could be with my family in a time I knew would be looming with darkness for our communities.

While on retreat for the 3 months, it was such a strange experience to be Palestinian and witness a live stream of one of the most brutal genocides in human history, and to hear no one talk about it or even acknowledge that reality to me. Not many friends or elders to assure me of my pain. Unfortunately my whole retreat I felt like I was dying inside as my grief welled up and I was never allowed the words. I practiced very diligently in sitting, walking, and eating meditation yet I mostly experienced depression. I realise it’s hard to surrender to the nourishment of the practice when you don’t feel safe or heard.

Another moment I struggled was when someone told me they removed the link for “Boycott Divestment Sanctions” on the board even though I wasn’t the one who put it there. While there was some willingness to hold space
for my grief, there was also a lot of willingness to hold comfort for those normalizing apartheid and genocide.

I feel inspired when I read Thich Nhat Hanh’s early poetry. I can feel the isolation he felt in America witnessing the indifference towards the intense suffering of civilians in Vietnam. He came to America to advocate and make those in power see the reality beyond the simple generalisations. He did this not just through loving speech, but also penetratingly honest heartbreaking speech. Speech that takes a level of deep vulnerability. It’s impossible to reach unity and control the raging grief of humanity and the oppressed. By remaining silent we are creating a false unity held together by fear and suppression.

A few months later I gathered with a buddhist sangha of Muslims and Arabs only to find out I wasn’t the only one who felt this intense dissonance, that we all felt silenced and alone in our own buddhist communities. For the first time I was in a dharma space where the South West Asian and North African diaspora could share their grief over Arab and Muslim dehumanization. The grief of watching western imperialism and colonialism destroy our home countries. The grief of living in places that constantly bombard us with messaging that western culture is superior to our own as our tax dollars fund the brutal oppression of our friends and family in the Middle East.
Western Buddhist Dharma Has a Zionism Problem

WEYAM GHADBIAN

I have been on five, month-long, silent meditation retreats at white, convert-Buddhist institutions. (A sentence with a lot of privilege in it, I know.) Long retreat is life-changing and profound and hard to encapsulate in words. It is like exfoliating ten layers of dead skin from my spirit, leaving me raw, shiny, open, and in touch with my most loving essence. I am forever grateful for the institutions that gave me generous scholarships to attend such retreats as a young nonbinary person of color in my twenties.

While several of these Western Buddhist dharma institutions have expressed commitments to ending racism and gender oppression (thanks to the work of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color within them), none have included Zionism within that commitment. I have now come to expect Zionist remarks and/or microaggressions by teachers and students on every retreat I attend at such institutions.

Zionism is the system behind the settler colonial project that kills thousands and displaced hundreds of thousands of indigenous Palestinians from their land and continues to operate through a complex system of apartheid and ongoing settler expansion at the cost of Palestinian dignity and life. It is not anti-Semitic to be anti-Zionist, and there are several key Jewish political institutions that call for an end to Zionism. However, many of the founders and practitioners of Western convert Buddhist centers are unquestioningly Zionist, having grown up shaped by institutions that equated Zionism with Judaism. Because of this fact, I now bring a Kuffiyeh (the traditional Palestinian farmer’s scarf) and wear it on the first day of any new Buddhist gathering to identify my anti-Zionist allies of all faiths and my people of all backgrounds who support justice.

On one retreat, a teacher chose to quote a 1967 Israeli Defense Minister as an example of nonviolent communication in a talk about mindful speech. As a Syrian, whose Palestinian friends’ families have been imprisoned, tortured, sexually assaulted, and killed by this colonizing army, and whose own ancestral land has been bombed & continue to be occupied by Israel, my whole body burned, aflame. I was in silence--unable to speak or push back or be witnessed by another human in this pain. No
friends or sisters or mother to call on the phone and vent, “Can you believe they did that?” Just myself, and the earth. I climbed the highest hill on the land, and when I reached the summit I remembered: the dabkeh--the harvest dance of our region, the stomp and step and leap hand-in-hand dance, given special meaning by Palestinians separated from their lands.

I danced the shit out of that dabkeh, stomping and leaping and skipping high high and landing lightly, with dignity and poise. No one saw me but the earth. And the earth held me and bore witness. But it’s time for us to move beyond our individual witness bearing, collectively and explicitly name Zionism as a form of oppression and commit to freeing Palestine as part of our greater commitment to justice and liberation.
Affirming Life in the Fires of Attempted Annihilation

SARAH SAO MAI HABIB

Truth be told, I’ve always felt weary in Western/Westernized institutional spaces including Dharma spaces where I’ve sought refuge in. The latest escalation of colonial violence in occupied Palestine has been revealing more of why I’ve felt this way.

Five years ago, I was drawn to Engaged Buddhism in the Plum Village tradition during a time of intense change and deepening towards my ancestral connections. Thich Nhat Hanh (TNH) created this global sangha out of necessity due to his forced exile, because of his decolonial advocacy for a unified self determined Vietnam, and end to the proxy war. He was punished for unwaveringly orienting towards life and Vietnamese sovereignty in the fires of attempted annihilation.

Lately, I’ve heard some sangha members express discomfort and disapproval of our community going on marches in support of a ceasefire in Gaza, or holding signs with Palestinian symbols, and donning Palestinian cultural attire such as the Kuffiyeh. The public calls for a ceasefire itself, and any pro Palestinian expression has been labeled as “divisive” or “taking a side”.

Are Palestinians and those facing the brunt of systemic oppression (and their allies) required to constantly justify their desire for dignity and safety? In other words, are they required to legitimize their particular grief?

When the dignity and safety of Gazans are directly tangibly linked to the safety of Israeli hostages in Gaza (who are both facing Israeli military bombardment and forced starvation); what was actually being said through these complaints? They are examples of the subtle and not so subtle influence of unexamined white supremacist, colonial, settler, and patriarchal mindsets that are anti-Palestinian, anti-Arab and Islamophobic, all of which are inherently separation mindsets.

This response lacks alignment with Buddhist teachings regarding: fierce compassion, awareness of causes and conditions, relative and absolute truths, and interbeing, etc. that I was taught through the Dharma. I have learned through the Dharma that fierce compassion takes on different forms depending on who is receiving it, and that one path is connected to all paths. Advocating for the rights of Palestinians, or queer people, or Black and Indigenous people, etc., does not mean we are advocating against the rights of other humans.
If the liberation of all beings requires the dismantling of oppressive systems that have beneted few at the expense of many and the earth itself; that is an uncomfortable truth to diligently grapple with rather than bypass in our spiritual communities.

As a practitioner and student of Buddhism, I look to the lineage of my traditions to support deeper understandings and applications of the teachings beyond any institutionalized, reductive, or static versions of them. I can not forget that TNH himself (and his community) rufled the feathers of Buddhist institutions of his time and context. One reason was because he wanted them to truly engage with the suffering of his people. He also spoke of how the USA had the most material power in the war, and that is why he often urged them specically to stop the war. This led to many different interpretations and accusations of him “taking a side”. However, it was less of a side and more of a liberatory stance. And any student would benet from reading the FAQ section in his book “Vietnam: Lotus in a Sea of Fire” to extrapolate the implications of the

Artwork: Indra’s Net, Daeu Angert
different accusations he faced; from questions around the motives of Buddhist led anti-war movements, to his understandings on the needs of poor farmers and their role in resistance.

I look at TNH’s entire life and deeper message of always getting at the root of suffering, understanding specific & larger context, and how his legacy is not about imitating ancestors but adapting the essence of their teachings to meet our current challenges. This is my compass beyond anything he has specifically mentioned or taught around Palestine and Israel in the past. TNH said that the next Buddha is the Sangha. So, I respectfully look to those who know their Indigenous culture and struggle for liberation in their specific timeplaces. I look to the Sangha Buddha in the collective liberatory knowledge that is speaking up now after being historically silenced and suppressed.

In Buddhism we are taught, everything is impermanent, and looking deeply into TNH’s life, he did what was in his knowledge, power and privilege to accelerate the impermanence of human made suffering in Vietnam. It is our bare minimum responsibility to accelerate a permanent ceasefire in Gaza, contribute to the rebuilding of a sovereign Palestine, and to encourage not distract those sincerely working towards that goal.

TNH taught us through his life’s work that the Dharma must be responsive to our times for it to be true. Our time is marked by significant appropriation of Indigenous and Eastern ancestral, spiritual and wellness practices by Western/Westernized institutions. I fear sangha members forget that the Plum Village tradition was born from war to nourish those who fought for life in the fires of attempted annihilation.

I fear these Western/Westernized spaces have become bubbles to feel comfortable in our individualistic delusions, to seek a false sense of safety, and to numb out to the very real demands of collective liberations: including the big sacrifices we need to undergo to listen to what the Earth needs during this time of escalating ecocides and genocides. We are being urged to return to a spirituality that is deeply engaged with the human condition, material reality, generational healing, and reparations for historic and ongoing harm.
Articles

©MamaMuralista

Artwork: Mama Muralista
Gaza Sutra: How Would the Tathagata Meet This Moment?

SHARAD CHARI

How would the Tathāgata meet this moment of indiscriminate war against life in Gaza?

