

Buddhism and conscientious objection to war

The Buddhist stance on violence, peace and war

- Buddhism is generally seen as associated with non-violence and peace. These are both strongly represented in its value system.
- Though some Buddhist countries have had their fair share of war and conflict, it is difficult to find any plausible 'Buddhist' rationales for violence.
- It can be observed that Buddhism has had a general humanising effect throughout much of Asia. It has tempered the excesses of rulers and martial people, helped large empires (e.g. China) to exist without much internal conflict, and rarely, if at all, incited wars against non-Buddhists.
- Moreover, in the midst of wars, Buddhist monasteries have often been havens of peace.

The first *upasika* precept

- A fundamental value of Buddhism, non-violence, is expressed in the first and most important of the *upasika* precept-vows that all lay Buddhists are expected to adhere to.
- This is expressed as an affirmation that: 'I undertake the precept to abstain from onslaught on living beings'.
- The precept is broken if a person intentionally causes death to any sentient being: human, animal, bird, fish or insect. It is broken by a direct act of a person or by a person ordering/requesting someone else to kill a being or do an act that requires a being to be killed.
- This is seen to lead, through the law of karma, to suffering in this and future lives.

Compassion

- Related Buddhist values are lovingkindness and compassion. The first involves friendly concern for the welfare and happiness of all beings, including those conventionally seen as 'enemies', and the second involves concern to reduce the sufferings, and the causes of suffering, of beings.
- Compassion is foundational for Mahayana Buddhists such as those who follow the Tibetan tradition. It is held to be the central motivating factor of the path of the *Bodhisattva*. This complements the earlier formulation of the Buddhist path (the Noble Eightfold Path) with an added particular emphasis on concern for others.

Bodhisattva vows

- The *Brahmajala Sutra*, a Mahayana code for lay and monastic followers which became influential in China, holds that those who take the *Bodhisattva* vows should not take any part in war.

- It forbids detention of anyone, the storing of any kind of weapons, or taking part in any armed rebellion. Those who have taken the *Bodhisattva* vows should not be spectators of battles, nor should they kill, make another kill, procure the means of killing, praise killing, approve those who help in killing.
- Its first of ten major precepts states the *Brahmajala Sutra*:

“A disciple of the Buddha shall not himself kill, encourage others to kill, kill by expedient means, praise killing, rejoice at witnessing killing, or kill through incantation or deviant mantras. *He must not create the causes, conditions, methods, or karma of killing (italics added)*, and shall not intentionally kill any living creature.”¹

- In Tibet, the 18 root *Bodhisattva* vows also include ones not to: destroy any place by such means as fire, bombs, or pollution; or encouraging people to abandon their vowed rules of moral conduct (including non-killing).

Tantric vows

- Tibetan Buddhists also take various Tantric vows, which extend the spirit of the *Bodhisattva* vows. For example the *Kalacakra* tantric vows include one against giving up compassionate kindness for all beings.

Conscientious objection

- Buddhism sees even defensive violence as less than ideal.
- In line with this approach the *Dhammpada* states:

“Conquer anger by love, conquer evil by good, conquer the stingy by giving, conquer the liar by truth” (v.223).

“Though he should conquer a thousand thousand men in the battlefield, yet he, indeed, is the nobler victor who should conquer himself” (v.103).

- There is a sense in which all Buddhist monks and nuns are conscientious objectors to war. This is because intentional killing of a human is an offence which leads to expulsion from the monastic community, in accordance with an ancient rule instituted by the Buddha.
- While non-Buddhists in China sometimes criticised Buddhists for ‘shirking military duties’, it is difficult to point to any self-conscious movement for ‘conscientious objection’ to war in the history of Buddhist lands. This is not because the idea is alien to Buddhist values, but because the non-violent principle it is based on is so fundamental to Buddhism.
- Any right-minded Buddhist knows that they should seek to avoid violence and killing. In a context of war, they might be drawn reluctantly into defensive fighting

¹ The Brahma Net Sutra: Translated by the Buddhist Text Translation Society in USA: Buddhist Text Translation Society: <http://www.purifymind.com/BrahmaNetSutra.htm>

in order to save their country or community: most lay Buddhists have been prepared to break the precept against killing in self-defence, and many have joined in the defence of the community in times of need.

