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P. D. Premasiri

Sri Lanka has been experiencing the agonies of war for almost two decades resulting in the death and maiming of thousands of her citizens. Despite recent moves for a peaceful resolution of the conflict, tension has not eased and the country is not completely free from the dangers of a resumption of hostilities. There are two major parties to the conflict, each of which is convinced about the justifiability of its own cause. Those who advocate L.T.T.E. militancy are strongly of the opinion that this organization is fighting a just or righteous war against oppression of the minority Tamil community by the majority Sinhalese who control the legislative and executive power of the state. They claim that a separate state carved out of the present territory of Sri Lanka is the only solution to their problem, and that since this is not possible by peaceful means, it has to be achieved by means of armed struggle. The majority Sinhalese in general claim that Sri Lanka has been one country throughout known history, and that under no circumstance should the territorial integrity of the Sri Lankan state be sacrificed in the interests of peace. There is also a much stronger opinion expressed by those who have been advocating the restoration of Sinhala Buddhist supremacy in the country since gaining independence from colonial rule. They contend that Sri Lanka should not only safeguard her territorial integrity but also remain as a predominantly Sinhala Buddhist state. It is the demand for

separation on the one hand and the demand for the establishment of Sinhala Buddhist supremacy on the other, that seriously hinder a peaceful settlement of the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict.

The two main parties to the conflict also represent people who inherit two of the world's most ancient religious traditions. Buddhism is the religion of a large majority of the Sinhala community. It is also evident that the most prominent among the Sinhala community who advocate war as a solution to the problem are leading people belonging to the Buddhist lay and monk communities. They perceive the Tamil militant movement as primarily a threat to the stability and survival of Buddhism in Sri Lanka. Sri Lankan historiography has created a distinct Sinhala Buddhist ethnic identity assigning the historical role of the protection of the Buddha Sasana to the Sinhala leaders of the lay and monk communities. The majority of the Tamils in Sri Lanka are Hindus, but they rarely perceive any religious connection to the present conflict except that they consider the attitude of the Sinhala Buddhist lay and monk perceptions of it as a great hindrance to the fulfillment of their aspirations.

Buddhism is a religion well known for its teachings about love and compassion. The ultimate goal of a person treading the path of Buddhism is the attainment of perfect inner peace. Whatever the worth of a desired end may be, the Theravada canonical scriptures considered to be the primary source of the Buddhist system of moral values of the Sinhala Buddhist community of Sri Lanka, contain absolutely no instance in which violence is advocated as a means of achieving it. This is in clear contrast to Hindu scriptures like the Bhagavadgita that contain a concept of a righteous war (*dharma yuddha*). Buddhism considers war and conflict as evil and teaches how an individual could transcend the universal tendency to engage in conflicts, debates, disputes and wars. However, in the early periods of Sri Lankan history as well as in the

ongoing ethnic conflict, those who profess to be Buddhists do not seem to have seen any contradiction in advocating war for the purpose of safeguarding Buddhism.

Concerning this apparent contradiction the opinion has been expressed that Sinhala Buddhist nationalism has transformed the character of Buddhism from being religion as moral practice to religion as a cultural and political possession.⁽¹⁾ It is argued that the original soteriological function of Buddhism emphasizing the cultivation of moral virtues has been replaced by a different social and political function conceived in terms of parochial interests concerning racial and ethnic identity. Those who see the historical development of Buddhism in Sri Lanka in these terms believe that this transformation has been a great contributory factor to the present ethnic conflict. Tambiah observes that even in the case of Buddhist monks "important tenets of the religion regarding detachment, compassion, tranquility and non-violence and the overcoming of mental impurities are subordinated and made less relevant to Sinhala religio-nationalist and social reform goals."⁽²⁾

As some of those who seek to justify the attitudes connected with Sinhala Buddhist nationalism would like to put it, Buddhists are confronted with two kinds of enemies to battle against. The first kind is that Gotama Buddha, the founder of the religion pointed out as the unskilled mental states, and personified as the armies of death (marasena). The second kind are those external forces that constantly conspire to destroy Buddhism by weakening the Sinhala race, recognized as the very custodians of the religion who preserved Buddhism in its pristine purity. The present militant movement of the Tamils is perceived by them as one supported by the enemies of Buddhism including those of the Western world who desire to attack the Buddhist heritage of Sri Lanka and to Christianize the Sinhala people. Therefore,

they perceive the war against Tamil terrorism as a just, righteous and necessary one.

