

Buddhist stand on war and its relevance to the present conflict

by Sarath Weerasekera

There have been many articles on "Buddhist stand on war" and all of them naturally conclude stating that Buddhism is "totally opposed to war". All these articles imply, either intentionally or unintentionally that those who (including monks) directly or indirectly support the current war effort in our country, act against the teachings of the Buddha and consequently disgrace Buddhism. I was motivated by this to write this article to express my views in this regard.

Buddha was very clear on war, peace and politics. He advocated and preached "non-violence and peace" as its universal message. Buddha has said, "Never hatred is appeased, by hatred but it is appeased by kindness." This is an eternal Truth.

The first precept is to abstain from taking life, and Buddha has covered the entire spectrum of living beings by classifying "life" into following five categories (mentioned in Karaniya Metta Sutta), i.e. a. *Tasa - Tava - moving, unmoving* b. *Digha (Long), Mahantha (large), majjima (medium), rassaka (short), anuka (minute), thula (fat)* c. *Ditta (that can be seen), additta (that cannot to seen) d. Dure (which live far) - avidure (which live near) e. Bhuta (born), Sambhavesi (seeking birth)*

Not only living beings, Buddha even condemned the destruction of plant life. He was very critical of contemporary religious rituals which involved sacrifices, killing of large number of animals. Thus, we can imagine how critical he would have been of indiscriminate killings, deliberate violence and devastation of vegetation in war.

Buddha says, "Victory breeds hatred, the defeated live in pain, Happily the peaceful live, Giving up victory and defeat."

Buddha rejects glorification of war since there can be no glory when the mind is dominated by hate. It is recognized that battle cannot take place without hatred and the wish to kill is prevalent both in the mind of aggressor and victim.

Hence in principle, Buddhism is opposed to war. But, what about the rules who are drawn into conflict when threatened by aggression, for the sole purpose of protecting their citizens? Is a father as the head and the protector of the family is not justified in killing a person who has entered the house forcibly to harm the family members? In situations like above, how

far it is relevant or correct to compare the best courses of action with the teachings of the Buddha?

LTTE has been categorized as the most ruthless terrorist organisation in the world. They commit atrocities against unarmed innocent people and also engage in "ethnic cleansing" by systematically terrorizing and chasing away Sinhalese from East. (Already completed in North) The government forces fight LTTE and the patriots from every quarter of the society (including monks) bless, encourage and support the troops in their above endeavour. It is in the light of this that articles do appear in papers challenging the above role/action of the troops/patriots by making parallels with the Buddhist teachings. Hence it is timely to discuss the Buddhist attitude during similar situations in history, including the period of the Buddha, Himself.

The texts show that Buddha, although preached non violence has acknowledged that a state must have an Army to defend herself. In *Chakka Vatti Sihenada Sutta* the Buddha gives advice to the righteous king. "Being a man of Damma, you should provide the right watch/protection for your own folk, for the Army, for the Nobles etc". This naturally implies that Buddha was mindful of the need for an Army to protect the citizens and the consequent use of force in defence as a world necessity.

Once Buddha asked king *Pasdenadi* whether he would like to keep a Noble youth in his Army if he was untrained, unskilled, unpracticed, undrilled, timid, trembling and one who would run away! The fact that the Buddha used similes from *Pasenedi's* military implies that he accepted and acknowledged the existence of an Army as a tool of the state.

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must not be in the Army and if so must get the consent of the king to enter order. (This rule is still valid and, in our country a serviceman cannot join the order without the written approval of the respective service Commander). This incident too implies that the Buddha has accepted that the state must have a fully fledged Army for defence whilst being fully aware of the role of the Army during an invasion.

There were instances where Buddha has prevented wars, but it is not claimed that Buddhism has prevented all the wars. Buddhism is not very clear as to how far Buddhist principles of non-violence can be followed when it comes to protecting the weak and innocent against aggressors. Buddhism allows the validity of certain worldly necessi-

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ties which may not be fully compatible with the highest ideals of harmlessness and non-violence. The administration of justice itself implies punishment to offender.

