

The Buddha's Moral Politics for 'Conflict Resolution'

by

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Observing the interdependence of religion and society Saicho (767-622), the founder of the Tendai Buddhist Sect of Japan, commented on the nature of the bodhisatta whose main tenet is compassion.

“What is the treasure of the nation? It is our religious nature.
Thus, those who have this religious nature are the treasures of the nation.
Long ago a man said,

“Ten large pearls do not constitute the nation's treasure.”

A philosopher of old said,

“He who can speak but not act is a teacher to the nation. One who can act but not speak is an asset to the nation. One who can act and speak is a treasure to the nation. Apart from these three, one who can neither speak nor act is a traitor. (1)

Herein, is implicit the social conscience and consciousness of a person who aspires enlightenment while remaining a social being.

In Buddhist social ethics, it is incumbent of the clergy to relate what is good and bad, right and wrong to the lay person. While duties for each party are five in number, as for the clergy, there are six duties. (Sigalovada Sutta): the one just quoted. It becomes all the more relevant, as science and technology progress in a mechanistic way. A Buddhist should not seek his personal welfare, regardless of others, because his welfare is inextricably bound up with the welfare of others, the globe.

The Blessed One's injunction for the good person, is to be deeply concerned with and actively working for the happiness and wellbeing of all concern; a reflection of his first admonition to the first group of disseminators, to go forth for the material and spiritual wellbeing of the multitude. For some had little dust in their eyes and the opportunity to be liberated is possible, once they have heard the Dhamma.

That being the case, his doctrine is not meant for mere individual liberation, but for universal, rather global liberation. This implies that as much as inner revolution is important, so is outer revolution. This moral responsibility further implies that there can be no happiness or peace on earth, as long as there is poverty and starvation, injustice and oppression, discrimination and segregation, social disabilities and inequalities; So much for his social philosophy.

In Buddhist moral science, the moral evaluation of good actions denotes that the action ought to be good not only for oneself, but for others and again, for both parties. Skillful actions are performed not only for the benefit of this life, but also for the next Buddhist moral science which is utilitarian and pragmatic, leads one to what is globally good; a compassionately engaged attitude.

Such universally valid positive emotions found in the Four Sublime States (Brahma viharana), begins to suffuse one's interpersonal relationship with others. Human life is a cooperative effort. 'No man is an island'. The necessary cooperation is best achieved through social morality. As an empirical science, Buddhist ethics (moral science) bears its biological imperative, anticipating responsibility that encompasses all aspects of human experience.

In a world where the demand is more for rights, the tendency is to become divisive. Alternatively, duties are reciprocal. One's duty to the other becomes the right of the other.

When a Buddhist practices the first precept of non-killing, his duty becomes the right of the others; not to be killed. Therefore, the right to life; a fundamental human right is guaranteed The Buddhist 'Golden Rule'. It makes one compare the result of an action and thereby avoid or perform the action, adopted by most faiths and rights groups. The approach, universal in character, is global. Such moral laws generate Right Understanding in our behavior that provides security to fellow human beings. By this, interpersonal conflicts are prevented.

Four months after the bombing of Hiroshima, Bertrand Russell, the humanist, gave a dire warning

"We want to look at it from the point of view of the future of mankind. The question is a simple one: Is it possible for a scientific society to continue to exist, or must such a society inevitably bring itself to destruction."

For this purpose, Buddhist dynamics suggest a creative dialogue with total openness. Nishitani Keiji opines this in Zen; a paradigmatic spiritual experience (2). But, in the Earliest Pali Canon (not Theravada), the notion of 'transformation' or 'change' (anicca) is well explicit. This adaptability, flexibility is the first basic reality of existence. Once understood, the transformation could be seen even from a

common sense point of view, without employing Zen paradoxes. A classic example is the dialogue between Prince Siddhattha and his cousin, Devadatta.

While Siddhattha was resting in his father's farm, an injured swan shot by Devadatta fell in front of him. The arrow had pierced its body and the bird was fluttering about in great pain. Siddhattha removed the arrow, dressed its wound and gave water to the bird to drink. He then wrapped up the bird in his upper garment and held it next to his chest, providing warmth.

When Devadatta inquired as to whether he saw a bird fall, the Prince replied in the assent and showed the bird, now completely recovered. Devadatta demanded that the bird should be handed over to him, to which the Prince dissented. Devadatta claimed that by the 'rule of the game' he was the owner as 'he who kills a game, becomes the owner'. Siddhattha denied the validity of this rule. His transformative view was, "he who protects life, has the right to claim ownership and not he who kills. As the case was taken to the courts, the view of Siddhattha was upheld.

