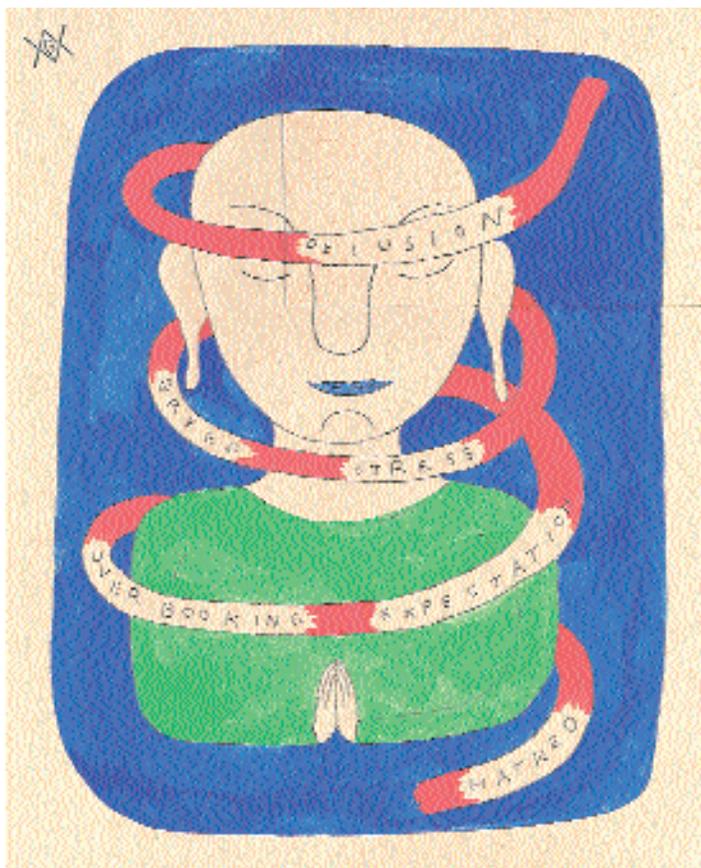


Violence against Self

Are you relating to yourself in a manner that results in your life

being more emotionally or physically violent than it need be?



SOME YEARS AGO people used to wear a T-shirt printed with the slogan, “Life is difficult, and then you die.” I once asked a group of people at a yoga retreat what they thought when they read those words. One person found it funny—a way to laugh at the hard truth of life rather than be overwhelmed by it. Another read it as justification for taking what pleasure you could out of life, while still another saw it as cynical and nihilistic, an excuse to give up. Someone who was active in a spiritual group said it was a call to action much like the Buddha’s teaching of suffering contained in the Four Noble Truths.

I asked for their thoughts because I wanted to see

if anyone would say it wasn’t true, which no one did. My own experience was that the slogan is composed of a half truth and also a full truth, but one that obscures rather than clarifies. The half truth is that indeed “life is difficult,” but it is not just difficult, it is also incredibly wonderful, puzzling, and routine, all in an ever-changing cycle.

“Then we die” is also true, but stating the truth in this manner implies that death is simply a personal failure. To me death is not a failure but rather a necessary part of the life cycle of being incarnate. Imagine if plants didn’t die, or if the note of a piano didn’t fade into oblivion, or if a thought didn’t arise and pass. Life would come to a standstill; it would drown in its own accumulation. Therefore, rather than viewing life and death as separate, I see them as part of one continuous, mysterious experience of redemption and renewal. Spiritual practices provide a means to relate to this experience in its mystery and vastness.

Still, there remained in my mind the all-important issue that the words on the T-shirt implied: If life is difficult and brief, how do we cope? How do we find meaning or happiness? I had already repeatedly explored these questions using different spiritual traditions and later came to devote my life full-time to this inquiry. Though not always finding answers, my explorations slowly led to certain discoveries about what makes life a struggle.

One of these discoveries is the degree to which we make life difficult for ourselves by being violent or violating to the body and the mind in the routine of our daily lives. Through the way in which we schedule our time, push our bodies, and compare and judge ourselves against others, we repeatedly create an inner environment that is filled with violence. If you can understand that this is so, it may have profound impact on your experience of life being difficult.

Initially, you may not identify some of your daily thoughts and decisions as moments of violence to self, but most likely they are. If someone was hitting you in your stomach, squeezing your neck, or not letting you breathe, you’d quickly call such behavior violent. Yet

when these same painful sensory experiences arise in reaction to your own thoughts or actions, you fail to recognize your behavior as violent. In your daily life have you not repeatedly experienced these bodily sensations or others like them?

