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The Buddha and the Māgadha-Vajjī War

Ven. Pandita (Burma)¹

Abstract

According to an account recorded in *Mahāparinibbānasutta*, the Buddha had to meet a royal minister named Vassakāra when King Ajātasattu ordered the latter to visit the Buddha and inform him about the king's plan to subdue the Vajjīs. After hearing Vassakāra, the Buddha spoke on seven Conditions of Welfare (*satta aparihāniyā dhammā*), which would ensure the prosperity of the Vajjīs as long as its citizens observed them. Vassakāra shrewdly inferred from the Buddha's discourse how to defeat the Vajjī people and later actually forced them into submission. Regarding that event, there are some perplexing questions:

1. Why did King Ajātasattu choose to consult a wandering ascetic on a significant matter of state like fighting a war?
2. Vassakāra discerned how to defeat the Vajjīs from the Buddha's exposition of the Seven Conditions of Welfare (*satta aparihāniyā dhammā*). So did the Buddha intend to help Ajātasattu defeat the Vajjīs? If not, what was his purpose in expounding the seven Conditions of Welfare to Vassakāra?

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3. If the Buddha really did not accept any kind of violence, as the tradition would have it, why did he not openly speak against it?

This paper will attempt to answer these questions and will argue, in the conclusion, that this event shows the Buddha's disapproving attitude toward a political role of the Buddhist Order.

Introduction

Even though the Buddha was a wandering ascetic living outside the normal social and political atmospheres of his times, he did come into touch from time to time with contemporary political events. One such event, an intriguing one if I may say so, is recorded in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* (DN II 72–76; Walshe 231–232). According to this account, the Buddha was made to give political advice when King Ajātasattu ordered his minister Vassakāra to visit the Buddha, give him the king's respects, and inform him about the king's plan to subdue the country of the Vajjīs. After hearing Vassakāra, the Buddha spoke on seven Conditions of Welfare (*satta aparihāniyā dhammā*), which, according to the Buddha, would ensure the prosperity of the Vajjī country as long as its citizens observed them. Vassakāra shrewdly inferred from the Buddha's discourse that the only solutions would be friendly negotiations or a victory won through smashing the unity of the Vajjī people. According to the commentary, he did divide the Vajjī people later and forced them into submission (Sv II 522–524; An 17–20).

There are perplexing questions regarding the aforesaid event:

1. Why did King Ajātasattu choose to consult a wandering ascetic on a significant matter of state like fighting a war?

2. Vassakāra discerned how to defeat the Vajjīs from the Buddha's exposition of the Seven Conditions of Welfare (*satta aparihāniyā dhammā*). So did the Buddha intend to help Ajātasattu defeat the Vajjīs? If not, what was his purpose in expounding the seven Conditions of Welfare to Vassakāra?
3. If the Buddha really did not accept any kind of violence, as the tradition would have it, why did he not openly speak against it when he was given a perfect chance to do so?

At present, there seem to be no satisfactory answers available for these questions, which has led some scholars to note:

... an *historically improbable* [Emphasis added] event is used here narratively to establish the Buddha's superiority over his interlocutor. (Collins 443–444)

Remaining silent, he did not condemn war and did not say anything in favour of a policy of peace, of non-violence The silent way the Buddha took in this case contrasts with the active part he played in the dispute between the Sākya and Koliya (Ja V 412ff., Sv II 672ff., Dhp-a III 254ff.). (An 17)

Although the historical evidence shows that the Buddha did not encourage kings to go to war, there are also indications that the Buddha was not always especially proactive in taking steps to prevent wars taking place. (Deegalle 5)

Damien Keown views this meeting as part of the evidence for the view that “on certain occasions the Buddha seems tacitly to accept—or at least does not explicitly condemn—the use of force by kings” (72). According to Keown, this view has led scholars like Steven Collins and Eliz-

abeth Harris to “detect ‘two modes’ of Dharma in the Pāli canon with respect to violence” (72).²

However, I believe that this meeting, as recorded in Pāli sources, shows the Buddha acting in accord with the traditional view—that the Buddha does not justify violence in any context—and this paper is an attempt to prove it.