This paper will not attempt to come to any conclusions about the justifiability of the claims of the two contending parties. Its objective is to go back to the canonical Buddhist sources and to examine whether the normative principles of canonical Buddhism can be invoked in favour of a righteous war involving the protection of Buddhism. An attempt will be made to present as far as possible all the material relevant to the issue. When all the material is presented one might find that it is not surprising that people who profess to be Buddhists also advocate war and directly participate in war. It is not a new phenomenon but one that Buddhism implicitly recognized as a possibility even during the canonical period.

There is no doubt that the ultimate goal of Buddhism is to overcome conflict primarily at the level of individual consciousness. This is evident from the answer that the Buddha had given to a person who questioned him about the doctrine he propounded. The doctrine of the Buddha is such that one who lives in accordance with it succeeds in living in the world without coming into conflict with anyone (*na kenaci loke viggayha titthati*).⁽³⁾ The Buddhist path of moral development is described as the noble and incomparable path of peace (*anuttaram santivarapadam*). The requirements of the Buddhist path are considered to be fulfilled when one's mind attains perfect peace (*santim pappuyya cetaso*). Nibbana, the ultimate attainment can be described as the attainment of inner peace (*ajjhanta santi*).

According to Buddhism, the foremost truth about the human condition is the existence of *dukkha*. The term *dukkha* connotes all disappointments, frustrations, discontents, unhappiness as well as the unsatisfactory state of affairs characteristic of the world of mental and physical nature. The persistence of *dukkha* in all its different forms is

dependent on the activity of unwholesome mental processes referred to in Buddhism as *asava* (influxes), *anusaya* (latent evil) and *kilesa* (psychological defilements). All inner psychological conflicts as well as conflicts produced in society are traced in Buddhism to these psychological causes. All wars, according to the Buddhist view, originate in the minds of people. The behaviour of the large majority of living beings is determined by the mental processes referred to in Buddhism as unskilled or unwholesome (*akusala*). Conflict in society is therefore, considered in Buddhism to be endemic. The *Sakkapanha Sutta* draws attention to this as follows:

Devas, men, Asuras, Nagas, Gandhabbas and whatever other different kinds of communities are there, it occurs to them that they ought to live without mutual hatred, violence, enmity and malice. Yet for all they live with mutual hatred, violence and malice.(4)

The intensity of the miseries produced when conflicts arise in human society is described in the *Mahadukkhakkhandha Sutta* as follows:

Having taken swords and shield, having girded on bow and quiver, both sides mass for battle and arrows are hurled and knives are hurled and swords are flashing. Those who wound with arrows and wound with knives and decapitate with their swords, these suffer dying then and pains like unto dying.(5)

In several contexts including the above the Buddha explains the psychological origins of such conflict.(6) Conflict is explained in these instances as a consequence of an unenlightened response to one's sensory environment. As long as people lack an insightful understanding of the mechanical nature of the reactions to the sensory environment produced by unwholesome roots of psychological motivation conflict in society cannot be avoided. Buddhism traces conflict in society to certain

instinctual responses of people such as the attraction to what is pleasant, the repulsion against what is unpleasant, the pursuit of what gives pleasure, the psychological friction against what produces displeasure, the great desire to protect one's own possessions, the irritable feeling experienced when other persons enjoy possessions that one is incapable of acquiring, competing claims on limited resources, ideological disagreements involving dogmatic clinging to one's own view and so on. The selfish pursuit of sense pleasures (*kama*) is considered as the root cause of conflict. Where there is sympathetic concern, compassion, sharing, charitableness and generosity conflict can be minimized. The latter attitudes, however, are not instinctive. They need to be cultivated through proper reflection and insightful understanding.

It is evident that in instances such as the above where Buddhism refers to conflicts, their source as well as their consequence is considered to be evil and undesirable. The unwholesome impulses that generate conflict as well as the unwholesome psychological states and patterns of behaviour that grow and become manifest in situations of violent conflict negate righteousness. It would, therefore, imply that there cannot be a righteous war from the Buddhist point of view.

