

The Non Duality of Good and Evil

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By [David Loy](#)

If only there were evil people somewhere, insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?

—Alexander Solzhenitsyn

Because it emphasises mindfulness of our thought processes, [Buddhism encourages us to be wary of antithetical concepts](#), not only good and evil, but success and failure, rich and poor, even the duality between enlightenment and delusion. We distinguish between the opposing terms because we want one rather than the other, yet the meaning of each depends upon the other. That may sound abstract, but such dualities are actually quite troublesome for us. If, for example, it is important to live a pure life (however I understand purity), then I need to be preoccupied with avoiding impurity. If wealth is important for me, then I am also worried about avoiding poverty. We cannot take one lens without the other, and such pairs of spectacles filter our experience of the world.

What does this mean for [the duality of good versus evil](#)? One way the interdependence of good and evil shows itself is this: we don't feel we are good unless we are fighting against evil. We can feel comfortable and secure in our own goodness only by attacking and destroying the evil outside us. And, sad to say but true, this is why we like wars: they cut through the petty problems of daily life and unite us good guys here against the bad guys over there. There is fear in that, of course, but it is also exhilarating. The meaning of life becomes clearer.

We all love the struggle between good (us) and evil (them). It is, in its own way, deeply satisfying. Think of the plots of the James Bond films, the Star Wars films, the Indiana Jones films. In such movies, it's quite obvious who

the bad guys are. Caricatures of evil, they are ruthless, maniacal, without remorse, and so they must be stopped by any means necessary. We are meant to feel that it is okay—even, to tell the truth, pleasurable—to see violence inflicted upon them. Because the villains like to hurt people, it's okay to hurt them. Because they like to kill people, it's okay to kill them. After all, they are evil and evil must be destroyed.

What is this kind of story really teaching us? That if you want to hurt someone, it is important to demonise them first—in other words, fit them into your good-versus-evil story. That is why the first casualty of all wars is truth.

Such stories are not just entertainment. In order to live, we need air, water, food, clothes, shelter, friends—and we need stories, because they teach us what is important in life. They give us models of how to live in a complicated, confusing world. Until the last hundred years or so, the most important stories for most people were religious. Today, however, the issue is not whether a story is an ennobling one, a good myth to live by, but the bottom line: will it sell?

The story of good and evil sells because it is simple and easy to understand, yet from a Buddhist viewpoint it can be dangerously deceptive. It keeps us from looking deeper, from trying to discover causes. Once something has been identified as evil, no more is there a need to explain it, only a need to fight it.

By contrast, Buddhism focuses on the three unwholesome roots of evil, also known as [the three poisons: greed, ill will, and delusion](#). In place of the struggle between good and evil, Buddhism emphasises ignorance and enlightenment. The basic problem is one of self-knowledge: do we really understand what motivates us?

In a passage from the [Sutta Nipata](#), Ajita asks of the Buddha, “What is it that smothers the world? What makes the world so hard to see? What would you say pollutes the world and threatens it most?”

“It is ignorance which smothers,” the Buddha replies, “and it is heedlessness and greed which make the world invisible. The hunger of desire pollutes the world, and the great source of fear is the pain of suffering.”

Because this view offers us a better understanding of what actually motivates people—all of us—it also implies a very different way to address the problems created by ignorance and desire and violence: not a new holy war against evil, but a less dramatic struggle to transform our own greed into generosity, ill will into love, and ignorance into wisdom. ▼

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