Why Did Ajātasattu Choose to Consult the Buddha on His War Plan?

This question has become important because of Collins’s following observation:

Readers can come to their own conclusions about the possibility that, historically, a king like the parricide Ajātasattu would have sent his Chief Minister to ask a *wandering holy man, publicly*, [Emphasis added] how to set about attacking and conquering a neighboring territory. I find it unlikely. (443–444)

Collins’s doubts boil down to two questions: (1) why should the king have even bothered to consult the Buddha, “a wandering holy man,” on a matter definitely mundane yet very important for the state? (2) Did he not care for his public image as a king when he ordered this (at that time at least) seemingly pointless public query? These questions, and obviously the lack of the reasonable answers, have led him to term this meeting “an historically improbable event” (443–444).

I argue, however, that it is possible to find reasonable answers to these questions without denying the historicity of this story if we consider the details of Ajātasattu’s order issued to Vassakāra. The king’s particular order can be found in the following summary by Collins:

² See the details of the two modes of Dhamma in Collins 419–423.

First we hear Ajātasattu announce his intentions, or hopes, to his minister Vassakāra in strong, even violent, language He then tells Vassakāra to go to the Buddha, greet him politely and then simply announce his plans, in the very same violent words, without an explicit question, indeed without any explanation of why the statement is being made. He is just to note “what the Blessed One says.” (444)

After duly considering the king’s order, I can answer Collins as follows:

1. Ajātasattu chose to consult the Buddha because he probably believed that he could use to his advantage whatever the Buddha said; see his command for his minister: *yathā ca Bhagavā vyākaroti taṃ sādhuḥkaṃ uggahetvā mamaṃ āroceyyāsi, na hi Tathāgatā vitathaṃ bhaṇantīti*. (DN 73) (“And bear carefully in mind whatever the Blessed One may predict, and repeat it to me. For the Buddhas speak nothing untrue!”)³ (Rhys Davids and Rhys Davids 2: 2)

“Buddhas speak nothing untrue!” can mean either that they do not deliberately tell lies (but they may still speak false out of honest ignorance) or that whatever they state is factually true and accordingly reliable. Merely telling no lies would not qualify the Buddha as the king’s consultant, so Ajātasattu must have meant the latter.

How could a king have such unreserved trust in an ascetic? My answer is, why not? Even nowadays, we can see some close disciples of famous religious masters having irrational

³ Cf. Walshe’s version: “And whatever the Lord declares to you, report that faithfully back to me, for Tathāgatas never lie.” (231). The term *vitathaṃ* literally means “1. Untrue, false ...2. Vain, futile” (Apte *vitatha* s. v); accordingly it is open to two interpretations as given above. Yet Walshe has chosen to render only one of them owing to reasons unclear to me.

trust in their gurus, such as “The master must have a reason for saying this or doing that, he cannot be wrong,” etc.; so we cannot deny that Ajātasattu was not such a case. For him, the Buddha might have been more than a religious teacher, for it was the Buddha who had rescued him out of the personal hell of remorse for having killed his own father (DN I 85; Sv I 133–138, 238). Besides, being a religious teacher does not mean that the Buddha would have to face or answer strictly religious questions only. It is a well-known fact that King Pasenadi Kosala consulted the Buddha on many subjects including even family matters (Malalasekara *Pasenadi Kosala* s. v.). If King Ajātasattu happened to trust the Buddha’s wisdom in the matters of state, he would certainly attempt, somehow or other, to get the information out of the latter.

2. Moreover, the king’s public image was perfectly safe. In accord with the king’s order, as seen above, Vassakāra did not explicitly admit that the king himself sought the Buddha’s advice; rather he merely announced the king’s intention to attack the the Vajjīs and waited for the Buddha’s response. Therefore the king would not need to admit that he was seeking the Buddha’s advice, nor that he actually made use of the information gained from the Buddha. Even if the Buddha had openly condemned his ambitions, he could have behaved as if he were unaware of the Buddha’s opposition, pretending that it had ended as part of Vassakāra’s personal discussion with the Buddha and consequently never come to his ears. In short, the king had nothing to lose and everything to gain.

