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Buddhism, Nonviolence, and Power

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Abstract

Contemporary Buddhists have in recent decades given the world outstanding examples of nonviolent activism. Although these movements have demonstrated great courage and have generated massive popular support, sadly, none of them has, as yet, prevailed. In this paper I will explore how nonviolent power was exercised in these cases. I will draw upon the work of nonviolent theorist Gene Sharp to help us understand the nature and sources of nonviolent power. I will then use that material to analyze the power dynamics of the Buddhist nonviolent struggles in Vietnam during the war years, and in Burma and Tibet today. I will also reflect upon Buddhist attitudes towards the wielding of nonviolent power in conflict situations.

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Contemporary Buddhists have in recent decades given the world outstanding examples of nonviolent activism. Although these movements have demonstrated awe-inspiring courage and have generated massive popular support, sadly, none of them has, as yet, prevailed. In this paper I will explore how nonviolent power was exercised in these cases.¹

I will focus upon three Buddhist nonviolent struggles: the Vietnamese Buddhist “Struggle Movement” between the years 1963 and 1966 that attempted to end the war in that country; the Tibetan Liberation Movement led by His Holiness the Dalai Lama; and the Burmese Democracy Movement of 1988-1990 and 2007. These cases, of course, are quite different. The Vietnamese struggle was not in opposition to a particular oppressive group *per se*, but was an effort to induce a series of governments to stop prosecuting the war and to strive instead for a negotiated, political settlement. The Tibetan struggle is with an invading, occupying and controlling power that has displaced the native government, repressed Buddhism, and reduced the native people of Tibet to a minority in their own country by relocating large numbers of Han Chinese into Tibetan territory. The Burmese struggle is an effort to remove from power the dictatorship of the Burmese military and to restore democracy and human rights.

Presumably, those who care about suffering and about nonviolence long for success in the Tibetan and Burmese struggles, for while the Vietnamese struggle is long over, these two struggles are not. A great deal of suffering would come to an end if either or both of these struggles would succeed. In addition, in this age of globalization, success or failure in these struggles has an impact on others. Successful struggles breed imitation, whereas failed struggles tend, naturally enough, to make people want to turn away from what they may see as failed tactics. Success matters, both for the sake of oppressed and suffering people and for the sake of the future of nonviolence.

So far, however, there have been no successes, no victories in the Buddhist nonviolent struggles. It is not as if nonviolence cannot win struggles, even against great and violent powers. Nonviolence was the tool used in many successful struggles: the *svraj* (self-rule) movement in India against the British Raj; the Solidarity movement in Poland against Communist rule; the civil rights movement in the United States; the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa; the “people power” deposing of Marcos in the Philippines; and the deposing of General Martinez in El Salvador, among others.² Indeed, the general sentiment that the Buddhist struggle in Vietnam failed needs to be qualified. When viewed separately, the six month nonviolent struggle from May 8, 1963 to November 1, 1963 succeeded in the overthrow of Diem. If the movement had ended then, it would have been considered a significant nonviolent victory. However, it continued on and that victory became obscured in the failure of the larger movement.

I was once asked in a radio interview by a particularly audacious interviewer: Do you think that the Engaged Buddhists have failed to win any of their struggles because there is no God in Buddhism? Although my answer to that question was and is an unqualified, “no,” I was at that time unable to answer to my own satisfaction why it is that Engaged Buddhist nonviolent struggles have not yet succeeded. Certainly it is necessary to regard each case as unique and to evaluate each one separately.

In this paper, I propose to draw upon the thinking of Gene Sharp to clarify our understanding of nonviolent power. I will use those ideas to analyze the dynamics of power in the nonviolent struggles of Vietnam during the war years, and Tibet and Burma today. Gene Sharp is arguably the foremost theoretician of nonviolent power in the world today. He is also an established friend of both the Burmese and Tibetan Engaged Buddhists, having worked directly with both. I will use the Buddhist cas-

es to reflect back upon Sharp's theories, offering a response from the Buddhist side to Sharp's views. As we proceed, we will also reflect upon the ethical issues implicit in Buddhist use of nonviolent power.

