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Buddhism and Weapons of Mass Destruction

An Oxymoron?

Donald K. Swearer

TAKING STOCK OF A DILEMMA

One of the most enduring principles of Buddhist ethics is the teaching of nonviolence (*ahimsa*), and the first of the five basic moral precepts is not to take the life of a sentient being. In the light of these teachings, is a conversation about Buddhist perspectives on weapons with the capacity for large-scale death and destruction not a contradiction in terms? David Chappell describes the tensions in the tradition between the normative Buddhist principles of peace and nonviolence and the actual behaviors of Buddhists both past and present, for example, rulers who have promoted war in defense of nation and religion and clergy who supported militarist regimes. In the light of this tension, Gananath Obeyesekere holds that Buddhism's noble principles are inevitably compromised by history and politics, a point of view that can be applied to other religious traditions, as well.¹ To situate the Buddhist ethical principles of peace, nonviolence, and nonkilling beyond history, however, obviates any capacity they might have to challenge and, it is hoped, to transform violence in any form, including violence associated with weapons of mass destruction. Whether Buddhism and the other world religions have anything uniquely distinctive to contribute to the specific policy decisions related to debates about WMD, such as utilization, deterrence, and proliferation, is moot. What the world's religions, including Buddhism, do have to offer, however, is a vision of hope where the values of peace, nonviolence, compassion, and the opportunity for human beings to flourish cooperatively are uppermost. These values should not be consigned to an ahistorical utopia. They must be calibrated not only to challenge the possession and use of WMD but to broaden the range of policy considerations to include long-term concerns for the well-being of the increasingly interconnected populations of the world and the natural environment on which we all depend. Buddhism teaches that all life forms are causally interconnected.

The destructive potential of WMD poses the greatest of threats to the world as Buddhists have understood it.

At issue in regard to the applicability of the world's religions to matters of contemporary urgency, such as terrorism and WMD, is what I call the "ethics of retrieval." Classical religious texts depict the issues of violence, murder, war, and so forth in a context vastly different from our own. Antisocial modes of behaviors were addressed on interpersonal and political levels in ways that could not have envisioned the potential for global crises caused by nuclear or biochemical attacks with the capacity for massive destruction to life, property, and environmental degradation. However, the fact that today's world is so radically different from that of classical Buddhist texts does not invalidate the applicability of their ideals, values, and principles. Nor does it vitiate the power of their narratives and metaphors to bring a crucial ethical and spiritual critique to bear on contemporary policy debates and decisions. This modern application calls for an imaginative retrieval, perhaps nothing short of the creativity that launched the tradition originally and marked its major turning points. At issue is survival, not merely the survival of Buddhism, the other world religions, or even nation-states as we have known them in the modern period but the very survival of the planet.

BUDDHIST ETHICS, PEACE, AND NONVIOLENCE

David Chappell claims correctly that the sources and principles of Buddhist ethics in general, and the ethics of weapons and war in particular, are to be found not only in text and world-view but in the Buddhist understanding of community. Consequently, he organizes his analysis in terms of four ethical frameworks: monastic ethics, the ethics of lay supporters of monks and nuns, lay ethics independent of monastic norms, and the ethics of Buddhist rulers in relationship to weapons and war. In each of these contexts, nonviolence and nonkilling are basic to the Buddhist moral life. In the case of monks and nuns (*bhikkhu/bhikkhuni*), taking human life may lead to expulsion from the monastic order. But destroying other life forms – animal, insect, and plant – also has disciplinary consequences. *Intention* figures prominently in the moral calculus of monastic ethics in terms of both karmic consequences and disciplinary action within the *sangha*. Equally important is the nature of the *result* of an action. Thus, with respect to the prohibition against murder, the legal or disciplinary consequence is less if the intended victim does not die or if the intended victim does not die and also does not suffer any pain or injury.

Additionally, it should be pointed out that while "a blow" delivered in anger is a monastic offense, a blow in *self-defense* does not entail punishment, "even if anger or displeasure arises in one's mind."² The rule prohibiting a monk from intentionally going to see an army on active duty (*Pacittiya* 48 of

the Buddhist monastic code) accepts the presence of standing armies as a matter of course and also indicates the nature of warfare in early Buddhist history.

Armies in those times consisted mainly of what we would call reserve units. These were organized into four divisions: elephant units, cavalry units, chariot units, and infantry units. The soldiers for the most part were citizens who would live at home until called up on active duty to engage in actual warfare or to practice maneuvers, activities that always took place outside the city. Battles, both actual and practice, were fought according to rules . . . and it was possible for non-military citizens to watch . . . much as people at present watch football games.³

A monk was allowed to visit an army on duty only for good reason. He was not allowed to stay for more than two or three nights and was also prohibited from viewing the army in battle or even battle formation.

