

Editorial *Buddhism and violence*

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Non-violence is a foundational principle of early Buddhist teaching. The first moral vow is not to kill: in the Pali formulation, “I undertake the rule of training to abstain from taking life” (*pāṇātipātā veramaṇī-sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi*). There is also no lack of sensible advice on how to quell trouble when it arises, such as the famous adage of the Dhammapada (I.5): “For hatreds are never pacified through hatred. Only through non-hatred are they pacified: this is the eternal law.” Early Buddhist texts tell us that the principle of non-violence is not to be violated, even in the most extreme circumstances. In the simile of the saw (*kakacūpama*, MN 21) the Buddha tells his *bhikkhus* that even if villains were to cut them up limb by limb with a saw, they should think “our minds will not be spoiled, nor will we utter evil words, instead we will abide in sympathy for the welfare (of others), with kind thoughts, undefiled within.” Within Mahāyāna Buddhism, a similar sentiment is found in Śāntideva’s *Bodhicaryāvatāra* (III.12): “I hand myself over to all embodied beings, to do with as they wish; may they strike and abuse (me), and cover (me) in dirt.”¹

Not everybody agrees that non-violence is a defining feature of early Buddhist teaching. It has been claimed that the principle of reciprocity – “an eye for an eye” – can be discerned in some Jātakas. But this is incorrect.² The Jātakas instead extend ascetic ideals such as renunciation and pacifism into the domain of lay life. A good example is the story of prince Temiya, who pretends to be a dumb cripple in order to

¹ *yathāsukhikṛtaś cātmā mayāyaṃ sarvadehinām, ghnantu nindantu vā nityam ākirantu ca pāṃsubhiḥ.*

² See the review of Steven Collins’ *Wisdom as a Way of Life. Theravāda Buddhism Reimagined* (2020) in *Journal of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies*, vol. 20 (2021), pp.166ff.

avoid the violence of kingship (Ja 538). Despite the fantastic nature of this story, it seems that some Indian Buddhists really did expect kings to avoid violence at all costs. The *Ratnāvalī*, authored either by Nāgārjuna or a member of the early Madhyamaka tradition, probably in the late second century AD,³ advises a king to renounce if he cannot rule righteously (RĀ IV.100): “If because of the unrighteousness of the world, the kingdom is difficult to rule with righteousness, then it is right for you to become a renouncer for the sake of righteousness and honor.”⁴

These fragments do not tell the whole story, of course. The *Upāya-kausalya Sūtra* strikes a rather different tone, in claiming that a Bodhisattva can kill if the circumstance warrants it.⁵ Whence the source of this idea? We can at least note that the pacifist sentiment of self-abandonment, found in mainstream Indian Buddhist teaching, is somewhat at odds with the Bodhisattva ideal. Why let the highest spiritual aspiration be compromised by needless acts of self-sacrifice? Surely it is better for Bodhisattvas to remain in *saṃsāra*, and apply their elevated wisdom and means as they deem fit, rather than give themselves up for no good reason.

Non-believers could thus be forgiven for finding the Bodhisattva ideal rather sinister and dangerous. If self-styled Bodhisattvas are not actually wise – a possibility which even believers must admit – who can stop them inflicting unwarranted violence on others? Exactly this problem is addressed in Brian Victoria’s current article, which shows how Zen Buddhists in late imperial Japan, inspired by a curious mix of Bodhisattva ethics, meditation and nationalism, committed deadly acts of terrorism.

Brian Victoria’s recent publications in JOCBS (vols. 5, 7, 9, 11, 13, 15, 17, and 19) have dealt with other aspects of Buddhism and violence, and make it clear that Zen and Mahāyāna are not solely at fault. Theravāda Buddhism is particularly prone to Buddhist nationalism, a problem attested as far back as the second century BC, when in the war against the Tamil king Eḷāra, a sacred relic was apparently placed in king Duṭṭhagāmaṇi’s standard. The *Mahāvamsa* even states that violence against Duṭṭhagāmaṇi’s Tamil enemies is no worse than the killing of animals.⁶

³ Joseph Walser, ‘Nāgārjuna and the Ratnāvalī: New Ways to Date an Old Philosopher’, *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, vol. 25.1-2 (2002), pp.209-62.

⁴ Karen Lang, *Four Illusions. Candrakīrti’s Advice for Travelers on the Bodhisattva Path* (Oxford University Press, 2003), p.108.

⁵ See Brian Victoria, ‘Violence-enabling Mechanisms in Buddhism’, *Journal of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies*, vol.5 (2013), pp.186-87.

⁶ See Alexander Wynne, *Buddhism: An Introduction* (I. B. Tauris, 2015), p.215; Brian Victoria, *ibid.*, p.173.

Religiously sanctioned violence, whether inspired by Bodhisattva exceptionalism, nationalism, or systems of hierarchy and patriarchy, is found throughout Buddhist history. If so, and given the increasing fragmentation of our age, one wonders how long it will be until Buddhist terrorism appears in the West. If Zen terrorism was inspired by Mahāyāna ethics, Zen meditation and Buddhist nationalism, it is quite conceivable that the Bodhisattva ideal, mindfulness meditation and radical politics will eventually inspire Buddhist terrorism in the West.

Some might object that even if Buddhist terrorism is a distortion of ancient principles, the extreme pacifism of the early Buddhist tradition is unrealistic. But the example of Gandhi, far closer in spirit to the Buddha than recent Zen terrorists, is a reminder that non-violence can be effective even in the most difficult political conflicts. Western Buddhist commentators who approve of Bodhisattva violence should perhaps bear this in mind. Those who believe that “surgical violence”, i.e. “killing the one to save the many”, is a valid part of the Bodhisattva way,⁷ should understand that not everyone might be able to apply religious violence wisely. This is especially true in of our world of value conflicts and war, in which human beings frequently lack certainty over what is right and wrong.

Whatever position one may hold regarding the question of Buddhism's relationship to violence, it is undeniable this is an important, if controversial, issue deserving serious consideration. If anything, in the face of an increasingly violent world, whether due to ethnic or national conflicts, the ongoing possibility of nuclear war, or the effects of climate change, this is a topic that cannot but concern all those who understand Buddhism to be a religion devoted to the well-being of both self and others. This journal looks forward to a continuing examination of this topic as it does to all topics regarding Buddhism's past, present and future.

⁷ Roberth Thurman, ‘Rising to the Challenge: Cool Heroism’, *Tricycle, The Buddhist Review*, Spring 2003. https://tricycle.org/magazine/rising-challenge-cool-heroism/?utm_source=Tricycle&utm_campaign=1b690eb695-Daily_Dharma_11_05_2021_NS&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_1641abe55e-1b690eb695-308002325