Tathāgata, Tathá (suchness) gātā (gone) and āgātā (come), the empty subject of arrival at the scene of suffering from the mysterious unconditioned, to return to the unconditioned at every moment. The suchness of arrival and return with compassion, neither with disinterest nor as white savior. The suchness of lokā-vidu (world-knowing), of arrival and return knowing the world for what it is, a cycle of suffering through attachment. The suchness of returning to the scene of the crime.

How does this Tathāgata meet suffering in Gaza? By investigating false-causes that have perpetuated more than a century of colonialism, dispossession, racism, apartheid and its effects in the world of delusion. Through arrival and departure, non-attachment, non-self, compassion. Through the dharma’s invitation into ēhipassiko (investigation for oneself, with dispassion, compassion, non-self) of the causes of suffering, the deeper causes but also the worldly causes of particular, intense sufferings (of Gaza, Palestine.)

Who knows that there can be no permanent resolution on the terms offered by samsara, even while we want an enduring cease fire now, an end to occupation and apartheid now. Who knows that we must look further into suffering and the causes of suffering, with dispassion and non-self, with Kuanyin’s thousand senses. Who knows there is no fundamental cause to go to. No resolution in pointing to a primal wound (Shoah, Nakba). The wound is always in the here and now (sandhiṭṭhiko), a here and now that has already come and gone, while the suchness of coming and going remains a potential for all. How does this contemplative home, the dharmakāya, help us build solidarity, as the sāvaka sangha, the living hope for this potential.

How do we find knowledge and conduct (vijjā-carana) to help facilitate awakening (opanayiko) for all beings, as “the sāvaka sangha who yearn for the good, direct and true path to collective liberation.” (supaṭipanno, ujupaṭipanno, nyāyapatiṭipanno, sāmīcīpaṭipanno bhagavato sāvaka saṅgho)
If we truly understand this teaching, then we know that there is no conflict between care for Palestinian life and care for Jewish life. On the contrary. As we commit to protecting the Palestinian people from unspeakable violence, we are also committing to protecting the Jewish people from the moral evisceration, and the endlessly ramifying damage, of continuing to cause immense harm—whether that be through supporting or denying Israel’s actions.

For me, Jewish wisdom comes alive perhaps most beautifully, and most clearly, in tikkun olam, the injunction to repair the world. At this time in the journey of the Jewish people, our friends are those who remind us of this, who support us in this, who protect us from the forces of destruction that we have faced so painfully through our history—the forces that now manifest not against us, but through the state that claims to represent us.

As a Jewish person, the granddaughter of immigrants from Europe who fled the pogroms, whose extended family perished in Europe during World War II, whose mother faced and carried in her body the violence of antisemitism, in humility and with a broken heart, I call on the Sangha to support the freedom and protection of the Palestinian people—with everything we have.
I write this essay as a senior American Buddhist monk of Jewish ethnicity who has been deeply distressed by Israel’s military assault on the population of Gaza. I see this campaign as one of the gravest moral crises of our time. The blistering bombardments, the ever-mounting death toll, the deadly blockade of vital essentials, the annihilation of innocent human lives—all these events sear the moral consciousness like a red-hot iron. I find myself shouting from the depths of my soul: “For God’s sake, stop it!” Indeed such a cry has arisen not only from Western-based Palestinian and Arab groups, but also from progressive Jewish organizations such as Jewish Voice for Peace and If Not Now. Yet American Buddhist communities and Buddhist leaders, who should be speaking up, have been eerily silent.

I learned this, to my dismay, already in late October, during the third week after the assault began. At this time I turned to the internet to see what the prominent Buddhist teachers, centers, and online Buddhist journals were saying in response to Israel’s operations in the Gaza Strip. I expected to see a flurry of essays and talks condemning the violence. However, with a few noteworthy exceptions, I found that hardly anyone was saying anything. Moved by
an urgent need to raise a Buddhist voice in response to the devastation, I joined with my friend Alan Senauke in drafting a petition to President Biden, asking him to call on the Israeli government to adopt an immediate and unconditional ceasefire in Gaza. We posted the petition online and within two weeks the petition had gathered almost 2,000 signatures. We printed it out and sent it to the White House and several congressional leaders.

Despite the positive response the petition gained across a wide swath of grass-roots Buddhist practitioners (and perhaps non-Buddhists too), silence still reigned at the top, among the Buddhist teachers I expected to be speaking up and mobilizing their students to act. Just recently, I discovered I’m not the first to notice the reticence of Western Buddhists to face painful global issues head on. The American social commentator Theo Horesh, in his book The Holocausts We Deny, anticipated my concern a couple of years ago when he wrote (Boulder: Cosmopolis Press, 2021, loc 1317):

... “we might expect Buddhists, whose religion focuses on examining and ending [suffering], to take a special interest in the social and political causes of injustice. However, Buddhists do not tend to talk much about justice and the suffering it can alleviate.... They deny its existence, argue against its importance, psychoanalyze the people talking about it, and dismiss the political processes involved in ending it for the anger they often generate.”

Horesh is certainly over-generalizing here, for there are Engaged Buddhists and other Buddhist activists who earnestly fight against systemic injustice and other forms of socially induced suffering. But in relation to the situation in Gaza the silence maintained by so many American Buddhist leaders seems to bear out Horesh’s observation.

Given the many instances of sheer inhumanity unfolding over just two decades—in Iraq, Syria, Tigray, Myanmar, and Ukraine—why should I highlight Gaza as the paramount moral calamity of this century? I do so for several reasons. One concerns the sheer intensity of the assault. Arif Husain, the chief economist at the UN’s World Food Program, bears testimony to this with his remark: (Gaza Is Starving | The New Yorker) “I’ve been doing this for the past two decades, and I’ve been to all kinds of conflicts and all kinds of crises. And, for me, this [situation in Gaza] is
unprecedented because of, one, the magnitude, the scale, the entire population of a particular place; second, the severity; and third, the speed at which this is happening, at which this has unfolded.” The figures representing deaths, injuries, and destruction in Gaza bear out Husein’s words. We are told that seventy percent of the victims are women and children; that doctors, medical staff, journalists, and university professors are being targeted; that all of Gaza has become a death camp where no one is safe anywhere. We learn of whole families being liquidated at the drop of a bomb, three generations wiped out in an instant; of kids losing their parents and all their siblings, left with no surviving family members in the world; of hospitals being shattered and their patients forced to walk miles to designated safety zones, only to be hit by sniper fire en route or struck by rockets when they arrive. On top of the deaths, injuries, and demolitions directly caused by the bombardments, Israel’s near-total blockade of vital essentials—food, water, fuel, and medicines—drives the spike of suffering even more deeply into the hearts of Gaza’s population, subjecting displaced people to extremes of hunger, thirst, and infectious disease. Now that the major Western donors are suspending their funding of UNRWA, the UN relief agency for Palestinian refugees, the very lifeline for the people of Gaza is being cut.

The second factor that underscores the moral gravity of the crisis in Gaza is its visibility, its living immediacy. Unlike the Nazi Holocaust and other war crimes—including Russia’s blood-curdling operations in Ukraine—the genocide in Gaza unfolds live on our television and computer screens, right before our eyes, just as it is happening. The images jump out from the screen and beg us to act: children with amputated limbs, their bodies torn and broken; babies abandoned in powerless incubators; apartment buildings and universities collapsing like decks of cards; historic churches and mosques destroyed beyond repair; refugees crammed into infested camps, crying out for water and food; corpses thrown into mass graves; captives blindfolded and stripped naked, paraded like cattle through desolate streets.

For me personally, such images make all my normal activities—chatting with friends, going out for a hike, discussing the intricacies of Buddhist philosophy—seem insipid, hollow, and pointless. I find that even meditation on the breath becomes difficult when the images of mutilated children and starving families keep streaming through the mind. I don’t see how, once we bear witness to these horrific crimes, we wouldn’t feel that a heavy moral
responsibility has fallen on our shoulders, a burden we just can’t shake off by claiming these atrocities don’t concern us.

A third factor that heightens the moral gravity of the Gazan crisis derives from the fact that it is the state of Israel, the self-declared national home of the Jewish people, that has been inflicting all this suffering, anguish, and death on Gaza. Yes, we do hold Israel to a higher moral bar than we do most other nations, but not from anti-Jewish bias. We do so because the Jews are the ethnic group that experienced the most horrific torments during the Holocaust, and, we believe, they would naturally be the most vigilant defenders of the inviolable right of people to be free from persecution and oppression. The vow “Never again,” as understood by Jews of conscience, means never again for anyone. Yet, instead of showing empathy, Israel is now using the past trauma of the Holocaust—and the guilt of the countries that inflicted that trauma—as a shield to silence criticism and maintain its impunity. It’s as if they are saying to the world: “You can’t touch us because you bear the guilt for our past suffering.”

The fourth way in which the crisis in Gaza bears moral weight relates specifically to us here in the United States. We have to recognize that it is our country that is providing Israel with the unconditional support it has needed to carry out its campaign. With our own tax dollars, we fund Israel’s military, supplying it with the most advanced, most deadly, most sophisticated weaponry available. We give Israel diplomatic cover at the UN through our use of the veto, blocking even feeble motions for a humanitarian ceasefire. And we give Israel moral cover by echoing the messages of its propaganda machine at press conferences and international gatherings, while tarring and stigmatizing those who criticize its actions.