Before taking up Sharp's analysis of power, I must point out that contemporary Buddhist activism often seems to have an uneasy relationship with the very idea of power, despite the fact that it engages in social and political struggles. For example, looking back upon the Struggle Movement in Vietnam, Ven. Thich Nhat Hanh has reflected:

There were people who described it [the 1963 struggle against Diem] as a holy struggle, because the intention was so pure. The struggle in 1966, 1967, and on up to the present has never been as pure as it was in 1963. Because, when we speak of a third force, of replacing the government, of all those things, there is always an intention of seizing or at least sharing power. ...

I think the motive of the struggle determines almost everything. [At the time of the 1963 struggle] you see that people are suffering and you are suffering, and you want to change. No desire, no ambition, is involved. So, you come together easily! I have never seen that kind of spirit again, after the 1963 coup. We have done a lot to try to bring it back, but we haven't been able to. ... It was so beautiful. (Berrigan and Hanh 80-81)

There is no question that motivation is important. There is a reason, I believe, why religion is often (though by no means always) involved in the motivation of those involved in nonviolent struggles—religion is often able to impart to its adherents great courage, hope and, at its best, an idealistic vision for which one is prepared to sacrifice. Motivation, however, is one thing, and success is another.

Another example of an uneasy Buddhist relationship with power is a 2007 statement by Ven. Ashin Nayaka, a leader of the International

Burmese Monks Organization. With respect to the “Saffron Revolution,” the monk-led protests in Burma/Myanmar of 2007, he said, “the Saffron Revolution is not a power struggle, but a conflict between peace and moral freedom on one side and the forces of political repression on the other” (Nayaka). Here we see a similar distaste for the very idea of political power.

These expressions of apparent distaste for the very idea of political power made by two important contemporary leaders of nonviolent struggles require a comment. On the one hand, this attitude is entirely in keeping with the ethos of contemporary Engaged Buddhism, a movement of social and political activism found throughout the Buddhist world in which Thich Nhat Hanh is a major leader. This movement, although having practical aims, also strives to embody the highest ideals of Buddhism, including selflessness. Perhaps the distaste for the idea of political power noted above stems from a perceived incompatibility between the ideals of Buddhism—including, for example, the intention to maintain an attitude of selflessness and universal benevolence—with the idea of “grasping” power for oneself, or for one’s “side” in a struggle.

On the other hand, this apparent distaste for power is entirely out of keeping with much of the history of Buddhism. The historical record clearly shows that in very many times and places a great deal of political power was wielded by monks, who frequently advised or served rulers. In addition, there was considerable symbiosis between Buddhism and the state in such countries as Tibet, with its monk-led government, and Thailand, with its national slogan, “Nation, King, and Religion” and its Emerald Buddha, possession of which was felt to be an essential source of power for the king. All this has been regarded as quite proper and even normative by most Buddhists in these and many other times and places.

Indeed, one may question (as do such Buddhist activist leaders as Ven. Walpola Rahula and Dr. A. T. Ariyaratne, both of Sri Lanka) whether the contemporary negative Buddhist attitude towards political power is at least partly a result of the Western colonial occupation in much of South and Southeast Asia, which eliminated the political advice and service roles of Buddhist monks, along with many of their constructive social functions, effectively confining them to their most unworldly roles (Rahula 71-89). Christian missionaries subsequently castigated Buddhism for its other-worldliness and subsequent generations soon forgot that Buddhism had ever been seriously involved in social and political matters. In light of the historically great participation of Buddhism in the shared wielding of political power, perhaps the real question is whether the contemporary negative attitude towards political power is in fact a negative feeling about contending for power with those who hold it, as opposed to supporting and serving the rulers and participating in their power, which has been the normative political posture for Buddhism. There have, of course, been many occasions when monks have contended for power with power-holders, such as the infamous “monk-soldiers” of medieval Japan; but such contending has generally been regarded with strong distaste by posterity, unless it has involved monks struggling against foreign invaders and occupiers (as, for example, in Korea).