The event demonstrates that life, even of a bird, is of value and needs to be respected. Though skilled in the military arts, archery etc., Siddhattha refused hunting. Buddhists believe in the value of human life as a rarity but not as sacrosanct (sacred) as in theology. Buddhists assume the possibility of a non-killing world and a globe without "hardware" or "software" lethality. The dictum "Non-violence is the law supreme", is shared by all major religions and humanist movements.

Dogmatic geneticists assume that violence is ingrained in the gene map. But, the 1986 Spanish UNESCO sponsored Serville Statement on Violence reads as follows (3).

"It is scientifically incorrect to say that war or any other violent behaviour is genetically programmed into our human nature."

This abrogates the genetics theory of Lombroso and the sociologists' view that as ex-hunters, our aim is to kill.

Gandhi's satyagraha; non-violence (a political activism) is different from the religious and spiritual connotation of non-violence. Gandian civil disobedience is meant to uphold the truth, a powerful tool in making negotiations. G. Ramachandran, a Gandhian educationist claimed,

"The unknown heroes and heroines of non-violence are more important than the known heroes and heroines."

Avihimsa samkappa (non-violence) plays an important role, in shaping Right Thought, the second step of the Noble Eight-fold Path that leads to the cessation of individual and social suffering. This spirit pervades in Buddhist ethics to every

aspect of human life. In its ethical economics, the trading of weapons, whether lethal, biological, chemical or digital is by all means to be avoided.

Needless to add nuclear weapons to the list as it undoubtedly causes anxiety. One can logically question, “Are there wars because there are firearms? Or are there firearms because there are wars?” This vicious circle exposes the fact that conflicts are maneuvered and nurtured, as there is a ready market for the flourishing arms trade, despite negotiations for arms control. Though at the apex of technological prowess, we are at the very brink of total annihilation, as perceptions tend to become more nihilistic.

Prof. Lily De Silva (4) stresses the need for moral laws (non-Kantian) to restrain the imminent catastrophe. She illustrates ‘empathy’ as the moral foundation to combat global violence. Accordingly, conflicts are, but the external manifestations of the internal disharmony in us. Living in ‘Sick Cities’ (5), we have created ‘This Confused Society’ she further adds.

The Buddhist global vision is enjoined in the Kutadanta Sutta of the Digha Nikaya; viz:

“Babies can dance on our laps and we can live with a sense of security, keeping our doors wide open.” (7)

Such a vision could be achieved, looking back at the history of Buddhism, which is remarkably free from lethal force and crusades. In fact, the Cakkavatti Sihanada Sutta (Sacred Books of the Buddhists, vol.iv. Lond. Luzac1957, p.67) elucidates the social analysis of The Evolution of Conflict.

“Thus, brethren from goods not being bestowed on the destitute, poverty grew rife, from poverty, theft increased, from theft, violence, from violence, weapons, from weapons killing...etc.”

Having analyzed the evolution, the Blessed One did not pass an ethical judgment as to which form of government (monarchical or republic) is the best. As one of the greatest rebels, he promulgated that a ruler needs to rule in accordance with righteousness (Dhamma), following the model of the cakkavatti (universal monarch) and the 10 norms of righteousness (Dasa Raja Dhamma); namely: generosity, morality, selflessness, integrity, gentleness, self-control, amity, non-violence, tolerance and non-obstinacy.

Max Weber (8) observed Buddhism as a Khattiya (Warrior caste) reaction to the increased social dominance of the Brahmins who claimed pre-eminence.

The Buddha’s interest was egalitarian, so much so that he decentralized the authority of the Bhikkhu-sangha, a largely democratic but more socialist, an assembly of equals based on voluntary cooperation without the desire for acquisition where all properties belonged to the community without private

ownership. The empowerment was great that the righteous ruler needed legitimacy from the Sangha.

On the other hand, in practical politics, cooperation had been anticipated.

The dialectics of the law of interdependence gave rise to the relationship of the State and the Sangha. The State became an instrument of the Dhamma (9), which did the checks and balances. It may be prudent to compare and contrast the invariable concomitance of politics and morality from the Kantian perspective. He argued, (10)

“If the art of politics is to be perfected it should be laced with morality. If morality and politics are incompatible in a single command, then these two are really in conflict? But, if these two qualities ought always to be united, the thought of contrariety is absurd, and the question as to how the conflict between morals and politics is to be resolved cannot even be posed as a problem.”

But, Trevor Ling (11) and Tambiah (12) give significance to the ruler rather than the Sangha who made decisions through consensus compatible to the Dhamma. Concord was the cause to their stability, not discord (13). Democracy was not their best criterion and the Uluka Jataka is testimony where the majority of birds elected an owl as their king which was detested by a crow who rationalized the situation and elected a swan instead. The Second and Third Sangha Councils are also testimonies to this effect.

As Winston Churchill remarked; Democracy is a bad form of government, but all others are worse!

