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Battlefield *Dharma*: American Buddhists in American Wars

Robert M. Bosco¹

Abstract

The Internet has become a space for today's American Buddhist soldiers to think through difficult ethical questions that cannot always be resolved on the battlefield. I argue that this emergent *cyber-sangha* of American Buddhist soldiers signifies the arrival of an important new feature on the landscape of American Buddhism. As Buddhism integrates ever more deeply into American life and collective consciousness, it forms links with American conceptions of national security, military values, and America's role on the world. When viewed in the larger social and cultural context of American Buddhism, the development of this *cyber-sangha* represents a new generation's answer to the predominantly anti-war Buddhism of 1960s and 1970s that continues to define Buddhism in the public imagination. We are thus beginning to perceive the faint outlines of how American Buddhism might be

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changing—accommodating itself, perhaps—to a new post-9/11 nationalism.

Introduction

Today's American Buddhist soldiers are comparatively few in number and spread far and wide throughout the United States and the world. Most of those deployed in Iraq or Afghanistan have returned home. Others serve on ships, or on bases in Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and elsewhere. American Buddhist military chaplains are also few, but growing. As of this writing, a number of candidates for Buddhist military chaplaincy are training at institutions such as the University of the West, and soon, at Naropa University. Buddhist Churches of America, the U.S. Department of Defense's official endorsing agency for Buddhist military chaplains, reports that four to five new candidates have applied for endorsement (Endo). Once commissioned, Buddhist military chaplains are most often sent to minister to U.S. Buddhist soldiers where they are concentrated, such as the West Coast, bases or ships in Asia, or in Iraq or Afghanistan.

The Internet has emerged as an important space in which these soldiers—including the chaplains—can communicate with one another. They rely on the Internet to advertise events (such as *Vesak* celebrations in Iraq) share news (like the commissioning of a new Buddhist chaplain) or links of common interest. However, by far the most common, and, I argue, significant conversations have to do with the ethical issues American Buddhist soldiers face before, during, and after combat. When such questions arise, soldiers tend to turn to each other for help. However, it is difficult to have conversations about being both an American soldier and a Buddhist when fellow Buddhist soldiers are far-flung across the world. A *cyber-sangha* of American Buddhist soldiers has thus emerged to

address this real need. This new *cyber-sangha* is best understood as an *ethical space*: a space that today's American Buddhist soldiers value because it provides them with an outlet to think through difficult ethical questions that cannot always be resolved on the battlefield.

Moreover, this emergent *cyber-sangha* of American Buddhist soldiers signifies the arrival of an important new feature on the landscape of American Buddhism. As Buddhism integrates ever more deeply into American life and collective consciousness, it forms links with American conceptions of national security, military values, and America's role in the world. As I will show below, many American Buddhist soldiers, including chaplains, draw on multiple Buddhist texts and historical episodes to demonstrate the compatibility of Buddhism with the career of soldiering, American military values of honor, duty, and sacrifice, and the defense of American freedoms, especially freedom of religion. When viewed in the larger social and cultural context of *American Buddhism*, the development of this new *cyber-sangha* of American Buddhist soldiers represents a new generation's answer to the predominantly anti-war Buddhism of 1960s and 1970s that continues to define Buddhism in the public imagination.

Who are American Buddhist Soldiers?

My category of "American Buddhist soldiers" includes Buddhist chaplains and current and former non-chaplain soldiers who self-identify as Buddhist. Empirical information on the number of Buddhists in the U.S. Armed Forces (USAF) is difficult to come by, but all roads seem to lead to a 2009 Defense Department study entitled "Pay Grade and Religion of Active Duty Personnel by Service" (U.S. Department of Defense). According to that report, the numbers of self-identified Buddhists in the USAF in 2009 were:

