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Dr. Mahinda Deegalle

Buddhist scriptures, whether they are in Pali or Sanskrit, are crucial and indispensable resources in understanding theoretical side of violence from a religious perspective and in elucidating non-violent path prescribed by the Buddha. In writing this paper, I have given priority to the examination of views towards violence as found in the Theravada scriptures in the Pali canon since my paper aims at addressing the issues in section A (i.e., exploring material from the Pali canon to analyze the place of violence from a Theravada perspective). This paper will explore a selection of scriptures in the Pali canon in elucidating canonical perspectives towards violence. It will examine what scriptures state about nature of violence, different manifestations of violence as noted by the Buddha, reasons for denouncing violence by the Buddha, fundamental roots of violent actions as analyzed by Buddhism, and more importantly Buddhist message for contemporary world in transforming all forms of violence both within individuals and society at large. To a large extent, this will be an exploration of Theravada Buddhist attitudes in preventing physical violence as understood by the Pali canonical literature. To a limited extent, while it attempts to explore the continuity of ideas about violence and non-violence from scriptures to practicing communities, it does not, however, make the presumption that what the Pali canon states is exactly what Buddhists have been doing over the centuries in Theravada Buddhist communities. The

immediate purpose here is to examine the potential of Buddhist scriptures as guidelines for non-violent human action. Identifying two key texts-Dhammapada and Cakkavattisihanada Sutta, I will demonstrate that Theravada Buddhism has a sound basis in denouncing violence and its decri of violence is founded on a strong moral and ethical teachings as taught by the Buddha.

In this paper, all forms of mental, verbal and physical abuses, whether directed towards oneself or others, are defined as possible examples of 'violence.' In any society, including Theravada Sri Lanka, violence can manifest in various forms and can have many dimensions with varying degrees of severity of harm. Causes of violence are not necessarily singular and violence as a threatening modern social phenomenon can have many causes and its agency can be plural. As evident even from a superficial observation of modern phases of violence related to Sri Lankan ethnic problem, violent contexts are complex and hard to come up with a singular explanation of its root causes. It appears that phases of violence are multivalent and can have pluralistic explanations. This conference itself will demonstrate diverse dimensions of violence and complex nature of violent activities. The severity of violent activities changes depending on the given context. Given Sri Lanka is proud of being the home of Theravada Buddhism, it is incomprehensible how and why within the last two decades Sri Lanka has experienced various forms of severe violent activities perpetuated by either extremists, terrorists, or government soldiers.

Though various forms of violent activities in Sri Lanka have no direct link with Buddhist teachings, the phenomenon of violence in Sri Lanka has challenged and tested sustainability of Buddhism in Sri Lanka and its continuing influence in Sri Lankan society. In the face of violence, no Buddhist anymore can ignore the implication of violence on Buddhist monks, Buddhist laity, Buddhist institutions in Sri Lanka and daily

practices of Buddhists. Unhealthy and violent conditions in modern Sri Lanka have forced all Sri Lankans going beyond their ethnic or religious boundaries to suffer as a result of violent activities. Moderate people in Sri Lanka have witnessed that extreme groups both within Sinhala and Tamil sides have continuously gained more power in perpetuating violence. Day by day, neutral voices get undermined and ignored both in political process as well as in social and religious spheres. As anywhere else in the world, in Sri Lanka, too, extreme groups resort to violence as a means of solving social and political problems which are perceived to be based on economic, ethnic, racial and religious prejudices.

The perpetuation of violent activities in the name of one's own religion and nationhood also have increased dramatically in recent decades. In Sri Lanka, however, various forms of violent activities are perpetuated, not in the name of religion but in the name of nationhood, either Tamil or Sinhala. While the perpetrators of violent acts justify their violent activities by giving justifications, the nature of violence and quantity of violent acts have increased dramatically within the last two decades. Certain forms of violence such as exploitation of labour are also embedded in the economic order itself and exploitation becomes a basis for animosity between ethnic groups leading to escalation of law and order. For Buddhists, the real challenge in the modern world is finding a way to avoid getting bogged down in various forms of violence either in the name of nationhood or religion.

