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TO THE EDITORS AND READERS OF THE **JRE**:

As a citizen of the United States, a philosopher, and a long-time Zen student now teaching in Japan, I would like to offer a Buddhist perspective on the September terrorist assaults on New York and Washington—and on the lust for vengeance that is rising in the United States as I write this letter a week after the attacks. I want to call attention to two contrasting religious ways of thinking and explore their implications.

On Friday, September 14, President George W. Bush declared that the United States had been called to a new worldwide mission “to rid the world of evil,” and on the following Sunday he said that the government was determined to “rid the world of evil-doers.” On September 14, the *Washington Post* gave this account of the man the West seems to hold primarily responsible for the devastation: “Osama bin Laden looks at the world in very stark, black-and-white terms. For him, the U.S. represents the forces of evil that are bringing corruption and domination into the Islamic world.”

This dualism of good-versus-evil is attractive because it is a simple way of looking at the world, and most of us are quite familiar with it. Although it is not unique to the Abrahamic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—it is especially important for them. It is one of the reasons the conflicts among them have been so difficult to resolve peacefully: adherents tend to identify their own religion as good and demonize the other as evil. Moreover, representing conflict in terms of a battleground of good and evil tends to preclude thought, because it keeps us from trying to discover causes. Once something has been identified as evil, there is no need to explain it; it is time to focus on fighting against it. And if the adversary is construed as the embodiment of evil, it is tempting to think that the threat may be fought by *any* means necessary.

The Abrahamic religions emphasize the struggle between good and evil because for them the basic issue depends on our will: which side are we on? Buddhism, in contrast, emphasizes ignorance and enlightenment, because the basic issue depends on self-knowledge: do we really understand what motivates us?

According to Buddhism, every effect has its web of causes and conditions. This is the law of karma. Karma implies that when our actions are motivated by any of the three roots of evil—greed, ill will, and delusion—the negative consequences of the act rebound upon the actor. Thus, the Buddhist solution to suffering involves transforming our greed into generosity, our ill will into loving kindness, and our delusions into wisdom.

From a Buddhist perspective, it would be a mistake to focus only on the second root of evil, the hatred and violence that have just been directed against the United States. The three roots are intertwined. Ill will cannot be separated from greed and delusion. This requires us to ask: why do so many people, particularly in the Middle East, hate the United States so much?

Micah Sifry's question highlighting the retaliatory cycle of ill will is a pertinent one: "Does anybody think that we can send the USS New Jersey to lob Volkswagen-sized shells into Lebanese villages—Reagan, 1983—or loose 'smart bombs' on civilians seeking shelter in a Baghdad bunker—Bush, 1991—or fire cruise missiles on a Sudanese pharmaceutical factory—Clinton, 1999—and not receive, someday, our share in kind?" But Buddhism encourages us to examine the role of greed and delusion as well: How much of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East has been motivated by our love of freedom and democracy, and how much has been motivated by our need—our greed—for its oil? If our main priority has been securing oil supplies, does it mean that our petroleum-based economy is one of the causes of the September attack? If the most fundamental and pervasive delusion is our sense of separation from the world we are "in," including other people, have we awakened this hatred through our own ignorance? The more separate we, individually, feel from others, the more we are inclined to manipulate them to get what we want. This naturally breeds resentment (both in others, who do not like to be used, and within ourselves, when we do not get what we want). Isn't this also true collectively?

Do not misunderstand me here. This form of self-examination does not entail the exoneration of mass slaughter. Those responsible for the attacks must be caught and brought to justice. That is our responsibility to all those who have suffered, and this is also our responsibility to the deluded and hate-full terrorists, who must be stopped. If, however, we want to break this cycle, our responsibility is much broader.

Delusion becomes wisdom when we realize that we are interdependent and responsible for each other because we are all facets of the same jewel we call the earth. When we try to live this interdependence, we embark on a mode of being in the world that is called love. Though sometimes mocked as weak and ineffectual, love can be very powerful (as Gandhi showed), and it embodies a deep wisdom about how the cycle of hatred and violence works and how it can be ended. Twenty-five hundred years ago, the Buddha said: "He abused me, he beat me, he defeated me, he robbed me"—for those who harbour such thoughts hatred will never cease. . . . [but] for those who do not harbour such thoughts hatred will cease. In this world hatred is never appeased by hatred; hatred is always appeased by love. This is an ancient law" (*Dhammapada*, 3–5).

This transformative insight is not unique to Buddhism. In all the Abrahamic religions the tradition of a holy war between good and evil coexists with this "ancient law" about the power of love. That does not mean all the world's religions

have emphasized this law to the same extent. In fact, I wonder whether we could accurately gauge the maturity of a religion (or at least its continuing relevance for us today) by asking to what extent the liberative truth of this law is acknowledged and encouraged.

In these late, darkening days of September, there is no way to predict the course of events. At the moment, it seems undeniable that a lust for violent retaliation is rising, fanned on two sides of the globe by two very different leaders caught up each in his own rhetoric of a holy war to purify the world of evil. No one can foresee all the consequences of such a war. They are likely to spin out of control and take on a life of their own. However, one inevitable effect is clearly implied by the Buddha's teaching: "hatred is never appeased by hatred."

Widespread of violence is not the only possibility—or at least that is the faith of a Buddhist. If this time of crisis encourages us to question dualistic assumptions and if we begin to understand the intertwined roots of this evil, including our own responsibility, then perhaps something good may yet come out of this catastrophic tragedy.

Sincerely yours,
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Editor's note: This is a shortened version of a longer statement available from loy@shonan.bunkyo.ac.jp.