

Understanding Violence

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When one of the producers of Mel Gibson's film, *The Passion of the Christ*, was asked why there was so much violence depicted in the film, his answer was: "Because violence is the language of our time." His statement may be controversial and provocative but it is also painfully true. Whoever today watches prime time television news programmes cannot but be overwhelmed by the amount of gore, cruelty and unceasing suffering generated by violence in its many forms. It is also true that modern media exploits the present climate of violence to its own advantage, but the media has not invented the human darkness that descended, for example, upon Srebrenica, Darfur and Iraq.

In a recent report, Amnesty International denounces that mass rape of women is being used as a weapon of war. Those who survived the Japanese invasion of Singapore during World War II can testify to that. The same pattern unfolds in the region of Darfur, Sudan, as this is written. On the other hand, millions of people have been displaced, forcefully removed from their homes and villages by armed conflicts in different areas of the world. There is growing urban violence in many cities in the world and also the not so visible domestic violence, the scale of which has compelled many governments to create hostels for women and children who bear the scars of brutality perpetrated by their "loved ones". The real dimension of the problem of violence is difficult to measure but its urgency has a voice which cannot be suppressed any longer.

Is it possible to understand violence? What are its origins? How does it maintain its grip over the human mind? Can it end?

Law enforcement agencies deal with the consequences of violence and act within the framework of existing laws. Necessary though this is, it leaves the causes of the problem untouched. It has been said, again and again, that one of the causes of violence is poverty and social alienation; but the fact that millions of poor people all over the world are law abiding individuals seems to indicate that the cause of violence lies deeper than any attempt at explaining it through social topography. The first step to understand violence is perhaps to enquire into the nature of emotion.(...)

Emotions are desires either to perpetuate a situation if pleasurable, or to escape out of it if painful. (1)

The Emotion thus begin in, and looks back to, a feeling of positive Pleasure and Pain, and looks forward to, and ends in, a possible Pleasure and Pain. (2)

Emotion is thus a reaction dictated by what is felt to be pleasurable or otherwise in our contacts with the world around us. Because emotions are also associated with deeply-rooted desires and their accompanying energy, they play such a vital role in the way we see the world and tend to perpetuate a reactive attitude which prevents a clear understanding of people, circumstances and situations. A mind dominated by reactions cannot see things as they are.

In-built in the nature of emotions is a feeling of expectation, of anticipation, which seeks pleasure and avoids pain. It is not difficult to see how this mechanism invites frustration and disappointment as it leads the personal self into believing that the whole of existence is organized to suit its illusory programme. As the *Bhagavadgita* teaches, the contacts of matter – pleasure and pain, happiness and

sorrow, honour and dishonour – are inevitable and have to be endured bravely. Perhaps one of the very purposes for such a polarity is that consciousness can learn that, in its essential nature, it is utterly free from identification with anything external to itself.

Emotions are Desires, and (...) the two elementary Desires are: (i) the Desire to unite with an object that causes Pleasure; and (ii) the Desire to separate from an object which causes Pain; in other words, Attraction and Repulsion, Like and Dislike, Love and Hate, or any other pair of names that may seem best. (3)

The above definition throws light on the pair of opposites which are at the very nature of our emotional life, and shows that Attraction and Repulsion are indeed two sides of the same coin. Because they have the same origin they display an almost chameleonic behaviour, for example, when a strong attraction turns almost instantly into a vengeful repulsion. Many of the so-called crimes of passion convey this almost bizarre transformation of “love” into hate and are evidence that the inherent duality present in human emotions is not only volatile – it can be also lethal.

Bhagavan Das goes on to attempt defining the most basic and fundamental human emotions: love and hate.

(...) Love, the desire to unite with something else, implies the consciousness of the possibility of such union, and (...) its full significance is this: an instinctive, ingrained, inherent perception by each individual self, each Jivatma, of its essential underlying unity, oneness (...) with all other Jivatma-s, all other selves. (4)

Hate is the instinctive perception by each self (...) of the non-identity, the inherent separateness, the manyness (...) of each not-self, each atom of Mulaprakrti, from every other atom, every other not- self, and its endeavour to maintain such separate existence at all costs and by all means. (5)

A number of emotions emanate from the abiding feeling of love: trust, sympathy, courage, compassion, forgiveness, helpfulness, sacrifice. They may be natural expressions of this perception alluded to above that there is an essential underlying unity at the heart of existence that makes us all profoundly one with each another and with every other form of life. This may be the reason why the ancients affirmed that “love conquers all”, for love is anchored in the mighty truth that all life is one and truly endures all things.