On the other hand, it was only Vassakāra who would look bad in the public eyes; he would appear to the public as a politician who would do anything or stoop to anyone for the sake

of achieving his ends. He was, I think, only a scapegoat to absorb any potential backlash of this meeting.

On the other hand, Harris suggests that Ajātasattu's decision to consult the Buddha on such a matter shows that "he did not consider the latter either ill-informed or dismissive of such political conflicts" (17). If this is the case, we should wonder why the king did not go to the Buddha himself or order Vassakāra to openly ask for advice rather than to make statements out of context in a surreptitious manner.

On the contrary, I believe that the king must certainly have been aware of the Buddha's disapproving attitude towards violence yet was not in a position to concede if the latter chose to speak against his plan. By using Vassakāra, not known as a follower of the Buddha, as a scapegoat, the king removed any need to worry about his relationship with the Buddha even if the latter had taken an ethical stand against his ambition to overcome the the Vajjīs.

Did the Buddha Really Advise Vassakāra How to Destroy the Vajjīs?

This is a very old question, for Buddhaghosa tries to answer it in his commentary as follows:

Kim pana bhagavā brāhmaṇassa imāya kathāya naya-lābhaṃ jānātīti? Āma, jānāti. Jānanto kasmā kathesīti? Anukampāya; evaṃ kir' assa aho-si: Mayā akathitepi katipāhena gantvā sabbe gaṇhissati. Kathite pana samagge bhindanto tīhi saṃvaccharehi gaṇhissati; ettakampi jīvitam eva varaṃ, ettakañhi jīvantā attano patiṭṭhābhūtaṃ puññaṃ karissantī ti. (Dhp-a II 522)

But does the Blessed One know that from this speech the brahmin is gaining access to the proper way? Yes, he knows. If he knows, why did he speak? Out of compassion. They say that he thought thus: "Even if I do not speak, he will go and capture them all

within a few days. But if I speak, he will break up their harmony and capture them, spending three years. Even such a span of life is really important; for while living they will perform merit, which is their own refuge.”

An is not convinced by Buddhaghosa’s explanation; he observes:

We come to wonder about the position of the Buddha in the conflict between Magadha and the Vajjis. If the Buddha had compassion for the Vajjis, why did he not warn the Vajjis of the impending danger from their opponent? (17)

However, An’s criticism seems beside the point, for any warning would not have reduced the death and destruction resulting from the subsequent war. On the contrary, such a warning might have made both countries sustain substantially greater damage, for a war between two well-prepared enemies could have become attrition warfare,⁴ which might have resulted in no real gain for whoever was the victor, given that Māgadha and the Vajjīs were probably not so different in strength.⁵ (Why would Ajātasattu seek the Buddha’s advice or take his time to destroy the unity of the Vajjīs if defeating them militarily were a mere pushover for him?)

He also notes:

According to Buddhaghosa’s interpretation, the Buddha just aimed to postpone the war by three years in order for the Vajjis to do merit for their own salvation. His commentary seems based

⁴ “Attrition warfare is a military strategy in which a belligerent side attempts to win a war by wearing down its enemy to the point of collapse through continuous losses in personnel and matériel [sic.].// The war will usually be won by the side with greater such resources.” (“Attrition warfare”)

⁵ “If the sides are nearly evenly matched, the outcome of a war of attrition is likely to be a Pyrrhic victory.” (“Attrition warfare”)

on the result rather than on the situation in which the Buddha found himself. (An 17)

I agree with him that Buddhaghosa's interpretation seems based on the result, but this fact still cannot convince us to abandon the commentator's explanation unless we are ready to reject all interpretations based on results.

In my opinion, Buddhaghosa's interpretation is unacceptable only because, according to him, the Vajjī people were doomed whatever they tried to do. This contradicts the Buddha's own statement, which essentially was that they could not be defeated as long as they maintained their harmony properly. It also implies that the Buddha was lying outright to Vassakāra.⁶

On the other hand, I argue that we can find the correct answer if we think over the following facts in the context:

1. The Buddha did his best to publicize the meeting between Vassakāra and himself:
 - a. Venerable Ānanda was present when the Buddha met Vassakāra. This means the information Vassakāra obtained was not privy only to him.
 - b. Immediately after their meeting, the Buddha asked Ānanda to have all monks residing at Rājagaha assemble. Such an order is not commonly found in the *suttas*; it would naturally arouse curiosity among monks. And Ānanda would be at hand to answer any question raised by the curious.

