

Non-Violence vs. Pacifism

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Dharma Talks · 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, something was going to happen in Ukraine, I don't think anybody imagined what actually has eventuated.

Anyway, I just thought I'd clarify, or at least give you my opinion, on this business of non-violence as opposed to pacifism.

Pacifism really is an ideal. It's coming from some great concept about violence, making it a 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 does spread out to killing as well. The basic position is that the value of human life is such that killing a person deliberately is simply not on.

Unfortunately, with isms, they do tend not to be in touch with reality as it is. You do get types of pacifism which are a bit more close to reality. You get militant pacifists who will oppose all violence and war, but then you get conditional pacifism—circumstances where war might actually lead to less suffering. I think perhaps the Second World War would be one example of that, to overcome Nazism. Then there are selective pacifisms that really only have to do with weapons of mass destruction. But normally speaking, when people talk about pacifism, it tends to be in that absolute category.

Now, non-violence is of a different nature. One of the things that I think we find hard to understand is that the Buddha was teaching in a society that 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. So there are no isms during the Buddha's time. The Buddha is always grounding himself on actual experience—his personal experience as to what actually causes suffering and how to get rid of it.

There's nothing in the literature like philosophy as we would recognize it, sociology, or systems thinking. There just isn't that sort of thing. 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 at the moment by greed, aversion, fear, and delusion. So it's a very practical approach to the world. This practical approach is coming from a wisdom base, a practical wisdom base. It's coming 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—the mind is never empty in the sense that there's nothing there apart from maybe sleep—when there's no violence in the mind, when it's in a state of non-violence, then empathy and compassion arise quite naturally. Those two can't exist together. That's the point.

Now, interestingly enough, in the discourses, when the 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. Also, certain punishments were vicious punishments. There was one I remember which was rubbing the convict's head with a conch shell until the bone glistened. I mean, it's amazing how we can think up these things. But there's a point that he never actually advises kings to get rid of their armies. So there's some basic understanding that this is the way it is. But he does, of course, invite them to develop this sense of non-violence.

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 was one story where a samurai has beaten his opponent and the sword is high, about to crash down on his head, and he walks away. When they ask him why he walked away, he said his opponent 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.

Now, there's another interesting thing about the scriptures. Remember that when the Buddha was born, the Brahmins, one in particular, a sage, came to see him and decided, or saw, that he was either going to be a world-conquering monarch or a fully self-awakened being. This alter ego of the world-conquering monarch is in the scriptures. It's the *Chakravartin*. He has this wheel which appears and begins to roll. He follows it with his fourfold army: his foot soldiers, his cavalry, his chariots, and his elephants. Wherever it goes, of course, he defeats the enemy. At times he's actually invited.

As soon as he takes over, what does he do? He establishes the five precepts. In so doing, everywhere he goes becomes just a very peaceful and loving place. That's a motif that occasionally comes up in the discourses. Then it gets to a point where one of these *Chakravartins* doesn't follow the five precepts. Immediately the society begins to corrupt and all sorts of things happen.

There was one rather interesting occasion where stealing began. The minister told him, "Well, the person's stealing because they're poor." So he decided to give this person some wealth, some land, so that he had no reason to steal. Then others thought, "If I want more wealth and land, what I've got to do is steal." So stealing became common. That's when he had to start chopping heads off. That's the way it goes.

Now, there's also an occasion which brings about a rule for the *bhikkhus*, for the monastic life, *bhikkhus*

and *bhikkhunis*. The Buddha had obviously given a very enthusiastic talk about the repulsiveness of the body. Of course, the purpose of seeing the repulsiveness of the body is to become non-attached to it. However, the *bhikkhus*, the monks, seem to have misunderstood this. They went off into the forests and began to do this contemplation on the disgusting nature of the body. They became so disgusted that they started killing themselves and asked other monks to kill them.

There's this wonderful story of a monk who's actually just stabbed a monk to death to release him from this disgusting body, and he's wiping the blood off the knife. When the Buddha hears about this, of course, he must have been in a bit of a shock, really, because his words had been completely misunderstood.

So anyway, 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 we know as a *pārājika*. In other words, he's defeated in the sense that he can no longer be a monk in this lifetime, and he leaves the order. The people who actually murdered the other *bhikkhus*—this rule, of course, doesn't apply to them because it's 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 *pārājika*, a proper defeat. If the person whom he's trying to kill, or intentionally trying to kill but fails to do so, then it's a serious offense, of course, but he's not actually asked to leave the order.

As we've said, it's not a philosophy as such. It's 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 has to be made really between force and violence. I think this is the crucial bit. For instance, if you drop your mobile phone, you might just go and pick it up and see if you've broken the screen and then just put it in your pocket. But on the other hand, you might be quite angry with yourself and fed up with yourself. So you go down and there's that extra pressure in the hand of grabbing this mobile phone and stuffing it in your pocket.

One is non-violence and the other one is violence. One is the use of just simple force to put what has gone wrong right, whereas violence is the same with some form of anger, hatred, revenge, etc.

There are arguments to justify armed intervention 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 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, if somebody would try to kill somebody with that sense of hatred, revenge, anger, etc., that's a far worse place to come from than somebody who is killing in order to defend themselves.

Anyway, these are just some thoughts that I might put to you. On the news bite that comes out in a couple of weeks, I shall put a couple of links. Some of you might already have started seeing it, but it's a very good set of programs on the BBC about this Ukraine disaster. It gives you a bit of back history, and 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.

Very good. 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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