When all the moral dimensions of the situation in Gaza are viewed together—the sheer volume of indiscriminate killing and destruction; the fact that the devastation is starkly visible to us through the media; the fact that the operation is being carried out by the state representing the Jewish people, the historic victims of persecution and genocide; and the complicity of the United States in furthering the destruction of Gaza—they point to a still deeper moral crisis. Taken conjointly, all these factors shatter the moral framework offered to us as the key for understanding our world.

For decades, the major Western powers—especially the U.S., the U.K., France, and Germany—have presented themselves as the bulwarks of the rules-based international order, the defenders of human rights and decent human morality. Yet now, under the shallowest of pretexts, they throw their weight behind Israel’s assault on Gaza, even when the International Court of Justice designates it a “plausible genocide.” This unwavering loyalty to a nation that flouts international law overturns the moral lens through which we’ve been taught to view the global order. Now the
masks come off, exposing the hypocrisy of the major Western powers hidden behind their polished exteriors.

In short, the crisis in Gaza shows those nations that should be defending international law and humanitarian values to be openly betraying their commitments in subservience to a state that flagrantly violates the most fundamental standards of human dignity. They advise Israel to carry out its operations in accordance with international law, but continue to provide it with weapons even when it breaks those laws. They say they favor peace, but at the UN Security Council they veto or abstain from resolutions calling for a humanitarian ceasefire. They say they are opposed to genocide, but dispute South Africa’s case at the World Court. They say that Israel should treat prisoners humanely, but turn a blind eye when it tortures, humiliates, and even executes them. Since we, as Americans, are citizens of the nation foremost in shielding Israel from accountability, this places on us the moral burden of opposing our country’s policies. Given this responsibility, how can we keep silent? The ethical teachings of Buddhism provide the pillars of a strong moral framework that should shape our engagement with the world, particularly today when we bear witness to the tragedies in Gaza. The five precepts enjoin non-harming in body, speech, and thought. Buddhist social ethics advocate non-violence in resolving conflicts. The Buddha enjoins non-killing not only as a personal endeavor but as a duty to prevent killing by others. Buddhism extols the “divine abodes” of loving-kindness and compassion as ethical ideals and themes of meditation practice. The bodhisattva vows commit us to saving and liberating countless sentient beings from suffering.

Though the background to the conflict may be complicated, extending back to the late nineteenth century, the moral temperature of the events playing out in Gaza over the past four months has been starkly clear. Thus, there is no excuse for standing speechless on the sidelines. Granted, Hamas triggered the latest round of violence with its horrific assault on Israel on October 7th, granted that Israelis should be able to live secure within their country’s borders, this cannot justify military operations that are killing and wounding hundreds of civilians each day or a program subjecting the whole population to mass starvation. Opposing such violations of basic human rights is not an endorsement of Hamas. Demanding that Israel comply with international law does not mean we side with terrorism. It is, rather, an act of courage and compassion.

Again, taking a bold stand doesn’t mean that we are being swept away by discordant views and failing to maintain a stance of impartial equanimity. In my understanding equanimity should not stifle our capacity to make wise moral judgments or negate our obligation to act on the basis of clear ethical convictions. Equanimity can easily coexist with compassion.
and accompany conscientious action intended to rectify moral wrongs. The moral obligation in this case becomes especially compelling when it is our own country’s government that has been backing Israel in a campaign that the International Court of Justice determined may plausibly be considered genocide.

In the final analysis, we can’t let silence reign as the final word. We can’t let silence replace the word. Both as U.S. citizens and as Buddhists we have a solemn moral duty to speak up and step forward to act. Since the U.S. government represents us, we must boldly oppose its support for Israel’s operations that are battering Gaza’s desperate population. Our commitment as Buddhists amplifies our moral obligation as U.S. citizens. The Buddhist ideal of non-violence, the strictures against killing, the primacy of compassion, and the vow to save sentient beings oblige us to join our hearts, voices, and deeds with the many others demanding a resolution to the crisis. The plain fact is that the key to a solution lies in the hands of the U.S.; only by applying economic and political pressure on Israel can the conflict be justly resolved. And crucially, a just resolution would also serve Israel’s long-term interest, finally permitting it to live at peace with a free Palestine state, for the mutual benefit of both nations.

Every voice counts, and we can add our weight to the effort in a variety of ways: by joining marches, writing to the White House and our representatives in Congress, posting relevant news articles and commentary on our social media platforms, writing articles and giving talks, and better informing ourselves about the situation. It’s not enough to post bromides on social media about love and peace or to pin doves and hearts to our profiles. To fulfill our duty as moral beings and as followers of the Dharma, we need to actively express our solidarity with the besieged Palestinians who can’t come forward and speak for themselves. And that means, for a starter, that we need to call for a complete ceasefire. Not just for “peace,” but for a real, complete, monitored ceasefire.

But a ceasefire is only the first step. Beyond stopping the present round of destruction, we should also demand a genuine, sincere, concerted attempt to finally fulfill the aspirations of the Palestinian people for a fully sovereign state of their own, which will also be the precious key to Israel’s security. The road to a solution of this long-standing problem will be rocky and hard, but we need to join with the many others calling for the first steps to be taken—and to be taken now.
I love harmlessness and harmony and prefer the quiet of meditation on retreat, and the bliss of not contending. But, in this time of great peril for our world — stirred by the teachings of the Buddha — I’m learning it is important to speak out and encourage others to live blamelessly, not harming or exploiting.

The Buddha recognized that some disciples practiced for their own benefit, but not for that of others. They refrained from killing, stealing, etc., but did not encourage others to do that. They knew the harm of these unskillful actions, abandoned them in their own lives, but did not encourage others to do that. The Buddha described that situation as “one who practices for their own benefit but not for that of others,”

Although I have worked for years in the field of teaching and encouraging others who were interested to do likewise, I have been reluctant to enter the political fray. I don’t like disharmony. Now with such peril wreaking havoc on our planet — the catastrophic energies of hate, violence, and greed for domination and control, and before our eyes the genocidal destruction of the Palestinian people — I’m learning, albeit slowly, how to speak out for peace, the ending of violence, for a permanent ceasefire in Gaza, for a concerted effort to seek a just diplomatic solution.

Sometimes Buddhists argue, “We need to stay neutral and not pick sides. We can’t be political.” When the loud voices of hatefulness, domination, distortion and divisiveness control the narrative and continue to lead our civilization over a cliff, I realize that sometimes being quiet is not neutral, but it allows the collective insanity to carry the day. Sometimes being quiet becomes a form of perpetuating the status quo. It’s a moral question, not a political one.

Encouraged by my wonderful sacred peace activist wife Thanissara, I’m learning to stand up and speak out for peace. My father is Jewish, mother a Southern Baptist. I have deep
affinities with Jewish people, and Thanissara and I have taught meditation retreats in Israel on many occasions. This war and the indiscriminate bombing of Gaza is not for the true welfare of the people of Israel, and it is ensuring that the endless round of violence and retribution continues. As the Buddha says, “Hatred is never overcome by hatred.”

For the sake of the Palestinian and Jewish people, I am praying for peace, and demanding our political leaders here in the US to push for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza and the transition to a negotiated settlement. Human Rights Watch just said, “The Israeli government is using starvation of civilians as method of warfare in the occupied Gaza Strip, which is a war crime. Israeli forces are deliberately blocking the delivery of water, food, and fuel, while willfully impeding humanitarian assistance, apparently razing agricultural areas, and depriving the civilian population of objects indispensable to their survival.”

In speaking out for peace and justice, may we evolve into what the Buddha called, “Those who practice for their own benefit and for that of others.”
Neutrality is an Illusion

SARA SHAPOURI

Sara delivered this compelling address for Sacred Mountain Sangha’s Awakening Activism series as part of its Calling for a Ceasefire event on January 15th, 2024.

I come today as a Persian American contemplative teacher and practitioner, as a lawyer, as a parent, and as a human who has deep concerns for humanity’s soul and future. I hope that my words offer the due respect and care to Palestinians and can contribute to a free Palestine and a freer and saner world.

I would like to first speak to those listening who are from Southwest Asia and North Africa, and/or of the Muslim heritage. My hope is that we can come together to support one another’s liberation and to advocate for change in our Dharma communities. The past has shown us we must do that.

White run Dharma institutions, if left to their devices, will maintain the racist status quo inherent in their organizations, our society, and in the wider world. Progress that has been made at Western Dharma centers around racism and anti-blackness happened because black teachers and practitioners mobilized for it. I believe if we follow their lead, we can make these spaces more equitable and help them honor the spirit of the Dharma which asks us to not only free ourselves from greed, hatred, and delusion but calls on us to actively support
the freedom and liberation of all beings from the systemic impact of these poisons.

To the rest of the audience, thank you for being here and your support is needed. It begins with calling for a ceasefire in Gaza but must not end there. A ceasefire in Gaza does not guarantee the respect of basic human rights, does not end the blockade, does not end settlements, and does not end the occupation. I ask you to consider where your views, opinions, and actions, or lack thereof, support the marginalization, erasure, and violence toward the people and land of this region. I ask you to use what power and ability you have to stand up for those who are systematically silenced and ignored. If you haven’t done anything, why haven’t you? What do you gain from that silence and inactivity? And what do you lose? If we only speak up when we directly feel the heat of violence and oppression burning down our house, it will be too late.