Thus, while monastic ethics do not support the possession of weapons or engaging in violence, warfare was clearly accepted as a fact of life in society at large. But based on these same sources, we may draw the following inference relevant to WMD debates: Because of the extent of death, injury, and destruction caused by weapons of mass destruction, any first strike or *offensive* use of WMD is not justifiable regardless of how noble the intention is – even though, in Buddhist terms, noble intention would mitigate the karmic consequence.

The ethics of devout lay Buddhists (*upasaka/upasika*) lacks the legal, detailed, prescriptive nature of monastic ethics but embodies many of the same ethical principles. At the opening of Buddhist rituals and ceremonies the participants “take” the five precepts (*panca sila*) beginning with the prohibition against taking the life of sentient beings. The Eightfold Noble Path, included in the Buddha’s first teaching after his enlightenment, valorizes life work that, as Walpola Rahula states, does not bring harm to others and promotes the conditions of mutual human flourishing.⁴ Even more important than the specific elements of the Eightfold Noble Path, such as “right action” and “right vocation,” is the basic intention of this ethical catechism, namely, to confront and resolve motives and drives responsible for negative, destructive behavior that brings suffering to self and other – the “poisons” or “cankers” stipulated as hatred, greed, and delusion. For this reason, Buddhist social ethics necessarily includes mental cultivation, epitomized by the term “mindful awareness.” Right action depends on understanding that nothing – atom, individual, nation-state – exists in isolation; everything is causally intertwined. In this regard, the Buddhist-path ethic has been summarized not only as “avoid evil and do good,” but also “purify the mind.” The prohibition against taking life is coupled with the positive virtues of generosity and compassion, and both are linked to “understanding things as they really are.”

The connection between mindful awareness and compassionate action is beautifully expressed in the poem, “Please Call Me by My True Names,” written by Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Zen monk and founder of the Tiep Hien Order of Interbeing. Nhat Hanh, who worked tirelessly for peace during the Vietnam War and to assist Vietnamese refugees fleeing the country by boat after the war, wrote the poem after being told that pirates had pillaged a refugee boat in the Gulf of Siam. The excerpt below refers to the pirates’ rape of a young girl, who subsequently jumped overboard and drowned:

I am the twelve-year-old girl, refugee
 on a small boat,
 who throws herself into the ocean after
 being raped by a sea pirate,
 and I am the pirate, my heart not yet capable
 of seeing and loving.
 . . .
 Please call me by my true names,
 so I can wake up,
 and so the door of my heart can be left open,
 the door of compassion.⁵

The Buddhist-path ethic necessarily entails a view of human nature and the conditions for the realization of a state of human flourishing.⁶ It de-centers the autonomous self, placing human agency in a series of interconnected webs – social, natural, and cosmic. The *Sigalaka sutta*, to which Chappell refers, stipulates a social web of mutual responsibilities. Other Buddhist sources, including the contemporary Thai monk Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, expand this web of social interconnectedness to a broad vision of a universal moral commonwealth.⁷ Citing Mahayana texts, Chappell asserts that other-regarding action based on a realization of a common kinship with all beings – including enemies – would not mean a total self-sacrifice or the laying down of one’s arms. It would simply mean that by acknowledging a universal kinship with all beings, they are not objectified as “the other.” Hence, in any action, such as armed conflict, their suffering becomes our suffering.

Does such an idealistic vision have any relevance to the ethics of weapons and war? In general terms, it challenges the viability of any international policy based on narrowly construed national self-interest. More specifically, it would certainly support treaty agreements that limit the proliferation of WMD and promote their elimination. Contemporary Buddhists, for example, were signatories to the Global Ethic declaration produced by the Council for a Parliament of the World’s Religions in 1993. And Buddhists support the NGO Abolition 2000 Statement: “A world free of nuclear weapons is a shared aspiration of humanity. This goal cannot be achieved in a

non-proliferation regime that authorizes the possession of nuclear weapons by a small group of states. Our common security requires the complete elimination of nuclear weapons. Our object is definite and unconditional abolition of nuclear weapons.”⁸

Options: Deterrence, Disarmament, Negotiated Settlement, Just War

Not surprisingly, the ethics of Buddhist rulers and citizens provide examples most directly relevant to the topic of weapons and the conduct of war. Buddhist texts adopt a rather ambivalent attitude toward rulers. After all, though they may patronize the *sangha*, they can also act arbitrarily and capriciously. Nevertheless, the texts assume that kings are necessary to maintain and protect the social and political order. To do so, the rulers need weapons, armies, competent generals, and able advisors. In what follows, I briefly examine four war stories that offer different solutions to military engagement, at least as I choose to interpret them: military forces as a *deterrent* to war; *disarmament* as the best deterrent to war; a peaceful resolution to armed conflict through *negotiated settlement*; and minimal conditions for a *just war*. They offer, I believe, relevant perspectives on the modern questions relating to weapons of mass destruction being considered in this volume.

