Non-Violence v. Pacifism

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 15:53

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhasa.

Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-awakened one.

A few things have happened since we last met, my goodness. I think it was Harold Wilson who said a week is a long time in politics. Although it was on the horizon that something was going to happen in Ukraine, I don't think anybody imagined what has actually eventuated. I thought I would clarify, or at least give you my opinion on, this business of nonviolence as opposed to pacifism.

Pacifism is really an ideal. It comes from some great concept about violence, making it a sort of global, total position. At its most radical, an absolute pacifist position would never take part in any war. It's normally centered on war, but of course it spreads out to killing as well. The basic position is that the value of human life is such that deliberately killing a person is simply not on. Unfortunately, with isms, they tend not to be in touch with reality as it is.

You do get types of pacifism that are a bit closer to reality. There are militant pacifists who oppose all violence and war, and then there is conditional pacifism, which acknowledges circumstances where war might actually lead to less suffering. Perhaps the Second World War would be one example of that—to overcome Nazism. Then there are selective pacifisms that really only concern weapons of mass destruction. But normally, when people talk about pacifism, it tends to be in that absolute category.

Nonviolence is of a different nature. One of the things I think we find hard to understand is that the Buddha's society was preliterate. There was no writing. If you don't have any writing, you really can't think about things in that systematic philosophical way. There are no isms during the Buddha's time. The Buddha is always grounding himself on actual experience—his personal experience of what actually causes suffering and how to get rid of it. There's nothing in the literature like philosophy as we would recognize it, or sociology, or systems thinking. Not that there weren't views and opinions, but there weren't these solid isms that we have these days.

What he's actually teaching is how to be in a world which is largely driven by greed, aversion, fear, and delusion. It's a very practical approach to the world, coming from a wisdom base—a practical wisdom base. It comes from his own personal experience and, of course, the good heart. What we're getting to is an ethical stand, a way of relating to people and, in fact, all sentient beings. These days, you can also add nature.

When there's no violence in the mind—and the mind is never empty in the sense that there's nothing

there apart from maybe sleep—when it's in a state of nonviolence, then empathy and compassion arise quite naturally. Those two cannot exist together. That's the point.

Interestingly enough, in the discourses, when kings are talking to him and one or two of them go to war, he never advises the kings to get rid of their armies. He never tells them to stop executing people. And certain punishments were delicious punishments indeed—there was one I remember which involved rubbing the convict's head with a conch shell until the bone glistened. It's amazing how we can think up such things. But the point is that he never actually advises kings to get rid of their armies. There's some basic understanding that this is the way it is. But he does, of course, invite them to develop this sense of nonviolence.

Basically, it's about principle rather than going into the details of how you ought to do something. He always leaves that to us. It's up to us to decide what we feel to be ethically good or bad.

This translated in later Buddhism, in later Buddhist cultures—for instance, the samurai. The samurai was taught, or developed himself, to kill without any hatred. There's one story where a samurai has beaten his opponent and the sword is raised high, about to crash down on his head, and he walks away. When they asked him why he walked away, he said he was angry. You'll also know the martial art of Aikido, which is really based upon the idea that you use the other person's energy to deflect their violence towards you.

Remember that when the Buddha was born, the Brahmins—one in particular, a sage—came to see him and determined that he would become either a world-conquering monarch or a fully self-awakened being. This alter ego of the world-conquering monarch appears throughout the scriptures as the Chakravartin. He possesses a wheel that appears and begins to roll, and he follows it with his fourfold army: foot soldiers, cavalry, chariots, and elephants. Wherever it goes, he naturally defeats the enemy. At times, he is actually invited to come.

Now, as soon as he takes over, what does he do? He establishes the five precepts. And in so doing, everywhere he goes becomes a peaceful and loving place. This is a motif that occasionally appears in the discourses. But then it reaches a point where one of these Chakravartins fails to follow the five precepts, and immediately society begins to corrupt; all sorts of problems emerge.

There is one rather interesting occasion where stealing began. The minister informed the king that the person was stealing because they were poor. So the king decided to give this person wealth, some land, so that he would have no reason to steal. But then others thought, "If I want more wealth and land, what I must do is steal." And so stealing became common. That is when the king had to start chopping heads off. So that is how it goes.

There is also an occasion that brings about a rule for the bhikkhus, for the monastic life—bhikkhus and bhikkhunis alike. The Buddha had given a very enthusiastic talk about the repulsiveness of the body. The purpose of seeing the body's repulsiveness, of course, is to become non-attached to it. However, the

bhikkhus seem to have misunderstood this teaching. They went off into the forests and began this contemplation on the disgusting nature of the body, becoming so disgusted that they started killing themselves and asking other monks to kill them.

There is this remarkable story of a monk who has just stabbed another monk to death to release him from this disgusting body. He is wiping the blood off the knife. When the Buddha hears about this, he must have been in a state of shock, really, because his words had been completely misunderstood.

So he makes up this rule: "Should any bhikkhu intentionally deprive a human being of life, or search for an assassin for him, or praise the advantages of death, or incite him to die in this way—'Dear friend, what use is this wretched, miserable life to you? Death would be better for you than life'—and with such an idea in mind, such a purpose in mind, should in various ways praise the advantages of death and incite them to die, he is also defeated and no longer in communion."

This is what is known as a parajika. He is defeated in the sense that he can no longer be a monk in this lifetime, and he leaves the order. The people who actually committed these killings—this rule, of course, does not apply to them, because it is not backdated. It starts from that point onwards.

The other interesting thing about this rule is that the person has to actually be killed or die for it to be a proper parajika, a proper defeat. If the person whom the monk is attempting to kill fails to die, then it is a serious offense, of course, but he is not actually asked to leave the order.

So we have said this is not a philosophy as such. It is really just practical moral reasoning. These two verses come from the Dhammapada:

All tremble at violence, all fear death. Seeing others as being like yourself, do not kill or cause others to kill.

All tremble at violence. Life is dear to all. Seeing others as being like yourself, do not kill or cause others to kill.

A distinction here must be made between force and violence, and I think this is the crucial point. If you drop your mobile phone, you might simply pick it up, check whether you have broken the screen, and put it in your pocket. On the other hand, you might be quite angry with yourself, fed up with yourself, and so you reach down with extra pressure in your hand, grabbing this mobile phone and stuffing it into your pocket. One is non-violence—the use of simple force to correct what has happened, to put right what went wrong. Whereas violence is the same action accompanied by some form of anger, hatred, or revenge.

So there are arguments to justify armed intervention.

and which would prevent further, worse bloodshed.

In this terrible thing that's happening in Ukraine, if the soldiers are following their duty—this is the Buddha saying, well, you've been given a command, this is what you've determined to do with your

life—if they try to kill, or in fact if they kill soldiers and people of the other side, but there isn't any violent hatred in their hearts doing it, then obviously that would come under non-violence. But it still isn't something that they should be doing.

Now, the Abhidhamma, this later teaching, says that you cannot kill anything—you can't kill any sentient being without some negativity in the heart. But as you can see, to actually try to kill somebody with that sense of hatred, revenge, anger—that's a far worse place to come from than somebody who is killing in order to defend themselves.

So anyway, these are just some thoughts that I might put to you. It's worth looking into the back history of this Ukraine disaster. You can begin to see that it's a product, really, of all sorts of reasons that have come to manifest in this terrible war.

I can only hope my words have been of some assistance, and that by your devotion to non-violence, you will eventually liberate yourself from all suffering—sooner rather than later.

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