It is not lost on me that having a Persian speak about a genocide taking place against Palestinians and Arabs reflects a lack of Arab representation and leadership in the Western Dharma community. While many factors have contributed to this, colonialism, racism, Islamophobia, and anti-Arab bias are at play. Recently I have been feeling into how deeply anti-Arab and anti-Muslim bias is embedded in Western society. Our Western Dharma institutions are not immune to this. No amount of poetry by Rumi or Hafez will get them around the work of interrogating how they too live, breathe, and have been infected by this culture of dehumanization.

Having to prepare for this event has revealed a new layer of grief. That we even need an event like this, that there is even a question about standing with people who are being massacred is both infuriating and heart-breaking. I am disturbed at how spiritual institutions can so easily compartmentalize themselves. It is deeply disappointing and frustrating that there has been so much silence from Western Dharma institutions. I have heard different reasons for why these centers are silent or why they only offer vague statements that avoid directly calling for a ceasefire. One justification is a claim appealing to the value of neutrality. I call it a claim because it is just that.
Neutrality is an illusion. It selects only specific binaries and obscures the fact that there are interests at play that one is partial to. I question whether these institutions are neutral to their revered and popular status, to their donors, and ultimately, to their comfortable position within the status quo. I propose that a stance of neutrality indicates that one is partial to or benefits from the status quo. And I cannot help but ask whether statements of neutrality are an attempt, consciously or unconsciously, to avoid having to acknowledge their impact with regards to justice, equity, and oppression.

Our politicians are failing us. The media is failing us. When those two fail, what else do we have to uphold the dignity of all beings? To help remind us about what matters? To help disrupt twisted logic that makes us think genocide and apartheid are acceptable and necessary?

This is where spiritual and religious institutions must come in. Western imperial powers have shown they are not finished with their project of violence, theft, extraction, and oppression. It is incumbent upon those who claim to have an orientation of ethics and liberation, to use their power and privilege to call for an end to this. I ask you to consider, what if Dr. Martin Luther King Jr’s church decided that the civil rights movement was not within the scope of their mission.

That they had to stay out of these “political” issues. In hindsight, it sounds like madness and yet this is the stance these Western Dharma centers are taking. I have no interest in a spiritual path that is an island of self-centeredness and narcissistic comfort, that stands on the necks of others. You might think I am being dramatic, but I believe that those are the fruits of a spiritual path that is unmoved by a crisis of this magnitude, so clearly documented day in and day out. Are we not diminishing the value of the precepts if we don’t include them in our standard for how all beings should be treated?

What use and relevance is the Dharma if it has nothing to say about the atrocities that are happening? I am tired of Dharma talks that call out oppression and violence after the fact, or make gestures against genocide via land acknowledgments and retreats for indigenous and other marginalized communities but are silent when these things are actively happening and supported by our government.

Silence is a form of communication. The silence from these institutions tells us they don’t care to speak, it is not worth it to them. Silence, like neutrality, signals support of the status quo. And in this case, as the AIDS activists in the 1980s clearly and courageously taught us, silence equals death. Silence tells our leaders that we will tolerate their violence, that they can keep on killing and we will accept it just like they have been able to do in the post 9/11 wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, and Syria, which have led to the astonishingly high figure of 4.5 to 4.7 million
deaths and counting. I want to say that again - 4.5-4.7 million deaths.

The vague statements and silence are a spiritual failure. To me, it indicates that they don’t see themselves in Palestinians, in Arabs, in Muslims, in any of us. The current and past atrocities committed against Palestinians along with all of the post-9/11 wars are a mirror to the pervasive anti Muslim, anti-Arab, racist bias that most of us in the West, including our Dharma centers, have internalized. I urge these centers to consider who is hurt by their silence, who is left out? What message are they sending when they do not ask for a ceasefire? When they do not support the human dignity and rights of Palestinians. The fog of war is thick, the engine to separate and dehumanize is powerful and so we need something powerful in response. The Dharma must be a part of this response. I believe these centers can change because the spirit of the Dharma is liberatory - and I believe there needs to be a reckoning of what they have condoned or been complicit in.

As Reverend Dr Martin Luther King Jr said “There can be no justice without peace, and there can be no peace without justice.”

Justice is a necessary condition for peace. Just like there can be no harmony as long as some voices are being strangled, there can be no peace for any of us as long as some are dehumanized and oppressed.

I remember being told by a teacher that we practice for the hard times - this is one of those hard times. All of us, including our institutions and teachers must call upon our practice not just for ourselves, but for Palestinians, for all those being strangled by the West, and for this beautiful Earth that has been through enough. I say this not as a savior for anyone, but to encourage us to save our own spirit and humanity.

“There can be no justice without peace, and there can be no peace without justice.”

May Palestinians and all lands and people know justice and thereby know peace. May all beings be free.
Loving Call for Buddhist, Hindu, Jain Leaders in the US

KRITEE KANKO

Shortened and edited version of appeals to Buddhist teachers from Zen Priest and Climate Scientist Rev Kritee Kanko, posted on Instagram and Facebook in December 2023

I am a Climate Scientist and Zen Buddhist meditation teacher living in the U.S. I was born in India in a Hindu-Jain family. I am publicly and lovingly calling in my fellow Buddhist, Hindu, Jain, Yoga, Ayurveda teachers, and other Ecodharma leaders who haven’t yet been able to summon the clarity to ask for a ceasefire in Palestine to sit in your love and power. My ask is that you be loving and wise teachers for all beings in the Middle East, not just the hyper-masculine and war-mongering voices within Judaism or elsewhere. Please be a loving friend for Palestinian Arabs, as well as all the people around the world who are screaming and screeching for your help to build peace.

I have been studying the conflict in the Palestinian region since Oct 7th and put together this large resource. (Healing in Palestine/Israel). I want to break it up, especially for teachers in the US, why your support for a ceasefire is crucial. The United States is the biggest supporter militarily, technologically, and financially for Israel. Israel would not be committing the war crimes it is committing right now without the help of the United States. The United States is also home to the largest concentration of Jews in the world after Israel. What we do or say in the United States matters for these two reasons.

Yes, it is true that there are so many conflicts around the world. Conflict has been a human reality since time immemorial. That is true. But this is a blatant case of a breach of all limits that were put on by international organizations to protect civilians, and this breach is happening because of the relationship the United States and Israel share. Yes, it has complex geopolitical reasons. But what is happening right now is going against everything Dharma has taught us. The U.S. has repeatedly vetoed all efforts to bring on a ceasefire in the region.
My fellow Dharma teachers, your voice matters. You are the artists of consciousness. When you sit in your power, you are the creator and narrator of powerful myths. You evoke archetypal energies and deities. You are the creator of ceremonies. You are the creator of new stories and new narratives. You all don’t have to buy narratives sold by our hyper-masculine, capitalist, colonial, patriarchal, and war-mongering systems. You can envision, create, and speak about new narratives and new paradigms. You can create new stories of peace and justice. In fact, that is our role as dharma teachers.

Peace arises from the right causes and conditions. It will not arise unless we all help to create the conditions for stopping the carnage. I wonder what Buddhist teachers would have done if there were 13,000 white children in Paris or California or Boulder. Are brown (Muslim children of Gaza) not our children because they aren’t white? The world sent more public thoughts and prayers to Boulder when someone killed 10 people at a local store in Boulder. Do we have to be born in rich and white places in the world for the Western world to care?

I would personally love to see healing spaces where Jews and Palestinian Arabs sit together and grieve together for what has happened to both their communities. We haven’t had collective ceremonies of grieving for the trauma and pain Jews have faced in pogroms and in the Holocaust. I always say that Jewish trauma has been memorialized (in museums), picturized (in Hollywood movies) and weaponized (throughout the history of Israel) but it hasn’t been grieved enough. Jews have faced so much trauma: they know what displacement dehumanization and genocide feel like. That is why many Jews are speaking up: “Never again for anyone.” Can we Dharma teachers create spaces where Jews can grieve their pain within the Jewish community, and then they can also grieve with Palestinian Arabs about their pain? I understand your pain, brother. I understand your pain, friend. Jews can tell Arabs, "My ancestors were also killed." And Arabs can say to Jews, "I'm sorry we haven't grieved your ancestors fully." How will we move towards such healing ceremonies?
The first step has to be a ceasefire. And who will speak in favor of a ceasefire if not you? Without this first step, how will collective grieving and healing be possible?

Dharma teachers help create new ways of looking at reality. We are the ones who talk about interdependence and interconnection with all beings. How is what is happening in Israel in alignment with what Buddha and Dharma have taught us? If it is not in alignment with that, and given the power the US has in this situation, it is important, it is crucial that you speak up. You cannot maintain neutrality. One of my sangha members from the Middle East questioned a few teachers today and she said it is so easy for us to name a street, hospital, or airport after a peace and justice advocate has died or after genocides have happened. We do land acknowledgments for the genocide of indigenous peoples, but after the fact. It is alarming, she said, that we cannot engage in real-time with violence because we think these issues are too complex.