In the *Three Worlds of King Ruang*, a thirteenth-century Thai Buddhist cosmological treatise, the mythic Buddhist world-ruler/world-conqueror (*cakkavattin*) negotiates peace with the help of a large, standing army. He travels to the four quarters of the world led by a gem wheel and followed by the four divisions of his armed forces. He establishes his rule, presumably with such great force that none dares to challenge him:

None of the rulers, neither the great ones nor the small ones, are able to bring their weapons to do battle with the great Cakkavatti king. . . . Instead they are drawn . . . [to him] by love and adoration . . . they come to pay their respects to him . . . and gather around to pay him homage. Neither the ogres, nor the evil spirits, nor any kind of beasts that can kill and bring death to human beings harbor any evil intentions against the great Cakkavatti King.⁹

The mythic war waged by the Cakkavatti king may thus be viewed as an argument for maintaining overwhelming military force as a deterrent to violent conflict. Under the righteous rule of the king, not only all classes of people, but also all manner of animals will find shelter and protection.

A second legendary story – which itself has come down to us in two versions – provides the basis for an alternative perspective that suggests disarmament as a more rational alternative to the vagaries of war. According to one version, King Ajatasattu of Magadha mobilizes a fourfold army to attack King Pasenadi of Kosala. Pasenadi, in turn, mobilizes his fourfold army and launches a counterattack. In the ensuing battle, King Pasenadi is defeated and retreats to his capital. The following morning a group of

Buddhist monks returning from their alms round reports the events to the Buddha, who, in turn, replies: “Monks, King Ajatasattu . . . has evil friends, evil companions, evil comrades. King Pasenadi of Kosala has good friends, good companions, good comrades. Yet, for this day, monks, King Pasenadi, having been defeated, will sleep badly tonight.”¹⁰ The opening line of the capstone stanzas concludes, “Victory breeds enmity.” In the second version of the battle, King Pasenadi captures Ajatasattu, but instead of killing him he merely confiscates his army, that is, his power to wage war. The monks who report these events to the Buddha are then instructed with the following verse: “A man will go on plundering/So long as it serves his ends/But when others plunder him/The plunderer is plundered//The fool thinks fortune is on his side/So long as his evil does not ripen/But when the evil ripens/The fool incurs suffering.”¹¹ This and other stories of armed conflict in Buddhist texts make clear that today’s victor is tomorrow’s vanquished and vice versa and that karmic justice dictates there is no absolute victory or final solution brought about by armed conflict regardless of the scale of the weaponry. The moral of these stories seems to be that armed conflict may or may not bring a short-term benefit, but that there is no such thing as an absolute victory, a war “to end all wars.”

The third illustration comes from the commentary on the *Dhammapada* (Dhp.A. iii.254–56). It relates the story of hostilities between the Sakyas and Koliyas over water rights from a dammed river that ran between their territories. As the two republics prepared for war, the Buddha by his meditative powers perceived the situation and flew over the area, hovering above the river. In the ensuing events, the Buddha acts as a negotiator, convincing both sides that they were about to sacrifice something of great value – the lives of warrior nobles – for something of much less value.¹² In this story, a negotiated compromise is reached because the parties to the conflict are made to realize the human tragedy caused by war, that the results achieved would not be commensurate with the cost.

The final story of kingship has become quite well known even beyond Buddhist circles because it has been cited so often in the context of the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka between Sinhalese Buddhists and Tamil Hindus. It is the story of King Dutugemunu told in the *Mahavamsa*, the sixth-century Pali chronicle that relates the fate of Buddhism in Sri Lanka. The climax of the narrative is Dutugemunu’s defeat of the Tamil king, Elara, who ruled over part of the island. The story has figured in various ways in the development of Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism from the 1950s to the contemporary conflict in Sri Lanka and is the focus of Tessa Bartholomeusz’s analysis of Buddhist just war theory.¹³ As background to the Dutugemunu story, she describes the tension found in Pali *sutta* texts: On the one hand, they portray the righteous Buddhist monarch as adhering to the principle of nonviolence, and on the other, they establish his duty to guarantee the peace and protect the citizenry. The king maintains a standing army both as a deterrent and as

a course of last resort. In the story of Dutugemunu, the *Mahavamsa* provides the following justifications for the king's actions: First, the cause was just, that is, in defense of Buddhism and to establish a "dharmic" or just order ("Not for the joy of sovereignty is this toil mine, my striving [has been] ever to establish the doctrine of the Buddha");¹⁴ second, the king did not act with false intentions, namely, personal ambition or hatred; third, he felt deep remorse and honored the king he had defeated and killed; fourth, the enemy was treated justly in defeat.

