Buddhism and the Just War Tradition[1]

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Abstract

This paper aims to investigate two major theoretical concerns regarding the relationship between Buddhism and the Just War tradition. The first, the main part, addresses the question of how Buddhist teachings can be interpreted to justify warfare. The second concern is directly related to the first, with greater emphasis on the politics of interpretation and justification in actual practice. In particular, it briefly addresses the question of how Buddhism has been interpreted by some Buddhist leaders to justify participation in war.

Keywords: Buddhism, Just War tradition, Violence, Justification

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พุทธศาสนากับขนบว่าด้วยสงครามอันชอบธรรม[3]

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บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยเรื่องนี้มุ่งศึกษาประเด็นทางทฤษฎีสำคัญสองประการที่อธิบายความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างพุทธศาสนาและขนบว่าด้วยสงครามอันชอบธรรม โดยประเด็นหลักของงานวิจัยจะศึกษาว่าหลักคำสอนทางพุทธศาสนาสามารถถูกนำไปตีความเพื่ออ้างความชอบธรรมในการทำสงครามได้อย่างไร และประเด็นต่อมามีความเกี่ยวพันกับประเด็นแรกโดยตรง หากแต่จะเน้นความสำคัญในแง่การเมืองเรื่องการตีความและการเมืองเรื่องการอ้างความชอบธรรมในการทำสงครามจริง กล่าวโดยสรุปคือ จะศึกษาว่าหลักธรรมของพุทธศาสนาถูกตีความโดยผู้นำทางศาสนาบางคนอย่างไรเพื่อใช้สร้างความชอบธรรมในการเข้าร่วมสงคราม

คำสำคัญ: พุทธศาสนา ขนบว่าด้วยสงครามอันชอบธรรม ความรุนแรง การอ้างความชอบธรรม

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All tremble at violence. All fear death…Life is dear to all. Comparing oneself with others, one should neither kill nor cause to kill.

Dharmapada verses 129-130 (Keown, 2005, p. 71)

Every religion seeks to proclaim a truth which transcends the world, but is enmeshed in the very world it desires to transcend. Every religion seeks to remake the world in its own image, but it is always to some extent remade in the image of the world. This is the tragedy of the religion.

Dr Robert N. Bellah, Tokugawa Religion (quoted in Victoria, 2003, p. iii)

Buddhism is often stereotypically viewed as religion which has no room for debates over the justification for war. The non-violent approach taken by His Holiness the Dalai Lama in the face of the Chinese invasion of Tibet only confirms this view. However, countries with populations that are predominantly Buddhist do have armies. Notably, the militarisation of Japan in the twentieth century was not opposed by the country's Buddhists (Harvey, 2000). In this paper, I seek to examine how violence and war are addressed, and particularly how they are justified, in Buddhist thought and practices.

Buddhism and the Principle of Nonviolence

The teachings of *Siddhārtha Gautama,* founder of Buddhism, have developed into many sects over time and can be divided into two main traditions: *Hīnayāna* (also called *Theravāda*) and *Mahāyāna*. The former tradition prevails in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand and Indochina, and the latter in China, Korea, Japan, Tibet and Mongolia. Although different in emphasis, both schools adhere to the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, teach to forgive enemies, and uphold the Five Precepts i.e. to abstain from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying and intoxicants (Wenker, 1996).

Buddhist teachings strongly disapprove of violence, seeing it as the product of mental states associated with greed (*rāga*), hatred (*dvesha*) and delusion (*moha*). It is thought that aggression comes from the erroneous belief in a self (*ātman*) and what pertains to it, a notion that in effect causes suspicion and hostility towards what is perceived as 'alien' or 'other.' Indeed Buddha's teachings aim to dissolve this sense of self and with it the fear and hostility which cause conflict. One of the virtues they try to promote is patience (*kcānti*), since a lack of tolerance or forbearance is often responsible for violent disputes. It is also taught that our enemies in this life were in another life our friends, so no one is an enemy forever (Prebish & Keown, 2006).

Early sources of Buddhism condemn war almost without exception on the grounds that killing is a breach of the First Precept. Whether the war in question is an offensive or

defensive one is not taken into consideration, since either one results in the loss of life. Whereas Islam holds the view that warriors who die in a holy war become martyrs and go to heaven, Buddhism asserts that soldiers who die in a battle go to hell, as their minds were focused on killing at the moment of death. Some texts state that even killing in self-defence or in defence of loved ones is wrong, and an attitude of non-resistance as a response to violence is encouraged. One account in the *Dharmapada* tells how when the *Sakyas*, kinsmen of the Buddha, were under attack, they decided to be slaughtered in order not to break the First Precept (Prebish & Keown, 2006). Also, the *Jātaka* recounts some stories about the former lives of the Buddha that are related to this. For instance, there is a story of Prince *Temiya* who finds the violence connected with kingship so horrifying that he chooses to become an ascetic instead. Another is about King *Mahāsilavant* who, although attacked, refuses to defend himself by armed forces (Schmithausen, 1999).