Yes, yes. What Hamas did on October 7 was brutal. It was pre-planned and it should not have happened. Of course, it brought up past Jewish trauma. But are we now acting in ways that will reduce collective Jewish trauma? Will the children who survived this genocidal violence today after burying 50 members of their family not grow up to want revenge? Does this make anyone safer in the long run? Yes, you can flatten all of Gaza and take out Palestinian Arabs from the West Bank completely. Then, you will not have those pesky rocket attacks on Israel. But will the Palestinian children, wherever they live in this world, not be seething with rage? Is that the seed we want to plant today? There are so many war crimes that Israel and Israeli soldiers will have to be accountable for in the times to come. Do you want young soldiers of Israel to be committing more heinous crimes? Their souls are dying in this process too.

At the height of the Holocaust, 700 people a day were being murdered in gas chambers at Auschwitz camp in Germany. [A few hundred people don’t sound like a genocide or ethnic cleansing at first, but it adds up over time]. If we speak up after this genocide is over, then what the heck did we do to reduce suffering? You have a role. We have to start somewhere.

Please, please. Your voice matters.
An Open Letter to Human Beings

SANTAMANO BHIKKHU

“If you’re not careful, the newspapers will have you hating the people who are being oppressed, and loving the people who are doing the oppressing.”

Malcolm X

“Settlers always think they’re defending themselves. That’s why they build forts on other people’s land. And then they freak out over the fact that they are surrounded.”

Fred Moten

At times like this it is especially important to meditate or pray, in accordance with one’s spiritual tradition. Making sure to stay as connected as possible with the deep stillness or Allah or God or Ishwar, however one conceives of these ultimate realities for oneself. It is with the deepest sadness that I write this. I cannot say how distressed and sickened I feel at the coverage from the racist Western media, white supremacy in service to imperialism.

So eager to describe Palestinians as savage, barbaric, animals, monsters etc. and thus justifying genocide against them. Having cared deeply for the struggle for justice in Palestine for many years, I am used to representations of Palestinians through a racist, Islamophobic lens, but even I am shocked at the extent of the rhetoric condoning or encouraging genocide by the governments and media of the militaristic, imperialist countries in North America and Europe.

At times like this it is also imperative not to stay silent as a concentration camp is being turned into an extermination camp right in
front of our eyes. Are we human beings any more if we are silent at this unfolding genocide?

Spiritual practice is about examining the way we think, the way we feel, even those ways of feeling we take to be closest to us and examining if those ways of thinking or feeling cause harm to any group of people. If we do find such ways of thinking within ourselves, the ethical task we face is examining where these ways of thinking came from and seeing how we can change them, maintaining our integrity with our deepest sense of right and wrong. I have been a Buddhist monastic for 15 years (with 13 years as a Bhikkhu). A primary concern for me has been how to live in this world while minimising one’s participation in the various systems and structures that cause harm.

Different societies teach us different forms of racism, demonising certain groups of people, thus justifying any atrocity committed against that group. White supremacy has always functioned to manufacture consent for colonialism, slavery and indigenous genocide, deadening the moral sense of the population, or even having them cheering genocide on as it happens before their eyes. Compassion also requires rigorous thought, the great poet and thinker, Fred Moten offers a deeply ethical and reflective analysis of the ongoing genocide in Palestine. Talking about Palestine, decolonization, settler colonialism, and the nation-state of Israel. The contradictions of the fierce urgency of the present and the long arc of the moral universe that (perhaps) bends towards justice. How do we “among ourselves” refuse to take on the imposed frameworks of the coloniser?

Despite the unspeakable and incessant trauma Wael Dahdouh, Motaz Azaiza, Bisan Owda and the many journalists like them, are working tirelessly to cry out to the world about the genocide that is being carried out in Gaza. How is it that white supremacy, Islamophobia and racism function to make people unable to hear these cries? When will the world wake up to the reality of Israeli fascism? If spiritual practice has some supposed connection to ethics or morality, what is the cognitive dissonance and moral cowardice that prevents people from discerning the difference between right and wrong? If you feel that you cannot
say anything because you do not know enough, I would urge you to at least attempt to learn more about the context of settler colonialism and apartheid in which the attacks on 7 October occurred.

I would urge you to study the work of Palestinian scholars and activists who have been analysing their situation in the most eloquent terms for decades, using the frameworks of art, music, legal analysis, history, carefully documenting atrocities etc. etc. and yet whose work tends to be systematically ignored.

I would urge you to consider how the media manufactures outrage in order to justify whatever atrocities the coloniser perpetrates, to prescribe whose lives are grievable. It is always of benefit to the coloniser to paint the colonised in the most savage and inhuman terms.

I would urge you to reflect on what sort of white supremacist, colonialist conditioning allows us to go along with the racist governments of the militaristic, imperialist countries that are cheering on this genocide and even providing material support to ensure that it continues.

I do not think anything I say can change anyone’s mind unless they themselves come to an awareness of a need to change the lens through which they view this issue. Unfortunately, unless you do so, you will be tacitly supporting the genocide unfolding right before your eyes. I can only hope that someday people come to realise the monumental obscenity of describing the almost century long Palestinian struggle for liberation as “fighting hatred with hatred”.

As they show images of indiscriminate bombing of residential areas, for more than four months, racist news presenters continued to describe them as strikes against Hamas targets. Deliberately targeting civilians and civilian infrastructure; cutting off food, electricity, fuel, water, medical supplies, and internet; assassinating journalists, medics, poets, scholars etc.; using banned weapons like white phosphorus, that burns away any skin and flesh it touches; destroying hospitals, universities, mosques, churches; ordering 1.1 million people to evacuate Northern Gaza; a population of about 1.5 million people, trapped in Rafah, with nowhere to run; I wonder at the nature of the white supremacist way of thinking that is unable to register this as being wrong.

Hegemony trains us to not see that which is right there before our eyes. The monumental ethical failure of so many individuals is staggering.
Letters

Artwork: Annika Slabbert
Lindsay Alderton

With leading dharma centres reluctant to call for a ceasefire so as to prioritise 'a neutral stance', many practitioners find themselves shaken and bereft. When our beloved spiritual homes and teachers stay silent in the face of a genocide fuelled by racist legacies of colonialism, then what pernicious views and narratives remain upheld, unquestioned, unchallenged? Historical trauma is undoubtedly complex, but aligned with the first precept, it is the wish of many practitioners that our centres and spiritual leaders courageously engage publicly with issues of deep moral importance. This feels particularly important to ensure that friends of colour, already under-represented in Western Buddhist communities, know that they too are held safe.

Lindsay Alderton

Sally Bowden-Schaible

I tried for so many years (over 20) to bring up in insight dharma circles the situation in Israel-Palestine for the Palestinian people. I have been met with outright hostility, steely glares, comments like “this is not the dharma” and “this is not the time and place [to talk about Israel-Palestine]. I have been ostracized, told the situation was hopeless (by a very well-known teacher/scholar), and had dharma friends tell me they didn’t want me to talk about this because they had Jewish friends, family, and partners.

I started a sangha in my community in 2006 after having studied and practiced at a Buddhist center for 10 years and before there were teacher training programs and community dharma leader programs. I wanted to share what I was learning with others. And as related to Palestinian human rights, the time period of my education and advocacy coincided. So I spoke out, sometimes within the sangha. I could not (cannot) do otherwise when almost no one in the Buddhist community was speaking out and taking a stand (at least publicly). I make no apologies for this.

Admittedly, however, within the Buddhist community with developing training programs becoming available, I feared disapproval for leading a sangha; I feared “doing something wrong” at times (such an old internalized message). In spite of this, I kept on going because I had seen the beauty of the Dharma and I could not imagine not sharing what I was learning with others. This applied to both the Dharma (which was beautiful) and the plight of the Palestinian people and their human rights (which was ugly and tragic).
Fortunately, my path crossed Thanissara’s many years ago—and she showed interest, compassion and support. I felt less alone. I also spent an afternoon in Clil, Israel in 2014 with Stephen Fulder, founder of the Insight Community Israel (TOVANA) who encouraged me to “talk about what I know” in Buddhist sanghas, including bringing up the situation in Israel-Palestine as means to talk about the dharma. I felt encouraged. They both encouraged me and gave feedback for a petition I initiated in 2014 to halt the US unconditional sale of weapons to Israel.

Something I could do with no other Buddhist leader support was to develop an on-line Buddhist presence for writings, resources, blog-postings, etc., which is the Buddhist Alliance for Non-Violence and Human Rights in Israel-Palestine (BANVAHR). While I am grateful that so many people around the world and in some segments of dharma communities are now standing up, I’m deeply sad that it took THIS blatant genocidal action to wake people up. We MUST stand up courageously, not for just one people or another, but for all of humanity— what happens to my Palestinian brothers and sisters affects what happens to ALL people. We are all one people and we are destroying not only ourselves but non-human life and this planet that is our home.

Sally Bowden-Schaible - Founder of BANVAHR: Buddhist Alliance for Non-Violence & Human Rights in Israel-Palestine.

---

**Iona Steen**

What is happening in Gaza is a genocide, while all the eyes of the world are watching. It tears at the moral fabric of our society and our individual and collective hearts break. They break because when governments, society, religious institutions will not take an anti-genocidal stance it leaves us in a state of moral crisis.

Calling into account the credibility of those institutions and that society. The pain/suffering of a genocide is not only the violence and killing that is committed against a group of people, but the causes and conditions that are needed to give rise to genocide are large-scale social and government complicity. Unexamined delusion and hate both gross and subtle in the case of Gaza a global complicity.