⁶ To be fair to Buddhaghosa, he does say "They say" (*kira*), by which he seems to indicate that he is only giving the official interpretation of Mahāvihāra tradition and that he is not necessarily endorsing it.

2. If that meeting became public knowledge in Māgadha, sooner or later the Vajjīs would certainly get the information, for two countries at the brink of war would certainly have spies in each other's territory.⁷
3. Even if the Vajjīs happened to be ignorant of the meeting between Vassakāra and the Buddha, the information Vassakāra got was not news to them, for the Buddha had already taught them the seven Conditions of Welfare before, as the Buddha himself told Vassakāra.
4. The Buddha was seemingly trying to declare his neutral position when he informed Vassakāra of the Vajjīs having already learned these seven conditions, for what he seemed to mean is, "Do not think I am supporting your cause when I tell you about these conditions, for I have already taught these to your enemies too."

Therefore the Buddha was just like a football expert who gives a public assessment of a forthcoming match without giving unfair advantage to either side. What made the difference was that while Ajātasattu made use of the information gained from the Buddha, the Vajjīs failed to do so and suffered for it.

On the other hand, suppose the Vajjīs did take heed to the Buddha's advice and managed to maintain their unity despite Vassakāra's efforts. Then Ajātasattu would have waited as long as possible to attack while waiting for a chance to disrupt the unity of the Vajjīs. Then an imminent war would have been postponed if not canceled altogether by later circumstances. This was, I believe, the Buddha's actual objective for expounding the seven Conditions of Welfare to Vassakāra, and the Vajjīs

⁷ Espionage was in use even at that time. King Pasenadi Kosala himself admitted to the Buddha of using spies to get information (SN I 79; Bodhi 1: 174).

did survive three more years before they lost their harmony and subsequently their freedom. (Of course we cannot be sure that Ajātasattu would have entirely called off the war even if the Vajjīs remained in harmony.)

Why Did the Buddha Not Attempt to Condemn the Impending War?

I have already shown that Ajātasattu seemingly had no wish to give up his ambition even if the Buddha had chosen to speak against it. Therefore, we may be tempted to think that the Buddha was too smart to waste his breath in such a case. However, I argue that it was not a matter of context but that of principle. To understand the general principle that underlies the Buddha's behavior, we should compare this event with two other occasions when the Buddha did try to prevent war:

1. The first (Pj II I 357–358) was the dispute of Sakyans and Koliyans that arose while they were building a dam to use the water of the Rohini river, which divided their territories, during a drought. The Buddha successfully convinced both parties not to make war. It should be noted here that:
 - a. Both parties were relatives of the Buddha.
 - b. The Buddha appeared to act alone without involving the Saṅgha.
2. The second (Dhp-a I 356–358; Ja IV 152) was the attack of Viḍaḍūbha, the king of Kosala, on Sakyans. Again the Buddha attempted to intervene but he failed this time. Viḍaḍūbha managed to destroy Sakyans. Here also it should be noted that:
 - a. One party was related to the Buddha.

- b. The Buddha appeared to act alone without involving the Saṅgha.
3. The third was the Māgadha-Vajjī war, which we have been discussing here. In this case:
 - a. None of the parties were the Buddha's relatives.
 - b. What little the Buddha did was in the presence of Venerable Ānanda.