Turning from theory into practice, there have been many ideal examples of the non-violence approach from Engaged-Buddhist thinkers and activists (King, 2005), both laypersons and ascetics such as the Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hanh, *Mahā Ghosananda*, *Bhikkhu P.A. Payutto* and *Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu*. For example, the Dalai Lama maintains adamantly that nonviolence is the only way to address the Sino-Tibetan conflict. He proposed the famous peace proposal called 'the Five Point Peace Plan,' which includes the transformation of the whole of Tibet into a zone of peace, a fully demilitarised zone (King, 2005). Glenn D. Paige has advocated the value of a Buddhist principled commitment to nonviolence in enhancing global problem solving. In short, for him, 'a Buddhist approach to global problem-solving combines patient dialogue, universal education and compassionate nonviolent action' (quoted in Paige, 1999, p. 167).

Buddhism on Violence and War in Theory

At first glance, the principle of non-violence appears to be fairly straightforward in the sense that every Buddhist monk, nun as well as lay person should abstain from killing. Because war involves taking lives of others, participation in it makes it impossible to observe the First Precept. Strictly speaking, this principle does not even allow waging a defensive war, especially if killing aggressors is involved. However, upon critical examination of Buddhist classical texts and the thoughts of several renowned and respectful Buddhist figures during the contemporary period, we may find that Buddhism can be interpreted to justify warfare in certain circumstances.

1.1 Classical Texts of Buddhism on Violence and War

Ample evidence from the classical texts in both strands of Buddhism suggests that the scriptures could be interpreted to justify warfare. For example, The *Mahāparnirvana Sūtra* offers evidence of one scriptural justification for killing in a story of one of the Buddha's former lives, where he killed some *Brahmin* heretics to protect the *dharma*, and also to

save them from the consequences that would befall them should they continue attacking it. It follows from the story, then, that when the *dharma* is in danger, the Five Precepts, including the prohibition on taking life, may not apply. As such, the Buddha may be said to encourage his followers to resort to violence to defend the *dharma* (Ferguson, 1977).

Furthermore, there is a rarely cited *Mahāyāna sūtra*, the 'Skill in Means *(Upayakausalya) Sūtra*,' that justifies killing in order to protect life. In this *Sūtra*, a Buddha recounts one of his past lives as a ship's captain named 'Great Compassionate.' One night, the local gods revealed to the captain in his dream that a man on board planned to kill the travelling five hundred merchants to steal from them. He knew that if the man succeeded in such a deed, he would be in hell for a long time. Waking up from the dream, the captain thought of how to prevent the mass murder. He realised that if he told the merchants of this man's intentions, they would all kill him 'with angry thoughts' and go to hell themselves. At last, the captain decided that the best thing to do was for him to kill the man himself, thinking:

> 'If I were to kill this person, I would likewise burn in the great hells for one hundred-thousand eons because of it. Yet I can bear to experience the pain of the great hells, that this person not slay these five hundred merchants and develop so much evil *karma*. I will kill this person myself.'
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> … Accordingly, the captain Great Compassionate protected those five hundred merchants and protected that person from going to the great hells by deliberately stabbing and slaying that person…with great compassion and skill in means.
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> The Buddha comments:
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> For me, *Sangsāra* was curtailed for hundred-thousand eons because of that skill in means and great compassion. And the robber died to be reborn in a world of paradise (quoted in King, 2005, 189).

What is remarkable about this is the fact that killing is approved in the *sūtra* as an example of the 'skill in means' that a *bodhisattva* might resort to in order to prevent violence. Moreover, not only does the captain not go to hell for the killing, but he actually earns karmic reward for that very deed. What matters here is the state of mind. Because the captain acted out of compassion; he was genuinely concerned with the welfare of others at the expense of his own, his negative *karma* was rescinded and became positive.

Regarding this idea, the Dalai Lama, a strong advocate of the Buddhist principle of non-violence, asserts that only a very advanced *bodhisattva* would possess the state of mind that is required to kill without anger but out of pure compassion. He observes further that he has never known a person who has fully developed that kind of altruism, including himself. He also refuses to take this approach for himself and anyone who is insufficiently advanced (King, 2005). Nevertheless, the Dalai Lama's statement reflects that he acknowledges this possibility, even if only in theory.