Spiritual and religious institutions have always served to inform and bolster our individual and collective morality, guiding our ethical actions in the world. One could argue that is the social function of religious institutions. Buddhism resonated with practitioners in the West because of the way ethics (Sīla) is interwoven into the fabric of the teaching; whether the precepts (refrain from harming all
sentient beings), the teaching of four noble truths, dependent origination or the cultivation of the brahma viharas. We can use these teachings to examine our own internal experience, see how we create suffering by clinging to views or being aversive to ourselves or others or we can look at how greed hatred and delusion give root to geopolitical action in the world, how they unpin colonial regimes, racism, sexual violence or the sale of arms, etc., etc.

These teachings are not just practiced in silent meditation retreats, they are there to help us make sense of our geopolitical situation of the harm that happens on individual, institution, social and political levels. So, when the institution of Western Buddhism cannot take an open, transparent, and firm stance against the causes and conditions which bring genocide into being, those institutions cease to be meaningful, and we must question whether the institution of Western Buddhism is practicing the teaching it expounds.

This is why genocide is so destructive, it traumatises, slaughters, violates a group of people, but it also shines a big light on the individuals and institutions which make up the fabric of our society and often what is revealed is painful to behold. Part of what happens during and after a genocide is we can no longer be beholden to the institutions in which we once placed our faith. This is how genocides happen: good people (who in their hearts would not want a genocide to happen) do not examine their gross or subtle levels of complicity.

Because they fear dissent, because they fear getting it wrong, because in some places they fear for their safety, placed where anti-genocidal speech or action results in ostracisation, detention, torture, etc. The thing about genocide is there is too late, history in time will write itself and make the retrospective call on whether Israel’s attack on Gaza represents a genocide, but the retrospective call on genocide is a call too late. The slaughter is done, and the intergenerational trauma is unleashed.

So, in not saying anything, by remaining seemingly neutral, what operates unchecked is the dominant geo-political narrative, which is the propaganda that has dehumanised the Palestinian people allowing what has happened before and since 7th October. If we really think Palestinians should not be killed and brutalised in the manner we are currently witnessing, if we think they too deserve a safe and peaceful existence then we need to say that loud and clear. To not say it is not neutrality it is complicity, and complicity is and always has been one of the conditions that is needed for a genocide to unfold.

The dharma is a radical body of teaching. It teaches the liberation from suffering for all sentient beings, which is no small thing. It is not for the faint-hearted. Practicing dharma does not just happen on mediation cushions or the very particular and safe condition of a retreat center. To practice the
dharma, things have to break, we have to learn how to recognise the many guises of delusion and hatred, the subtle and the gross. How delusions and hatred can filter into our own worldview, our institutions, because it is part of the dominant view of our times, and that if we cannot see and name these views as they are operating, they will construct whole worlds of suffering.

If the institutions of Western Buddhism doesn’t and can’t take an open stance against genocide, then they are not a place where I can take refuge. And I suspect that is the same for anyone practicing liberation from suffering for all beings in its full radicality. That is not to say they are to be shunned or cast out or torn down but they are to be held to account by open and honest dialogue which happens beyond the safety of neutrality.

Kind regards, Iona Steen

---

**Laur Sigvaldason**

The Buddha first set us all on this dharma path when he witnessed the profound truth of the world. Confronted by the inescapable suffering, sickness, age, and death, the illusions of his existence were shattered. This revelation compelled him to take action, abandoning his entire life in pursuit of a means to reconcile and find peace within the harsh realities of the world. His first actions reveal that responding to the world's suffering is the catalyst for cultivating profound peace. Without first taking action, there is no peace.

For many people, witnessing the current visible and devastating acts genocide of against the Palestinain people is an illusion shattering moment. As a Buddhist, this raises the question: How would the Buddha, a teacher born from a moment like this, respond when wisdom alone fails to halt genocide? Would he abstain from taking action toward peace? This pivotal moment calls for right action, arising from a right understanding that we all are humanity. Our collective awakening begins with profound action to reconcile with the world we face.

Thank you for reading,
Much care and gratitude, Laur Sigvaldason
Jean Leonard

As a trauma therapist for 28+ years, I know for certain that the cycle of trauma is never healed by inflicting more trauma generation after generation. The Buddha understood this truth 2600 years ago when he taught “hatred never ceases by hatred, but by love alone.” True compassion inspires wise action in the service of the alleviation of suffering. The energies of greed, hatred and delusion are currently devastating Gaza, where 17,000+ civilians have been killed – 70% of whom are children and women, creating a devastating humanitarian crisis and extreme suffering. For Buddhist communities to truly be a refuge where all beings can feel a measure of welcome and safety, it is essential to take our practice off the cushion and to advocate for peace and justice. Silence in the face of such violence is neither neutral nor wholesome. Buddhist communities must use our power, moral authority and spiritual leadership to join the call for a ceasefire in Gaza.

In solidarity,
Jean Leonard

Alanna Birch

Many of my fellow sangha members are expressing significant concern over the public silence from leading North American Dharma centers on the current humanitarian crisis in Palestine. Some institutions have cited a desire to maintain neutrality. However, it is just this response that prompts me to express my deep concern.

Proclaiming neutrality in the face of this grave, US-backed genocide upholds the very conditioning of colonialism and oppression we seek to dismantle through practice. Though this is one of the immeasurable forms of injustice sanctioned by our nation, we are seeing in real-time the urgent need for swift, collective efforts to put pressure on our government to endorse a ceasefire for the safety and long-term stability of both Palestinian and Israeli lives.

I trust that for many in leadership roles, the stance to maintain neutrality is rooted in sensitivity towards the diversity of your community. I also understand that speaking publicly against oppression as an institution confers discomfort and certain risks. While I deeply appreciate the staggering complexity of the historical and colonial context that preceded this moment, living the values of justice calls us to explore wise moral responses within our unique personal and institutional conditions, even in the face of discomfort and risk. Just as our practice instructions remind us to come back to
awareness moment by moment over the course of a lifetime, so do the choices that lead us towards actively resisting and dismantling harmful structures that perpetuate suffering, especially for those by which structural violence is disproportionately inflicted. This is an irrefutable genocide in Gaza.

Coming together in sangha, seeking refuge in the reality of the injustice we are witnessing, creatively engaging one another to show up more fully and tending to our aching hearts continues to be a profoundly impactful experience for my spiritual practice and capacity for service. Because of this support within my Buddhist communities, I have stretched to engage directly in a myriad of new ways which I will continue to invest in long after this war is over.

It is heartening to hear the many skillful responses from teachers, dharma institutions and sangha members courageously speaking out. I am encouraged by those who honor the gravity of the loss of both Israeli and Palestinian lives while acknowledging the dire imbalance of power that led to these catastrophic conditions. There are many courageous voices joining to foster nuanced dialog as a means to help expand our capacity for being with the not-knowing. I believe this holds immense creative power in service of shaping new ways of being in our communities, deeply needed in our 'Western' dharma institutions.

I feel more strongly than ever that our spiritual institutions and teachers have a powerful opportunity and responsibility to foster dialog, space for critical analysis, and engagement with the most pressing issues we face today. We will need this leadership. With multiple compounding escalations of climate emergency, world violence, racism and other systemic oppressions, along with accelerating wealth disparity across the world and in my own community, conversation and direct action will only become more urgent and necessary if we are to foster a more life-giving society for all to thrive and allow the harmful structures that do not support life to perish.

I hope for sanghas and buddhist communities in North America to grow in their courage, honesty and nuance to hold space for the complexity that their members bring. To foster conversations that unfold the tenderness, fear, grief and hope in our hearts to allow it to be witnessed and transmuted together in the light of the teachings.

This sacred inner work creates the momentum to help us move through blockages that might keep us stuck or inactive in ways that do not serve life, to mobilize ourselves towards unique expressions of justice that feels in alignment with our heart’s deepest wish, for the elimination of suffering for all beings.
This effort needs your voice. I ask you as teachers, and leading North American dharma institutions to join the other Buddhist voices in the West speaking publicly against the apartheid and genocide of Palestinians and to speak out in favor of rapid humanitarian aid and immediate de-escalation.

Please use your significant platform and privilege to oppose violence with compassion. Expand the meaningful investments you have already made towards justice by promoting life-affirming engagement through programs, multi-faith conversations, and exploration of sacred engagement for justice. As one of our leading Dharma institutions affirms in their own words, “to provide a spiritual refuge in the face of significant challenges and upheaval in the US and the world.” Thank you for your time and reflection.

With care and respect, Alanna Birch

Nic Oestreicher

A key dharma understanding is that outside of periods of cessation in deep practice, there are always concepts operating - even when we feel we are experiencing ‘bare attention’ or ‘things as they are’ or ‘reality’. If the idea of ‘neutrality’ is taken as a similar blank slate or truth, the mind will always revert to its entrenched and mostly unconscious conditioned concepts. The default conditioning will remain dominant, and any actions that follow will be coloured by that conditioning. Dharma centres stating that they need to stay ‘neutral’ often do it in the name of ‘inclusivity’ – now a key value that Dharma centres wish to uphold.

