Just War

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Dharma Talks · 43:24

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammasambuddhassa. Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammasambuddhassa. Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammasambuddhassa.

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

What I want to give you some ideas about or discuss, and I wouldn't say this is completely worked out, is these two attitudes that we have in society when something goes wrong: we have a pacifist approach and the just war. We have, at least in Western religions, very strong arguments for just war. I think Thomas Aquinas, the medieval philosopher, who had a great effect on the West, talks about the just war and gives all sorts of conditions for what makes it just. One of them is defensive rather than offensive. Things like that.

Now, from a Buddhist point of view, remember that we always start with ourselves. We always start here. And it's recognising how we treat ourselves that we can then project that onto a given situation, political or otherwise.

Let's think on. Supposing now I'm sitting and feelings of anger, feelings of revenge arise. What do I do? I suffer them, don't I? I accept them as unwholesome and I sit there and I suffer them. Feelings and attitudes of greed, of getting, power, riches, fame. So what do I do? I just sit there and suffer them. Allow them to come up and die away. So we can see that in our meditation we have a pacifist approach.

On the other hand, when I'm lazy, when the body says lie down, when the mind says have a kip, I do something, I get up, I move. I follow a certain discipline, I have to get up and follow the schedule. I determine very strongly to put the mind on the present moment. This is all force, this is all determination, a force for the good.

So we have a dual approach even in our spiritual life. Sometimes we have to suffer it and sometimes we have to put energy into our practice, depending on the situation. Now if that energy we put into the practice is laced with some sort of achieving, some sort of aggression, then that force turns into violence, becomes a violent force.

So here I think we have three definitions. Pacifism is the approach to something whereby we allow that energy to die away. Force is the energy necessary to put right what is wrong. And violence is the same energy laced with anger, aggression.

So that's how we behave inwardly as meditators. We know that when we're pushing something away

which we don't like, that's an aggression. We have to bear with it, we have to suffer with it. And what we realise is that in this pacifist approach to ourselves, inside ourselves, we have to bear with it. So there's a sacrificial element to it. There's a sense of being the happy victim.

Now it's easy for us to do that inside because we recognise that we've created all this stuff. So we have to have a certain patience towards it. And patience means a willingness to suffer. *Khanti*. It's a willingness to suffer. And the Buddha actually calls it the highest form of ascetic practice. The highest form of ascetic practice. So it's a suffering practice which we go through, a bearing which we go through in order to get rid of suffering.

So if we now extend that psychology outwards and we look at the scriptures, there are one or two incidences where the Buddha is confronted with violence. The first one relates to an incident which happened in his Sakya clan where the local king, which has a sort of difficult name, Viruddhaka, asked for a bride. And the Sakyans, being of a high caste, decided that the king was definitely not worthy of one of them. So they shipped him a slave girl. And the marriage went ahead and everything was lovely and beautiful.

And then one day Viruddhaka decided to visit his in-laws. And turned up. And so the story goes. Somebody heard somebody slag off his queen, one of the Sakyans, as an ordinary slave girl. And one of his retinue heard this, told it to the king, and the king, of course, was livid.

So getting back home, he couldn't contain his anger and he decided that the only way to re-establish his dignity was to wipe out the Sakyans. So he gathered his army with the elephants and horses and off he went. The news came to the Buddha and he went off and he stood in front of the army, in front of the king. What he said we don't know, but it was a good enough argument for the king to turn back.

However, the king must have stewed on it a bit and decided that, no, he was perfectly right, he was going to slaughter the Sakyans. So off he got on his horse again, or his elephant, and made his way. Again, the Buddha appeared. The argument must have again won the day and the king turned back. He got back there and it stewed even more. So this time he got on his elephant again and he thought, well, you know. Now when this came to the Buddha's attention, he said he couldn't do anything. He said the *kamma* was too strong. So Viruddhaka ended up killing a lot of his people.

There's the only incident of what you might call force in the scripture that I've come across is an occasion when they're reading, the monks are all together reading the Patimokkha. So this is something that monks go through every two weeks. It's actually, yes, every two weeks, the full and the new moon. And all monks are supposed to gather. They're supposed to confess to each other any transgression. And then they enter into the meeting. The meeting opens and basically the rules are read. That's all, the rules are read. So it's an act of confession, purification, and a reminder of what the holy life's about. Then usually there's a talk, sometimes a bit of chanting, and that's about it. So that happens every two weeks.

