Polarisation

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 16:40

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa. Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-awakened one.

I'm going to offer some reflections on polarisation. I've been researching this topic, and I'm trying to understand it within the Dharma of the Buddha.

Polarisation often happens in times of change, when people take positions. This would be fine, except that identity seems to be the primary cause for this polarisation, or the foundation of it. Of course, that's at the root of suffering, according to the not-self doctrine of the Buddha. Each party thinks of itself as morally superior, hence more virtuous, more intelligent and, of course, more patriotic. This is the working of the self that thrives on comparison — not on the various definitions of what virtue might be, but personalising and criticising the person. Hence the three conceits: I'm better than you, I'm worse than you, and the more subtle conceit, I'm equal. The last one is what supports group identity. You find your companions and that group now compares itself with other groups. That's how it works.

When it comes to immigration, for instance, we have those who accept it and even say we need more of it. And the opposite, of course, who say it's a conspiracy to replace the white race. These people see each other as existential threats because they've personalised it. Disagreements are no longer about policy, but about who you are.

Now we as *Dhammikas* — which was the original way that the followers of the Buddha referred to themselves, followers of the true law — we need to be aware when we're identifying with a group and not lose the objective perspective, which enables us to criticise their stance on any particular topic. For instance, if there's a general agreement in the group that immigration has gone too far, especially since COVID, then we also need to know that there are changes happening in the European Convention of Human Rights, which also protect our own freedoms.

This leads to hardening of positions, moralising of areas such as public health, climate crisis and wealth. They become moral absolutes such that any compromise is experienced as betrayal. Because of the distortion of conceit, such positions fail to see the interconnectedness, interrelatedness, interdependence that we talk about. For instance, withdrawing international aid — in other words, not sharing our wealth — leads to greater poverty. So it should not be a surprise that the numbers grow of people wanting to escape that very poverty and destitution. This fact that richer countries are reducing aid also tells us about this neoliberal order and its economic system, which has allowed the market to rule without any social responsibility and follows the dictum, greed is good. The system has produced such uncertainty that more

and more people are feeling their jobs are insecure, causing anxiety about loss of status and wealth. Such unhealthy and unwholesome mental states drive people to believe anyone who says they've got the answer.

All these fears around such areas as loss of work, rising cost of living, immigration and climate are all coupled with the growing despair that normal institutions are incapable of bettering the situation. This leads to a loss of confidence in political parties, unions, religious organisations, and other civic institutions that once were able to mediate and bring needed change. It's no wonder that people start to join mass movements, emotionally manipulated by demagogues and led by populists to deceive them into believing that they are working for the common good.

What has made everything exponentially worse, of course, is social media. From the heady days when it was believed the internet would bring a harmonious world community, we're descending into a worldwide verbal brawl. At the moment it's words, but it soon could become violent action. Witness the storming of the Capitol by MAGA devotees. The algorithms feed on our natural bent for threat and opposition, rather than helping us to welcome and cooperate. They herd people into what are called epistemic silos — isolated groups of like-minded people that go on to intensify the situation, even to the point of conspiracies. This, of course, has happened many times in history, leading to civil wars. Europe's been full of civil wars.

Such an occasion happened in our little tiny village of Whitegrit. A neighbour working for the Shropshire Council in England to bring more wealth to the area won a grant — I think it was a million pounds actually — from the lottery fund. A local eco-warrior saw this as a danger, turning the area into a holiday resort. There were meetings and finally a confrontation with the lottery fund grant receiver. Young men used foul language, happily stamped out by a retired magistrate. Eventually everything calmed down. In the meantime, an email was sent full of expletives calling on resistance. Frankly, the whole fracas was beyond pathetic. To this day, I haven't seen any change and still wonder what happened to the money. But all the markers were there. Moral outrage: what right of the Shropshire Council to do this to us? We're in Powys, Wales. Simplified narrative: it's going to ruin the area. Conspiracy theories: what else are the council going to do? And group validation: I was told the meeting at the pub went very well. It's a wonder they didn't turn up to the meeting armed with picks, shovels and trowels, the local population being farmers and retired well-to-do. But what stays with me is the amount of anger that it generated. Quite weird.

The consequences of these silos is that they are groups that create realities that cannot coexist with other realities. That's the problem with conspiracies. This is also a consequence of the postmodernism that questioned objective truth, declaring we all have our own realities, hence all is relative. So we move to post-truth and, of course, outright lying.

Now, the Buddha taught the whole of the spiritual life was good companionship. We're interdependent

beings. And of course, the obverse is also true: a den of thieves. Good companionship, in inverted commas, is also necessary to invoke false narratives and conspiracies. The disturbing fact is that feedback loops intensify, since thoughts feed on thoughts, emotions on emotions, and readily backed by social media and the rewards of finding such friends — the feeling of safety, emotional support and ideological fantasising.