Understanding Violence

WHENEVER I introduce the topic of violence against self in a Dharma talk, almost everyone squirms. No one wants to hear it. I will directly ask the question: Are you, in an obvious manner or in a series of subtle, covert actions, being violent with yourself? Usually people want to assure me that while they may work too hard at times, stay in an unhealthy relationship, eat too much, or sleep too little, they would not characterize their behavior as violent toward themselves. Yet, person after person, once they've closely examined their lives, experiences a moment of self-recognition that at first can be painful and embarrassing. This initial discomfort is often followed by a sense of liberation as new possibilities arise in their imaginations for how to live more peacefully.

Most people perpetrate this violence against self through mistakenly identifying with various thoughts that arise due to impersonal conditions coming together. The body and mind's well-being are the innocent victims. Each individual has a unique pattern, but the common ground is that you relate to yourself in a manner that results in your life being more emotionally or physically violent than it need be.

You may have limited your understanding of self-violence to physical abuse or other blatant self-destructive behavior that calls for a 12-step program. The word "violence" may sound too harsh to you, but its dictionary meaning is "an exertion of extreme force to cause injury or abuse in the form of distortion or infringement." The extreme force can be a mental act that then shows up in the body or an act that is done repeatedly to an extreme.

You can think of violence as any highly energetic form of relating to a person,

including yourself, that is jarring, turbulent, and distorting. Can you identify any times in the last few days in which you treated yourself in a discordant, abrupt, or distorting manner?

The Trappist monk and spiritual author Thomas Merton once said, "To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything is itself to succumb to the violence of our times." Obviously Merton wasn't speaking about pathologically self-destructive behavior. Instead he was drawing our attention to the shadow side of normative, even seemingly positive, culturally approved behavior. He was referring to how we do great violence to ourselves simply in the manner in which we go about arranging our lives.

Practicing Ahimsa

GRADUALLY I'VE COME to realize that violence against oneself is one of the great denials of our time. People are very willing to talk about the violence that the world does to them, but they're much less willing to own the violence that they do to themselves. Violence against self can most easily be recognized in your experience of the body in daily life. You already know the general health problems that come about because of stress, sleep deprivation, and constant strain. You may not identify them as examples of violence to self, but anytime you make yourself sick or dysfunctional, it is an act of violence for which you need to take responsibility. We all know people who are overworked or have too much stress, which causes problems with the digestive system, heart, or other parts of the body, but who never label their behavior as violence to the self. But is there any description that is more apt?

One of the *yamas*, or moral restraints, in Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra* is *ahimsa*, the practice of nonviolence, and this includes nonviolence toward yourself. Of course, you may well want something in your life so much that you are willing to take a chance of hurting your body by driving it too hard. But usually a conscious, short-

term exertion to reach a goal is not what causes violence to self. More often it is a matter of long-term disregard of the signals of imbalance. This disregard comes from repeatedly getting so caught in wanting or fearful mind-states that you're unable to reflect on your own behavior. You may have a surface-level awareness of the distress you are feeling in your body, but you don't sincerely respond to the discomfort. In such instances you are in a driven state, controlled by your mind's imaginary creations rather than your inner values.

Inner development and maturity come from acknowledging to yourself that you are being violent with a human being; the fact that you happen to be the human being who is being hurt does not change the truth of the violence. From a spiritual perspective, it is never right to hurt any human being—including yourself—for selfish reasons or because of sloppy attention to the consequences of your actions. Understanding this is your first step in practicing ahimsa toward yourself.

It is often hard to make the distinction between the mind-states of fear and wanting and your inner values because there is such a strong tendency to identify these mind-states as "you." But if you observe yourself, you will see that an endless number of mind-states arise each day independent of any intention on your part. The way to freedom from self-violence is to separate from these thoughts by getting to know your mind. This is the underlying purpose of yoga, mindfulness meditation, and selfless service, called karma yoga or *seva*.

Violence against self through the body can also occur in situations where you are ostensibly taking deliberate care of your body, such as in doing yoga. How many times in a yoga class do you get lost in your willfulness to get a pose right and actually add tension and strain to the body rather than freeing the tissue for movement? It is good to hold a pose longer or to work to get more lift in a backbend, but not if you tense or harden the body as part of the effort. The skin should stay soft even when the muscles underneath a particular area are engag-

ed, the face should stay relaxed, and the breath be free of any holding. Even more importantly, the mind needs to stay soft and gentle; my teacher describes it as the “mind staying cool.” Practicing yoga in this manner can help you learn how to release the tendency toward violence to yourself in the rest of your life.