The only instance in which Buddhist canonical sources speak of victory or conquest through righteousness is where reference is made to the political principles of a *cakkavatti* who conquers territory not with the force of arms but through principles of morality. The idea of a just or righteous war (*dharma yuddha*) involving the use of weapons of war and violence is conspicuously absent in the Buddhist canon. The Buddha countered the prevailing belief that soldiers of war who fight for a cause could, as a consequence of their rightful performance of duty, aspire to attain a heavenly rebirth if they succumb to their injuries while in combat. According to the Buddha one who fights a war does not generate wholesome thoughts but thoughts of malice and hatred, which

are absolutely unwholesome.⁽⁷⁾ Therefore, their future destiny will be a woeful one, which is in accordance with their unwholesome kamma.

The Atthakavagga of the Suttanipata speaks of conflicts, debates and disputes prevalent among people who pursued the religious life, dogmatically clinging to mutually contradictory opinions or theories on the nature of the good life. Although the context in which such disputes are mentioned did not involve any armed combat, the Buddhist analysis of the psychological conditions that determined them can be seen to be applicable to all situations in which disputes arise. The Buddha's observations on the psychological and behavioural processes that operate in situations of conflict are very relevant to instances in which people argue in favour of righteous wars. There is no doubt that in the modern civilized world, war or aggression motivated by imperialist and expansionist intentions is subjected to universal condemnation. Similarly deprivation of human rights and oppression of the weak by the strong is also widely open to moral condemnation. However, it is to be noted that attempts are made by each party that is currently engaged in war to show that violence is the only alternative available to achieve what is perceived by each as the righteous cause. The point made by the Buddha in this connection is that people are psychologically incapable of forming opinions about what is right and wrong, just and unjust, righteous and unrighteous while being immersed in their defiled psychological condition. They may express strong convictions about what is just and right, but when objectively examined they turn out to be mere rationalizations of their pre-conceived notions, desires, cravings, likes and dislikes. When the unwholesome roots of motivation are removed conflicts and disputes no longer arise. When people make decisions about what is right and wrong, just and unjust while they are still affected by the roots of evil, greed, hatred and delusion their judgements are mere rationalizations. What we may conclude from this is that Buddhism allows no place for righteous wars.

The Buddhist canonical standpoint elucidated above shows clearly that the psychology of war is antithetical to the psychology of Buddhist liberation. Liberation is ensured only by the elimination of greed, hatred and delusion. War, whatever form it takes, is produced by greed, hatred and delusion and other ramifications of these basic roots of unwholesome behaviour. This would imply that if every Buddhist pursued the Buddhist goal of liberation there should be no wars in Buddhist communities. But can we reasonably expect this to happen? The Pali canon itself bears evidence that even the Buddha did not expect it to happen. It would be totally unrealistic to entertain such an expectation.

A Buddhist community, like any other one consists of people of different degrees of moral development. Ordinary lay Buddhists are referred to as persons who enjoy the pleasures of sense (*kamabhogino*). Here we should note that the pursuit of *kama* (sense pleasures) is seen in Buddhism as the most proximate psychological cause of conflict. Disputes arise even between members of the same family, of the same caste, race or social group, between nations etc. due to the pursuit of *kama*. People who are engaged in this pursuit are not liberated beings in the Buddhist sense, for, they are not free from the roots of evil, greed or lust, hatred and delusion. The *Mahanidana Sutta* describes, in terms of the Buddhist doctrine of dependent origination, how people are driven to conflicts as a result of seeking to secure their cherished possessions. People are strongly attached to their material possessions, their cultural traditions, their belief systems, their values, etc. If they perceive a threat to any of these things to which they are attached the natural tendency is to be drawn into conflict. This is why Buddhism considers conflict as an unavoidable evil in society. Even the *Cakkavatti* ruler conceived in Buddhism as one who rules according to the principles of justice does not disband his armies. For, he too had secular duties to perform as the guardian of his citizens. This shows that Buddhism does not envisage a

society in which the necessity for engaging in war never arises. Perhaps the implication is that even a righteous Cakkavatti who will not engage in wars of imperialist aggression, would need to fight in self-defense.