So the Buddha's sitting there and he's got lots of monks in front of him and he's got his major disciples by him. We know that Moggallana was there. Moggallana was the second chief disciple, known mainly for his powers, not so much for his insight. That was Sariputta. So they sat there waiting, waiting, and finally Moggallana had the gumption to ask why don't we start, Lord? And he said, well, there's somebody here who shouldn't be here. Somebody is impure.

So Moggallana, taking his part, announced that monk who's impure, let him leave the assembly now. And nobody moved. So for a second time, let that monk who is impure remove himself from this end. Nobody, nobody move. And finally the third time, unlike the Buddha, Moggallana got up from his seat, got hold of this fellow by the arm and looked him out. An act of force to put right what is wrong.

Apart from those acts, similar occasions, there's another one that comes to mind where the two tribes next to each other, the true ethnic groups I suppose you'd call them now, the Sakyans and the Koliyas were arguing over river rights and they were getting to a point where they were going to do battle. And the Buddha turned up and asked them whether the water in the river was equal to the blood in their veins. And somehow it brought them to their senses and they came to some sort of compromise.

And that's really the sort of major incidents where violence impinges on the Buddha. In terms of a personal violence of course there's Devadatta who actually tries to kill him. Coming into old age, Devadatta decided that he was losing it a bit, and it was time for another leader, and he would do very well, thank you very much. And he thought that the order had gone soft. Going back to the early days, when he had joined maybe twenty, thirty years ago, before monasteries were built, before the order allowed in men and women of not such a high calibre, it was very strict. You mainly lived out in the forest, you lived under a tree, you only ate one meal a day, you only had three robes. All these rules began to be softened. The Buddha recognised that people couldn't, not everybody could live at that strictness, and also there was no need for that sort of heavy ascetic practice. So many rules were softened.

For instance, in terms of food, now the monks at one point were allowed to go around and take food wherever they wanted. But in the early days the monks would have been very ascetic, very proper. But because there was no rule about when to get food, the monks would appear at any time in front of the gate. And instead of the Buddha being hard on that and saying no, you only have this and that's the end of it, he came to that middle point. He said, you can only go out in the morning for your food. You can have whatever you want, but you must finish it by midday.

Now monks complained about that because it would seem that in those times, just as now, the better food is cooked in the afternoon. So they were getting the morning gruel, really, with a bit of leftovers from yesterday, whatever. So there was this way of softening things.

For instance, he himself would have spent all his training life out in some sort of forest, in some sort of glade or something. Very shortly after his enlightenment he was offered a monastery by one of his chief supporters. And that meant of course a place, and it was near a city. And it meant that as he grew more

famous, even kings came to visit him. So this movement out of the forest towards the city, towards the good life, was something that he had to handle.

So Devadatta saw this all as a great softening, as a dropping of standards. So he wanted to go back to the original thing. He even wanted them just to become vegetarians. So he plotted with one of the kings, well, the king's son, Ajatasattu, who was the son of one of the Buddha's main disciples, Bimbisara. And he starved his old man to death. He stuck him in a cell and starved him to death. And so he was going to rule the kingdom and Devadatta was going to rule the order.

And what Devadatta did was he set this mad elephant onto the Buddha. And the Buddha through his power, you've probably seen the posture of the Buddha, the *abhaya* posture, the fearless posture. And he's like this, expressing his fearlessness to the elephant, but also offering loving kindness. So it's the power of his love that eventually the elephant collapses before him and adores him. Then there's the occasion where he rolls a big boulder down the hill and it goes over the Buddha's foot. So he got pretty close. He got pretty close. He must have, damn, just missed.

The whole story comes to an end when the Buddha sends his two disciples, Sariputta and Moggallana, to go and see Devadatta. When they arrived, Devadatta, as all these monks that have decided to follow him, he's taken a large chunk of the sangha. And on the chief disciples' approach, he presumed that they had come to join him. He was overjoyed. He says, oh, great, come on in. And he said, please, give them a talk. And he himself went for a rest.