Attitudes of the Dhammapada towards Violence

A glance at the Dhammapada demonstrates that certain verses there contain basic attitudes of the Buddha towards violence and his position in overcoming it both on the individual and social levels. These teachings can be used as a foundation in formulating a clearly defined Buddhist view towards non-violence. Such popular scriptures which had been quite accessible for both lay and monastic communities in

Theravada countries are important in understanding Buddhist perspectives towards violence. An outline of this Buddhist perspective can demonstrate that Buddhism condemns violence. However, this demonstration of the non-violent Buddhist point of view itself is not adequate. As practising religious persons, Buddhists have an obligation to show how that message is reflected upon and gets translated into Buddhist lives. Furthermore, the modern challenge for Buddhists is that they have to demonstrate that Buddhist message can transform violent contexts into more positive actions. Buddhist scholars also have the responsibility to interpret the nature of violence, the root causes of violent actions and show a path which transforms violence to peaceful actions.

Physical tortures as well as verbal abuses are forms of violence. On the whole, the Pali canon gives clear indications that physical violence cannot be accepted even as a means of solving human and social problems. Its rejection of physical violence is based upon a strong conviction and reflection on the severity of the violent acts. The Dhammapada verses 129-30 draw our attention to a common human situation and reaction in the face of all forms of violence:

All tremble at violence,⁽¹⁾

All fear death

Comparing oneself with others

One should neither kill nor cause to kill. (Dhammapada, v. 129)

All tremble at violence

Life is dear to all

Comparing oneself with others

One should neither kill nor cause to kill. (Dhammapada, v. 130)

This popular Theravada scripture, the Dhammapada, draws our attention to several important factors with regard to violence and

human reactions in the face of suffering. It states that (i) all sentient beings fear violent activities. When a rod or any form of violent act falls on them, they become frightened (*sabbe tasanti dandassa*). (ii) It states, in particular, that all living beings are scared of death (*sabbe bhayanti maccuno*),⁽²⁾ (iii) all living beings appreciate their own lives (*sabbesam jivitam piyam*), (iv) when one is faced with violence, one has to reflect that one's situation is similar to that of others (*attanam upamam katva*) because of the very fact that as human beings we love our own lives to be secured. (v) thus, the motivation to avoid violence and protect the lives of others come from the conviction that one's life is also 'sacred' or precious. Abstention from violent activities come from a reflection on the fact that everyone has a similar position towards one's own life. Thus, the Buddhist notion of protecting all forms of life and avoiding violent activities derive from the fundamental conviction that as one's life is worthy for oneself, others also have a similar position with respect to their own lives.

In the above Dhammapada verses, the Pali term *danda* (punishment or rod) has been translated as 'violence.' The original context which led the Buddha to recite these two verses are important. The Buddha had recited these verses when it was reported that the groups of six monks had assaulted the group of sixteen monks⁽³⁾ on a dispute in possessing a temple constructed by the group of sixteen monks: when the latter objected the intrusion of the former, the former assaulted the latter. Thus, it was basically a dispute in the construction and the possession of a material property. However, the focus in the verses has nothing to do with monks' possession of buildings and houses. Rather it centres on the aspect of violence in the incident and encourages to abandon violent activities. The encouragement for abstention from violence comes from a real practical context in which monks had resorted to violence in resolving a dispute on a physical property that they themselves had constructed. While the dispute had

been among two groups of monks, from the context, it is clear, that physical assault is not accepted in resolving disputes.

On another occasion, when the Buddha witnessed some young children were injuring a snake with sticks, the Buddha advised them not to do so by stating:

Seeking one's own happiness, he, who harms other pleasure-seeking sentient beings with a rod, will not experience happiness hereafter. Seeking one's own happiness, he, who does not harm other pleasure-seeking sentient beings with a rod, will experience happiness hereafter. (Dhammapada vv. 131-132).

In this case, too, violent actions-using a rod to harm other living beings-are rejected because such violent acts cannot be justified as means of deriving one's own happiness.