Furthermore, although I wrote above that, “those who care about suffering and about nonviolence long for success” in these struggles, I have found, to my surprise, that this is not necessarily the case. Linked to the phenomenon of some Buddhists finding the idea of power struggles distasteful and/or unethical, I have found that some Buddhists, at least, are similarly prone to question the idea of winning such struggles. When I have had occasion to speak with Asian Buddhist monks about my concern that Buddhists are not winning any of their nonviolent struggles, the inevitable response (given with a smile) has been: “ah, but what

is winning?” as if either (1) this is a philosophically complex and elusive subject, or (2) there is no fixing samsara, therefore there is no winning. I daresay, however, that the people of Burma know very well indeed what it would mean to win their struggle.

In short, negative attitudes towards the idea of struggling for power and quizzical attitudes towards winning such a struggle are present in the contemporary Buddhist world. However, nonviolent theoretician Gene Sharp argues that whether one likes it or not, the success or failure of a nonviolent struggle is finally determined by who holds the greatest power in a power struggle. Would it, then, be important for contemporary Buddhists to think more positively about struggling for power if they want their struggles to succeed? Would it be important for Buddhists to believe in winning in order to have their struggles succeed?

Let us examine Sharp’s views. Sharp begins his magnum opus, *The Politics of Nonviolent Power*, by investigating the nature of political power itself. He argues persuasively that the power of the state, even the most despotic state, ultimately rests upon the consent and cooperation of the people of that state.³ He begins making his case by pointing out that rulers, whether a single individual or a small, governing group, do not and never could rule the state by themselves. Every ruler has only two hands and twenty-four hours a day of time. In order to wield power, all rulers must acquire power from sources outside of themselves. He discusses six sources of such power.

- *Authority*. This is the right to give commands and to be obeyed voluntarily by the people. Sharp argues that although rulers can use violence to punish people who do not obey them, this cannot be the main source of their power. This is because it takes resources to inflict violent punishment—for example, policemen or soldiers who will be in the right time and place to see the disobedience and punish it. This can be done for the occasional disobeyer but it

cannot be done for an entire country full of people. The rulers depend upon the majority of people obeying automatically without the use of violent force, of which there is a finite supply.

- *Human resources.* By themselves, rulers can actually do very little; they require subordinates to execute their orders. A source of power for rulers, then, is the cooperation of government ministers, the entire government bureaucracy, the military, and police.
- *Knowledge.* By extension, another source of the power of rulers is having command of an array of skills and knowledge—planners, engineers, a weapons industry, manufacturers, etc.
- *Culture.* The power of the ruler is affected by religious, psychological and ideological factors, including habits and attitudes towards obedience and submission.
- *Resources.* Rulers require command of material resources—property, food and water, natural resources, financial resources, means of communication, and transportation.
- *Enforcement.* A final source of rulers' power is the ability to inflict harm through penalties and punishments.

Upon examination, it becomes clear that all these sources of the power of rulers fundamentally depend upon the consent and cooperation of the people. Authority, as we have seen, is nothing but the consent and acquiescence of the people. Similarly, the human resources upon which the ruler directly depends would not be available to the ruler unless people allowed themselves to be of use, whether they be civil servants, soldiers or manufacturers. Even natural resources, which might seem to be independent of human consent, have to be delivered by human beings to the place where they are wanted. Penalties, too, must be delivered by human agents. A ruler cannot personally arrest or shoot

everyone everywhere who disobeys him; he relies upon others to do this for him.

In short, everything that a ruler needs in order to exercise power depends upon the cooperation of others. Others put the power into his hands. Therefore, each of these sources of the ruler's power is something that could also, at least in theory, be withheld from the ruler. Thus, Sharp is able to argue that the people of the state have sufficient nonviolent power to overturn a government that they do not accept when they remove the consent and cooperation upon which that government depends. That is, the people gain control "not by the infliction of superior violence ..., but rather by the subjects' declining to supply the powerholder with the sources of his power, by cutting off his power at the roots" (Sharp *Politics* 47). Might this be a conception of power that would be acceptable even to the most exacting Buddhist ethics (assuming that the ethics did not require withdrawal from the world and its concerns)? Could those who understand their struggle in the most selfless and idealistic terms embrace this conception of power?