In Buddhist canonical mythology there is reference to two types of celestial beings, one representing the righteous, the devas, and the other representing the unrighteous, the asuras. The two groups are mentioned as engaging in war from time to time. The battlefield of the devas against the evil asuras was led by Sakka, the most devout Buddhist god. Sometimes Sakka is represented as ordering the leaders of his armies like Suvira and Susima to act vigilantly and effectively against the aggressive enemy forces. However, in such instances Sakka concedes the fact that the Buddhist goal of Nibbana is of much greater worth than the victory over a mundane conflict.⁽⁸⁾ Sakka himself, advises the combatants on his side that when they are overcome with fear in the battlefield, confronted by the advancing enemy forces, they should take courage by looking towards the might and glory of Sakka or that of any of the other powerful gods in order to be rid of their fear. The Buddha says that by this means they will not always be rid of their fear because neither Sakka nor any of the other gods, is free from lust, hatred and delusion. They can all be overcome by fear and flee in the face of a threat to their lives. The Buddha says that his bhikkhu disciples who may be overcome by fear when they battle against the inner foes of the mind meditating in desolate places may look towards the Buddha to be rid of their fear. In this case they would indeed succeed, for the Buddha is free from lust, hatred and delusion and therefore would not be overcome by fear, or flee in the face of danger.⁽⁹⁾ In another instance Sakka speaks to the Buddha about the joy and happiness he experienced by becoming victorious over asuras after engaging them in war. But Sakka says that the joy he experienced then was associated with the victory obtained from violent armed conflict and therefore did not conduce to the Buddhist goal of liberation. He contrasts that joy with the joy, which is

free from any associations with violence that he experienced after listening to the good teaching of the Buddha. That he says, is joy that leads to disenchantment with all worldly things and to the ultimate peace of Nibbana.⁽¹⁰⁾ In these instances it is implied that armed conflict is not compatible with any serious commitment to the Buddhist goal of liberation, but may on occasion be unavoidable in the case of people dealing with mundane affairs. Even the pious Buddhist god Sakka, as a participant in mundane affairs, was no exception to this.

The points highlighted in the above discussion should not be taken as implying that Buddhism places no moral restrictions on people who are concerned with mundane affairs in going to war. War involves violent behaviour on the part of those who directly participate in it, and violence proceeds from malice and hatred whether it is motivated by the desire to achieve what is conceived as a just cause or not. Therefore the canonical teachings often emphasize the importance of conciliatory methods of resolving conflicts before embarking on war. The ethical teachings of the Dhammapada maintain that hatred can never be appeased by hatred and that it can only be appeased by non-hatred.⁽¹¹⁾ Anger ought to be won over by non-anger, and miserliness by generosity.⁽¹²⁾ Forbearance and non-injury are considered as cardinal virtues of rulers. The Buddha himself had intervened in situations where people had thought of resolving their problems through war, and persuaded them to resort to peaceful and conciliatory methods of resolving conflicts, drawing their attention to the intrinsic worth of human lives.⁽¹³⁾ From the Buddhist point of view, most wars are a consequence of the collectivized emotions ruling over a sound sense of judgement. The teachings of the Buddha contain immensely valuable principles that can be applied for the purpose of educating people for peace. Attention has already been drawn to the role of unwholesome emotions, the various obsessions, prejudices, psychological complexes and pre-conceived notions that influence people's judgements.

Collective delusion and ignorance often play havoc in society. A great deal of human suffering is produced as a consequence of improper reflection (*ayoniso manasikara*). If some of the principles of proper reflection (*yoniso manasikara*) introduced in the Buddhist teachings are clearly identified and really applied in social thinking and behaviour, it might be possible to reduce the tendency to seek to resolve disagreements through violence.

Before this discussion is concluded it seems appropriate to mention one last point about the Buddhist canonical accounts relating to war. Where one of the parties engaged in war is considered as righteous and the other as unrighteous, the Buddhist canonical accounts highlight the ethical qualities of the righteous party by showing that although they are compelled by circumstances to engage in war for the purpose of self-defense, they do not resort to unnecessary acts of cruelty even towards the defeated. The righteous party in war avoids harm to the innocent and is ready to pardon even the defeated enemy. Skillful methods are adopted in order to cause the least harm. Where the enemy could be defeated without injury to and destruction of life those skillful means to do so are explored to the maximum.⁽¹⁴⁾ An example of this aspect of the ethics of war is found in Buddhist mythology where the wars between the righteous Devas and the unrighteous Asuras are mentioned. According to one story, on one occasion the Devas were defeated by the Asuras and they had to flee from the battleground for the protection of their lives.⁽¹⁵⁾ As they were taking to flight for fear of the enemy they had to cross the Simbali forest. As the armies crossed the forest a large number of nests of Supannas built on tree tops were in danger of being broken and falling into the ocean as the tree tops were getting crushed by the fleeing armies of the Devas.⁽¹⁶⁾ It is said that the armies headed by Sakka, turned back through fear of harming innocent beings not caring for the risk they were facing due to the pursuing armies of the Asuras. In another mythical story, the Devas become