Army:	1,942
Navy:	1,112
Air Force:	1,343
<u>Marines:</u>	<u>928</u>
Total:	5,325

There is no reason to doubt the accuracy of these numbers per se. Alone, however, they do not tell us very much, only how many soldiers among those surveyed chose “Buddhist” as their religion. No further questions were asked; therefore there is no data about diversity of tradition, gender, age, ethnicity, years of military service, combat engagement, or anything else. Respondents self-identify as Buddhist, but we do not know whether they studied at a Zen Temple for ten years prior to military service or read a book about Buddhism for ten minutes. We also do not know whether the respondent entered U.S. military service as a Buddhist or converted after joining. Finally, we will never truly know how many Buddhists there actually are in the American military, because the U.S. Department of Defense does not require soldiers to declare their religion.

Nonetheless, from some knowledgeable sources we can shade in a bit more. Danny Fisher was Associate Professor and Chair of the Buddhist Chaplaincy Department at the University of the West. Having taught a number of rising Buddhist chaplains in all areas, including military chaplaincy, Fisher has noticed certain patterns over time. According to Fisher, most of the University of the West’s students who are prospective military chaplains seem to self-identify as Buddhist at a younger age, with many (but not all) considering themselves Buddhist when they first entered military service. Fisher also points out that the University of the

West's students who are prospective military chaplains are generally supportive of U.S. military involvement in the War on Terror and the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan. Students and other members of the University of the West community with a history of military service during Vietnam and other earlier conflicts, by contrast, seem to have "dropped their faith in the military-industrial complex" upon their return home (Fisher.) Those returning from Vietnam found themselves in a very different social and political climate than today's Buddhist soldiers. However, whether this explains the change in attitude among returning U.S. Buddhist service members remains an educated guess. Only an extended analysis that places Buddhists in the U.S. military in the larger context of religious, social, political, and cultural changes in American society could hypothesize more reliably about the extent of these attitudinal changes and what might be causing them. Fisher's observations are important nonetheless, because they lend support to the hypothesis that newer generations of American Buddhist soldiers have a very different outlook on military service and war than past generations.

Remarks from a number of U.S. military Buddhist chaplains also support this argument. In 2004, the Navy commissioned its first Buddhist Chaplain, Lt. Jeanette Shin. Shin, an ordained priest in the Jōdo Shinshū Pure Land tradition, describes herself as both "pro-military and pro-Jodo Shinshū" (BMS 12/11/2007). According to Shin, the Navy's core values of honor, courage, and commitment reflect the principles of Jōdo Shinshū Buddhism, so there is no necessary contradiction between the two.

In the Army, Captain Thomas Dyer converted to Buddhism from the Southern Baptist Ministry and trained under Thich Hai Vien at the Pho Da Temple in Memphis, Tennessee, and under Khenpo Gawang Rinpoche. Commissioned in 2008, Dyer became the first Buddhist chaplain in the Army's history. He began with the Tennessee National Guard and was deployed to Iraq in 2009 as chaplain to the Army's Regimental

Support Squadron, 278th Armored Cavalry. Dyer's training with Gawang Rinpoche proved formative in molding his outlook on the issue of war and military service. "My teacher concluded that without the military, without civil protection, the world would enter into a very dark place very quickly," he wrote on the website Buddhist Military Sangha (BMS 10/30/2009). Like Shin, Dyer sees no contradiction between being a Buddhist and serving in the military in times of war.

Chaplain (Capt.) Somya Malasri, a Thai native trained in the Burmese Theravāda tradition founded by Mahasi Sayadaw, completed his chaplaincy coursework at the University of the West and became the second active-duty Buddhist chaplain after Dyer in the Army's history in 2010. To do so, however, Malasri had to renounce the monkhood and change his name, because in the Theravāda tradition, a monk cannot be a soldier. For Malasri, too, neither military service nor killing is necessarily incompatible with the teachings of Buddhism.