Of course, people do not routinely rid themselves of unwanted governments. To do so is very, very difficult. Sharp identifies two main impediments to the people's exercise of their power to unseat tyrants: will and ability (Sharp *Politics* 31-48). In order to acquire the will to change the status quo, Sharp argues that the people must overcome their ignorance of the fact that it is they who are empowering the ruler by accepting and cooperating with his rule. When they understand this, they must firmly decide that they are going to withdraw their cooperation from the ruler. In addition to acquiring the will to make change happen, it is also necessary to have an idea of *how* to make change happen. Sharp argues that in order to achieve success in a nonviolent struggle, it is essential that there be group or mass action, and furthermore that there should be a carefully considered strategy based upon an un-

derstanding of how nonviolent power works. It is not difficult to see that the Buddhist attitudes discussed above—disdain towards the idea of contending for power and a quizzical attitude towards winning—would be significant impediments to success according to Sharp's theories.

It must be acknowledged that nonviolent power is by no means safe. The more a nonviolent group builds up power, the more they are a threat to their opponents and therefore risk violent repression. Struggling nonviolently does not remove a group from the risk of harm. However, most nonviolent activists believe that there are likely to be fewer casualties in a nonviolent struggle than in a violent one. This is one of the reasons that Aung San Suu Kyi has given for taking a nonviolent approach in the Burmese struggle. She has said:

We've chosen non-violence because it is the best way to protect the people, and in the long term assure the future stability of democracy. ... [I]f you have a choice and feel that you have an equal chance of succeeding, I think you certainly ought to choose the non-violent way, because it means that fewer people will be hurt (Suu Kyi 114).

Similarly, Ven. Samdhong Rinpoche, the Kalon Tripa of the Tibetan Government in Exile, has said:

Due to our non-violent approach, not only is the Tibet issue still alive, but not a single PRC [People's Republic of China] or Tibetan life has been lost as a result of non-violence. That is also a great achievement: to preserve human life is very important and very sacred (Samdhong Rinpoche 158-159).

Sharp explains that there are four ways in which victory may be achieved in a nonviolent struggle.⁴ First, in cases of "conversion," the nonviolent group succeeds in changing the attitude of their opponents, "converting" them, such that the opponents no longer want to continue

their repression and voluntarily change their behavior in a way that is satisfactory to the nonviolent strugglers. This scenario describes what Gandhi aimed for and achieved in his struggle with the British. He wanted the British to leave India, but he wanted them to leave “as friends.” This, in fact, is exactly what happened.

A second scenario is “accommodation.” In this scenario, the opponents are not converted and do not change their original perspective of wishing to dominate the nonviolent group. However, they ultimately come to agree to at least some of the demands of the nonviolent strugglers and change their behavior accordingly, despite the fact that they still have sufficient power to refuse. Why do they change, if they have not been forced to do so? The opponents change because they have come to feel that though they could continue to repress the nonviolent strugglers, it is not worth it to them to do so; that is, the costs to them of repressing the nonviolent group outweigh the benefits. There are many ways that this could happen. For example, there may be a feeling that although the nonviolent group is wrong, the oppressors have gone too far in violently repressing them. There may be a division within the group of opponents, with those favoring continued repression needing to bow to the wishes of others in their group who feel such repression is no longer worth the trouble. Again, the opponents may come to believe that the economic cost of repressing the nonviolent strugglers is too high, due to such factors as economic boycotts or the high cost of extensive policing.

A third scenario by means of which change can come about through nonviolent means involves “nonviolent coercion.” Nonviolent coercion occurs in instances in which the opponents are forced to give in to the demands of the nonviolent strugglers, despite their wish not to do so, due to the power of the nonviolent group. Generally speaking, nonviolent coercion may succeed when the nonviolent group’s noncoopera-

tion and defiance has either made it impossible for the social, economic and political system to operate or has made it impossible for the oppressors to successfully repress the nonviolent group (Sharp *Politics* 741).

