The Buddha and War

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 23:15

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhasa. Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhasa. Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhasa. Homage to the Buddha, the Blessed, Noble, and fully self-awakened one.

I'm going to start off with just a little talk about the Buddha and war. The first thing is to make a distinction between pacifism and nonviolence.

So pacifism is an ideology. And ideologies like communism and neoliberalism always work on some sort of idea of how things ought to be. And therefore they lose connection with what's actually happening. And as Marx said about capitalism, it has the seeds of its own destruction. So you can say that of any ideology.

Non-violence is an attitude. It's a way of relating to all beings.

There are several stories that have been told about the Buddha who came into contact with war. The first one is an argument between the Sakians, his own people, and the people on the other side of the river, the Coleans. This argument over water rights was moving towards a war between the two tribes.

So the Buddha heard about it and he went up there to try and help with the rights of the water. And he basically asked them what was more precious, the water in the river or the blood in their veins? Well, that brought them to the table and they were able to discuss the situation calmly and the problem disappeared.

Now there was a more serious situation with Viduddha Bhat. So he was the son of Passenadi. And Passenadi was a very committed supporter of the Buddha. So Viduddha wanted to marry into the Sakya. The Sakya were already vassals to the king of Kosala. They were subjects. And so he married one of the Sakyan princesses.

However, he came to know that in fact she wasn't a princess at all, but belonged to the lowest of all the castes. Well, he was very angry, so he got his army together to go and destroy the Sakians. He had his elephants and his cavalry, his chariots and his infantry.

When the Buddha heard this, he went to see him. Now, we don't know what the Buddha said to him, but I would think it was along the lines of this is not going to create good *kamma* for you.

So Viduddha took his advice and went home. No sooner had he got home than he got angry again and got back on his elephant. So the Buddha appeared again and seemed to have convinced him to turn back. As soon as he got back, he got angry and he got back on his elephant. Again, the Buddha came and again

convinced him that this was not a good idea, so he went back home.

But unfortunately as soon as he got home he got angry and he got back on his elephant. This time when they asked the Buddha to go again he says it's not going to work, he's committed. So it would seem that he destroyed the capital of the Sakyas, Kapilavatthu. Probably the Sakyans ran off into the jungle for a while. And they set up another capital city. Seemingly, you can actually visit them. One is in India and one is in Nepal.

The final example is to do with Ajatasattu. Ajatasattu was the son of Bimbisara, the king of Magadha. In the same way, Bimbisara had been a very good supporter of the Buddha, but his son just didn't have the same commitment. In fact, Ajatasattu starved his poor old father to death. He locked him in a little room which they say you can still see in Rajgir. It was a small building away from the palace.

Now, he wanted to conquer the Vajji Confederacy. And the peculiar thing is that he sent his chief minister to ask the Buddha whether it was the best time to do so. Now the Buddha, of course, won't tell anybody what to do. All he does is point to principles and you are left to make the decision.

Now what he did was to describe the qualities of a strong community. And he was really talking about the monastics, the monks and nuns. So Vassacaro and the king assumed that he was hinting that the Vajjis were a strong people. So he didn't attack them. He sent in the CIA. And in order to bribe and set one people against another. And when the time was right, he went in with his army to keep the peace.

So, some writers say that the Buddha would support a defensive war. But there's no indication in the scriptures that he either encouraged or discouraged anybody from war as such.

And he was in a tricky position. Because the monks and nuns had spread throughout the whole of North India. If he had supported one king against the other, then you can imagine all the monks and nuns in the territory of the king he did not support would be kicked out.

Now, this does make the Buddha sound, it does sound a little cynical of the Buddha. But he was grounded in reality, realpolitik. So there must have been some concern about the monks and nuns. But I think the main thing is that he never told people what to do. He was only concerned with getting across those principles that are necessary to bring suffering to an end.

So I can only presume that when the question of war came up, it was always pointing to that person and saying, if you go to war, you will create bad *kamma* for yourself. Because it's very difficult to kill another human being unless you have aversion in the heart.

Now we have the example of the Shaolin Kung Fu monks in China. So in China, if the emperor didn't like Buddhists, they would be persecuted, and the next emperor would like Buddhists and they were okay. So the Shaolin monks began to develop a form of fighting which was defensive. Not to be overcome by aversion towards the enemy.

This ethos went into Japan from China. And it became part of the samurai code. So the samurai were warriors. And there is a story where a samurai had beaten his opponent, had lifted the sword to cut him in two and then walked away. And when they asked him why he'd walked away, he said, I was angry.

So when it comes to considering what our personal relationship is to war, remember that that is our personal relationship to war. It's not the Buddha's. And all the Buddha would say to you, if you were to ask him, is, can you kill somebody without aversion in your heart? And if you do kill someone with aversion in your heart, then that will bring unwholesome results for yourself.

So, of course, this is not a very straightforward decision between black and white. If you're defending your family, defending the country, then, of course, that particular motivation may be greater than getting rid of the aversion in your heart. Certainly, if you find yourself having to defend your family or your country, and it's left to the individual to decide how they feel or understand they ought to behave.

I can only hope my words have been of some assistance, that I have not caused greater confusion and that by careful decision-making you will find your way to complete liberation from suffering.

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