As of this writing, the Buddhist Churches of America (BCA) is the only official endorsing organization for Buddhist chaplains in the U.S. Armed Forces (USAF). In the late 1980s, Pentagon Chaplain John Mann, former BCA chaplain Rev. Kenryu Tsuji, Kennon Nakamura, and Shig Sugiyama applied to have the U.S. Department of Defense approve the inclusion of Buddhist chaplains in the U.S. military (BCA). The BCA was best positioned to take on this role, owing to its long history in the U.S. and high level of organization. By relying on the BCA to vet and endorse candidates, the U.S. Department of Defense thus avoids the problem of employing self-declared Buddhists with no formal training who may have discovered Buddhism only yesterday.

The BCA represents the Jōdo Shinshū sect of Buddhism in the U.S., however, so the question naturally arises whether interested candidates must endorse or "convert," one might say, to the BCA's Pure Land Buddhism. Aware of this issue, the BCA takes every opportunity to em-

phasize that it does not expect candidates to “buy in” to their doctrine as a condition for endorsement (Fisher). The BCA does prefer to endorse former monks or others who have a track record of formal training in a reputable Buddhist organization. In fact, all current U.S. Buddhist military chaplains have come from 501c3 organizations and have a history of monastic or other formal training (Endo). More Buddhist military chaplains will join the U.S. Armed Forces, as the University of the West’s program continues to grow and other institutions become involved in chaplaincy training. Naropa University, for example, recently graduated their first prospective military chaplaincy student from their M.Div. program (Fisher.)

Once on the job, Buddhist military chaplains are forced to balance multiple priorities simultaneously, including what their faith may tell them, what their professional ethics tell them, what the soldier needs today, and what the military mission requires. Different chaplains juggle these responsibilities differently, but the first priority for all is to serve the soldiers in their care. According to Dyer, a Buddhist Chaplain serves “as a special advisor to the commander of a battalion on the mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being of the soldiers,” be they Buddhist or not (194). As Chaplain, much of what Dyer did in Iraq was what he describes as “*helping-counseling*, which is neither religious nor therapeutic but has to do with daily life problems” such as marriage and family issues, career problems, finances, or relations with other soldiers (196). One soldier, Mike Nam, founder of the website “U.S. Military Buddhists” wrote on the site “some people like myself found Buddhism during military service trying to make sense of some of the madness. Buddhist principles saved me from my constant nightmares, alcoholism, and PTSD” (USMB 1/14/2013).

Somya Malasri of the U.S. Army argues that Buddhist chaplains have an obligation to share techniques with soldiers who suffer from de-

structive emotions before, during, or after combat. According to Malasri, “I think the Soldiers have stress in their minds, so I can help them with meditation. I can teach them how to meditate and how to get rid of stress, anger or anxiety” (BMS 2007). Jeannette Shin has been particularly passionate about delimiting the Buddhist chaplain’s role. She writes that “the most crucial emphasis for chaplains is not on theory and doctrine, but on core counseling: PTSD, stress and anger management and treatment, marriage and family counseling, and clinical pastoral education” (BMS 10/29/09). In a later post she added, “Buddhists, like all other people, make individual choices about their practice of *Dharma* . . . it is not for me to judge how they interpret doctrine” (Shin).

If helping and counseling take priority over doctrine, how do Buddhist military chaplains deal with issues of Buddhist ethics when they arise during war? At the University of the West, where most prospective Buddhist military chaplains go for training, candidates interested in military chaplaincy are not educated in ethical problems exclusive to military service or combat. Rather, they study issues of ethics together with other candidates interested in hospital, prison, or other fields of Buddhist chaplaincy. According to Fisher, the logic behind this approach is to help all students become aware that each field of chaplaincy has its own special challenges, and “no one field has the market cornered on ethically thorny issues; certainly working in prisons, police departments, health care organizations, and other institutions come with their own ethical conundrums to negotiate, so military chaplains are not unique in this regard” (Fisher.)

