

The Pain and Inspiration of Hong Kong

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I hadn't planned on visiting Hong Kong at this time, but as events unfolded during the summer, and as I was in communication with friends there, it gradually became clear that a visit could be beneficial. Whenever people are suffering, then offering support, understanding and Dhamma guidance is a helpful offering. When friends are having difficulty, they need to know we have not forgotten them. Visiting Hong Kong at this time was one of the most moving and intense experiences I've had.

I gave talks each evening and met with people throughout the day. There was clearly a widely felt anxiety about the unknown future of their city and the real-life ramifications it will have for them. Political divisions have led to deep polarization within families and friends. An increase in extrajudicial killings of young protesters has brought a new level of gravity, fear and emotional reaction to the situation. And the stress of uncertainty is wearing on everyone.

I'd taught a few times at the Hong Kong Theravada Meditation Center, so I was familiar with the community. Hong Kong is, for the most part, a sophisticated, well-educated and prosperous society that has been on the cutting edge of modern developments for decades. They view themselves as a democracy with free speech, a free press and a fair judicial system based on the English model. The Hong Kongers have gotten used to these freedoms and understandably do not want to lose them anymore than we would.

For the most part, the Hong Kong people see themselves as distinct from mainland China, and certainly they fear being taken over by a repressive dictatorship with a horrific human rights record. Legally they were supposed to retain their rights and freedoms for another 30 years, but already, beginning 5 years ago, it was clear that Beijing was gradually nullifying these rights and had no intention of allowing their freedoms to continue.

Protests aside, Hong Kong is just a very cool place. A stunning island-dotted harbour and forested mountains nestle an array of insanely tall apartment buildings packed into the most expensive real estate in the world. Laser light shows projected from atop the numerous downtown skyscrapers dazzle the night sky each evening as if we were in the midst of a Star Wars battle scene. Giant malls that can be measured in square-kilometres display all the high-end designer products that I don't need. With this unlikely backdrop, insert a middle-class revolution of millions.

I had promised my family and friends that I would restrain myself from engaging in the front-line confrontations of the protests, but when I arrived I found that the Hong Kong Theravada Meditation Center was located directly across the street from the police station. My 14th floor

window looked directly onto the 8-story station that had been the epicenter of some of the most intense confrontations and conflagrations. The new slang term the protesters call the police is 'Popo', and numerous spray-painted commands in English near the station made it clear that the Popo were not so po-popular. (Think N.W.A.).



Initially the protests had been entirely peaceful, including massive marches of 1-2 million people. That's a mind-boggling number of humans, making it clear that the mainstream of all ages was pro-democracy. As the calm protests with their modest and reasonable demands were met with absolute inflexibility and disdain, the younger section of the protesters began to lose patience. Adopting more disruptive tactics, such as shutting down the international airport or blocking main roads, then put them in direct confrontation with the police.

Even now, almost all of the protests are entirely peaceful. One day after the midday meal I was in discussion with people at the Center, when the sound of protest chants gradually increased in volume until it was right outside our building in front of the police station. It turns out this was just a small lunch break protest. People's lives are busy, and they need to be efficient with their time, so on their lunch break, they grab a quick bite to eat and go protest before going back to work. Very Hong Kong.



Essentially leaderless and grassroots, the movement to resist totalitarian repression and stand up for freedom has dominated every aspect of life. People can hardly talk about anything else. They even wrote and recorded their own national anthem which they now sing en masse at spontaneous gatherings across the city. There is an undeniable uplifting and joyful determination in the face of almost certain failure that fills people with inspiration.

But it all comes at a cost. So many people told me stories of how their family harmony has fallen apart under the severe strain. Passions run high on both sides. Teenagers take to the streets with complete disapproval from their parents. One spouse is pro-democracy, one is pro-government. One friend calls the other reckless, while the other calls the first selfish. The wealthy make plans to leave, but most don't have that luxury. There is very little neutral ground, and almost no common ground--other than stressing over where this is all going. *Everyone* feels that.

Harmony is the first casualty. I saw it first-hand many times as a normal conversation suddenly morphed into divergent opinions and the volume and energy behind the words intensified. But

words, however fraught, are no comparison to bloody beatings and death. Recently the casualties have been far more reminiscent of war.

The Hong Kong Police used to enjoy a good reputation among the people, and there was relatively little crime in the city. However, after being forced by the pro-Beijing government to dispel protest gatherings with tear gas and beatings, the police have quickly lost much local support. Additionally, Hong Kong police are gradually being bolstered by Chinese police and soldiers. The Chinese wear the same uniforms as HK police, but all identifying names or numbers have been removed from the uniforms. The Chinese speak a different language than the Hong Kongese, so if they talk it is immediately clear they are not locals. Organized crime also seems to be getting involved on the side of the government. The Chinese police are far more brutal than their Hong Kong counterparts, and this has ratcheted up the tactics to a point where it is increasingly difficult for either side to take it down a notch.



