Is Armed Intervention Ever Justified?

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Bhante's Essays · 22 min read

Is Armed Intervention Ever Justified?
Pacificism, Non-violence and the Just War.
There are times when we are faced with acts of international violence, which force us to contemplate our attitude to war. In my youth it was the Kennedy/Khrushchev confrontation over Cuba. Today it is the Twin Towers of New York and its aftermath. There have been many articles written since from many points of view in the Buddhist press. Here, I would like to draw on that reading and make the following distinctions: between pacifism and non-violence; between force and violence; and between two levels of consciousness, the one of the moral self and the one of the 'supramoral' not-self.
Pacifism vs. Non-Violence
Pacifism is an ideology. It has a creed. A creed binds itself around a central statement which is believed to be true no matter what the circumstance. It is a universal statement. It says there is no such thing as a Just War.
The Buddha lived in a simpler philosophical age. There were no great socio-economic ideologies and systems theories. There was a momentous shift occurring in society away from the smaller pastoral, oligarchic tribes towards larger agricultural, monarchical societies whose kings came to subjugate local peoples. Indeed, the Buddha's own family were 'vassals' to Pasenadi, King of Kosala. But it seems to have been driven by better farming techniques and the growth of trade, not by well-worked ideologies such as Communism. Even so, the discourses concerning the All-Righteous, Dhamma Wheel Turning Monarch (the Bodhisatta's 'alter ego'?) show that a lot of thought went into what constituted 'Right Monarchy'.
In the Nipta Sutta, in the chapter on Eights, there are a number of discourses where the Buddha warns against debates between 'isms'. The Buddha constantly asks his followers not to get caught up in useless exercises, 'a thicket of views', where everyone holds on to their opinion, their 'ism'. The purpose is simply to defeat the other as if defeat of another 'ism' meant that one's own was vindicated! In the Culaviyuha Sutta, (880) the Buddha makes this observation. 'If one who does not tolerate another's view is a fool, a dolt and stupid, then all of them are fools without understanding, because all of them abide by their own views alone.'
The Kma Sutta reinforces this message. The Kmas were confused by all the often-times conflicting views of various teachers and each one's insistence that theirs was the Way.

But the Buddha asked them not to believe anything because it was a 'revelation, tradition, report, product of mere reasoning, true from a particular position, superficial assessment of the facts, conformed with preconceived notions, authoritative or because of the prestige of the teacher.'

For to hold on to a point of view is to blinker oneself to other perspectives. In this way an 'ism' focuses only on those parts that fit the theory, thereby blinding one to what is actually happening. An 'ism' will rationalise everything to fit the theory. Suppose, for instance, we make not to kill any living being an absolute law. What does Buddha Dhamma say to the Inuit? Eat snow? And what does Buddha Dhamma say to people suffering from diseases caused by tiny creatures - viruses, bacteria and worms? Suffer gladly?

So if by Pacifism is meant no use of force, no war, in any circumstance whatsoever, we fall into the trap of an 'ism'. Rather than intellectual positions, perhaps we are on safer ground if we talk more of attitudes, of dispositions. In the Punishment Section of the Dhammapada we find not rationalisations but a call for empathy.

All tremble at the rod.
All fear death.
Comparing others with oneself,
One should neither strike nor cause to strike. (Dhp 129)

Although the Buddha offers these sentiments, nowhere in the scriptures does he directly ask the authorities to stop all corporal punishments. As we shall see later on, even though he tries to stop a king from attacking his people, he does not ask his people not to defend themselves. And there is no rule in the Vinaya forbidding a monk or nun to defend themselves from a physical attack. The Shaolin monks translated this in late Buddhist history in a pro-active way.

Is there a way then that non-violence could mean other than an outright ban on all war? This becomes clearer when we make a distinction between violence and force, war and armed intervention. Force is the energy used to put right what is wrong. Violence is the same energy laced with anger, revenge, spite and so on.

Violence vs. Force inwardly

Let us begin where the Buddha himself began his own investigations: inwardly. Let us see if our meditation draws this distinction between force and violence and let us see what might be meant by non-violence as an attitude towards ourselves.