Public opinion (lokadhipateyya) has been given some space. In Arabic, by politics they meant public interest (Tariq Ramadan).

With regard to ‘public interest’, a comparison to English Jurisprudence and the Indian legal system may be worthwhile.

Buddhist philosophy entangles not in a fixed, dogmatic position. As in ideologies, there are contradictions which in turn cause conflict! It is a bondage that could lead to extreme views.

Viewed from a global perspective, social ills e.g. war, extremism, racism, inequality and poverty seems inseparable. Duplicity in peace accords and the affirmation of ‘just wars’, only creates space for the law of the jungle. Warring nations have become awesome arsenals of military hardware, ensuring continued business and profit to merchants of death War for whose sake? As if who matters?

The US spends 45% of the world’s purchases for military purposes. British Aerospace is the third largest arms producer with branches in Israel, Sweden, South Africa etc. Russia, China, Japan and the US are re-arming. The U.K. annually spends 1.34 trillion pounds for military purposes. Negative science draws us to

nuclear destruction. Fritjof Capra cautions us 'The Buddha or the Bomb?'(14); prophetic imagination.

Ideological contention triggered from the Middle East has been blown out of proportions. Dominance and retaliation have multiplied extremism, resulting in terrorism. The United States, recently spent 20 billion dollars on arms for Saudi Arabia and the gulf states, 13 billion for Egypt and 30 billion for Israel, to counter Iran's nuclear power, contrary to international requirements.

Anxieties have increased since the rise of Ayatollah Khomeini in the 70's. The Soviet and US involvement in West Asia made petrol the bone of contention. In fact, the mother of all wars (Desert Storm) was not only an economic problem, but a moral problem of greed for power!

Afghanistan became the hotbed of fanaticism, with US-trained guerillas (against Soviet) becoming Islamic warriors (Mujahedin) and UNO sanctions that backfired with 9/11. The Taleban influence in Pakistan borders and the madrasa (religious schools, rather hostels) ideology gave currency to the creation of Osama Bin Laden.

That the blasting of the giant Buddha statues of Bamiyan did not create any retaliation from the Buddhists is a valid moral to conflict resolution. Pashtun irredentism and 'jihadis' became a power to be reckoned with. Lawless tribals enriched by the sales of poppy harvest became centre stage. The might of the entire Allied troops' could not subdue the Talibanization of Afghanistan and Pakistan. So much so, that to counter terrorists, you have to think like a terrorist!

To hunt Osama and the al-Qaeda, to find the so called Weapons of Mass Destruction, to strike pre-emptively, the Allied troops 'invaded' Iraq. But, then the Shi'ite - Sunni divide, aggravated.

Islam is more than a religion. It possesses the power to unite a nation, yet, divides the people. A precedent was found during the Bhuttos regimes. The inevitable contradiction, sectarian violence, also, a 60,000 Mahdi Army of Muqtada al-Sadr, sided the Allied troops with the intention of consolidating power for the future.

By 2007, the US alone lost 901 troops but the Iraqi government is irresolute. Yet it is heartening to learn that more than 60,000 over Iraqis have enroll in the 'Concerned Local Citizens' group and the 'Awakening Councils'.

The beans spilt over to the Indian Sub-continent as India has one of the largest Muslim populations of the world. Seventeen years before Ali Jinnah's demand for a separate Islamic state from the colonial masters; it was the emotional poet Mohd Iqbal in 1930 who voiced out the demand to the All India Muslim League. Three wars fought with India and the ejaculation of East Pakistan (Bangladesh) made Indian Muslims both perpetrators and victims. The unavoidable rise of Hindutva

(Hindu nationalism) and anti-Muslim riots that surface every now and then, the undecided fate of the Kashmiris, the bombings in Bombay twice within a short span of time, agitates the globe, as both countries are nuclear powers (16).

Despite a 7% yearly growth in Pakistan, mismanagement and corruption are two reasons for the tendency to extremism. Even the nuclear bomb is called an Islamic bomb (17)! DVDs on the aggression of Afghanistan and Iraq prompted male and female suicide bombers to become martyrs. In fact, some 9/11 bombers were trained in the same madrasas; a global network.

At an earlier stage, 1,000 Pakistanis joined the Afghan brethren. Some Pakistanis think of an Islamic state (18) which includes India, as it was at a time under Muslim rule! One would question, where was Pakistan then? But, the present dilemma is, if it is destabilized, the implications for Islam, the war against terrorism and the relationship with neighbours and the West becomes chaotic. The moderate Bhuttos were feudal aristocrats who used the 'jihadis' to sideline Kashmir's secular resistance, thus paving the way to terrorists; said to be part of the US 9/11 bombers!

UNO Gen. Sec. Ban Ki-Moon, when addressing world leaders of the global water crisis, remarked "Too often, where we need water, we find guns instead!"

