

How is it that Humans do These Things to Other Humans?

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Here at Vimutti Buddhist Monastery, we just finished our monthly 'Day of Peace' meditation workshop. The timing could not be more pertinent, the title more apropos. Yesterday a gunman killed 50 people in Christchurch mosques, a shock every bit as powerful as the devastating earthquakes, an ethical shaking whose aftershocks rippled quickly around the globe. It is a valid question to ask, 'why do people do this to each other?'

Attachment to skin colour should be the most obvious delusion. This epidermis is merely a paper-thin wrapping, and like with birthday presents, the more colours the more beautiful. Attachment to our ethnic or cultural background goes more deep. This is social conditioning that forms a large part of who we think we are: our language, our accent, our traditions. A little identification is relatively harmless, as when we celebrate our roots, a shared heritage or the countries from where our families originated. But if that identification grows strong, such that it increasingly divides people rather than uniting them; and if the identification leads to self-aggrandisement and perceiving others as inferior, then that attachment becomes toxic.

Then you throw religion into the mix....

In Buddhism we attempt to let go of our attachment to our views, opinions and beliefs. We are even encouraged not to attach to the words of the Buddha. We certainly will have views, opinions and beliefs, gradually evolving based on our experience, but we emphasise being open to learning from different perspectives and not to believe blindly. In most other religions, however, unwavering belief in the words written in the holy books is praised. This is seen as an expression of dedication, a sign of true commitment. When these beliefs are presented as holding the key to eternal happiness or pain, then attachment to those beliefs can become rigid to the extreme. It is the attachment that is the problem, not the diversity of practices. Political ideology can also function as a religion, a set of beliefs we have faith in, at times to the extreme.

When you combine attachment to religious beliefs, identification with race, enthusiasm for political ideology and a lack of appreciation for cultural differences, you find yourself with a giant pile of tinder dry fuel. When political or religious leaders then soak it with the petrol of fear, all it takes is a match. And it becomes easier to understand why humans do what they do.

Compassion is the result of empathy for the pain and suffering of others. Sometimes we get so busy, it is simply easier to be callous. Sometimes it is just too hard to make the effort to understand people who are different from us. This is understandable, but it hardens our heart. An incident so horrific as a mass shooting of innocents can shock us into remembering compassion. If there is any silver lining at all to these mass shootings, it is that people are reminded—sometimes forced against their will—to open their heart. We then might see that we don't need a mass shooting in order to empathise with the pain of others. Our family, friends, colleagues and enemies...they all experience pain too.

As important as it is to empathise with the victims, it is also important to empathise with the perpetrator. You can see how quickly people dehumanise the killer: a monster, a demon, insane. This is unrealistic and unhealthy. Rational and sane people are capable of extreme cruelty. But this is uncomfortable to admit. Because we too are rational and sane. None of us here could imagine perpetrating a mass killing, but it is important to admit that we too have the seeds of those actions in our hearts and minds. Anger is dangerous. Defilements are dangerous. Extreme attachment to a belief is dangerous. Ultimately anything that we identify with that divides us from

others is pernicious. In small ways we are still capable of aggression and harming others, so even with the killer, it is possible to empathise. We are both the victims and the killer.

How can humans do these things to other humans? If we dismiss this incident as the one-off work of a lone crazy, we not only downplay the danger of the supremacist ideology, we miss the opportunity to learn from the tragedy, and we unwittingly create the causes for it to happen again in the future. It is normal to feel a kinship with people from our same culture, but can we extend that feeling of kinship to all people? This is more difficult. In the past we could more easily avoid this hard work through geographical separation, but in the 21st century mutual understanding becomes a moral imperative with the urgency of survival.

We are not powerless to effect positive change. But how?

Responding to the present situation with compassion;
recognising the danger of anger in our own heart;
understanding the causes that lead to violence;
and taking action from that place of wisdom and understanding;
this is what we can do to increase peace in the world.

To all the victims of violence and their families, please accept our heartfelt sympathy from Vimutti Buddhist Monastery and the Auckland Theravada Buddhist Association. May terrorism and all forms of violence be eradicated through wisdom.