The precept to refrain from killing is one that is voluntarily under taken. A Buddhist knows if violates does so at his own peril. But the question remains whether there is any mitigation, if killing is carried out as a duty of the state. In a situation like this hatred is not so dominant in "Chetana" or the mental volition accompanies such an act, as otherwise. But the extent to which it is modified can hardly be known even to the person concerned. A diminished responsibility may be argued in the case of conscripts forced to kill to protect the coun-

try. Surely, there has to be a difference between wars of conquest and wars of defence!

In what is called "mercy killing", certainly it is not the victim that is hated. The pain and the suffering are the aspects taken into consideration. Although unwholesome mental states exist, yet they appear in the guise of compassion.

When it comes to a State, the primary duty of it is to look into the welfare of the people and ensure freedom. It is the duty of the State to protect its individual members under all circumstances. It cannot give them Nibbana any more than it can attain Nibbana itself. All it can do is to ensure their worldly welfare. In order to do that the state may have to wage war in defence, kill the common enemy of the public etc. Only by this, an individual, who in Buddhism is the most important of all, will be free to work out his own salvation.

Buddhism, hence doesn't directly deal with the "Buddhist" way of reaction against aggressors. All what we can see from above is that non-violence in the face of violence is not a moral absolute in all circumstances.

As it was mentioned earlier, it is the Chetana or the intention which is the key factor in all the activities. In the second century BC the

Chola prince "Elara", a Hindu, invaded the country and ruled the Northern part of the island for 40 years. King Dutugemunu mustered the whole nation in his fight for national Independence against the invader. His war slogan was "Not for kingdom but for Buddhism" and it was psychologically so effective that even Bhikkus left the order and joined the liberating Army to fight against the foreign invader. Mahawansa describes how Ven. Theraputhabaya derobed, joined king Dutugemunu's Army and after victory, re entered the order and attained Arahathood!!

We are fully aware that if not for king Dutugemunu, the entire country would have become a Hindu Tamil dominated one and

Buddhism would have suffered the same fate as in India, Maldives, Bangladesh, South Korea etc. which were Buddhist countries earlier. Hence as Ven. Walpola Rahula three points out, fighting for national Independence had become an established Buddhist tradition, since freedom was essential to the spiritual as well as material progress of the community.

Throughout the history Buddhist monks have taken an active role in protecting the country and Buddhism, against foreign invasion. On 05th century BC during the invasion of Hindu Tamils from South India, Ven. Mahanama raised the Royal Prince Dhatusena amidst attempts to assassinate him. He admitted the prince into order and brought him up secretly giving education in every relevant field of a king. Dhatusena subsequently liberated Sinhalese and Buddhism from the aggression. Can anybody argue that Ven. Mahanama acted against the Buddhist teachings? If not for him, what would have been the fate of Sinhalese and Buddhism in the country?

As per Mahawansa when king Dutugemunu became remorseful at the thought of killing a large number of human beings in battle, a representation of Arabahs living on the island of Piyangu had met the king and said that his path to heaven was not obstructed as his intention had been pure and clean. Ven. Rahula in his book "The heritage of the Bhikku" concludes that although the above record is diametrically opposed to the teachings of the Buddha, working for the freedom and upliftment of religion was recognized as so noble by both laity and Sangha that they seemed to have believed that Arabahs themselves had accepted that even the destruction of human beings in order to save the country was not a grave crime. If there was no violent reaction to the repeated aggressions by the enemy Buddhism in our country would have suffered an irreparable blow.

Our country is in peril. The terrorists are destroying the Buddhist heritage in the North and East. The harmless farmers in the villages affected by terrorism are being massacred. The innocent men, women, children of such villages withdraw to the jungle at night fearing attacks by terrorists. In this state of affairs, as patriots, do we fight to eliminate the terrorism or, lobby the message of Buddhist stand as "totally opposed to war" and wait with folding arms allowing terrorists to rule the North and the East?