While he was resting, Sariputta and Moggallana argued to the monks that they ought to get back to the Buddha. So they all upped and left. And of course when Devadatta awoke he was very much disturbed. According to the myth he was swallowed up into the earth, into the worst of hells for eons to come. But obviously I think he carried on, and in fact the flavour of that reformation comes right through today with the forest tradition which is very ascetic.

There's a Danish monk I know, for instance, living up in the north near Kandy, up in the hills of Sri Lanka, who lives in a three-sided hut in a forest. That means that snakes, anything can come in and out. And he just lives on his bed there. So these are sort of incidents in the Buddha's life where he takes personal attack, but there's no revenge, there's no response to it except in these sort of kindly ways.

Now, it seems to me that what we're really talking about are two levels of consciousness. And if what we understand by a level of consciousness is a way of understanding the world, a way of seeing the world, then I think we can distinguish between these two approaches: pacifism and the just war.

To give you a very sharp example of a shift in consciousness is the age between six and eight. So for a six-year-old, Father Christmas coming down the chimney is no problem. For an eight-year-old, it's a big problem. And what's happened is, of course, is that the child comes to a reality testing of its fantasies, of its energetic life, begins to understand that what it imagines is not always true. So there's a movement

towards reality.

Secondly, of course, this whole business of morality comes in with the attendant guilt and all that. It's not that a young child doesn't feel that. It was a rather interesting occasion with a friend's child who was about four, and for some reason he had taken something which he shouldn't have taken and it had been on his mind and he actually became ill. And when he finally got it out and told his parents that he'd taken this thing, the illness disappeared. So I think that's a very premature feeling of guilt, personally. I don't see three-year-olds too worried about taking things they don't know. So normally we associate that with seven.

And of course in our culture that's mythologised in the Garden of Eden, isn't it? Where Adam and Eve approach the tree of good and evil, the knowledge of good and evil. And although in our tradition Eve of course is the evil thing and the destroyer of heaven, of mankind, from a point of view of the movement of consciousness Eve is given the primary task of shifting it. So she's actually lifted human consciousness out of its six, five-year-old state. From a Buddhist point of view she's a heroine, not a devil.

So if we have that sort of thing in mind, then you can see there's a shift from a person who believes in a self to a person who doesn't have a self. Now if I have a self, I have these attitudes. I am greedy. I'm averse to anything which poses a problem to me, and I'll run from anything which is too great.

So in terms of greediness, for instance, should we say, take a fairly recent example, Saddam's little sojourning into Kuwait. That's obviously him trying to extend this idea of the pan-Arabic nation. And it's a grandism, isn't it? Because he's going to be the head of it. I mean, it's not as though he goes there and gives the Kuwaiti prince the charge of all Arab nations. He's going to be there. So that's obviously a war of aggression, a war of aggrandisement. That, I think, is fairly easy to show that that is just not justifiable. That's not a problem for the self.

However, from the Kuwaitis' point of view, they're being attacked. They're being attacked. Now the self must protect itself. So there is long argument in both our own law and in laws of any religion and state whereby you can defend yourself, because you're defending your life and you have to defend your life because you've got a self to defend.

So now the problem is how are you going to defend yourself? If you defend yourself with violence, then that will lead to all sorts of consequences of revenge and all that sort of stuff, isn't it? And you find that wars continue because of this vengefulness, because of this vengefulness.

Even in our own recent history, after the First World War, there was huge, enormous reparations demanded of Germany, which just threw them into abject poverty. And it was out of that that somebody like Hitler could arise, and then you've got another war on your hand. After the Second World War, happily, people understood, and nothing was demanded. In fact, the Marshall Plan rebuilt Germany, and a whole new idea of Europe came in after those two world wars.

So we can see this ability to defend ourselves, for a self to defend itself, without the violence, without the sense of revenge. So here we have now this business of America in Afghanistan. It's difficult to think that there isn't a sense of revenge in Bush and those soldiers. There probably is, but luckily it's been very much contained by the fact that they have to keep

who has the power to stop them? Simple as that.

So what stopped them, obviously, was the Muslim nations who didn't want an all-out destruction of Afghanistan. And, of course, the balancing act of especially Europeans who also don't want that sort of catastrophe.