Whenever something negative arises in our hearts or minds, we indulge it if it is pleasing or we suppress it if painful. Staying, for the purpose of this essay, with those emotions around anger, revenge and hatred, there's nothing more delectable to the self than to get one over another or, if beaten, to avenge oneself! And if it can only be done in the virtual reality of fantasy, well that is better than nothing! But what we discover is that our inner life becomes

more and more inflamed and it's only a matter of time before we act out these fantasies in our daily life and engulf everyone around us in the same blaze.
If, on the other hand, we decide to suppress them, perhaps by practising loving-kindness as a sort of palliative balm, we find the hatred and anger is only dampened. Should the hot winds of anger fan some new irritation, a great roar ensues. Such outbursts of rage are warning signs that we are not actually dealing with that anger or hatred.
The first sign is a clear indulgence in anger. The result is more anger and hatred since indulgence is the technique we use to develop a conditioning. The second is a more subtle case of the first. For whereas the first believes that the way to rid ourselves of anger and hatred is to annihilate the object, the second believes it can be done by 'annihilating' the anger and hatred inwardly. The technique here is to suppress them even with something beautiful such as metta, as if laying a bed of flowers over toxic waste gets rid of it! These are both acts of violence, violence towards ourselves.
What we discover through the teachings of the Buddha and the practice of vipassana is that there is a third position we can take, one that bypasses these two. We sit and bear it. By allowing the flames to roar within us, we allow that conditioning to burn itself out. But we have to bear the pain of it! That is what is so difficult. We have to suffer the consequences of our own conditioning.
And we have to use force! We have to 'force' ourselves to sit and bear it! To bear it patiently and gladly. This is Right Effort. Emotions lose their hold over us by observing and experiencing them as mental phenomena. We can 'let them go'. By insisting we endure them rather than fighting against them, we have followed the path of non-violence. This is the psychological underpinning of the attitude of non-violence within society.

Again, in ordinary daily life, the Buddha asks us to 'restrain the senses' (indriya samvara). This is force, not violence. We are not to beat ourselves, but to be firm in putting ourselves out of the way of enticements that foster our defilements. We all have a reservoir of unresolved anger and hatred which loves to indulge itself. Therefore, we need to be careful even when watching scenes of violence on TV or film. This restraint, this turning away from what is pleasurable, but unwholesome, demands strong resolution. One has to be forceful with oneself, but it becomes violence if it is done with self-hatred or self-anger.
The distinction between being firm with oneself and treating oneself violently is crucial. It is often a difficult distinction to make because restraining the senses can feel very uncomfortable, and sometimes downright awful. Yet, the result after the struggle will be freedom from that particular compulsion. Unfortunately indulging anger and hatred does feel like a release. People like to use the word 'express', but this can be very delusory. If over a period of time 'expressing anger and hatred as a form of catharsis' seems to have had little effect on one's behaviour, or has made it worse, then such 'expression' needs to

be investigated. And sure enough, it will be found to be none other than acts of indulgence, that is, acts of violence.

Violence vs. Force in Interpersonal Relations

When it comes to the rearing of children, parents must often use force to be obeyed, yet it can so easily slip into violence. But if this distinction is not clear, then a parent may be confused as to how far they can go to demand obedience. It demands clarity on the parent's part as to what is allowable and then for them to stand their ground. Whether it's the age of the terrible twos, disobedient child, or a fractious teenager, when reasoning and cajoling have failed, it may be that no treat, no pocket money or curfew respectively is the appropriate action. If this is done in a temper, then the penalty will be inappropriate. There will be that added force of anger. The demand for obedience will be too rough, the fine too great, the curfew too long.

When it comes to the unacceptable behaviour of adults, the law demands that force be used. And that is what we expect of the police. After all, it is a Police Force! We do not expect them to be violent. We are very sensitive to police brutality. We know when the police are using protective force and not punitive action in public demonstrations. We are rightly disgusted if the police use an incident to beat up an individual. When such scenes are caught on video, it horrifies us. But when we see the police behaving rationally, using force to restrain someone, even to the point of having to kill them, then we are grateful for that protection. We admire their bravery.