It would, however, be a mistake to conclude that Buddhist military chaplains can avoid hard problems of applied ethics on the battlefield. Once deployed in today’s theaters of war, they must address in some way the ethical problems their soldiers bring to them. Foremost among these is helping soldiers work through the karmic consequences

of their actions on the battlefield. How to counsel the Buddhist soldier who has—directly or indirectly—killed the enemy or harmed an innocent? For Buddhist military chaplains, the wider equation of Buddhism with nonviolence and peace in American society can itself become a problem, insofar as it can confuse and demoralize American soldiers, and potentially undermine the success of the military mission. As I have shown, many current and former Buddhist chaplains in the U.S. military, though certainly not pro-violence, support the U.S. military and argue forcefully that military values such as duty, honor, and defense of country reflect, rather than contradict, the basic teachings of the *Dharma*. But such interpretations of Buddhism are not self-evident to those Buddhist soldiers who struggle with what their religion teaches about military service and war.

In Buddhism, killing, like any other act of violence or hostility, is an outflow of the negative emotions of greed, hatred, and delusion. A blanket condemnation of killing appears most obviously in Buddhism's First Precept. As expressed in the *Sutta-nipāta*, "Laying aside violence in respect of all beings, both those which are still and those which move . . . he should not kill a living creature, nor cause to kill nor approve of others killing" (quoted in Harvey 69). There are also stories about the Buddha's own battlefield interventions. We are told, for example, that the Buddha Śākyamuni personally intervened to prevent war between the Śākyas (his clan) and the Koliyas, who were preparing to go to war over access to the river Rohini. "The Buddha then got the warrior-nobles to see that they were about to sacrifice something of great value—the lives of warrior-nobles—for something of very little value—water" (Harvey 241).

Another important source supporting Buddhism's core doctrine of nonviolence is the story of King Aśoka Maurya. Famous for his battlefield cruelty, Aśoka renounced violence and, according to pillar inscrip-

tions left behind, ruled his empire according to justice and compassion for the remainder of his time. Finally, in the *Samyutta Nikāya*, we read of an episode in which a soldier asks the Buddha what happens to soldiers killed in battle. Might they be reborn in a special heaven? No, the Buddha answers. Negative actions are the result of negative intentions that flow from greed, hatred, and delusion. Because of this, negative intentions yield negative karmic consequences. Killing could not exist without the intention to kill. Thus, soldiers can expect rebirth into a special hell. After reviewing historical episodes of Buddhist-sanctioned violence in China, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Japan, and elsewhere, Peter Harvey argues “it is difficult to find any plausible ‘Buddhist’ rationales for violence,” later adding that “in general . . . failures of Buddhists to live up to their non-violent ideals can be put down to unresolved human fears and attachments aggravated by politically unstable times” (239, 284).

On the other hand, there are multiple historical examples of Buddhist support for war, imperial expansion, or militant nationalism. As Michael Jerryson writes, “the military has been involved with Buddhist affairs throughout the history of Buddhism” (*Buddhist Fury* 116). Indeed, warrior-monks have existed in China, Korea, Burma, Thailand, and Japan (Jerryson and Juergensmeyer; Victoria; Gombrich). Jerryson has uncovered the existence of “military monks” in the Southern Provinces of Thailand who act in armed defense of the *Dharma* against Malay Muslims (*Buddhist Fury*). In Sri Lanka, nationalist Sinhalese monks look to the ancient story of the defeat of a Tamil king by a Sinhala prince, as recorded in the *Mahāvamsa*, to help justify violence in defense of Buddhism and the nation in their war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Ealam. Tessa Bartholomeusz argues that this story provides the foundation for a “just war ideology” in the Theravāda context (53). Thus, according to Bartholomeusz, “for the monk, it does not logically follow that the Buddhist teaching of non-violence must always—in every case—lead to a conclusion of pacifism” (40). Scholars continue to debate how much

weight such stories, sources, and historical events dealing with military service and war should be given in the Buddhist canon (Keown).