So, in a sense, the war in Afghanistan was described as a just war in terms of there you have this man, Bin Laden, who really has gone beyond the pale. See, what do you do with somebody who says that the ends justify the means? It's totally amoral. It's not immoral, there's just no morality involved. Anything works so long as I get to the ends I want. That was beautifully portrayed in that film, *Apocalypse Now*, where the American general—the American army have decided to get rid of this American general. The reason is because they think he's gone mad, but what he wants to do is treat the Viet Cong like the Viet Cong are treating the Americans—no holds barred—and he wants to drop the bomb and win the war.

So you come against this business of the ends justify the means. When you're up against an enemy such as a sworn enemy such as Bin Laden, then really what option have you got apart from to use force from a self point of view?

From this self point of view, if we now take the argument down a slot back into our ordinary civil life, we expect the police to use force. We don't expect them to use violence. Whenever the police are involved in a violent situation where they're being attacked and all that, we expect them to be restrained. We don't expect policemen to take their revenge on others. That's why I think it was probably very shocking that these Italian police went and shot these people. They shot him. I mean, they weren't even armed. It was absolutely outrageous. I don't know what's happening about that. There's supposed to be some sort of investigation about it. But that, from I think most people's point of view, is just completely over the top.

So we always have this problem, like there was a case, I think, maybe in Liverpool or something, where this man with a great machete or something was going around and he was about down the street or something, and the police shot him. So now the question is, did they have to shoot him? Why didn't they shoot him in the leg, for instance, or why did they kill him? These questions are always going to come up as to the edge between justifiable force to put right what is wrong and force which shifts into violence with something added—he's useless anyway, we'll get rid of him, shoot him in the head. You don't know what the policeman's thinking when he does it.

In our own family, in our own family situation, right up until I think in Britain anyway right up until the early sixties, the family was sacrosanct. You couldn't go into it. If the wife was being beaten up, if the kids

were being maltreated, and if occasionally the husband was being beaten up, you couldn't go in. It was a locked unit. It had nothing to do with—

I had an incident like that. I got off the bus where I was living in Birmingham. And right across the road, I could see this woman being kicked by this man in the head. I saw it. And so I went over, and I stood in between them. He was going to have another go. So I just said to him, "I think you've done a lot of damage here." And it sort of came to his senses. And off he went. As it turned out, it was a husband. Okay. In the middle of the street there.

So I helped this woman up and I said, "Look, what do you want to do? How bad are you?" And she didn't seem to be that bad. I mean, she'd been kicked, but it didn't seem as though she was necessary to hospitalise her, at least that's what I thought. So I said, "What do you want to do?" And it occurred to me that perhaps this ought to be reported to the police. So we walked up onto the main road and I must have looked as I was trying to help her walk, because I think she was a bit unsteady. And a car stopped very kindly and took us a lift to a local police station.

Well, we got off and I was amazed, really. I went in there and I said she'd like to report, grievous bodily harm. She's just been really battered, kicked to the ground and all sorts by her husband and we want to— And the policeman basically looked blank at us. They're like, what can I do? And I suddenly realised, yeah, well, there was no procedure for it. There didn't seem to be any particular interest in it at all.

However, the law is changed. As we know, even if a neighbour, and some of them use it for evil reasons, nefarious reasons—if a neighbour reports that they heard a child scream in the next house, you've got the social services, the police, you've got everybody darting in there to see if you can sort it out.

So this suggests that society at base understands that where there's violence one can use force to put an end to it—justifiable force. We're coming now to an international situation where the world community feels that in a given violent situation you can go in there and use force. The Balkans is an obvious place. Macedonia recently where there was more ethnic trouble—the EU got involved. And very recently, it's only actual war criminals being brought before justice and things like that. So you can see that the idea of using force to put an end to an evil is justifiable now both at an ordinary national level and international level.

Now that's jihad. That's what jihad is supposed to be. It's a just war. That's what Saint Thomas Aquinas would have argued for. The problem is that there's no such argument in Buddhism. No such argument in Buddhism. There's no argument in Buddhism to do something towards gratuitous violence.