There is a telling incident in the Vinaya Pitaka, the monastic rules. On one occasion at a recital of the Patimokkha, the Buddha did not give the signal to begin. After a long wait, Mogallna asked him why. The Buddha said there was someone in the gathering who was not pure and should not be there. Mogallna called upon that person three times to leave the assembly but there was no response. Because of his power to read minds, Mogallna knew who it was. He went to him, took him by the arm and 'showed him the door'. Mogallna, as an Arahat, would be unable to react with anger. As far as he was concerned some direct action was needed for the meeting to proceed. Such is the use of force.

In the wider society, we see that individuals are by law allowed to defend themselves against physical attack. The law allows a right to self-defence. But even then it has to be appropriate. Should a person be attacked and then in defence kill the attacker, he may very well find himself going to jail! Any hint of revenge and that person is guilty of murder! It all comes down to attitude. There is a difference between assertion and aggression.

In China during the periodic persecution of Buddhists, Shaolin monks began to defend themselves. They had developed the art of kung-fu in which, true to Buddhist principles, the aim was not to do violence to the attackers but to turn their violence back on to themselves. That does not preclude stopping the attacker in his tracks, but the intention was purely self-

defence.

War vs. Armed Intervention

So finally we come to war.

War is a very loaded word. It cannot really be used in any neutral sense, but always carries with it the horrors of armed conflict. Westerners, in general, and Europeans in particular, have had such a history of bloody conflicts that there is a sizeable number of the population for whom any hint of war is anathema. They see only the killing of innocents and destruction. If we use the term 'armed intervention' this helps to bring a little balance back into the argument.

What are the reasons to justify war? This was a great debate in the late Christian Roman Empire and Medieval Ages. These are the reasons given by St. Thomas Aquinas for a 'just war' (jus ad bellum).

First, war could only be undertaken by a legitimate authority. That's a bit dodgy in these post-modern days. Is the war waged by Basque separatists illegitimate because they are a minority in the country of Spain or legitimate if they have the support of majority of Basques in their fight for independence? In general, most would agree that a common vote within a given community or nation state, so long as the decision is made by the due process of open democracy, would constitute legitimate authorisation.

Secondly, it must be a just cause. Well, here is another debate. Who is to decide that? Both sides of a war would necessarily believe their cause to be just. It is important to realise that people will only fight if they believe they have good cause. These days the only just cause most people will agree to is a response to aggression, hence the Gulf War and the war in Afghanistan. This, of course, is compared with the right of self-defence.

However, whereas in individual cases it can be argued that the would-be murderer has forfeited his right to life, in the case of a country, do all civilians forfeit their right to life if the rules take them into war when they themselves feel strongly against it? What about conscientious objectors?

And is it right to kill other human beings in order to defend one's borders, one's culture and civilisation? What price human life?

But then again, is life worth living without liberty? This is something Westerners take for granted, but a yearned-for aspiration in countries which are ruled by dictatorships such as Myanmar, where people are ready to die for this freedom, as Westerners once were.

Thirdly, it must be the last resort. Although definitely correct, this is a problem if a nation has such superiority of arms that it does not have to explore all the channels of diplomacy. Just as during the period of European empires, the gunboat was an easy resort, why wait for the last resort? Hence the actions of America and Britain in Iraq - here perhaps not only an abuse of power but a case of arrogance arising out of a sense of superior moral righteousness.

Fourthly, there must be a formal declaration of war. This seems to be nice protocol, but easily dispensed with to get the upper hand as the Japanese at Pearl Harbour. And indeed Al Qaeda in New York.

And finally, there needs to be reasonable hope of success. Foolish not to believe that!

When it comes to the right way to conduct a Just War (jus in bello), there are two main guidelines.