In the last couple of months, many young protesters have been severely beaten. This has given rise to an additional wing of the protesters who are just there as medics. As in battle, they rush to the injured with backpacks of supplies, offer treatment on the spot and get them to a hospital if necessary. Many protesters have been arrested; some young women have claimed they were sexually abused in custody; and dozens have died. After being arrested or involved with protests, young people have been found floating in the harbour or fallen from a high balcony. These have all been classified by the Popo as suicides.

So what makes people suddenly willing to walk through tear gas, face the possibility of broken bones and explode like a final scene from Joker? Just this week a private parking space in downtown Hong Kong was sold for a record US\$969,000. With a disparity of wealth that extreme, what future prospects does a poor university student, living in a tiny box of a dwelling, have to look forward to? Not a whole lot. Then on top of a seemingly insurmountable financial struggle to survive, China rushes the timeline to remove any remaining features of a modern democracy. The extradition bill was the match carelessly thrown into the dry grass of discontent that then burst into the now-or-never explosion of passionate urgency. If we don't make a stand now, they say, we have already lost.

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The youth may feel that they have nothing to lose, but they do. China will keep a record of anyone they can identify, and this could then make it impossible for them to land a good job, an apartment or a loan. (Currently in China, you can't even get a ticket for a high-speed train if you have a low social credit.) Yet when the youth see their peers beaten, abused or dying suspiciously, it only further emboldens them, hardens their resolve and encourages them to radicalize.

One night I was scheduled to give a talk at the university, and on the way I was taken to 'Lennon Wall' or 'Lennon Tunnel', named for John Lennon. This was explained to me ahead of time as

basically a large notice board where people post personal notes and share information, but that didn't begin to prepare me for what I saw.



In one of the underground pedestrian passages that link important areas, every space from floor to ceiling was filled with homemade posters, photos, artwork and post-it notes encouraging resistance and sharing the most current information. In a situation where people find they can no longer trust the official government accounts of events, the tunnel's walls, floor and ceiling have been transformed into the most current source of first-hand information. People post photos from recent protests, particularly incidents of police brutality. They document a timeline of events. They seek information about fellow protesters who have gone missing. They creatively release their emotions with art. And everywhere they encourage resistance and courage.

Authorities had ripped it all down many times, but it goes right back up with new material. As I walked down into this tunnel I was touched by the dedication, energy and effort that this reflected. But then I turned a corner, and the Lennon Wall extended on into the distance as far as I could see.

'Oh...my...God'.

It was definitely an 'oh my God' moment for me. And I'm not even Christian.



The Hong Kongers are uniquely high tech in their rebellion. Cell phone videos of protests are live streamed or quickly uploaded to allow information to travel as rapidly and widely as possible. It's always a cat and mouse game with Chinese censors and police. Apps on smart phones allow protesters to see where the police are on a map, so the location of a protest can suddenly change with fluidity. A member of our group had it on her phone, so I could watch the movements of the police in real time.

Upon arrival at the university, my hosts explained to me that this center of higher education was nicknamed 'Rebellion University,' because so much of the activism had originated on that campus. We had some time before my talk, so the organizers took me for a walk around Rebel U. Slogans were spray painted everywhere. One slogan in English had misspelled the word 'tyranny', so the spray-painting author had then corrected the spelling with a small note "sorry"--- ever the good students.

In the darkness, as we approached the library, we saw a paparazzi style crowd with cameras and reporters in a semi-circle hovering around a folding table where a lone young woman sat in bright lights. As we drew closer, I was told that this was a press conference by this student who had been arrested and sexually abused by the police. I thought I'd just seen her photo in the Lennon Tunnel.



The talk at Rebel U went fine, all translated into Cantonese. As a monk, my teachings never focused directly on the politics but on the sources of fear, aggression, mutual misunderstanding and general impassioned dukkha. I discussed the Buddha's relationship with social justice and freedom, how he balanced seclusion with efforts to improve society. In many ways, the Buddha was quite the social revolutionary, but at the same time, it was always clear that he considered samsara by its very nature to be un-fixable. Freedom is a central theme of the Buddha's teachings. It's what it's all about. My monastery's name translates as 'Freedom' or 'Liberation', but of course freedom has many forms and levels, and ultimately no one is truly free until they realize Nibbana, Awakening.

