

Non-Violence is not Pacifism

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Tips of the Day · 3 min read

Some reflections as a consequence of the invasion of Ukraine. Pacifism is an ideal. Although there are various forms, it takes the high moral ground that all war is morally indefensible, no matter what the circumstances, what the context, whether self-defence or justifiable armed intervention. It is centred on war. However, Non-Violence is not an ideology. It doesn't say how the world ought to be, but how we should behave in a world that is always going to be driven to some extent by acquisitiveness, aversion and delusion. The Buddha was born into pre-literate society. There were plenty of views and opinions, but no systematic philosophy, sociology, systems thinking that we have today. (Socrates did not leave a philosophy either. He thought writing was inferior to dialogue. He developed a method of enquiry. It was left up to Plato and Aristotle to write 'philosophies'.) Non-violence is a direct practical approach to life's problems coming from moral reasoning, either received or developed, based on a good heart – a commitment not to harm any sentient being – the first Precept. It is about relationship. How we should behave towards each other. The Axial Age, which was a great turning point in humanity, was led by the Buddha and other Indian teachers, Confucius, Lao Tse and Socrates. The message is 'do unto others as you would have them do unto you'. And when the mind is not infected with anger, hatred and revenge, empathy and compassion arise naturally. All tremble at violence; All fear death. Seeing others as being like yourself, Do not kill or cause others to kill. (Dhp.129) All tremble at violence; Life is dear for all. Seeing others as being like yourself, Do not kill or cause others to kill. (Dhp.130) When it comes to moral reasoning, all moral decisions are contextual and circumstantial. What is right in one circumstance, may not be right in another. So it is that the Buddha taught moral and virtuous principles and left their interpretation up to the individual. That is why the Buddha never counsels kings to stop maintaining an army or physically punishing and executing criminals. The Discourses carry stories about the World Conquering Monarch, Cakravartin. At birth, the wise man foretold that Siddhartha would either be a Cakravartin or a fully Enlightened Being. It seems this is the Buddha's alter ego. This monarch makes his way around the world with his four fold army – infantry, cavalry, chariots and elephants - conquers everyone not in battle, but by intimidation through the size of his army and then establishes the subject kingdoms in the Five Precepts and brings peace. He is able to accomplish this because he is devoted to the Five Precepts. Does this suggest a 'Just War'? Finally, it is important to distinguish between force and violence. Force is the necessary energy needed to put right what is wrong. Violence is the same with hatred, anger, revenge – any aversive state of mind. Even dropping our mobile phone may cause us to pick it with anger towards ourselves. More so if someone else drops it. The Buddha is always bringing us back to the 'me'. It is for each of us to develop the attitude of non-violence. Yet there are occasions where we believe there is a moral obligation to defend, to protect, even to use deadly force. The problem is to kill

or intend to kill without aversion. Is it possible? When the Dalai Lama was asked whether he would kill someone if he saw them about to push a nuclear button, he said he would and that he would accept the resultant kamma. There may be justification for armed intervention. The purpose may be to prevent further bloodshed. But again we come back to the individual. The soldier may be able to empathise with the enemy. Other soldiers are in a similar position. Sorrow may arise after killing. It maybe that a soldier harbours revenge or enjoys torturing and so on. On reflection, shame and guilt may arise. Research of American soldiers in WWII shows how difficult it is for us to kill another human being. Hope on the Battlefield. Non-violence was the attitude behind Kung Fu and the Samurai code. There is a story told of a samurai who had defeated his enemy and was about to slice him through when he walked away. When asked why, he said he was angry.

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