Soldiers in combat do not have the luxury of scholarly debate. During a battle in Iraq, an American Buddhist soldier fired at an armed insurgent crouching on the balcony of a house. The shots killed not only the insurgent, but went through to the house, killing the insurgent's pregnant wife and six-year-old son. The soldier went to Thomas Dyer for help. Dyer recalls, "The soldier recounted a sutra from the *Samyutta Nikāya*. In short, the sutra says that if a warrior kills someone while exerting himself in battle, he will be reborn in hell. As a Buddhist chaplain, how could I help this Buddhist soldier? What could I say?" (201). Dyer told the soldier "although bad things happen in combat, this world cannot sustain itself without protecting forces. We talked about the good military has done . . . then I affirmed him as a soldier, reminding him that his service is valuable and needed and that he . . . did the right action at the right time. As a Buddhist soldier, if his motives are good, his karma is good" (202). Dyer acknowledges that many American Buddhist soldiers are well aware that "it was a common thread of most Buddhist lineages that military service was considered *wrong livelihood* and a vocation that would produce negative karma" (200). Dyer handles this problem by reasoning that "motives are central to the quality of karma being generated" (200). According to this view, it is not killing per se that generates negative karma or condemns a soldier to rebirth in a hell. Rather, the soldier's karmic consequences are determined by the *intention* behind the shot.

The counsel of right intention is not unique to American Buddhist military chaplains. Many Buddhist traditions appeal to right intention to help assuage the karmic consequences of intentional killing in war. In the Chinese Mahāyāna tradition, intentional killing can be acceptable when employed as an expedient means (Yu 201). In Theravāda

Buddhism, the ethics of soldiering revolves not around killing per se but on state of mind (Jerryson “Buddhist Traditions” 47). Like American Buddhist military chaplains today, Sinhalese monks who work with the Sri Lankan army “consider it their duty to increase the soldiers’ morale and help them calm their temper and thoughts” (Jerryson *Buddhist Fury* 104). From this perspective, killing in war, if done with the correct state of mind, need not transgress the general prohibition against the taking of life in the First Precept.

Battlefield Dharma Online

Fundamental questions of Buddhist ethics thus become mortal questions for soldiers in combat. The above anecdote by Dyer suggests that whatever tentative resolutions there may be tend to emerge organically in conversation between chaplain and soldier. As most Buddhist soldiers are scattered far and wide across multiple theaters of deployment, however, such face-to-face counsel is often unavailable. A different kind of environment is required that will connect chaplains with soldiers across time and space. Increasingly, such conversations happen virtually, evidenced by the growth of a new military *cyber-sangha*. The first and most extensive of these online fora is the blog, Buddhist Military Sangha, started in 2007 by former Chaplain Jeanette Shin, of the U.S. Navy. In her introductory post, Shin lists multiple objectives for the site, including:

Provide a welcoming and positive forum for Buddhists currently serving or who have served in the military to communicate and support one another.

Recognize and promote honorable military service as in accord with the Eightfold Path’s Right Livelihood.

Correct misconceptions about Buddhists serving in the military.

Help Buddhist Sanghas learn how to support and understand Buddhist military members, veterans, and their families. (BMS 7/30/2007)

Shin explains, “as a Navy chaplain, I encounter Buddhists from a wide variety of Buddhist traditions and cultures, and also I have met Buddhists who have been ostracized because of their profession. We need a space where we can communicate without fear of criticism or hostility because of our profession or our particular form of Buddhist practice” (BMS 7/30/07). As the objectives above suggest, Buddhist soldiers face unique challenges. Societal assumptions about Buddhism can create psychic disturbances for soldiers during and after combat and make it more difficult to readjust to normal life when they come home. Others may find themselves the object of misunderstanding, a function of the widely held assumption in American society that Buddhism preaches peace, nonviolence, and compassion for all living things. Such assumptions, though not at all baseless, make the very notion of a Buddhist soldier seem incongruous. One purpose of Buddhist Military Sangha, then, is to correct such misperceptions and provide Buddhist soldiers with intellectual, moral, and professional support to counter both group and individual pressures (does my service not violate Buddhist Precepts? Won’t I be trained and required to kill? Will my family, friends, fellow soldiers and *sangha* members understand my predicaments?).