Firstly, the means ought to be proportional. That is, that the war itself should not be a greater evil than the evil it is supposed to be fighting! This is a difficult one to decide because if the intention is to create better conditions, then it might be argued that no matter how bad the war is, in the long run it will create the conditions for a better situation. If World War One still contained the seeds of future conflict after the terrible slaughter, then it could be argued that it was a bad war. If World War Two succeeded in putting an end to European internecine aggression then it might be argued that the slaughter was the last blood-letting necessary for a Pax Europa and the European Union and so a just war.

Secondly, it is not allowable to kill innocents. This refers to non-combatant civilians. This is very much in line with today's thinking. We deplore 'collateral damage'. But then, how can you fight a modern war without such unwanted casualties? The point perhaps is that civilians are not targeted as such. This would mean a proper warning is to be given should installations such as electricity generation plants and government propaganda offices be targets.

Now although this refers to non-combatants, it may also be argued to refer to armed personnel who do not support the war, for they in a sense have been 'made to fight'. They must follow orders whether they want to or not, for if they do not they will be executed for mutiny.

Others will argue, of course, that military personnel forfeit their right to freedom of choice in these matters; otherwise, the army would be full of factions. Perhaps it is more the responsibility of those joining the armed forces to consider this carefully before joining. What country would want soldiers who say they will fight only when they personally think it correct to do so, no matter what the common will?

So, from a Buddha Dhamma point of view, could there be a Just War? There were two occasions in which the Buddha was directly involved in conflict. The first concerns a dispute that arose between his own people, the Sakka and the people of the neighbouring clan, the Koliya. It was an argument about the rights to the water of a river that divided their two counties and it was nearing war. There is a rather ironic part of the tale in which the Buddha asks the different strata of society what the quarrel is about and none really knows until he gets down to the farmers. These days it might be the other way round! Anyway, he asked the two sides to come together and simply asked them what was more precious, the water

in the river or the blood in their veins. They came to their senses and war was averted. And it does raise the question: what cost human life? Is there anything worth dying for?

The second occasion was when King Viddhudabba, the overlord of the Kosala and the Sakka people, learned that the woman the Sakka had given him to be his bride had come from a low caste. It seems the Sakka were too proud to intermarry with this king's caste. The insult was too great to bear and the king decided to destroy the Sakka. On two occasions the Buddha stood before the king's army and argued against vengeance. What he actually said is not recorded. I am sure the Buddha would have agreed with the Chinese proverb which warns that whoever seeks vengeance should prepare two graves. However, when the king set out a third time, the Buddha said the karma was too great. He did not approach them. He did not stand before them. The army went on to destroy his people. This is a salutary lesson for all who work in a peace process. Even the Buddha has limitations. There is only so much one individual can do.

One of the great dangers is the way the rational mind can bend around obstacles to support war. We know now how much the Zen roshis supported the Japanese government before and during the Second World War. But we should not be surprised. Philosophers when called upon will support their country. In the First World War, the German philosophers such as Max Scheler depicted the war as a battle between the profound German culture and the shallow Anglo-French culture. On the side of the allies, Bergman wrote about the battle between life force and matter. Guess who 'matter' were? A more glaring case is that of Martin Heidegger who was a member of the Nazi Party, nor did he later express any regret for the Nazi crimes. So, returning to the Kma Sutta in which the Buddha warns us to beware of rationalisation masquerading as wisdom, we need to be suspicious of the philosopher in us.

But what can one do against an immoral enemy for whom the ends justify the means, who argues that weapons of mass destruction are legitimate since they serve the ends? Think of a Stalin, a Hitler, a Pol Pot, Milosevic, Saddam Hussein, or indeed any fundamentalist terrorist?

However, was the dropping of atom bombs on Nagasaki and Hiroshima or the fire bombing of Dresden justifiable? Both were ordered on the grounds of saving allied troops and to bring the war to a speedy end, yet both had horrific consequences for the civilian population. Surely it is also immoral when even those who act out of self-defence argue that their correct moral reasons permit the use of any means to achieve their ends.

Morality vs. Supramorality.