But what actually happens is that those speaking out and ‘disrupting’ the dominant views that are left unacknowledged and unquestioned by a ‘neutral’ stance will be the ones excluded, often those who have experience of oppression and marginalisation already. This is dangerous - an unseen dynamic that allows for the appearance of an equanimous, peaceful, harmonious, morally correct organization or centre, and yet leaves a vacuum at its heart, something is left unexamined. But that is just one part of the problem. ‘Neutrality’ is always impossible, but in times of acute moral crisis it dangerously reinforces oppressive dominant narratives.

The belief that not speaking out is ‘neutral’ and an avenue of ‘right speech’ leads to the ‘good people doing nothing’ syndrome that ultimately contributes to oppression and violence continuing unchecked. Thousands of Palestinians are being massacred as we watch, in the context of decades of illegal occupation and increasing dispossession.
It is not enough for us as Buddhists to claim ‘neutrality’ and essentially say nothing. I hope that Western dharma centres and teachers (especially in the UK and America, two countries deeply complicit historically and currently in this genocide) will find the will and the courage to grapple with and reflect on what it means to take an active, moral stand in times of inexpressible darkness and horror.

My great-grandmother Else took her own life with a cyanide pill the night before the Nazis were rounding up Jews for deportation in her German town. We all have a duty to those who have suffered the excesses of humanity’s apparently endless capacity for hatred and delusion, to not let it happen again.

Nic Oestreicher

---

**Robert Schaible**

**STAYING NEUTRAL IN THE ISRAEL-PALESTINE CONFLICT**

Frequently we come across someone who justifies staying neutral in the Israel/Palestine conflict by saying both sides have extremists and both sides have committed seriously wrong acts. True enough. But how valid is this kind of argument? Let’s look at the two sides.

Serious wrong has been done by people on both sides, to be sure, but only one side is occupying the other side’s land, and on a daily basis building on that land and taking ever more land for even more building. That same side has taken total control of the other side’s water resources and then sells it back to them at a price 50% higher than illegal settlers pay. Even at those higher prices, only a limited amount of water goes to Palestinians: Settlers get 6 times more water than Palestinians. Indeed, settlers have enough water for swimming pools and lush gardens, while Palestinians have barely enough to allow bathing, cooking, and some farming.

Only one side has specially built bulldozers armed with powerful guns that have been used to destroy tens of thousands of homes of those on the other side. One side has a huge army, navy and air force with which it can kill people on the other side at a ratio of 10-1 and does not hesitate to use its power to maximize that ratio. During the 2nd intifada (the Palestinian uprising that began in September 2000), close to 100 Palestinian children were killed by Israeli forces before a single Israeli child lost her/his life.
The overall death ratio was 10 to 1 until suicide bombers began their awful work. (Suicide bombings and other acts labeled terrorism are what a people do when they are oppressed, stolen from, humiliated every day, and killed with unacceptable frequency.) That awful and immoral decision had only one thing to recommend it in a macabre war-statistics sort of way: it brought the death ratio down to 4-1. The ratio gap rose again once the suicide bombings stopped. (The ratio has vastly worsened in the last two months).

According to a study done by the Israeli human rights organization B’tselem, our media report 100% of Jewish children's deaths, but only 14% of the deaths of Palestinian children. Why? Are Jewish children so much more worthy than Muslim and Christian Palestinian children? It’s only one side that has thousands of the other side’s people in prison, many of them not charged with any crime at all; they are jailed on "administrative detention," a designation usually given to someone helping to organize protests against Israel’s illegal occupation. Only one side has placed hundreds of the other side’s children in jails, abused and often suffering from multiple traumas upon their release.

Hamas has become the whipping boy for almost everyone who supports Israel. To say "Hamas" seems to be a magic act that frees people from having to look behind the rhetoric about Hamas. It’s an excuse not to see what Israel has been doing for many years on a daily basis to the people of Gaza that creates hopelessness, despair and a desire to retaliate.

The world has stood by as Israel's 17-year siege has strangled Gaza, but world leaders unite in condemnation of Hamas if it dares to strike back Gaza’s oppressor. Hamas strikes back because no one else will or can (certainly not the people in the West Bank since the PA, under Arafat, disarmed them after Oslo was signed). Ever wonder why boys just throw stones instead of shooting AK47s at soldiers who invade their refugee camps to arrest even more boys for throwing stones? That’s why. The only citizens with guns in the West Bank are the settlers, who are armed by the IDF and routinely attack Palestinians and destroy their olive trees. If Israel would stop trying to displace Palestinians in order to have the Holy Land for Jews only, if they would stop their myriad injustices, Palestinians would no longer feel driven to violent resistance.

Why are mainstream Christians and the Buddhist community staying on the sidelines? To those seeking the comfortable hammock of neutrality, I offer the words of Archbishop Desmond Tutu: “If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor.”And I recall Dante's Inferno, where those who cannot take a stand, “neither faithful nor unfaithful to their God, but undecided in neutrality,” spend eternity in limbo, entering neither hell nor heaven.
World Jewry is being led down a very destructive path (destructive to others and to itself) by both Israeli and American leadership. Perhaps one day the required number of Jews (and their Evangelical Christian allies) will understand this and tell Israel it can no longer count on their support or silence. That’s when a true peace will be possible for everyone between “the River and the Sea.”


---

**Suzanne Hudson**

Our powerful precept of “not taking the life of any being,” provides us with wisdom to use our privilege to address that “we cannot stand by while lives are being taken.”

Additionally, when we use the wisdom that has so graciously been provided to us through practice, we incorporate Right Speech and speak out against lives being taken. Something is fundamentally off for some sanghas to EVEN consider “neutrality.” What does it mean, anyway? An excuse to do nothing.

Suzanne Hudson

---

**Derek Roguski and Lauren Elliot**

**THE PROBLEM OF NEUTRALITY IN WESTERN BUDDHISM**

Why do we need our Dharma leaders to take a stand against the ongoing genocide of the Palestinian people? What is amiss in our Western Buddhist leaders claiming neutrality at this moment? How do we make sense of the majority of our American Buddhist leaders choosing silence or “neutrality” over speaking out against US-supported genocide?

The Buddha’s teachings on the emptiness of perception help us see that there are always views operating in our experience of the world. There is always a stance taken even within silence. There is always a polarity even within claimed “neutrality”. Doing nothing, or claiming neutrality, allows the current streams of greed, hatred, and delusion in our world (now manifested in the actions of the Israeli and US leadership against the Palestinian people) to continue unabated. When we are working
so hard as practicing Buddhists to challenge greed, hatred, and delusion in ourselves, we wonder what is the point if that is not manifesting in actions in the world?

We as white US-based Buddhists, wonder if there is something in how Dharma is being taught in the West that is leading to so few Buddhist leaders speaking up against the US-backed genocide of the Palestinian people. It’s common for Dharma teachings to focus on being with "things as they are" and not emphasize how our perception (of ourselves, of the world, of everything) is always shaped by our mind states and our underlying beliefs (which may or may not be apparent to us).

These teachings can limit our capacity to see and challenge our own stuck ways of relating to the world. We may become caught in delusion, thinking we are being with "things as they are" and not grappling with how we might be perpetuating the dominant views of our society. This is where politics enters the Dharma, whether or not we are aware of it, because the dominant frameworks in our Western society are ones of power over others.

We live in societies built out of the violence of white supremacy, settler colonialism, and corporate capitalism: systemic manifestations of greed, hate, and delusion. As Dharma practitioners, we are committed to the end of suffering for all beings and to learning how our ways of perceiving create suffering in ourselves and others. If we are just "with things as they are" and do not investigate how dominant views shape our worldviews and our actions, then our practice of Dharma itself may support our complicity in the violence of our times.

Perhaps Dharma leaders and practitioners are not speaking up because they do not believe their actions would have a positive impact. We also struggle with feeling hopeless about the impact we can have as individuals in violence on a global scale. But we wonder if this hopelessness comes from a limited belief about the self, and about how change happens.

When we, for example, return our lives in worship to the compassionate activities of Kuan Yin or take refuge in the Buddha’s teachings of Metta, we can feel how our individual and collective actions are part of the timeless stream of compassionate activity in the world. We can have faith, knowing that the way change works is mysterious and our little gestures against injustice, our small gestures of kindness and care, have ripples that we may never be privy to.
Jamie Shearn Coan

Why is it important to me as a dharma practitioner to show up at this time in the face of the genocide in Palestine? The teachings I have received and the insights I have experienced through the dharma are not meant to be helpful to me in isolation. Rather, they fuel me to work with others towards reducing suffering for all. There is no separation between who I am on the cushion and off. I have been marching in the street and organizing with others in an effort to stop the genocide and longstanding violent occupation of Palestinians by Israel because I know in my body that it is wrong.

I also believe that collective compassion practices are so necessary right now to soften our hearts around this suffering and to prevent further divisions, as it is so easy to fall into "us vs. them" thinking. Finally, because there has been so much disinformation and suppression of information of the genocide and ethnic cleansing of Palestinians, I believe that it is imperative that we speak out explicitly to assert what is really going on. Right speech and right action require me to show up.

Jamie Shearn Coan

Kara Nicole Spezeski

I hardly feel more qualified than Thanissara or Kittisaro to articulate a way forward here, but as a former teacher of Ethics and Holocaust studies, I have some thoughts.