When you go to a hatha yoga class, if you don’t observe and work with all of the emotions and moods that arise, you are missing half the value. Watch yourself the next time you go to class: Do you get angry at your body? Do you load it with the frustrations of your day and then expect it to do what you want? See for yourself how every strong emotion—from frustration and fear to longing—is felt in the body as tension, pressure, heat, tingling, and so on. In turn, each of these bodily sensations can be released through the yoga which will free the body from violence and usually quiets the mind. Once you learn to do this in yoga class you can utilize this awareness—at work, driving in traffic, or in difficult home situations—to release the body when the mind starts to feel pressure or anxiety. Moreover, the cultivation of a soft spaciousness of body and mind points to the true intention of yoga, which is liberation from our separateness. It is this fear of separateness that leads to self-violence.

Taking Time Out

AS THE THOMAS MERTON quote points out, if you abuse your time, you are participating in violence against self. This may be in the form of overscheduling to the point that you rob yourself of the experience of being alive. Or it may be in the form of allocating your time in a manner that doesn’t reflect your inner priorities. Both create a distortion or infringement of self through strain and turbulence. When you treat your time as though you are a machine—a doing machine—you are committing violence against the sacredness of life itself. Whenever I do Life Balance work with organizational leaders, I have them make a list of their values and prioritize them, then compare their priorities with how they actually spend their time. The dis-

parity is usually shocking.

Another abuse of time that disturbs your well-being occurs if you succumb to the modern day compulsion to avoid boredom at all costs. In our stimulation-based culture, there is near hysteria around constantly seeking fulfillment through activity, which leaves no time for the quietness of simply being present with yourself. Do you allow yourself time each day, or even weekly, to exist without an external purpose and without even background music or television? Empty time is vital to your well-being, and to deny yourself this nourishment is an act of violence.

You may ask why you continue to abuse your time and your body when you have the option to live more peacefully. Or you may say that you feel as though you have no choice but to be harsh toward yourself because your life situation is such a struggle. Under either circumstance you push the body and strain the mind violently because you are filled with the tension that comes with the feeling that there’s not enough of something in your life, whether it’s money, love, adventure, or confidence.

Feelings of inadequacy, vulnerability, longing, or not having enough are an inevitable part of the human experience. If you, like most people, have not found spiritual freedom, you cannot stop them from arising. But you can stop such feelings from controlling your life by changing how you perceive them. If you refuse to identify with these feelings, disown them as being neither you nor yours, thus seeing them simply as emotional states of mind that come and go, you will discover there is the possibility for some inner harmony even under difficult circumstances.

For instance, let’s assume you cannot change your work schedule, and it seems so overwhelming to you that you regularly get very tense and anxious about it. You can experience the schedule as much less violent by not thinking about it in its entirety except when you are in planning mode. The rest of the time you just do what the plan calls for, concentrating on the task in front of you without adding the thought, “Here I am with all this

work and so much more to do this week.”

Said another way, don’t make a panoramic movie out of your difficult schedule such that you are constantly seeing yourself doing all that has to be done, as if it were going to be done all at once. Instead just do what has to be done right now, for that’s all you can do. It may sound like a simple thing to do, but it is very subtle and difficult, yet so liberating!

Another method you can use to cope with overscheduling is to notice each time you experience fear or wanting while thinking about all you have to do. Consciously label these feelings as fear and wanting in your mind and then see for yourself that they originate as impersonal mind-states, the way a storm forms due to weather conditions. The land that receives the storm does not own it, and the storm is not the land; it’s just a storm, which due to its own characteristics can cause damage. So it is with the stormy situations in your life where there is a tendency to both deny and take ownership of fear or wanting. This misperception leads you to believe you should be able to control them, which in turn causes the physical contractions and the mental anguish that constitute violence to self.

Stopping the Violence

IN SEEKING FREEDOM from violence to self, practice noticing over and over again that you are constantly, and usually unconsciously, wanting things to be different than the way they are. You become a little dictator to yourself sitting on a throne, arms crossed, pouting and demanding that things you like should stay the way they are forever and what you do not like should disappear immediately. This craving to hold on to what you like and to get rid of what you find difficult is considered the source of suffering in life and the origin of violence against self. By practicing living with things as they are, you will discover that while life may not be less painful, your experience of it is immeasurably better. Also, fully accepting what is true in the moment is the only firm place to begin to make changes in your life. Living in the moment is not a

one-time commitment but something that has to be done again and again.

Nonviolence to self is a lifetime practice of which there are ever more subtle levels to discover. The more you are able to be with yourself in a nonviolent way, the less harm you will do to another. Be gentle with the body and mind; refuse to get caught in believing that things have to be a certain way in order for you to be happy.

At some point each day, softly close your eyes, relax your shoulders, let your mind settle on the breath without trying to control it. In the ensuing quietness, see for yourself how mysterious life is. Maybe we should create a new T-shirt, one that reads: "Life is interesting, and then I'm not sure what happens!" ■

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