So far the arguments put forth are from a position of a 'self'. Can we distinguish a different morality for one who has gone beyond the self, what I have termed 'supramorality'. If there is a difference of perspective, should we always be acting from the view of supramorality in

a world where such a view is hardly ever found? Indeed might it cause more suffering?
On the one hand, we have someone who has a self. So long as there is a self there will be someone to defend. There will be possessions, a country to own. There will be borders, cultures, a way of life to defend. And here we have the definitions of a Just War and the Geneva Convention to guide us.
On the other hand, we have the not-self attitude of the Arahat. Nothing to defend. Nothing to own. Hence no resistance. That seems too easy. It takes the humanity out of the Enlightened Being. It feels too unfeeling, lacking empathy, even callous. Detachment as cold and uncaring. But detachment means that the attitudes of love and compassion are not dependent on the object, be it kith and kin, friends or love of one's country. In this sense it is universal.
Supposing we were to see human beings as vortices of energy, some loving and kind, others ferocious and destructive. From a higher level of understanding, is it not that all that is happening is that the forces of rising and falling, birth and death, are being played out; that the game is governed by consciousnesses that are unwholesome or wholesome, deluded or wise? Is it possible for someone to see himself or herself as the means by which turbulent energy is calmed; that their deaths are the means by which violence is drawn out of the universe? What happens if a bull should charge a mount of soft sand? People who were and are ready to follow that path - Jesus Christ, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, Aung San Su Kyi, the people who joined Arafat in the siege of his compound in Ramala - such people are not armchair pacifists. If they were not killed, they definitely had to undergo hardship. They have the courage to undergo physical suffering, even death. Yet paradoxically, suffering arising from compassion is borne gladly and brings joy to the heart.
When we look at the level of consciousness of our politicians and indeed the general populace, it may be too much to ask of them to behave in a sacrificial way. But we can demand that they do not follow a route of violence. And what of ourselves who are still part of the Great Unenlightened Masses? We need to remember the importance of intention and that whatever action we do or support of that we must bear the fruit.
So, are there then two paths we can follow? The one, based on a self, a self to defend, allows us self-defence and use of force but not violence. The other, based on not-self, allows the use of force to put right what is wrong, but also offers the choice of sacrifice on the understanding that it draws violence out of the system.
So, if someone were about to fly an aeroplane into a office block, would it be wiser to allow this as an unfolding of kamma, or would compassion intervene even to the point of killing the hijacker?[illegible] Or take the recent massacres in Liberia, or former killings in Rwanda and Burundi or the present situation in Darfur. Is it better in the long run to allow the blood-letting, or to intervene? The question, surely, is one of motivation, of intention. Is this

beginning to sound like the ancient Hinayna versus Mahna arguments?
However, for the supramorality of not-self, there is the choice of sacrifice. Just as in our meditation, we allow inner negative states to burn out, so we allow the same of outer negative states. It is also understood that violent creeds and attitudes always have a self-destruct mechanism. Witness how capitalism is destroying its own feeding grounds. In this way the violence is drawn out of the system.
Oh disciples!
Should a cruel bandit savagely carve you up
Limb from limb with a two-handed saw
And should you indulge your heart in hatred and anger
You would not be following my teaching.
M.21.20
Addenda
A Choice between Two Evils
Life rarely offers us a choice between good and evil. For the most part it is a choice between two evils. The main reason given for the war against Iraq was the inherent danger of weapons of mass destruction and, later, to rid the country of a brutal dictator. If we thought armed intervention was necessary, but knew that there was another agenda to seek revenge and to control oil output, would we be guilty of supporting an unjust war? When there are all sorts of reasons given for war, some of which may be morally incorrect, can we then still support armed intervention?
Do we not face the same dilemma with political parties? We support a party because of its overall ethos or because of a particular policy. We may disagree with other policies. Does this mean we do not vote? Would this not be an abdication of responsibility? Surely, we vote to support the party that most coincides with our desires for society, even when we may think that some of its policies are actually unethical. There will never be a cause where all participants have exactly the same objectives. Nor will there ever be a cause where every objective fits into the Buddhist ethical framework. Yet we vote and have effect. Even should we decide not to vote, we have effect.
We can see this more clearly in international politics. It is the desire of many to find non-violent solutions to existing conflicts. Yet there was general agreement that force was necessary in Afghanistan even though it was understood that American soldiers might fight with revenge in their hearts.
The conundrum of Social Kamma
It is often the case that we do good in the world, only to see it create suffering. There was a case of a charity which sent clothes to an African town. It ruined the tailors' trade and undermined the local economy! We should not be surprised if Iraq becomes a catalyst for