Non-violent reflections on a violent world

- There are a number of Buddhist textual passages which reflect on war and punitive violence, seeking to subvert the 'violence is sometimes necessary' of worldly common sense by a dialogue with the non-violent ideal.
- The Buddha himself came from the warrior-noble (*khattiya*) class but clearly implies that conquest leads to tragedy for the defeated, which may lead to hatred and the likelihood of a desire to overcome the conqueror.
- Without justifying defensive violence, it is pointed out that aggression often leads to defensive counter-violence, which can be seen as a karmic result for the aggressor. Such a response happens, whether or not it is justified. Thus aggression is discouraged.
- Kashi Upadhyaya comments that the peace-loving defender is portrayed as only moderately good, falling short of the ideal of complete non-violence.²
- Elizabeth Harris, after an investigation of early Buddhist texts, holds:

“That lay people should never initiate violence where there is harmony or use it against the innocent is very clear. That they should not attempt to protect those under their care if the only way of doing so is to use defensive violence is not so clear. ... The person who feels violence is justified to protect the lives of others has indeed to take the consequences into account. He has to remember that he is risking grave [karmic] consequences for himself in that his action will inevitably bear fruit. ... Such a person needs to evaluate motives... Yet that person might still judge that the risks are worth facing to prevent a greater evil”.³

- If violence is then used, it is something that Buddhism may *understand* but not *approve of*.

The Dalai Lama and Tibetans' peaceful opposition to Chinese occupation

- In the early twentieth century (1906-08), when the Dalai Lama of that time ordered soldiers to fight threatening Chinese troops, this was seen in a bad light by many Tibetans, as they felt he should not be involved in killing.⁴ In fact, at the time, there were hardly any soldiers in Tibet, and the country came to be easy prey for British interference, and then the Chinese Communist takeover.

² Upadhyaya, K.N., 1971, *Early Buddhism and the Bhagavad Gita*, Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass, p.537.

³ Harris, E.J., 1994, *Violence and Disruption in Society: A Study of the Early Buddhist Texts*, Wheel booklet no.392/393, Kandy, Buddhist Publication Society, pp.47-8.

⁴ Bell, C., 1924, *Tibet Past and Present*, reprinted 1992, Delhi, Asian Educational Services, pp.121, 140.

- The present Dalai Lama (the 14th, born 1935) has set up a government-in-exile in Dharamsala, India. His response to the Chinese is one of patient, but determined, non-violence.
- He sees the action of the Chinese as having reminded the Tibetans about important Buddhist principles such as impermanence, suffering and tolerance. Yet he also has unshakeable confidence in the power of compassion, humanitarianism, non-violence and truth to bring about a restoration of the Tibetans' control of their own country, and more generally in such values benefiting the world through their animation of the 'good heart' of peoples of whatever culture.
- Monks and nuns in Tibet have been very active in demonstrations against the Chinese, and many have been jailed and tortured. Some sections of the Tibetan population feel so frustrated that they have resorted to violence, but the Dalai Lama steadfastly opposes this and reiterates that the principle of non-violence should be followed.
- In 1989, the Dalai Lama was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. In his acceptance speech, he stressed the need to transform Tibet into a zone of non-violence and peace through demilitarizing it, ending the testing and stockpiling of nuclear weapons there, and protecting the environment by setting up the world's largest natural park.
- He stresses the ideas of human rights and human equality, basing such an emphasis on the idea of the Buddha-nature shared by all.
- He is also deeply influenced by the *Bodhi-caryavatara* of the seventh century Indian monk Shantideva, with its emphasis that beings are equal in their desire for happiness and dislike of pain, and that the response to provocation should be patience. If Tibetans or others need to act against an aggressor, 'we should react without bad feelings. Deep down, tolerance, compassion and patience must be present'.⁵ The Chinese too 'are human beings who struggle to find happiness and deserve our compassion' (Nobel Peace Prize Lecture⁶).
- For the Dalai Lama, the classical Buddhist theme of all being interdependent is especially true today, in a world where international economic, technological and environmental interaction is pervasive.
- He thus stresses that we are 'truly a global family' and by necessity must develop a sense of 'universal responsibility' (Nobel Peace Prize Lecture⁷), and :

“It is our collective and individual responsibility to protect and nurture the global family, to support its weakest members and to preserve and tend to the natural environment in which we all live”.⁸

- In this, responsibility lies not only with leaders and administrators:

⁵ Quoted on Cabezón, J.I., 1996, 'Buddhist Principles in the Tibetan Liberation Movement', in Queen, C.S. & King, S.B. (eds.), 1996, *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia*, Albany, State University of New York Press, pp.295-320, p.304.

⁶ Piburn, S., ed. 1990, *The Dalai Lama; A Policy of Kindness: An Anthology of Writings By and About the Dalai Lama*, Ithaca, New York, Snow Lion, p.16.

⁷ Ibid p.17.

⁸ Ibid p.114.