And this meant for instance when the Turkish armies came into India—the Muslim Turkish armies—and they saw this statue of a Buddha and all that which was horrific to them, they simply wiped out monasteries and monks. They killed them all. Now the Hindus were also under that sort of attack. They were also persecuted, but they had a philosophy to help them fight back, to help them use—well I presume

sometimes it was violent force—but definitely they had a philosophy. And it's in the *Bhagavad Gita* and it's in the story of Arjuna who has to fight his own family, the evil ones, and Krishna is by his side. And Arjuna says he can't do it. He can't kill his own people. And Krishna's argument is that he has a duty for the good. Now, whether his own people or not, his duty is to put right what is wrong. And Arjuna goes on, of course, to defeat these enemies. And therein is established, at least in a mythological sense, the idea of a just war.

So, from the point of view of the self—understanding that the vast majority, the vast, vast majority of human beings at this present time in our development believe very strongly in a self—there is justifiable moral law to say that they can defend their lives, they can defend their own people, they can defend their country. We would all agree with that. I don't think it would be hard for Buddhism even to argue against that, even though as far as I know, there's no incident of such a thing in the discourses. One of the things about the discourses is that, of course, they tend to be centred very much on the Dharma, and you get very little about the society around. You don't get much sort of history like this.

Now if there's no self to defend, we're moving into a very strange area for us. So we have this saying by the Buddha—I think it's in the *Dhammapada*—where he said: "Should someone approach you with a sword and cut you up to pieces, if hatred arises in your heart towards that person, you are no disciple of mine." That's pretty tough, isn't it?

So what is the psychology of pacifism? True pacifism, not armchair pacifism. Not pacifists who wouldn't want to go to war, they won't kill anybody, but somehow there's—maybe even though it's put in this wonderful justifiable language—there's a hint of cowardice underneath.

I met a very interesting man when I was out in the East. He was an American who had fled, well, he'd gone into Canada, escaping the draft from Vietnam. And, of course, he had very rational reasons for doing so, as many of them did. But there was in him this niggling doubt as to whether, in fact, he'd not done it because he basically didn't want to fight, he was afraid. You get killed, don't you, in war? And what he did to—funnily enough, what he did to prove that it wasn't a case of lack of courage was he walked through the Cambodian jungle from one end to the other, this big jungle for about two or three weeks. I can't remember now, but it was something that nobody in their right mind would do. And he just went like that. He told me he went in a straight line, didn't shift. He just kept going and going and going and going, meeting with all sorts of things. And after that, he felt he'd exercised out of himself this idea that he'd not joined the war because of cowardice—that he had actually done it in good faith. He'd done it in good faith. Maybe there was cowardice there, but he'd done it in good faith and that if he had been forced to go then he would have gone.

So the pacifist stand—what's that based on? So we have to project as it were onto human beings as a society the way we treat ourselves. When anger arises within us we bear it and we know it'll die out. Now can we project that psychology on all human beings when they come to us with anger? Can we take it and be a funnel for that anger to be drawn out of the system?

Now one of the great archetypes in human history of that of course is Jesus Christ because that's what he does. He is the sacrificial victim. He's the one who having stated the truth, having been a truth which the authorities saw as subversion and therefore it became a political problem, decided to get rid of him in a very unjust trial, and he says nothing. He doesn't fight it. He just takes that violence into him and in so doing manifests a way of being with anger, undoing anger.

That sort of philosophy runs through people like Gandhi—civil disobedience, yes, but being able to take the blows. If you remember in the film, the soldiers kept whopping them. He must have been an enormously charismatic person to get people to do that when you think about it. I mean can you imagine the Americans have taken the blow of the Twin Towers and appealed to the world community to undermine that evil without them using force? To take the actual blow as it were.

People like Aung San Suu Kyi. The worst part of the troubles, the real part where the government were just shooting, even children in the street, they were just shooting them here and there. She stood right in front of the army, right in front of the guns and said, "If you want to shoot me, shoot me," just took them on. Of course, what helps these people is their charisma, their aura, their reputation. She was the daughter of the first leader of Burma after independence. So she has that aura. Gandhi has the aura. If an ordinary person had done it, you'd get shot.

Although we have that incident, don't we, in China, Tiananmen Square. But before Tiananmen Square, when the tanks came in and that man stood in front of a tank and they just all stopped. And he offered, I think he offered him a flower, didn't he? Sort of a latter day version of the flower power. But eventually, of course, that didn't work either.