democratic change in the Middle East. The theory of chaos is at work at a moral and social level too.

The Monastic Sangha

The Buddha did not want the monastic sangha to get involved in the running of societies as such. Since his aim is to create an institution for the sole purpose of spiritual practice, he forbids involvement in politics. And when those politics come close to war, there is the third Parajika rule:

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

It may be construed that any monastic who argues for the case of a Just War may by default fall into this error. This highly constrains a monastic and can force them to take positions closer to Pacifism than non-violence.

Is it the inability to accept that often we are caught between two evils and not a simple choice of good or evil that can make an absolutist stance of Pacifism untenable?

A Just War without Just Warriors?

I would like to pass onto you these thoughts sent to me by a friend, Peter Herissone-Kelly, a researcher at the University of Central Lancashire, who writes on ethics:

"Let's suppose that WWII was fought for entirely unwholesome motives. It was still a good that the Nazi regime was toppled, wasn't it? In other words, someone ought to have waged a war against it. The justness of the war is not affected by the motive from which it is waged. In the western philosophical tradition, there are, broadly speaking, three major ways in which the subject of ethics has been conceived: the Utilitarian, the Kantian, and the Aristotelian. Utilitarians would say, in such a case, that the right action was done, even though the agents who performed the action were not good. Kant might say that the action was in accordance with duty, and so far was praiseworthy, though it was not done from duty, and so had no specifically moral worth. And the Aristotelian could say that the action was such as would have been carried out by the virtuous person, and so was right, even though it was lacking in moral status, as it did not proceed from a virtuous disposition possessed by an agent."

Hindu Understanding

Hinduism, through the advice of Krishna to Arjuna in the Bhagavad-Gita, sees conflict in cosmic terms. This is his advice to Arjuna who is on the battlefield facing an army composed of his evil relatives whom he does not want to fight.

'The wise grieve not for those who live; and they grieve not for those who die - for life and death shall pass away.' 'No-one can bring to an end the Spirit which is everlasting. For

beyond time he dwells in these bodies, though these bodies have an end in time; but he remains immeasurable, immortal. Therefore, great warrior carry on thy fight.'
The onslaught of Islam was enormously destructive to Buddhism in India. The Hindus had a philosophy which allowed resistance. So the question arises:
Does Buddha dhamma have an answer to gratuitous violence?
Renunciates versus Lay
Is it possible that there are two ethical callings here? The first, the calling of the renunciate who, following the metaphor of the Saw, sees himself as one who absorbs violence and offers a mirror to the violent. The second is of the lay person, who has responsibilities to those near and dear and the wider community of protecting them against such violence.
A Personal Statement:
I am caught between two ethics. I shall call them: the ethics of the renunciate and the ethics of the engaged.
As renunciate, I understand the psychology of inner violence and I see outward manifestations of violence as simply a continuing projection of that inner psychology. Unless we stop somewhere along the line, there is no hope to the end of war. It may call for great slaughter before all violent energy is drained. But then: No greater gift has a human being than to give up his life for another.
As engaged, I am moved by compassion. Could I stand idly by while others are humiliated, tortured and killed? Would I really allow one human being to destroy the lives of hundreds of thousands at the press of a button? How far could I go? Maybe I would kill. The better of two evils. Yet paradoxically, my motivation would have been to save lives out of compassion. I make, here a distinction between force and violence. Force: that which is needed to put a wrong right. Violence: the same with malevolence.
Is it not possible to use force to stop violence?
Bhante Bodhidhamma
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