The day after I visited the Lennon tunnel, a young man putting up a poster was stabbed multiple times by a stranger. It was caught on cell phone video by passers-by. The young man survived, but it highlighted how serious the situation had become. A few days earlier, the spokesman for one of the peaceful protesting groups had been beaten by a group of men with hammers and left in a pool of blood. Thankfully he too survived.

In previous trips to Hong Kong, one of the meditation group members that I'd gotten to know was a policewoman. Concerned for her welfare and how she was dealing with all of this, I'd inquired about her a few times. But she was not to be seen at our events. No one wants to be a Popo in public these days. However, on Saturday I led a daylong of meditation and teachings at the Center, and as we were ending at 5:00, I saw her quietly entering from the back. After others had mostly left, she approached me to pay respect. It was joyful to see each other again, and I just wanted to hear if she'd been OK, straddling these two worlds of police allegiance and Dhamma dedication. She said initially the protests had been extremely stressful for her. Friendships fell away; she became socially isolated; had difficulty sleeping; feared for her safety and had to make sure that even when she was out of uniform in public that no one found out that she was an officer. Desperately needing to find some peace, she went to Thailand and stayed with her teacher, one of Ajahn Chah's well-known disciples. That helped her gain perspective and balance and find the strength to return to her job.

As we spoke, it was clear that her understanding of the facts on the ground was a polar opposite of what the protesters understood. But I wasn't there to verify facts. Different information leads to different beliefs in an impersonal process, and clearly that's not where the protesters and police are going to find common ground. I wanted to know how she was applying Dhamma in the midst of chaos and tremendous stress. She related how hard she has worked to extend her forgiveness to include the protesters. She is senior enough to be a team leader, so she also encourages her team on the street to be as kind and non-violent as possible. We discussed practical ways that she could maintain some measure of inner peace, how to avoid hardening her heart with resentment, and how to see the situation as a valuable opportunity to strengthen the good qualities in her heart.

So we had people on both sides of the political divide, all into meditation, all into the Thai Forest Tradition, all sincere, and yet pitted against each other with no foreseeable possible political resolution. And yet Dhamma practice always seems to help. Our conversation was full of laughter, joy, caring and acceptance, and the policewoman finally left after long hugs with others at the Center. Unconditional love and kindness did seem to offer a bit of hope.

The great enabler of violence is de-humanization. When a protester sees a line of black-clad, club wielding Popo with faces hidden by helmets behind a row of shields, the police hardly look human. When the police see a large crowd of black-clad masked youth challenging them with fury, the protesters look like a crazed threat to society and peace. With a faceless foe, justification is achieved, and fear then amplifies and overrides normal interpersonal compassion. Although our police yogi was only one of 30,000 on the local force, I was grateful to know that there was at least one who was generating as much metta as she could from the inside.

On my final night, I was taken to attend a prayer gathering held in a different section of the city. 'Prayer' gatherings don't need a permit. We took the ferry to the brightly lit central business district and immediately after disembarking saw crowds of young people dressed in black clothes with black masks marching and chanting and singing their new anthem. I have to say, as far as revolutionaries go, these kids have got to be some of the most wholesome in history. Educated, polite, clean-cut, skinny and generally meek, they seem more sweet and nerdy than fearsome. Yet they are utterly determined. And as is typical for initial stages of rebellions, the sense of comradery is palpable and infectious. That night there was a noticeable police presence, but all was peaceful--joyful actually. The students still manage to have fun, turning protests into celebrations.

Sunday, the day of my departure flight, a large and unsanctioned protest was scheduled to take place at the police station directly below my window. There had been no large-scale protests or confrontations with police during my time in Hong Kong. But it was time. Following a now typical pattern that involves hundreds of thousands peacefully massing and marching at a designated location throughout the afternoon, followed by the more confrontational students taking over after dark, I could have watched it all unfold from my window above, tear gas wafting in. It would have been a fitting farewell. Or I could have meditated silently in front of the line of riot police as the Buddha had done sitting alone under a dead tree to successfully halt an invasion....but then again I might have been beaten and marked for life by the Chinese--so there was that.

However, the timing of my flight left me no choice. It required that I leave the area an hour before the protest was due to begin. But even getting from the Center to the car was a circuitous trial. Police had erected barricades blocking the main walkways, roads and metro stations. The battle preparations were in place. I left feeling both grateful for the freedom to do so and concerned for the people who would stay and fight. **So please remember these people of Hong Kong with compassion. Whenever we see suffering and turn away, saying it's not my problem, we**

play a role in its perpetuation. Sending loving-kindness is already right effort and something we can all do.

with metta,
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