Other Considerations

In general, Theravada Buddhism holds the opinion that extreme violent activities, for example, war and conflict among groups arise due to sensual desires. The Mahadukkhandha Sutta, in particular, identifies sensual desires as the leading factor in creating disputes among various segments of society:

Monks, when sense-pleasures are the cause, sense-pleasures the provenance, sense-pleasures the consequence, the very cause of sense-pleasures, kings dispute with kings, nobles dispute with nobles, brahmans dispute with brahmans, householders dispute with householders, a mother disputes with her son, a son disputes with his father, a brother disputes with a brother, a brother disputes with a sister, a sister disputes with a brother, a friend disputes with a friend. Those who enter into quarrel, contention, dispute and attack one another with their hands and

with stones and with sticks and with weapons, these suffer dying then and pain like unto dying. This too, monks, is a peril in the pleasures of the senses that is present...the very cause of pleasures of the senses" (The Middle Length Sayings I.113-4)

This Sutta suggests that as long as human beings are driven by sensual desires, violent activities such as using sticks and weapons to harm one another, verbal and physical abuses of each other, are unavoidable. The total overcoming of violent activities seem to be impossible as long as human beings have not completely eliminated their sensual desires. In violent circumstances, generating a relatively peaceful state is the only lasting possibility for creating peace.

In creating a violence-free-context, Theravada Buddhist teachings propose a causal point of view towards violence. Since all phenomena are conditioned, there is nothing in this world that can be claimed to be independent from each other. Because of this inter-dependent nature, various forms of violence are also conditioned by other activities. By analyzing those causes which lead to violence and transforming violent contexts into non-violent social realities, Buddhism shows a way out of the vicious circle of violence.

Some Buddhist discourses such as the Cakkhavattisihanada Sutta analyze conflicts which lead to extreme forms of violence by showing their inter-dependence and conditionality. In those discourses, the complexity of issues are discussed and the importance of distribution of wealth to the poor are emphasized. Once income is not distributed fairly among all the communities, the potential for crimes increase among the poor and as a result, communities encounter various forms of violence. In this context, in a traditional society, the role of the king in resolving conflicts and violent activities becomes very crucial.

In a mythological framework, the Cakkavattisihanada Sutta suggests that, though the king had provided "rightful shelter, protection and defence" he failed to "give money to the poor."⁽⁴⁾ Because of king's inability in providing a means of right living which creates wealth for the poor, in that society, poverty increased creating a violent context. A poor man "intentionally took from others what [they] had not given [him]." When grabbed and showed to the king, the king gave him wealth because he had stolen since he could not make a living. Hearing that the king gives wealth to thieves, others began stealing. When the king heard that some steal because he gave money to thieves, he revised his policy and began punishing thieves with death. However, to avoid reporting the king, thieves began to have swords and kill those victims whose property they had stolen. As a result crimes increased. The Sutta states:

In this way, monks, money not being given to the poor, poverty flourished; because poverty flourished, theft flourished; because theft flourished, weaponry flourished; because weaponry flourished, murder flourished; because murder flourished, these beings' vitality decreased, as did their beauty...⁽⁵⁾

Violent conditions lead to decrease in life span:

When people live for (only) ten years, the ten Good Deeds...will completely disappear...the idea of 'good' (kusala) will not exist...[men will not recognize women as] 'mother,' 'mother's sister,'...the world will become thoroughly promiscuous...fierce mutual violence will arise among these beings, fierce ill-will, fierce hatred, fierce thoughts of murder, in a son for his mother...Just as now when a hunter sees an animal fierce violence...fierce thoughts of murder arise in him...there will be a seven-day period of war, when people will see each other as animals; sharp swords will appear in their hands and they will murder each other, each thinking 'This is an animal.'⁽⁶⁾

The Sutta further states a transformation of these violent contexts through self-reflection and by the practice of non-violent means:

'Let me kill no-one, let no-one kill me'... 'It is because we have undertaken Bad Deeds that we have for so long been murdering our (own) relatives. Why don't we start doing good?...Why don't we abstain from killing?(7)

This self-realization to do good and engage in non-violent actions, from a Theravada perspective, can be seen as the most important step towards transcending the vicious circle of violence.