So, Martin Luther King, finding a way through all that racism and stuff in a peaceful way, but in the end, he himself takes the blow, but he stands now as a martyr, he stands as a figure, an archetype of how these relations can be brought to a more peaceful end.

Nelson Mandela and I think that South Africa has given to the world a wonderful example of a non-violent solution through these—what do they call them—reconciliation courts? They weren't trials, were they? Where people were allowed just to give the truth and then if they just spoke the truth so that people knew—because a line had been drawn in history—there was no need for revenge, there was no need to... And that of course is a wonderful thing if you can do that.

So we have this higher consciousness which doesn't see human beings—sorry, doesn't see cells. It doesn't see human beings. What it sees is forces. It sees violent force, turbulent force just as we see in ourselves, and it sees loving force. It's not caught up in I am me, I have to defend me, you are you. It's just this interrelationship and out of compassion one as it were offers oneself as the sacrifice to absorb that violence. That's the pacifist.

So how would a pacifist have done something about Afghanistan? It seems to me that one thing pacifists

could have done, really could have done, through the internet, through telephone calls, would have been, for all of them, as many as possible—I don't know, a million, two million—with all these wonderful Nobel Prize winners for peace, to have congregated on the borders of Afghanistan and walked in completely unarmed. Now they may very well have been shot. A lot of them might have died. But eventually if so many of them flooded the country with argument slowly they would have got the sympathy of people. And eventually, they might have brought about a revolution, not just simply in terms of government, but in terms of heart, in terms of what are these Afghanis doing to each other? I mean, we blame these Taliban people, but they've been slaughtering each other for years now.

Maybe. I don't know. It's just one idea. There's no infrastructure whatsoever for Afghanistan. Yes, how do you get all these people in there? There's not even anything for the people who live there. Well, that's it, but you'd work out—you'd work away, if you really thought that might be a solution. It's just an idea, I mean, I've not thought of it in terms of logistics or anything, but definitely, if you want to affect a situation which is violent, then you've got to go in with peaceful motives. Like in Northern Ireland, she was young then, Devlin, wasn't it? Bernadette Devlin. Frontline stuff.

So if we understand that, I think that we can take certain positions. I think we can say that from a Buddhist point of view, a pacifist approach definitely is the more skilful and will bring much longer lasting results to a society.

I think using force, so long as the force is measured and to the point and so long as afterwards reparations are made, as they're trying to do now with Afghanistan, I think that also may have very much a similar outcome. And I think that's justifiable, personally. I think that a Buddhist need not feel guilty for supporting force in a given situation, so long as those conditions are there. Because it's not gone with violence, it's not gone with revenge, it's just gone to put something right which is wrong.

And we have again an example even in Christ's own life where he turns the tables in the temple and gets the moneylenders to leave. Now, it's unfortunate that a lot of Christians actually see that as anger and they talk about justifiable anger. And that amazes me because it's not making a distinction between anger, aggression and assertion. Sometimes you've got to say, well, that's wrong, and out you go.

I can imagine him doing that without any anger, just with a forceful voice, headmasterish. "Leave this room immediately." All that sort of thing. I don't see why that had to have aggression in it at all. But of course, the moneylenders would have seen it as aggression, and the authorities would have seen it as aggression.

"Are you saying that in terms of society viewing itself as a collection of selves, then there is an argument for a just war? But are you saying that if you take the higher consciousness viewpoint that there is no self, then there isn't a just war?"

Well, I think that you can then argue for a pacifist approach. Or rather, you can see how pacifism works.

But even at that level, I would argue that force can be used.

To give you one final example, the Dalai Lama. Now this is what I've heard, I don't actually know whether he said this or not, but he was asked in those heady days when we thought we were going to blow each other to bits, would he kill the person who was about to press the button? And he said he would for the benefit of all beings. It's a utilitarian argument, it's for the benefit of the many. But he said he would take the *kamma*, he would take the consequences of that killing.

Now my argument would be, if he did it out of compassion, if that was his main intention, he did it out of compassion, where would the bad kamma be?

I shall leave you with that conundrum. I hope it's been of some benefit to sort one or two problems out.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.