The (Buddhist) declaration of neutrality is a seemingly innocuous gesture that actually moves towards shutting out our miraculous capacity to experience, understand, and respond to complexity and nuance as beings bound to each other in community, locally or globally. If the Buddhist commitment is to transform all suffering, then we must denounce staggering harms, including enacting genocide as revenge—and in this way the Bodhisattva path holds. If the Buddhist commitment is to transform only one’s own suffering, then I do not know what conscionable routes of existence are made available in the face of chronic human-authored atrocity on planet Earth and in Gaza now.

I would never want to oversimplify in these waters, but to the extent that the case for neutrality is against taking stands (I am pointedly avoiding “choosing sides” language here because it could be a useful distinction), it could be essential to frame the discussion around not only the dire necessity for taking stands but the very appropriate, uniquely Buddhist call to do exactly that.
All of the examples of the Buddha’s intervention in war disputes are relevant here - I know you have
been citing the fact of them daily. I hope this does not sound overly strategic, but I have found that
when the heart is shut down, sometimes it is only a well-considered choice of language that can pierce
it. I do not know if any of the above is useful, but I send it to you in willingness to think this through,
work on it, and in full solidarity.

Sincerely, Kara Nicole Spezeski

Gareth Fysh-Foskett

Dharma Center Neutrality during Genocide in Palestine

The current cycle of violence and bloodshed in Gaza is bringing untold suffering and despair to every
human heart that it touches. The history of genocide and ethnic cleansing, of western imperialist
brutality, and the collective trauma of war and oppression, can render our hearts immobilised and
despairing, each facing our own particular inherited shadows, or pain, or complicity, or helplessness.

In the midst of this horror, the preciousness of dharma practice as a beacon of sanity, compassion,
discernment and balance is unquestionable. Can it also provide the basis for a meaningful political and
civic engagement with these times, as an expression of care and courage, meaningful solidarity, and our
inter-connected longing for justice and dignity for all? Is it possible to mobilise our capacity for insight,
for flexibility in ‘ways of looking’, to hold the dignity and basic humanity of all beings entangled in the
75 year history of apartheid and occupation, whilst also acting to shift global systems of oppression
rooted in greed, hatred, and delusion that perpetuate the state-sanctioned conditions for violence and
misery in Palestine?

Six months have passed since October 7th; approximately 40,000 Palestinians have been killed, the
majority of whom were women and children. Despite multiple declarations from the UN citing legal
evidence of war atrocities, and outcries from a growing majority of governments worldwide, the Israeli
state continues to massacre with impunity. Meanwhile, historic and monumental waves of
international civil resistance continue to shift narrative, prevent harm, and provide humanitarian aid
and support.

We are living through times of unprecedented solidarity and peaceful protest at all levels of culture and
society, of collective shock, horror and outrage at the unfolding genocide and ethnic cleansing of the
Palestinian people. And this is beginning to bear fruit, with successful direct action campaigns disrupting the illegal and inhumane arms trade, fundraising initiatives supporting life and health within Palestine, and a growing shift in the cultural and political conversations that challenge colonialism and its legacy of harm.

Yet many dharma centers around the world are currently reluctant to join this call, claiming neutrality and withdrawing engagement from a conflict that the UN human rights chief has described as ‘apocalyptic’, in which ‘war atrocities’ are being carried out, for fear of creating division and compromising their status as ‘apolitical’. Is there a historical precedent for a positive response from these sanctuaries that we love, one of empowered and ethical action in the face of massive human suffering? Can we as citizens and dharma practitioners have a meaningful impact on what is often described as an ‘intractable situation’, to support, with compassion and discernment, movements for peace and dignity for all?

During the 1980s, amidst growing awareness of the racist segregation and brutal violence of the white population in South Africa, an international movement of boycotts, divestment, and economic sanction began to take root within social and civic institutions, including religious and spiritual organisations throughout Britain. The South African people’s resistance to injustice, alongside this international movement, created a shift in public perception and social license, eventually forcing the South African government to reform its racist policies.

The Christian church, alongside Muslim, Jewish, Hindu and Sikh delegations, threw their full weight behind the anti-apartheid campaign around the world. And current Dharmic organisations and institutions are beginning to do the same, in the context of solidarity with the people of Palestine; the World Council of Buddhists, Soka Gakkai, and the Buddhist Peace Fellowship, have all brought institutional status to a call for an immediate end to Israeli state violence in Gaza.

Buddhists internationally are now also beginning to bring their community and their voice to direct action that intervenes, through collective power, in the practical mechanisms of violence utilized by the Israeli state and facilitated by corporations and complicit governmental bodies.

---

1 https://tinyurl.com/yc2ehz54
2 https://www.aamarchives.org/who-was-involved/faith-organisations.html
3 https://www.aamarchives.org/who-was-involved/faith-organisations.html
Last week, after years-long series of disruptions and occupations at arms companies across England, Scotland and Wales, it was announced that three of the main distribution outlets for weaponry produced in the UK and sold directly to the IDF were to close permanently, and that the governmental select committee MP’s tasked with commissioning funding for the arms trade threatened to resign, citing the continual ignoring of legal reports detailing war crimes directly linked with the UK arms trade.

The movement to end apartheid required moral courage, and a willingness to disagree with the established status quo, in order to mobilize sufficient civic pressure for justice, and support for legitimate change in South Africa.

Dharma centers can play a part in the current movement for an end to the bloodshed in Gaza; not as an expression of divisiveness or partisan loyalty, but as one component of a unified call for peace and justice for the people of Palestine.

Hostilities aren’t stilled through hostility, regardless.

Hostilities are stilled through non-hostility: this, an unending truth.

Dhammapada, Yamakavagga, v. 5
Closing Prayer
Closing Prayer

THANISSARA

Namo Kuan Shr Yin Pu Sa.

We bow in reverence to the compassionate one who listens at ease to the sounds of the world.

Oh, holy one, we are lost.

Please bring your presence to us now. Please bring your merciful healing to all bodies, hearts, and minds.

We call on all Dharma protectors and benevolent forces of protection. All Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, enlightened ones, saints and sages, divine beings, and all celestial guides. May your benevolence shield all from harm, within and without. Let the light of awakening dispel the shadows and liberate all pain.

To the elemental protector spirits and ancestral guardians, to the great Nagas, dragons, and healing forces, we offer our invocation. May your healing powers flow through the sacred web of interbeing washing away all suffering.

May the illumination of pure consciousness within all guide us toward compassion, love, and peace. May all that binds us in fear, hatred, and delusion be replaced by courage, love, and clear knowing.

We pray for the true freedom of all beings, united in the sacred dance of life.

May this prayer resonate deeply with all hearts uniting us in service of peace and healing.

Namo Buddhaya
Namo Dharmaya
Namo Sanghaya
Resources

Link to full SMS Ceasefire Awakening Activism Event
Moral vs Political Positioning Guidelines

Open invitation to affinity spaces:
- SWANA+ Sangha (South West Asia and North Africa, including what’s commonly known as the Middle East, and those from elsewhere with Muslim heritage) swanasangha@gmail.com
- Jewish Affinity in the Dharma. jewishdharma@gmail.com
- White Awake: Study & Action for Palestine

Statements from Religious Orgs
- Sorrow & Fury: a letter from American Rabbis to President Biden
- Black Pastors Pressure Biden to Call for Ceasefire in Gaza
- Quaker organizations call for a ceasefire and humanitarian protections in Gaza
- Buddhist Peace Fellowship: True Justice, True Peace: Response to Gaza
- Unitarian Universalists Association Condemns Violence Against Gaza, Urges Immediate and Total Ceasefire

Petitions and statements from Buddhist Institutions
- List of written statements from buddhist institutions and sanghas
- Dharma toolkit for writing ceasefire letters & petitions

Further Dharma resources & education on Palestine
- List of dharma talks and other education resources
- Buddhist Alliance for Non-Violence and Human Rights in Israel-Palestine

Buddhist Organizations in Palestine / Israel
- Garden of Hope - Supporting the first Palestinian owned mindfulness-based center in the West Bank
- TOVANA Insight & Engaged Dharma Sangha, Israel
- Sangha Seva & Being Peace Retreat in Palestine / Israel, Oct ‘24
Special Thanks

With heartfelt gratitude and deep appreciation to the working team of Sacred Mountain Sangha’s current two-year *Dharmapala Training* (DPT2) whose exceptional focus and dedication has enabled this offering:

- Thanissara, Sacred Mountain Sangha / DPT2
- Kareem Ghandour, Sacred Justice Coalition / DPT2
- Bernadine Mellis, Insight Western Massachusetts & Jewish Affinity in the Dharma / DPT2
- Michele Ku, Sacred Justice Coalition / DPT2
- emiko yoshikami, Dharmapala / DPT2
- Sharad, Dharmapala / DPT2
- Jen Cannon, Dharmapala / DPT2
- Maia Marie, Dharmagiri Sacred Mountain Retreat, South Africa / DPT2

Profound thanks for support with editing and layout to Kareem Ghandour and Iona Steen.

Many thanks to Michael Krass (Executive Director, Sacred Mountain Sangha), JD Doyle (DPT2) for your wonderful support, and much gratitude to each and everyone of our authors for your powerful truth-telling and heartfelt contributions.

Cover and document design by Annika Slabbert (DPT2).