Bartholomeusz concludes that Dutugemunu's sacrifice of his prima facie duty of nonviolence – one of the stipulated virtues of the just king – is judged in the text as proportional to the goal of creating a just realm. Yet from the standpoint of the limits of war, the *Mahavamsa* does not stint in describing the violence of the conflict: The king conquered seven mighty Tamil princes in one day and gave the booty to his troops; sitting on his horse he slew the Tamils in great numbers; the water in a reservoir was dyed red with the blood of the slain; and so on. This description seems to challenge the proportionality of the act and might be read as a surreptitious criticism of excessive violence. A modern interpretation might see it as a critique of the wanton destruction associated with WMD. Furthermore, in stepping back from the text, we might also observe that while its monk-authors ascribed noble motives to Dutugemunu, their own motives may have been more self-serving. Rather than justifying a defensive war as a last resort, they may have been seeking to legitimate a conflict that protected their monastic property.

In conclusion, it will be instructive to look briefly at the Buddhist response to the events of September 11, 2001, a national tragedy that has been construed as an attack of mass destruction. The Buddhist Peace Fellowship website includes remarks by several internationally distinguished leaders, including the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh. The predominant theme is the often quoted phrase from the *Dhammapada* that hatred should not be answered with hatred but with nonhatred and compassion. The Dalai Lama expresses his shock and personal sadness at the terrorist attacks, but then goes on to caution President Bush, "I personally believe we need to think seriously whether a violent reaction is the right thing to do and in the greater interest of the nation and the people in the long run."¹⁵ Nhat Hanh comments, "All violence is injustice. Responding to violence with violence is injustice, not only to the other person but also to oneself."¹⁶ In a typically Buddhist manner, he then addresses the issue of the causal matrix of this violence:

The violence and hatred we presently face has been created by misunderstanding, injustice, discrimination, and despair. We are all co-responsible for the making of violence and despair in the world by our way of living, of consuming and handling the problems of the world. Understanding why this violence has been created, we will

then know what to do and what not to do in order to decrease the level of violence in ourselves and in the world to create and foster understanding, reconciliation, and forgiveness.¹⁷

Other voices worry that identifying terrorists as evil-doers perpetuates a simplistic dualism that “keeps us from looking deeper [and] from trying to discover causes. Once something has been identified as evil, there is no more need to explain it; it is time to focus on fighting against it.”¹⁸

These representative responses to September 11 do not speak directly to the issue of weapons of mass destruction, but Buddhist responses to a potential WMD attack may be extrapolated from them. The Buddhist call is for nonviolent action, one that is not motivated by hatred or revenge but directed instead toward addressing the complex matrix of causes that lead to violence and destruction. This call is joined with a cautionary warning that in the long term answering violence with violence will lead only to a cycle of increasing violence. On the level of policy, Buddhists would favor treaties that restrict, limit, and eventually eliminate weapons of mass destruction. But a Buddhist perspective insists that in a more fundamental sense, policy options and defense strategies calculated to defend national self-interest are ultimately insufficient without a more inclusive vision of human flourishing.

Notes

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2. Thanissaro Bhikkhu (Geoffrey DeGraff), *The Buddhist Monastic Code* (Valley Center, Calif.: Metta Forest Monastery, 1994), 448.
3. *Ibid.*, 398.
4. Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, 2nd ed. (New York: Grove Press, 1974), 47.
5. Thich Nhat Hanh, *Call Me by My True Names: The Collected Poems of Thich Nhat Hanh* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1993), 72–73.
6. Damien Keown, *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992), chap. 8.
7. Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, “Democratic Socialism,” in *Me and Mine: Selected Essays of Bhikkhu Buddhadasa*, ed. Donald K. Swearer (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 167–81.
8. <http://prop1.org/2000/abolstat.htm> (February 15, 2001).
9. Frank E. Reynolds and Mani Reynolds, *The Three Worlds of King Ruang* (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1981), 146.
10. Bhikkhu Nanamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha* (Boston: Wisdom, 1995), 177.
11. *Ibid.*, 178.
12. Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics: Foundations, Values, and Issues* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 241.

13. Tessa Bartholomeusz, "In Defense of Dharma: Just-War Ideology in Buddhist Sri Lanka," *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 6 (1999): 1–16.
14. Wilhelm Geiger, *The Mahavamsa or the Great Chronicle of Ceylon* (Colombo: Government Information Office, 1960), 171.
15. <http://www.bpf.org/hhdl/html> (February 15, 2001).
16. <http://www.bpf.org/tnh.html> (February 15, 2001).
17. *Ibid.*
18. <http://www.bpf.org/Loy-war.html> (February 15, 2001).