If we look at all accounts carefully, we will at once notice that the Buddha seemingly declined to act when he did not have blood relation to the parties involved in violence, while he did act when his relatives were involved, which fact is emphasized by Pāli records:

1. The Suttanipāta commentary recounts how the Buddha started to act, when Sakyans and Koliyas were at the brink of war, as follows: *Atha Bhagavā 'ñātakā kalahaṃ karonti; handa ne vāremī' ti ākāsenāgantvā dvinnaṃ senāniam majjhe atṭhāsi.* (Pj II I 357) (“Then the Buddha (thought) thus: 'The relatives are quarreling. Probably I should restrain them,' went through the sky and stood between two armies.”)
2. When he tried to prevent Viḍaḍūbha from attacking Sakyans, he chose to stay under a leafless tree in the Sakyan territory rather than under a shady tree in the Kosala territory; when asked by Viḍaḍūbha why he did so, he answered: *hotu, mahārāja, ñātakānaṃ chāyā nāma sītalā* (Dhp-a I 356–357) (“Let it be, great king, the shade of the relatives is cool.”).

On the other hand, when we think of how the Buddha dealt with Ajātasattu, we can notice that not only that the Buddha did not openly attempt to deter him from fighting wars (against the the Vajjīs or against King Pasenadi Kosala [SN 82-84; Bodhi 1: 177-178]) but also that the

Buddha did not raise even a finger during the time Ajātasattu ascended to power by first putting his father Bimbisāra, a devout follower of the Buddha, into prison and later having him killed (Sv I 133–138).

Now the question is, why? Did the Buddha feel more compassion for his own relatives while not caring enough for others? I answer that the Buddha acted in this particular way not because his compassion for his own relatives was greater than that for strangers, but because he wished to protect his followers from the effects of political events and fortunes. By having his relatives as one or more parties involved, he managed to personalize his actions so that these deeds might be viewed by the public rather as personal efforts of an individual concerned with the well-being of his relatives than as deeds that represented the Buddhist Order as a whole. In other words, the Buddha used his blood relationship with Sakyans to protect his followers from being targeted by the people unhappy with his interventions. This argument is corroborated by the fact that the Buddha acted alone, unaccompanied by his followers, in such events.

On the other hand, Ajātasattu was not a relative of the Buddha nor were his enemies. If the Buddha had chosen to intervene, his act would have been without the excuse of blood relationship; then it would have been interpreted as representing the whole Buddhist Order given his status of leadership, and accordingly drawn his followers into a potential danger zone. And it is not possible to exaggerate the danger that monks dabbling in politics might have to face; we can find in the Vinaya what can happen when monks cross the powers that be, even if unwittingly:

*atha kho rājā Māgadho Seniyō Bimbisāro vohārike mahāmatte pucchi:
yo bhaṇe rājabhaṭaṃ pabbājeti, kiṃ so pasavatīti. upajjhāyassa deva
sīsaṃ chedetabbāṃ, anussāvakassa jivhā uddhāritabbā, gaṇassa
upadḍhaphāsukā bhañjittabbā 'ti. ... rājā Māgadho Seniyō Bimbisāro*

bhagavantam etad avoca: santi bhante rājāno assaddhā appasannā, te appamattakena pi bhikkhū viheṭtheyyum. sādhu bhante ayyā rājabhaṭam na pabbājeyyun ti. (Vin I 74)

Then King Seniya Bimbisāra of Magadha asked the chief ministers of justice: “Good sirs, what does he who lets one go forth who is in a king’s service engender (for himself)?”

“Sire, a preceptor’s head should be cut off, the tongue should be torn from the announcer of a proclamation, half the ribs of a (member of a) group should be broken.” ...

King Seniya Bimbisāra spoke thus to the Lord: “There are, Lord, kings who are of no faith, not believing; these might harm monks even for a trifling matter. It were well, Lord, if the masters did not let one in a king’s service go forth.” (Horner 4: 92)

In the account cited above, the monks who granted going forth to royal servants did so only on account of the latter’s request, not because they wished to dabble in politics. If even such monks could have faced such terrible punishments, we can only imagine which kinds of terrors would have awaited the monks who dared to lobby against a king’s ambitions. The Buddha might have been safe because he was what he was, but his followers would not have been as fortunate. The need to protect his followers should be the exact reason why the Buddha declined to condemn King Ajātasattu’s war plan.