When we investigate virtual spaces like Buddhist Military Sangha, we find that, just like in Dyer’s anecdote from the field, questions of karma and intention are of paramount importance to the soldiers that participate. The very first exchange on Buddhist Military Sangha ran this way:

Soldier (“Greg”): First, how do you reconcile Buddhism with being in the military? The short answer for me is, “Right motivation.” I am interested in your insight, and anyone else’s.

Respondent (“Shin”): For myself personally, I do not see any contradiction with being Buddhist and serving in the military. Ultimately, I view it as defending our religious freedoms, especially our freedom to practice Buddhism without fear of reprisals or oppression. Even in historically “Buddhist” nations, freedom to practice Buddhism has not always been guaranteed, even today. I believe it is important for Buddhists to support our nation, and work to ensure these freedoms will not be eroded. (BMS 7/30/07)

Other contributors emphasize the importance of intention on the battlefield. In 2007, Somya Malasri wrote, “a lot of people ask if a Buddhist can be a Soldier because the first precept is no killing . . . in Buddhism, if you go to war and kill others, it’s your duty, not your intention to kill other people. If a person dies of your intention, and you have anger, that is wrong in Buddhism. When Soldiers go to war, they don’t have any intention to kill others and they don’t have hatred in their minds” (BMS 2007).

The following year, Shin revisited the theme of karma and intention. What is needed, she wrote, is to provide Buddhists who serve in military (or law enforcement) with “a religious and historical context in which to step back and observe our own karmic decisions to serve in these fields. . . . Another reason is to address our allegedly paradoxical existence: some Buddhists have stated that there is absolutely no justification whatsoever to take up arms, even in self-defense of nation or family” (BMS 1/3/08). One such dissenter, the well-known Zen priest and former Director of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship, Alan Senauke, inter-

vened in the online conversation. Senauke wrote, “a group I work with designing Buddhist chaplaincy materials ran up on this question . . . do we include the Buddhist precepts, all versions of which begin with the vow or prohibition against taking life . . . to omit them is to undermine the moral basis of Buddhist teachings. But how individual chaplains will work with this, I don’t know. I would not really like to be in their shoes” (BMS 9/22/2007). This is, Senauke argues, because Buddhist military chaplains, like those of any other faith, “find themselves in the position of counseling men and women within a context that may be fundamentally not moral” (BMS 9/22/07). Senauke’s comment occurred in the context of a debate about conscientious objection. Conscientious objection is a good example of how the equation of Buddhism with nonviolent pacifism has concrete repercussions. The more often American Buddhists enter military service, the less it can be claimed that Buddhism is a religion of peace. This could well rob Buddhist conscientious objectors of their core argument. More importantly, however, Senauke’s objection illustrates very well the tension between the long-standing tradition of anti-war Buddhism in America and the more pro-military orientations of today’s younger Buddhist soldiers.

Shin’s blog is no longer maintained, but newer ones have arisen to take its place. There are Facebook pages such as “Buddhists in the Armed Forces,” begun in 2012 with 169 members, “U.S. Military Buddhists,” and the smaller “Buddhist Veterans and Service Members” with 31 members. The first of these, “Buddhists in the Armed Forces,” was started by a former Marine, medic, and California National Guard member who converted from Christianity. The purpose of the page is to help current and former Buddhist soldiers to “connect with each other and help each other realize that we aren’t alone” (BAF). By February 2012, the site could already boast over 1,000 members. By 2014, that number had doubled. “Buddhist Veterans and Service Members” has a more modest following. It posts news of note for and about Buddhist soldiers

and chaplains, and provides links to other Buddhist programs and support organizations such as Sarah Bender's "Springs Mountain *Sangha*" at the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs. The page claims to take its inspiration from the tradition of *Jinzo*, the Japanese tradition of warrior-monks, and bases its approach on Jōdo Shinshū principles. According to the site, the Jōdo Shinshū philosophy maintains that "instead of insisting we resist our hurtful human natures, Jodo Shinshū endures it as a tool that we can use to see the path to Shinj'in" (BVSM).