The final scenario of nonviolent change is “disintegration.” In this rare situation, “the defiance and noncooperation [of the nonviolent group] have been so massive, and the severance of the sources of the opponents’ power has been so complete, that the regime has simply fallen apart (Sharp *Alternatives* 14).” This, then, is an extreme case of nonviolent coercion.

These four scenarios of change are based upon two ways of using power. (1) Opponents can be converted to the view of the nonviolent strugglers and give in to their demands because they want to. (2) Or the opponents can be coerced to accommodate to the demands of the nonviolent strugglers. Buddhist ideals clearly accommodate conversion; but can they accommodate coercion? In any case, Engaged Buddhists have used not only conversion but coercion as well in at least some of their struggles, as we shall see. Let us now turn to a consideration of our three nonviolent Buddhist struggles in the light of this understanding of nonviolent power.

Vietnam

Let us begin with the Vietnamese Struggle Movement of 1963-1966. This movement, led by the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBC), aimed to end the war in that country and to resolve the conflict between North and South Vietnam by negotiation. Although the target, therefore, was not a particular group of opponents *per se*, the Struggle Movement nonetheless was able to amass significant political power. In 1965, American CIA analysis determined that the Buddhists were “strong enough to make unworkable any set of political arrangements their leaders care to oppose (Kahin 267).”⁵ What were the sources of their power? This can be

conveniently discussed using the three categories of nonviolent action proposed by Sharp.⁶

(1) Acts of “nonviolent protest and persuasion” are actions in which a nonviolent group expresses its opposition to or its support for a government or its actions. Although this may seem to be no more than a weak form of self-expression, these acts can generate significant power. By arousing attention and publicizing an issue they invite support from people not yet committed. They encourage those who are committed to become more deeply committed and possibly take action. Nonviolent protests are thus important in broadening the base of support of the movement. They also put the opponent on notice that their authority is being challenged, letting them know that there is a group of committed people who are not going to unquestioningly accept whatever is handed down (Sharp *Politics* 117-118). In this way, they weaken the opponent’s aura of authority, or expected obedience, thus weakening its power.

Between 1963 and 1966, South Vietnam saw a great variety of forms of nonviolent protest. These included: holding many massive public assemblies and marches; using poetry, folk songs, and anti-war songs to inspire and educate people; shaving heads, thereby taking on the appearance of a monk or nun, as a protest of the government’s actions; reading statements and making demands; public mourning and funeral processions. These acts and others continued throughout the movement.

Indeed, the Struggle Movement began with an act of symbolic and nonviolent protest, as do many nonviolent struggles. The Diem regime of South Vietnam had forbidden the display of religious flags; in practice, it permitted the display of the Catholic flag but prohibited the Buddhist flag. In 1963 when Buddhists in Hue flew Buddhist flags as part of a Vesak celebration, those flags were torn down. The flags were just cloth, but their tearing down symbolized the oppression of the Buddhist majority of the country. That night, when a Buddhist radio program was

not aired as expected, a crowd gathered at the station. This was a spontaneous act of nonviolent protest. The government ordered the crowd to disperse and when they did not, they fired into the crowd without warning, killing seven children and one woman. This event outraged the public, resulting in what Sharp calls “political jiu jitsu” (Sharp *Politics* 657ff.).

Political jiu jitsu is at hand when a government’s acts of violence rebound against itself. Typically, it occurs when a nonviolent action so threatens a repressive regime that it responds with violence. The violence is so inappropriate and offensive as a response to a nonviolent action that people are outraged. As a consequence, public opinion turns against the regime and support for the nonviolent activists increases. Already committed members of the movement tend to become further radicalized and their determination strengthened. Members of the public previously uncommitted may jump into active participation with the nonviolent activists. Allies of the blatantly oppressive regime may withdraw their support. The regime’s crackdown may also open up a fissure within the repressive regime itself, with some part of that group growing uneasy or even actively opposing the violent repression. All of this happened in Vietnam.