victorious over the Asuras and the king of the Asuras, Vepacitti was taken prisoner and was brought to the territory of the Devas, driven in Sakka's chariot by his charioteer Matali, Vepacitti's limbs all bound with chains. Vepacitti turned to be extremely abusive using harsh words against Sakka, the king of the Devas. Sakka, however, did not retort, and the driver of Sakka's chariot was curious to know whether Sakka's behaviour was due to fear or to weakness. Sakka responds saying that he is not so stupid as to retort to a foolish person like Vepacitti. Endurance of the abuses of a foolish person, according to Sakka, is a greater strength than retaliation. The last line of the verses where this canonical myth is introduced says "the person who does not express anger in return for one who expresses anger wins a war which is difficult to win" (kuddham appatikujjhanto sangamam jayati dujjayam).(17) While mentioning instances in which even the righteous are compelled to fight wars, Buddhism shows the striking difference between the behaviour of the righteous and the unrighteous even when they are warring parties. The canonical teachings also draw attention to the fact that in war, victory brings forth hatred (jayam veram pasavati); the defeated lie in grief (dukkham seti parajito); the one who is calm or of pacified mind puts aside both victory and defeat and lies in comfort (upasanto sukham seti hitva jayaparajayam).(18)

In summing up the inquiry into the question whether there can be any reasons in favour of a righteous war according to the canonical teachings of Buddhism, it should be reiterated that war, according to Buddhism is necessarily evil. Anyone who engages in it is compelled to commit acts of violence at least against the enemy who needs to be subdued. Participation in any kind of violence is absolutely out of the question for those who seriously pursue the goal of Nibbana. Their only option is to win over those who are cruel and violent through kindness and compassion. Wars and conflicts are endemic in society, due to the strong tendency of people to protect their own possessions with

miserliness (*macchhariya*) and due to the jealousy that affects people who are deprived of certain possessions enjoyed by others. More often than not, attempts to justify violence could be mere rationalizations of self interest. Buddhism grants that the large majority of people who are engaged in mundane affairs, although they may be devout Buddhists, and may be to a high degree righteous people, (as exemplified by the mythological stories of Devas headed by Sakka going to war with Asuras) are sometimes compelled to fight wars. The Buddhist teachings, by means of mythological tales and story telling homilies attempt to introduce a sense of morality and a concern for justice and fair play even in situations where people are compelled to fight wars. Reflection on the Buddhist canonical teachings outlined above by all Sri Lankans who cherish Buddhist moral values could be useful and important in the context of the current conflict.

Notes

- (1) S.J. Tambiah, *Buddhism Betrayed?* (University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 59.2 [Return to text.](#)
- (2) *Ibid.* [Return to text.](#)
- (3) *Majjhimanikaya* (Pali Text Society, London), vol. 1, p. 109. [Return to text.](#)
- (4) *Dighanikaya* (PTS) Vol. II, p. 276. [Return to text.](#)
- (5) *Majjhimanikaya* (PTS) Vol. I, p.86, translated by I.B. Horner, *Middle Length Sayings*, (Pali Text Society London, 1954), Vol. I, p. 114. [Return to text.](#)
- (6) *Kalahavivada, Madhupindika and Mahanidana Suttas.* [Return to text.](#)
- (7) *Samyuttanikaya* (PTS) Vol. 4, p. 308. [Return to text.](#)
- (8) *Ibid.* Vol. 1, p. 216. [Return to text.](#)

- (9) Ibid. [Return to text.](#)
- (10) Dighanikaya (PTS) Vol. 2, p. 285. [Return to text.](#)
- (11) Dhammapada, verse 5. [Return to text.](#)
- (12) Ibid. verse 223 [Return to text.](#)
- (13) Jataka (PTS) Vol. 5, pp. 412ff. [Return to text.](#)
- (14) See Ummagga Jataka, Jataka 4, p.329 ff. [Return to text.](#)
- (15) Samyuttanikaya vol. 1, p.224; Jataka no. 31. [Return to text.](#)
- (16) Supannas are a class of mythical birds mentioned in Buddhist mythological literature. [Return to text.](#)
- (17) Samyuttanikaya 1, pp. 221-222. [Return to text.](#)
- (18) Ibid. p. 83. [Return to text.](#)

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