On the other hand, hate is based on and rooted in this notion, this perception, of the personal self of an inherent separateness between itself and the rest of existence plus an endeavour to maintain such separateness “at all costs and by all means.” In other words, within the personal self lurks a deep-seated resistance, conscious or unconscious, to the truth of unity as the ground of all being. This resistance or reaction may be one of the wellsprings of violence in the human consciousness as it is an affirmation of division, separateness as well as a denial of the universal principle that life is relationship.

The Sanskrit word *dvésha* means hatred, dislike, repugnance, enmity to. It is derived from *dvish*, “to hate, show hatred against, be hostile or unfriendly”. A relevant word in this context is *dvi*, meaning “two”. The origin of feelings of hostility, aggression and violence lies in the dualistic perception that our individual existence is forever separate from the totality of life. The psychological and environmental consequences of this can be widely seen in our contemporary world in which cruelty, war and widespread devastation of Nature have come to be accepted as almost inevitable. Dr Taimni comments on the nature of *dvesha* or repulsion:

Dvesha is the natural repulsion felt towards any person or object which is a source of pain or unhappiness to us. The essential nature of the Self is blissful and therefore anything which brings pain or unhappiness in the outer world makes the outer vehicles recoil from that thing. (6)

We are tied to the person we hate perhaps more firmly than the person we love, because the personal love can be transformed into impersonal love easily and then loses its binding power. But it is not so easy to transmute the force of hatred and the poison generated by it is removed from one's nature with great difficulty. (7)

Enmity and animosity can indeed last for a long time, in some cases for centuries as many ethnic wars have shown for, as declared by a Mahatma, "Love and Hatred are the only immortal feelings, the only survivors from the wreck of Ye-dhamma, or the phenomenal world." (*Mahatma Letters*, 70c, chronological). Once harboured in the mind and nourished by continuous thoughts and images, enmity and animosity become even stronger as they make the sense of a personal self more solid, with its divisiveness, its isolation from the glory of life, and its stubborn insistence in asserting its own self-interest against and above the common good. Unless we can begin to look at these patterns within ourselves earnestly and constantly, violence and its dark progeny of pain, suffering and destruction are bound to continue to make of the earth a veritable valley of shadows and death.

Why do emotions have such a grip over our minds? Annie Besant comments: "Emotion is not a simple or primary state of consciousness, but it is a compound made up by the interaction of two aspects of the Self – Desire and Intellect. The play of Intellect on Desire gives birth to Emotion; it is the child of both, and shows some of the characteristics of its father, Intellect, as well as of its mother, Desire." (8)

The complexity of emotions lies in the interplay between desire and intellect. When the energy of desire vivifies and enhances the many images which are moving within the mind we have the birth of emotions. The simple but clear definition given by Bhagavan Das is eloquent in its conciseness: "Emotion is only a form of motion; motion towards an object, or away from it, in the mind, is Emotion." It is thought galvanized by desire and it retains its intrinsic nature of attraction or repulsion. Any attempt to suppress emotions necessarily lead to tension and fragmentation. But a mind that is nothing more than a playground to ceaseless emotions and desires can never find real peace and contentment in life. What is the path to equanimity?

He abused me, he injured me, he overcame me, he deprived me: for them who entertain such thoughts, enmity does not abate.

He abused me, he injured me, he overcame me, he deprived me: for them who do not entertain such thoughts, enmity abates completely.

Enmities do not abate here at any time through enmity; and they abate through friendliness. This is the eternal Dharma (Law)." (*Dhammapada*, I: 3-5)

Note the emphasis on the expression "entertain such thoughts". Is this a clue to ending violence in the human mind? As long as there is lack of self-awareness, an honest examination of oneself from day to day, mental patterns are not going to change miraculously. As it was wisely said, "an unexamined life is not worth living." But self-observation is just one aspect of the solution; the other is cultivating a positive attitude of loving-kindness, friendliness, helpfulness, service. In other words, an attitude of giving of oneself unreservedly to every contact, every relationship and every circumstance. One can thus become a self-effacing centre through which beneficent influences radiate into the world. This

way of life is possible for every self-responsible human being and it would naturally lead to the diminishing of the patterns of aggressiveness and violence that seem so predominant today. Every individual that steps out of the stream of mechanical living, which is the personal self, the “me”, helps to enlighten the consciousness of humanity for:

The “me” is the root of all this; the “me” is identified with a particular nation, with a particular community, with a particular ideology or religious fancy. The “me” identifies itself with a certain prejudice, the “me” says “I must fulfil”; and when it feels frustrated, there is anger and bitterness. It is the “me” that says, “I must reach my goal, I must be successful”, that wants and doesn’t want, that says “I must live peacefully”, and it is the “me” that gets violent.

(J. Krishnamurti, *The Awakening of Intelligence*, p. 468.)

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