“It lies with each of us individually. Peace, for example, starts within each one of us. When we have inner peace, we can be at peace with those around us. When our community is in a state of peace, it can share that peace with neighbouring communities, and so on” (Nobel Peace Prize Lecture⁹).

- Yet he sees peace as inter-related to other issues, so that:

“Peace can only last where human rights are respected, where the people are fed, and where individuals and nations are free” (Nobel Peace Prize Lecture¹⁰).

Modern warfare and its financial support

- Daisaku Ikeda, Japanese leader of the international Soka Gakkai movement holds that:

“Modern military power must be regarded as very different from the self-defense forces with which man has been familiar throughout the ages. I see no grounds for justifying military power in the world today... I am convinced that examples of warfare conducted for the sake of veritable self-defense are rare”.¹¹

- In the modern context, taking part in a war is not just a question of being a soldier. Warfare is now often based on expensive, high-tech weapons that require a high level of funding by the parties involved. For states, this will come from tax revenues.
- For a Buddhist, it should be clear that selling arms is ‘wrong livelihood’, so that the arms industry is fundamentally immoral. That part of a person’s tax payments that go to supporting such an industry, and the death it brings, should certainly make any Buddhist morally uncomfortable.
- The earliest allusion to Buddhist attitude to taxes is in the *Aggañña Sutta*, in a passage which talks of human beings choosing their first king, so as to impose some order on society, in which property, theft and quarrelling had developed.
- It is said that people reflected:

“Suppose we were to appoint a certain being who would show anger where anger was due, censure those who deserved it, and banish those who deserved banishment! And in return, we would grant him a share of the rice”.¹²

- This implies the idea of a kind of social contract. Hence when taxes are paid, this is on the implicit assumption that this is to facilitate action in support of an orderly and moral society. To evade taxes for such purposes is wrong, on Buddhist principles- indeed the *Upasaka-shila Sutra* says it is an offense for a lay

⁹ Ibid p.19

¹⁰ Ibid p.18.

¹¹ Toynbee, A. and Ikeda, D., 1989, *Choose Life: A Dialogue*, Oxford University Press, p.208.

¹² *Digha Nikaya* III.92: tr. Walshe, M., 1987, *Thus have I Heard: The Long Discourses of the Buddha*, London: Wisdom, p.413.

Bodhisattva to evade taxes or appropriate public funds¹³ - but so would a ruler's misuse of tax revenues.

- Indeed Buddhist texts also advise laypeople to take care of their possessions so that they are not lost by the actions of kings/rulers, thieves, fire, water, or ill-disposed heirs.¹⁴
- Overall, it is suggested that it is legitimate to pay taxes that support moral social purposes, but that taxes for other purposes are morally questionable.
- In a statement to Buddhist devotees in March 2003, the Dalai Lama has said, on the war in Iraq (<http://www.tibet.com/NewsRoom/iraq1.htm>):

“The Iraq issue is becoming very critical now. War, or the kind of organized fighting is something that came with the development of human civilization. It seems to have become part and parcel of human history or human temperament. At the same time, the world is changing dramatically. We have seen that we cannot solve human problems by fighting. Problems resulting from differences in opinion must be resolved through the gradual process of dialogue. Undoubtedly, wars produce victors and losers; but only temporarily. Victory or defeat resulting from wars cannot be long-lasting. Secondly, our world has become so interdependent that the defeat of one country must impact the rest of the world, or cause all of us to suffer losses either directly or indirectly.

But what can we do? What can we do when big powers have already made up their minds? All we can do is to pray for a gradual end to the tradition of wars. Of course, the militaristic tradition may not end easily. But, let us think of this. If there were bloodshed, people in positions of power, or those who are responsible, will find safe places; they will escape the consequent hardship. They will find safety for themselves, one way or the other. But what about the poor people, the defenseless people, the children, the old and infirm. They are the ones who will have to bear the brunt of devastation. When weapons are fired, the result will be death and destruction. Weapons will not discriminate between the innocent and guilty. A missile, once fired, will show no respect to the innocent, poor, defenseless, or those worthy of compassion. Therefore, the real losers will be the poor and defenseless, ones who are completely innocent, and those who lead a hand-to-mouth existence.”

- When it comes to the current Iraq war, it is clear that it could not be counted as ‘defensive’. Indeed it has added to chaos and death in Iraq and stoked resentment that feeds conflict beyond it.
- On Buddhist grounds, it seems legitimate for an individual not to lend support to it by payment of taxes which in part help it to continue.

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¹³ Shih, Heng-ching , tr. 1994, *The Sutra on Upasaka Precepts*, Berkeley, Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, Bukkyo Dendo Kyokai, p.82.

¹⁴ *Anguttara Nikaya* IV.281-5.

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