Further, this Sutta suggests that State has an important duty to provide sufficient means of wealth for all sections of society in order to prevent unhealthy social problems and secure law and order. If we analyze problems such as the ethnic problem in Sri Lanka, it is clear beneath terrorism, extremism, war and abuse of human rights lie a key issue: the growing unemployment for the youth and the lack of resources to provide a decent living for all sections of the population and the imbalance in distributing wealth. The last five decades after Independence show that all Governments which came to power failed to provide adequate and sufficient resources for self-improvement of the poor.

What some of the canonical suttas such as the Cakkavattisihanada Sutta demonstrate is that there is a close link between righteous rule, fair distribution of wealth and providing adequate ways of earning a living for the masses. Once unemployment is grown, poverty leads to stealing and all other forms of violent activities which bring the downfall of the social, religious and cultural aspects emerge.

In examining the nature of violence from a Buddhist perspective, another important factor is seeing the role of psychological factors

within the violent climate. Since Theravada Buddhism gives a prominent place to psychological factors in analyzing human actions, violent activities also have to be placed in that context. As the Dhammapada (vv. 1-2) states human mind precedes all verbal and physical actions. Thus, the leading factor even in an extremely violent event can be an unhealthy psychological state of mind. From a Buddhist point of view, thoughts of violence and violent activities are defilements. They defile oneself and others. Once defiled, they lead to severe conditions. From a Buddhist point of view transformation of defilements for positive thinking is very much needed. This transformation is essential for healthy communities.

Conclusion

This paper has examined a selection of Pali canonical sources, in particular, the Dhammapada and the Cakkavattisihanada Sutta in understanding Theravada attitudes towards violence. Though I have attempted to examine scriptures that support a non-violent path, I have not gone into detail how the acts of violence have actually occurred in modern Sri Lanka or whether there are strong connections between acts of violence in Sri Lanka and particular scriptures found in the Pali canon. The purpose has been merely to explore the vision of peaceful life as portrayed by Pali canonical sources. The canonical position explored here may be useful to know the ideal Buddhist way of life but those insights may have little to do with any modern emergence of violence. Nevertheless, exploring the Pali canon is important in understanding the current civil war and political violence in Sri Lanka and to see whether there is any relationship between the two. Since the Pali canon has been the basis and inspiration for Theravada understanding of religious life and the Dhammapada, the most popular scripture among Theravada Buddhists, I have used the Dhammapada as the foundation from which Theravada Buddhists draw inspiration for their actions in the world. This

examination has demonstrated that Theravada Buddhism has a negative view towards violence and it rejects violence at any cost even as a skill-in-means. In the scriptures, while there is an analysis of violence and its causes as psychological as well as external, it does not recommend violence by any means even in solving human conflicts and social problems. In terms of violence in Sri Lanka, it is clear that roots of violence are based on economic factors and misunderstandings generated over the centuries. In this practical context, the role of the Buddhist will be to explore ways to get out of the violent context and bring peace to all religious and ethnic communities in Sri Lanka.

Notes

(1) Here the Pali term *danda* is translated as 'violence.' It literally means 'stick' or 'punishment.' [Return to text](#)

(2) The Dhammapada Commentary [John Ross Carter and Mahinda Palihawadana, *The Dhammapada* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 202] makes it clear that only four are not frightened in the face of death: (i) the thoroughbred horse, (ii) the thoroughbred elephant, (iii) the thoroughbred bull, and (iv) the influx-extinct [*arahant*]. An *arahant* does not fear death because of the very fact that the very notion of 'self' is extinct in him. [Return to text](#)

(3) Narada Thera, *The Dhammapada* (Kuala Lumpur: Buddhist Missionary Society, 1978), p. 123. [Return to text](#)

4 Steven Collins, *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 606. [Return to text](#)

5 *Ibid.*, p. 608. [Return to text](#)

6 *Ibid.*, p. 610. [Return to text](#)

7 Ibid., p. 610-11. [Return to text](#)

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