Though overwhelmingly Muslim, the Bangladesh experience seems different. The political score between secular vision and fundamentalist vision, the bombings, the simultaneous 500 explosions by 'jihadis', are testimony of a nation bedeviled by violence and venal politics.

Undoubtedly, the most disturbing conflict is the Israeli–Palestinian issue. Gaza has become one of the most contentious places on earth. Rampant corruption and gangsterism breeds fanaticism. Israeli trade barriers do not ameliorate, but aggravate the situation by retaliation. With Hamas being duly elected to the Palestinian National Authority replacing Arafat's men, power seems to come only through the gun barrel.

Their charter declares "Israel exist and will continue to exist, until Islam abolishes it, as it abolished that which was before it..." If both the Jews and Palestinians of the Abrahamic faiths, follow the Mosaic law of eye for an eye, we are reminded of Gandhi's 'the whole world would become blind', not forgetting the agape of Christ.

The Buddha-to-be, Prince Siddhattha seems to have left his palace as he was not happy that his maternal and paternal kinsmen were at war for the waters of the Rohini River. (The Buddha and His Teaching, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar)

Then, the eternal law (19),

"Hatred can never be ceased by hatred, except by loving kindness"

and along with the often quoted (20),

“Victory breeds enemies, the loser lives in pain
The restraint lives happily, as he has given up victory and defeat.”

Buddhists are aware that the root causes to most of these problems are the psychological dispositions of hatred and desire. By eliminating the root cause we can get rid of the problem. Wars are man made, rather mind made. So, are the resolutions.

“Self conquest is better than conquering a thousand battles (21)”

“Tolerance is the greatest form of religion (22)”

Buddhism became a global religion, because of its ability to forebear. It never won adherents by the sword or by force. Never by bell, book, candle but by tolerance lock, stock and barrel. Aldous Huxley noted, “Alone of all the great world religions, Buddhism made its way without persecution, censorship or inquisition “

To the wanting to be prudent, the Buddha admonished,

“Do not come to the conclusion, that this alone is the truth, all else false”

To quote Prof. Premasiri, with regard to a root problem found in this paper,

“Attachment to a view is as much a hindrance to moral progress as attachment to a material thing. “

On reflection, I admire the tolerance and wisdom of H.H. the Dalai Lama who experiences exile for half a century despite his subjects face a cultural genocide (25).

Footnotes

- 1 Comments made in his curriculum to students at Mount Hiei.
2. The Buddha or the Bomb”: Ethical Implications in Nishitani Keiji’s Zen View of Science by Steven Heine. See Socially Engaged Buddhism for the New Millennium ed. Sulak Sivaraksa Satirakoses-Nagapradipa Foundation, Bangkok, 1999.

3. David Adams et al., Statement on Violence. Journal of Peace Research, 26, 1989, pp. 120-21.
4. Lily De Silva, "The Scope and Contemporary Significance of the Five Precepts "Buddhist Ethics and modern Science: An International Symposium, ed. Charles Wei-hsun Fu & Sandra, A. Wawrytko, Greenwood Press, New York,1991.
5. Michael Gordon , Sick Cities, New York, Macmillan,1963.
6. H.N.S.Karunatilake, This Confused Society, Colombo, Sri Lanka. Buddhist Information Centre, 1976.
7. Digha Nikaya ,Vol.1, P.T.S., Lond., p.136.
8. Max Weber, Religion of India, pp.226-7.
9. B.G.Gokhale, 'The Early Buddhist View of the State'. Journal of American Oriental Society, Vol.89 (4), 1969, pp.731-8.
Also, Dr.Uma Chakravarti,'The Social Dimension of Early Buddhism Munshiram Manoharlal, Delhi,1996
- 10.Immanuel Kant "On the Opposition between Morality and Politics with Respect to Perpetual Peace, paragraph 370.
- 11.Trevor Ling, 'The Buddha', p.180, Temple Smith, London, 1973.
- 12.S.J.Tambiah,'World Conqueror & World Renouncer- A study of Buddhism and Polity in Thailand against a Historical background, p.8, Cambridge,1976.
- 13.Parinibbana Sutta , Digha Nikaya, P.T.S.,London.
- 14.Fritjof Capra, The Tao of Physics, New York, Bantan, 1975.
15. In 2008, 25,000 Iraqis joined in 'Awakening Councils' and 60,000 (mostly Sunnis) joined 'Concerned Local Councils.
16. There seems to be an LTTE connection as far as the Bombay attack is concerned, as it happened on the 27th of November which is the day after the LTTE Supremo's birthday ('Great Hero's Day') when he addresses his people.
17. Parvez Musharraf, questioned non-Muslims during the 'World Economic Forum' in Davos, 2008, as to why there are no Christian/Jewish/Hindu Bomb but only Islamic Bomb!