Schmithausen interprets the *Gamani Samyuttam* as evidence that early Buddhism condemned war and believed that those who went to war would head for an unpleasant rebirth (Schmithausen, 1999). While this view is plausible, it might be useful to call to mind the *Yodhajivasūtra*, a story in the Pali canon about a warrior who asked the Buddha whether soldiers who died in a war would go to heaven, to which question the Buddha responded with silence. The warrior had to repeat the question three times before Buddha replied that those killed in the battlefield would not be reborn in heaven, because they were so inevitably filled with hatred and pain, and these feelings would send them to hell (Kent, 2010). Therefore, it is also possible to read this textual Buddha's reluctance to answer the soldier's question as his acceptance that violence and war may have to be embraced by some, despite the central Buddhist message of non-violence (Bartholomeusz, 2002).

In some *Mahāyāna* texts, transgression of the precepts, including the one that forbids killing, is permitted or required in certain exceptional circumstances. Some of these texts justify killing or war in the defence of the Buddhist religion or of *Mahāyāna* and its followers. This is for this reason that lay followers and the king in *Mahāyāna*, in particular, are allowed to take the weapons and fight (Schmithausen, 1999).

The above discussion suggests that justifications for violence and war can be found in the classical texts, and that these include the defence of the *dharma* and religion and killing with great compassion. There is also another justification for war which is inherently political relating to the Buddhist perspective on rulers as detailed below.

1.2 Buddhist Perspective on Rulers in the Classical Texts

According to the renowned Thai monk-scholar of our generation, *Bhikku P.A. Payutto*, a king in the Buddhist tradition should observe and possess four sets of Buddhist virtues and qualities (Payutto, 2007; Chappell, 2004). Two sets of these are related to war and violence.

The first set is the Twelvefold *Cakkavattivatta*, which deals explicitly with security issues. It comprises twelve duties of the Universal Ruler, which includes the protection for one's own folk and the armed forces, for the nobles, the royal dependents, *Brahmins* and householders, townspeople and villagers, monks and priests, beasts and birds. An ideal Buddhist ruler is a universal monarch (*cakravartin*) who by means of armed forces conquers the whole earth by following a thousand-spoked wheel that rolls in front of him, and to whom all the other local rulers submit without fighting. Having conquered the world in this manner, the monarch rules justly and without force. Because everybody abides by the Buddhist precepts, nobody commits crimes and therefore punishment is not needed; and because there is no such thing as external enemies, wars are relegated to history. It should be noted that this utopian condition is possible by the use of force (the universal monarch conquers the world by his army), but it involves no killing (potential opponents do not offer resistance to his conquest). Some part of this set of virtues is essential and worth quoting in length (Walshe, 1987, p. 397-8):

> Then, rising from the seat, covering one shoulder with his robe, the King took a gold vessel in his left hand, sprinkled the Wheel with his right hand, and said: 'May the noble Wheel-Treasure turn, may the noble Wheel-Treasure conquer.' The Wheel turned to the east, and the King followed it with his *fourfold army*. And in whatever country the Wheel stopped, the King took up residence with his *fourfold army*. And those who opposed him in the eastern region came and said: 'Come, Your Majesty, welcome! We are yours, Your Majesty. Rule us, Your Majesty (italics mine).'

After that the King preached the five precepts to the people as his subjects. Then the King did exactly the same in the south, west and north. According to this long discourse in the Pali Canon (Walshe, 1987), the fourfold army consists of elephants, cavalry, chariots and infantry.

Many Buddhists, both ascetics and laypersons, associate this ideal with the emperor *Asoka*, who ruled over almost the entire Indian sub-continent in the middle of the third century, B.C. *Asoka* became a lay follower, and he tried to refrain from violence in the rule of his country to comply with moral principles close to Buddhist ethics. However, we should never forget that he used brutal force to conquer the part of his empire that he had not inherited (Schmithausen, 1999) and he became a Buddhist only after he had established his empire.

The second set, *the Fivefold Khattiyabala or the five strengths of a monarch, includes the duty of a king to have strong armed forces* (Schmithausen, 1999).

Apart from the above-mentioned sets of virtues of the rulers, there is considerable canonical evidence that can be used to justify violence and war related to the Buddhist perspective on rulers. If killing or even contributing to war contradicts the First Precept, then it is reasonable to assume that the Buddha would not at all approve of war particularly offensive ones deemed incompatible with Buddhist ethics. However, in practice, the Buddha appears to have been rather reserved on the topic of war (Schmithausen, 1999). Evidence in support of this can be found in the beginning of the same canonical mentioned above (*Mahāparnirvana Sūtra*), which recounts how the Buddha, when asked by King *Ajātashatru*'s minister whether they will win the war on the clan confederation of the *Vajjis*, his answer is that they will not win if the *Vajjis* maintain their traditional attitudes and forms of organisation. It is remarkable that the Buddha does not declare the war, an offensive one, as immoral. Although one may argue that this episode is likely a fiction serving primarily a literary function, it is telling of the Buddha's stance in this matter. Indeed, when preaching to the extremely militant and aggressive *Ajātashatru*, the Buddha only teaches him the general Buddhist ethics, and does not touch upon the issue of war. He also treats *Prasenajit*, King of *Kosala*, in much the same way, teaching only the general principles of Buddhist ethics, leaving it to him to decide how they are to be applied in the realm of politics, including public violence of which warfare is a form (Schmithausen, 1999).