These blogs, posts, Facebook pages, and chatrooms frequented by American Buddhist soldiers all represent a new and important development in American Buddhism. "The Cyber-Buddhist tradition is firmly established," writes Lewis Lancaster, and has "become part of the religious tradition" (258; see also Prebish). To this cyber-Buddhist tradition we should now add the *cyber-sangha* of American Buddhist soldiers.

A New Situational Ethic?

American Buddhist soldiers often struggle with the karmic consequences of military service and the morality of killing. What has emerged from chaplains and soldiers, both in the field and online, is a kind of battlefield *Dharma*, an informal but loose consensus meant to give American Buddhist soldiers psychic closure. There are at least two main arguments in this emerging situational ethic. First, American Buddhist soldiers are engaged in a *defensive* war to protect American values and freedoms, especially the freedom of religion. Defense of religious freedom constitutes *right intention* for military service and justifies the soldier's participation in war. A comment by Masri captures this argument well: "you can protect yourself or sacrifice yourself to do the righteous thing. You can sacrifice yourself to protect your country because if there's no country, there's no freedom and you cannot practice your religion" (BMS 2011).

Another good example can be found in an announcement about Veteran's Day, Buddhist style: "for this observance of Veterans Day, please offer your thoughts and prayers for all our Nation's Veterans. Without their courage and sacrifices, we simply would not have the freedom to practice the diverse teachings of Buddha-dharma today" (BMS 11/12/2007). Second, a Buddhist soldier's karmic concerns must be assuaged in order to maintain the soldier's morale and fighting capacity, an essential part of a military chaplain's job. As Thomas Dyer put it, "from the Army's strategic perspective, religion is a 'combat multiplier,' which means that religion is one of the most powerful forces to encourage, help, and sustain a soldier in combat. Mental, emotional, and spiritual health is sustained by religious practice, which helps the Army fulfill its missions" (199). When a soldier comes to feel that the karmic consequences of his or her actions are negative, it erodes morale and can prevent the soldier from returning to the field. Buddhism can only function as a "combat multiplier" if the soldier is made aware that the karmic consequences of killing depend on one's intention in the moment.

American Buddhists in today's American wars do not justify fighting to expand the Buddhist religion, protect Buddhism's purity, or liberate a people from foreign domination. They do not seem to be motivated by religious nationalism, nor are the justifications millenarian or utopian. There is no real analogy between today's American Buddhist soldiers and those of, say, warrior-monks in China, Thailand, or Japan. Rather, the American Buddhist military *sangha* justifies its participation in combat by referring to the protection of the American way of life and the freedoms Americans can enjoy. As one Buddhist Air Force Cadet said when interviewed at the opening of the Buddhist Chapel at the U.S. Air Force Academy, "we realize that war is certainly a thing that we don't want to have to do, but sometimes it is absolutely necessary, and it requires compassion for your country, your family, the people that you are protecting. I think Buddhism definitely has a place there" (BMS

11/1/2007). Some intentions—defense of one’s nation—are the right ones, and can reap positive karmic consequences.