One instance in the history of Burma further testifies to the danger of politics to monks. It is the record of a tribal non-Buddhist king who murdered Buddhist monks because he saw them as a danger to his throne:

Sohanbhvā; the king of Añ:va, was ruthless, without compassion for other living beings and disrespectful toward the Triple Gem . .

. . (Thinking thus,) “These monks have no families but they build up communities by recruiting disciples. They have a potential to revolt. I should capture and kill them.” . . . (he) invited the monks living in the neighbourhood of Cackouñ:, Pañ:ya, Añ:va together with their disciples . . . surrounded them with elephants, horses and soldiers and killed them ... It was in the year 901 (1538 A. D) that the noble monks were killed. (Trans. from Mhannan: 2: 142)

It is an extreme case, yet an ample proof of how a political image can be dangerous to the Buddhist Order.

Conclusion

To sum up my argument as regards the Buddha’s role in the Māgadha-Vajjī war:

1. The king Ajātasattu chose to consult the Buddha probably because: (a) he believed whatever the Buddha said might be useful for his own ends and (b) he had nothing to lose by such an attempt.
2. What the Buddha told Vassakāra was meant to deter the war, not to give any advantage to Ajātasattu or to the Vajjīs.
3. He declined to condemn the war because he did not wish to have his followers come into harm’s way owing to political events.

The meeting of the Buddha and Vassakāra is important for understanding two things: (1) the Buddhist attitude towards violence and (2) the ideal role that ancient Buddhists have envisioned for the Buddhist Order in the general picture of politics and society. Of them:

1. It would have been premature to use a single piece of record for deriving a theory of Buddhist attitude towards violence.

However, I can at least state that the meeting of the Buddha and Vassakāra can be explained in terms of the traditional point of view; therefore, it cannot be conclusive evidence for the theory that Buddhism accepts violence in certain contexts.

2. If my interpretation is correct, the Buddha's behavior when he met Vassakāra shows the Buddha acting as an example to discourage his disciple monks and nuns from getting involved in politics if their political activities have a potential of bringing negative consequences to the Order.

Regarding the conclusion(2), I do not mean that he explicitly prohibited monks and nuns from engaging in politics, for he would have prescribed Vinaya rules against such activities if he intended to bar all politics from the Order. On the contrary, his own involvement in the political conflicts of his relatives seems to suggest that his followers can do likewise if they can manage, like him, to find a plausible excuse for engaging in politics while keeping the Order safe from the backfire of their actions. However, keeping the Order safe may require that such monks cannot leverage their religious status to achieve political objectives, or that they will have to do without the sanction and prestige of the Order, or both.

But is it feasible in real life to participate in politics and keep the Order safe at the same time? The answer is, "It depends." If we look at the history of Burma, for instance, we do see some monks active in politics since the pre-independence period. They may even have high political profiles.⁸ Yet, until 2007, the non-political Saṅgha had not suffered

⁸ Wikipedia gives some information on such a Burmese monk:

U Wisara (... c. 1895-1930) was a Burmese monk, and a national hero of the nation of Myanmar. He was one of the prominent activists against the British rule of Burma. He was captured eventually by the British and put in jail where he died 166 days later after a hunger strike. In Yangon (Rangoon) he is commemorated with the U Wisara Road and the U Wisara Monument ("U Wisara").

from their political activities, even under the British rule. However, during the 2007 uprising of the Saṅgha, many monks and nuns participated in an organized political action and many non-political monks suffered at the hands of the military government as well. Why? Probably because of two reasons: (1) unlike the earlier crises in which some members of the Saṅgha individually participated as part of the activities of laity, the 2007 uprising had monks and nuns as its core while lay persons played only a supportive role so that the government came to view the whole Saṅgha as a serious challenge to its power; (2) according to some observers, it can also partly be attributed to an intelligence failure, for the government at the time seemingly had no proper means to identify their targets because they themselves had wiped out the whole intelligence hierarchy in the 2004 internal power struggle. (The second reason will need further research to be confirmed.)

However, such monks are usually ignored by the main body of Saṅgha and they are not recognized as important figures in the religious atmosphere or in religious histories. Even if they happen to be good monks, religious persons—monks and lay persons alike—tend to think that political monks are bad examples .

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