1.3 Contemporary Great Buddhist Figures on Violence and War

Classical texts aside, many great Buddhist figures of the contemporary era who normally embrace non-violence methods acknowledge that war may be necessary in order to protect the *dharma* for all humanity. However, this is to be done in very exceptional circumstances. Interestingly and surprisingly, the tireless spokesperson of pacifism, the Dalai Lama (quoted in Bartholomeusz, 2002, p. 29), once said that 'If the situation was such that there was only learned lama or genuine practitioner alive, a person whose death would cause the whole of Tibet to lose all hope of keeping its Buddhist way of life, then it is conceivable that in order to protect that one person it might be justified for one or ten enemies to be eliminated -if there was no other way. I could justify violence only in this extreme case, to save the last living knowledge of Buddhism itself.'

Equally surprisingly, *Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu*, one of the most renowned and respected Thai Buddhist monks, once stated that 'No matter what kind of activity we carry out -be it politics, economics, or indeed, even **war-** if done morally it will maintain the natural, harmonious balance of all things and will be consistent with the original plan of nature. It is absolutely correct to fight for the preservation of *dharma* in the world, but it is wrong to fight for anything other than that. Indeed, we should be happy to sacrifice our lives in fighting to preserve *dharma* for…all humanity' (quoted in King, 2005, p. 185).

1.4 Buddhism and the Just War tradition

Buddhists, ascetics and laypersons, rarely directly address the question of Just War. This stands in stark contrast to the more developed and systematic Just War tradition based on Christianity. Arguably, in Buddhism, the subject matter is left to the discretion of political authorities, in isolation from the religious establishment. Some commentaries make passing references to war, but none of the philosophical literature discusses explicitly or systematically how the Buddhist pacifist ideal may be carried out in the practice of social and political life. To the extent that Buddhist texts reflect the true attitude of the Buddha in this regard, it seems that he did not explicitly apply his ethics to the issue of war at the political level. It can be argued that he may have thought such interference in political matters impractical, or even that it might threaten the prosperity of the Order (Schmithausen, 1999). He may have been aware that complete abstention from military force, even for defence, would not be possible or acceptable to a political ruler of his day, when there were a number of competing polities that were very aggressive and bent on expansion.

Having investigated the relationship between Buddhism and war at the theoretical level, I shall now end this article with two examples of what has happened in actual practice in various Buddhist countries during the course of history.

In Japan during the Second World War, many Zen monks disrobed to join the war. The teaching of selflessness in Buddhism was interpreted in a way that made these monks feel that they were not killing any living-beings. Below is a saying that captures some aspects of the selfless nature of Zen, but could be easily used to justify war. According to

D.T. Suzuki (1959), the famous Zen teacher that helped spread Zen into the West, 'The uplifted sword has no will of its own; it is all of emptiness. It is like a flash of lightning. The man who is about to be struck down is also of emptiness, and so is the one who wields the sword. None of them are possessed of a mind which has any substantiality. As each of them is of emptiness and has no 'mind,' the striking man is not a man, the sword in his hands is not a sword, and the 'I' who is about to be struck down is like the splitting of the spring breeze in a flash of lightning.'

After China's Communist revolution, some politically radical Buddhists interpreted the Buddha's teaching in ways that justified the killing of the counter-revolutionaries. Although monks were divided, there were some who turned to the story of *Sakyamuni*, who while practicing the way of a *bodhisattva*, killed a bandit to save a hundred merchants. They thus argued that killing for fame and profit was a breach of the Precept, whereas killing to save lives was indeed to observe the Precept (Ferguson, 1977). During the Korean War of 1950-53, Maoist China also sent Buddhist monks to fight for their Communist brethren. During the campaign to oppose America and aid Korea in 1951, a monk named Hsin-tao told a group of his brethren in Nanchang that, according to Buddhist doctrine, killing 'American imperialist demons' who were disrupting world peace was not only blameless, but actually earned positive *karma* (Welch, 1965, p. 149).

To conclude, this article explores theoretical questions relating to Buddhism and war and argues that there is a possible relationship between them. The paper draws the conclusion from the classical texts, especially the perspectives on rulers, and contemporary great Buddhist figures. It also briefly shows how Buddhism has been interpreted by some Buddhist leaders to justify participation in war.

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