The Buddha tells us about this inner process very clearly and how it produces proliferation. The Pāli word is *papañca*, which I particularly like. Sense consciousness arises from the base of the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and the mind-heart, dependent on those senses. When you have an object and a sense base and consciousness, that's what he calls contact. Contact is a requirement for feeling. What we feel, we perceive. What we perceive, we think about. What we think about, we proliferate. What we proliferate is the source from which judgements driven by proliferating perceptions beset a person. And this occurs on all the senses. For those of you who are interested, that's from the Honeyball Discourse in the Middle Length Sayings, number 18.

The same process is magnified between people, so that moral outrage rewarded by groups leads to certainty, and the group reinforces itself by denigrating the opposite groups, leading to a loss of empathy and a loss of communication. This distrust simply leads to a hardening of positions, especially where the others are seen as potential threats. And again, there are the emotional rewards of like-minded friends.

So how can we do something to reverse the process or at least undermine it? We have here the basic cause: identity, how people define themselves. And this identity narrows to a particular cause, creating a barrier that expels anyone who disagrees and then places verbal and other weapons on the barrier to destroy those it describes as enemies. For such an alienated group, one approach is to point to a higher identity that embraces, to some extent, those of other parties. This is the work of politics, of course.

When it comes to immigration, for instance, both sides of the argument need to be lifted to a greater overall view of the situation. This can be done through the very media that supports polarisation by bringing opposing groups to dispute in the open. No matter how distasteful we may find some of the people, they need to be engaged in open debate. There's also the benefit of citizen assemblies that have been used to great effect in Ireland. I don't know why we don't have them in the UK. Perhaps the government finds them threatening.

When we identify with a cause, everything becomes saturated with me, and me is always right. We might refer to this as ego, but I prefer the old word pride. It finds it hard to compromise, and any giving in to the opposition is seen as a sort of shaming betrayal. But once we soften the grip and admit that no one has total exclusive truth and open up to another's views, compromise allows a wise solution. These are perspectives that can accommodate different views. Enemies can become people we can discuss and argue with. And there's our Dharma practice.

As ordinary citizens, we need to make our views known to politicians, to our local MP, and whenever possible encourage the government to control media content. We also need to be sensitive to journalists,

to make sure we know who are non-partisan and independent. We need to be able to tell facts from comment. And when it comes to media, to limit the amount and type we allow into our hearts.

We also have to admit to our biases. Biases can be explicit — we're aware of them — or implicit — we're not aware of them. Prejudices, meanwhile, are those biases that we're actively developing. Acknowledging biases allows us to counteract their effect. It's virtually impossible not to have religious, racial, gender and class bias. It's in the DNA of our culture. We may find that difficult to accept, but unless we're aware of them, they'll affect our behaviour. We may be embarrassed by Freudian slips and suddenly become self-defensive or aggressive when accused.

Practising *mettā* is not just a contemplative practice, but approaching people or media we are strongly against with a heart that is open to understanding where they come from. It would really help to find a discussion group — online, or better in person — which is set to bring people of differing views into dialogue with each other.

This leads us to realising that it is destructive to shame other people. Like, for instance, saying they're ignorant. This happened after the Brexit referendum. There's no point in showering people with facts if they don't trust us. The wisest thing is to follow the Buddha's own approach, which was to understand the other's position and question it before launching into our own views and opinions.

Polarisation isn't something new. It can lead to civil wars. It's done so in many countries in the past. It's our task to be sure that we're not fuelling this malignancy that has the danger of metastasising into a general conflict that's of no benefit to anybody.

So what do we do when a racist, sexist, religious, gender or any other biased thought comes into the mind? We might find ourselves feeling guilty and push the thought away without really accepting it. That conditioning has not been allowed to manifest and continues to fester. If we allow the bias to manifest in our minds and hearts, then we can begin to undermine it. First, there's the acceptance: this is a bias in my heart. And once we accept it, we can recognise it as unwholesome. Usually it arises because we've seen or heard someone whom the bias hates. So we can bring that person to mind, see the situation from their point of view. We can apologise to them as an act of Dharma practice within ourselves. Then we can hold the person in a caring embrace. You can't hate and care at the same time.

Sometimes you have to be creative with this process of undermining biases. If we're sitting in meditation and we get one of these biases coming up, we might find it just as useful to sit with the aversion, just the feeling of the aversion. What we're doing is allowing that bad energy to exhaust itself. If we stay to the very end, when that feeling of aversion comes to an end, we stay to the point where it disappears, and we might experience it transforming into the opposite. We might suddenly find our heart full of love or peacefulness or some other positive state. Nothing's lost in allowing these negative states to come up and pass away. They're always changing towards their opposites. This we find in the right attitude of the Eightfold Path, which is stated as going from greed to generosity, hatred to love, and cruelty to

compassion. It happens naturally in the meditation, as long as we allow the heart to have full freedom to express itself.

Very good. I can only hope my words have been of some assistance, that they have not caused confusion. Write to me if they do. And may your practice liberate you from all suffering, sooner rather than later.

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