It is not self-evident, however, that such justifications constitute acceptable ones given the priority Buddhism places on compassion, non-violence, and the interconnectivity of all living things. We should pause to at least consider some potential objections to these justifications for military service and killing. For one, participation in a system that conditions the human being to kill may be just as bad as doing the killing oneself. How can an individual act of violence be acceptable if it takes place, as Alan Senauke wrote, “in a context that may be fundamentally not moral?” After all, well-documented and widely used research suggests “the vast majority of combatants throughout history, at the moment of truth when they could and should kill the enemy, have found themselves to be unable to kill” (Grossman, xviii). The purpose of military training is to break down the human being’s inherent resistance to killing a member of our own species. What, then, would the karmic consequences be of knowingly entering a system deliberately designed to condition us to dehumanize and kill? One way out of this problem is to try to remove the individual’s moral reservations about participating in such a system. This is particularly important when the object is to return the soldier to combat as soon as possible. To this end, the soldier can be reminded that what is most important—at least as far as karma is concerned—is individual *intention*.

The very entities one kills to defend might also be considered problematic. “The deepest delusion” writes Peter Harvey, “is the ‘I am’ conceit: the feeling/attitude/gut reaction that one has a permanent, substantial self or ‘I’ that must be protected at all costs. . . . yet just as a person contains no fixed essence as ‘Self,’ surely such conventional groupings as ‘a country’ or ‘a community’ lack any permanent essence that needs defending at all costs” (240). Bringing violence to bear on

oneself and others for the sake of the nation or a set of abstract ideas is a function of precisely the type of clinging or attachment that causes human suffering. From this perspective, no retroactive intention can remove the fact that Buddhist soldiers kill and are killed in defense of illusion.

Conclusion

As early as 1999, Charles Prebish wrote that “an almost endless set of possible permutations” awaits American Buddhism, “not the least of these will be the way in which the expanding role of information-exchange technology opens new modes of communication in the various Buddhist American *sanghas*” (262). The recent emergence of an American Buddhist military *sangha* constitutes one of the most interesting developments in contemporary American Buddhism. As Prebish’s remark anticipated, the Internet is very important to this *sangha*, for it provides a space for understanding and ethical conversation. Moreover, I argue, it is *quintessentially American*. Buddhist soldiers join the armed forces and conduct themselves in combat in the wider context of a defensive war to protect American values such as freedom, especially freedom of religion. I have argued that this can be seen as a reaction to the legacy in the U.S. of Buddhism being equated with a religion of peace. For Buddhism to serve as a “combat multiplier,” its identification with peace and nonviolence must be removed. The notion that being a Buddhist means that one cannot in any circumstances take life can be demoralizing and confusing for the Buddhist soldier, for whom the need to kill in combat is real and immediate.

More research is needed into this important phenomenon in American Buddhism. Demographic information about today’s American Buddhist soldiers will be key. To what extent do these demographics re-

flect the historical development of Buddhism in America? Another direction might explore the relationship between doctrine and the role it plays in the development of American Buddhist military ethics. Do certain traditions lend themselves more than others to the confluence between Buddhist doctrine and military service? For example, although the BCA does not require chaplains seeking its endorsement to adopt the teachings of Jōdo-Shinshū Buddhism, the influence of doctrine on the personal and structural aspects of military service cannot be ruled out. From the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries in Japan, the Jōdo-Shinshū school fought to defend its “True Pure Land” doctrine against the Nichiren sect. It is thus plausible that some forms of Buddhism in the United States lend themselves to a ready accommodation with American military values.

I have suggested here that the attempt to link Buddhism with military values and defense of American freedoms is in part a reaction to the legacy of Buddhism as a religion of nonviolent pacifism that continues to grip the American imagination. “The more I studied, the more I became confused and conflicted with the military and the Buddhist practice,” wrote one soldier, Mark, on Buddhist Military Sangha. Now, after having communicated with Buddhist chaplains and soldiers online, Mark has come to feel that “. . . it really is possible to integrate the two. The discipline that is inherent in the military helps one follow the Eightfold Path” (BMS 9/22/07). Through these Buddhist soldiers, we are beginning to perceive the faint outlines of how American Buddhism might be changing—accommodating itself, perhaps—to a new post-9/11 nationalism.

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