In the case of the attack at the radio station in Vietnam, the consequence of the government’s action was that the Struggle Movement was ignited. Two days later, over ten thousand people participated in a protest demonstration in Hue and the Buddhist leadership began to make public demands of the government. Three months later, government forces raided Buddhist pagodas in several cities. Monks were forcefully ousted, 1,420 of them were arrested, several were killed, about thirty were injured, and the pagodas themselves were ransacked. In further political jiu jitsu, these attacks rebounded against the regime in the most serious way. South Vietnamese generals began to plan a coup; the United States government, whose support was essential to the regime,

gave encouragement to the coup planners, who struck a few months later. The coup was bloodless except for the executions of Diem and his brother Nhu. Although these executions diminish the purity of the nonviolence that led to the coup, it should be noted that those executions were not part of the *power* that brought the regime down. Nonviolent power did that.

Although some might believe that nonviolent protest is weak, this account should make it clear that in some circumstances nonviolent protest can be so powerful that it is able to bring down oppressive power. This is perhaps especially so when an oppressive regime over-reacts and its own violent force sows the seeds of its own destruction.

(2) Acts of “noncooperation,” Sharp’s second category, involve the nonviolent activists deliberately withdrawing from the ordinary and expected forms of cooperation with the government. Noncooperation can be social—as in the withdrawal of religious services or student strikes; economic—as in consumer boycotts, embargoes, worker’s strikes or the nonpayment of taxes; or political—as in the boycott of elections, the boycott of government institutions, and noncooperation with military conscription (Sharp *Politics* 183-184). To the extent that the opponent government requires cooperation in order to function, actions such as these, when engaged in by a sufficient number of people over a sufficient period of time, constitute a direct loss of power and a real challenge to the existence of the regime.

The Vietnamese Struggle Movement engaged in a variety of forms of social, economic and political noncooperation. These included: many strikes; economic shutdown; the return of government licenses; mass resignations of university professors and government administrators; the boycott of classes by students; the refusal by officials to participate in public policy announcements; political resignations; the boycott of elections; the refusal of military conscription; widespread aid and pro-

tection of military deserters and draft resisters; and mutiny by the military.

Although it is difficult to measure the power of actions like these, it should be clear that if such actions as strikes, shutdowns, boycotts and draft resistance are massive enough and relentless enough, they may seriously weaken the authority and power of the government, putting it on the defensive and destabilizing it by raising serious questions in the minds of both the people and the government itself about how long it can endure. The mutiny by the army was a potentially decisive action. We will further discuss it below. We note here that the army's mutiny would never have come about without the cumulative effect of these plentiful and massive nonviolent, yet powerful, acts of noncooperation.

(3) Acts of "nonviolent intervention" use psychological, physical, social, economic or political means to intervene in the functioning of the government. They may either disrupt government functions or establish alternatives (Sharp *Politics* 357-358). Forms of nonviolent intervention used by the Struggle Movement included: the construction of alternative schools, such as the School of Youth for Social Service and Van Hanh University; the establishment of alternative communications, such as a publishing house, a journal and underground information circulation; the interjection of the activists themselves in front of troops in order to prevent the troops from entering their destination; placing sacred family altars in the street in the path of approaching tanks (in hopes of stopping them); fasting, both for self-purification and in the effort to convert others; and self-immolation.

A word must be said on the self-immolations of Vietnamese monks, nuns and laypeople. Although there is no question that these acts were extremely powerful, it is open to debate whether these acts were nonviolent. I do not propose to go into this subject in detail here as I have written about it elsewhere (King). Sharp, evidently considering

these acts to be violent, does not include them in his discussion. I am aware that many Buddhists, especially Mahayana Buddhists, understand them to be nonviolent acts, the acts of bodhisattvas. Whether violent or nonviolent, these are acts of self-suffering, similar to fasts, which Sharp considers to be acts of political intervention. Self-suffering may function to put pressure on an opponent, or it may be an effort to touch the opponent so deeply that he will be converted to the point of view of the self-sufferer. Certainly the Buddhist self-immolations in Vietnam had the latter intention. There is no doubt that especially in Vietnam, and to an extent even in the United States where these actions were not well understood, the self-immolations, at least until 1966, were extremely powerful.⁷ Their power lay in the fact that they were a form of self-chosen and self-accepted suffering. Many nonviolent activists deeply believe that self-suffering is the most powerful way of bringing about the conversion of one's opponents in a struggle. Gandhi advocated and repeatedly used self-suffering during his campaign, as did Martin Luther King, Jr., both of whom succeeded in winning their struggles by means of the conversion of their opponents. Gandhi explains it thus:

[I]f you want something really important to be done you must not merely satisfy reason, you must move the heart also. The appeal of reason is more to the head but the penetration of the heart comes from suffering. It opens up the inner understanding of man.⁸

The Vietnamese self-immolations appealed to the heart and indeed went beyond this to call up the veneration accorded the ideal of the bodhisattva.

In the end, despite all these actions, heroic courage, and massive support, the Struggle Movement was defeated. Why? In 1966 major parts of the South Vietnamese government's essential power base in northern South Vietnam were slipping away from them. As the U.S. Secretary of

State wrote to the U.S. President, in Hue and Danang “the police, civil servants, and large elements of the local 1st Division [troops] are in total sympathy with the [Buddhist-led] ‘struggle’ group.”⁹ The government was losing control. When General Ky brought Saigon troops in to crush the movement, a local general mutinied and blocked the Saigon troops from moving. Another general also declared for the Struggle Movement and General Ky had to back down. Public concessions were made to the Buddhists promising the granting of all their demands and it looked briefly as if the movement was on the verge of winning the struggle, but in reality General Ky just retreated to an American base where he prepared a larger assault force. A few weeks later, when local troops had been lured away, the government’s military crackdown recommenced. Using American arms, tanks and bases they completely crushed the opposition. After this, the Struggle Movement never again was able to gather sufficient power to seriously challenge the government.

Let us examine the movement in light of the four scenarios for change discussed by Sharp. It is clear that in 1966 accommodation was not going to happen. The government had ample opportunities to accommodate the movement by allowing elections to be scheduled as the movement was demanding, but their promises to hold elections were just decoys used to mollify the movement temporarily. The Struggle Movement did have enough power in 1964 to elicit accommodation from the government of Major General Nguyen Khanh, but when Khanh began to accommodate Buddhist demands, he was removed from power. The American government simply would not tolerate a government embracing the demands of the Struggle Movement.

I believe that the Struggle Movement’s actions created a situation that combined the dynamics of conversion with those of nonviolent coercion. The most visible and dramatic power was the power inviting conversion. The self-immolations strongly invited all those who wanted

to continue the war to change their minds. The public funerals of self-immolators reinforced this, as did the extensive suffering of many other nonviolent activists, the anti-war poetry and songs, and the public assemblies and marches. There is no doubt that quite a few did change their minds, as demonstrated by the mutiny within the army.

The mutiny of the army in Hue and Danang manifested a critical fissure in the power base of the Saigon government. If this mutiny had not been crushed and if it had spread to the military in other areas of Vietnam, the Struggle Movement could have won. This military mutiny did not come from nowhere, however. It was the culmination of a sustained, three year campaign in which the Struggle Movement had steadily amassed power and public support in all sectors of society—religious and lay, students, civil servants, workers, peasants—through a combination of all the tactics they had used, the public demonstrations, strikes, boycotts, draft resistance, etc. that together steadily eroded the authority and power of the Saigon government. There was no shortage of repression of the movement—there were constant attacks, arrests, tortures and executions—but this repression did not stop the Movement. If the Movement had not been out-manuevered in the final crackdown, and, critically, if the Saigon government had not had the strong support of the United States, the Struggle Movement might have succeeded in forcing the government to step down and be replaced by an elected government that would presumably have reached to the North for a political solution to the conflict. In this scenario, the top leaders would have been felled by nonviolent coercion, but their crucial power base—certain generals, mid-level officers and rank-and-file soldiers—would have been won over to support of the Struggle Movement by conversion.

Arguably, conversion is the most nonviolent of all the nonviolent approaches. Perhaps those Buddhists with a reluctance to think of nonviolent struggles as power contests would be pleased to see that the

power amassed by the nonviolent movement in Vietnam acted most effectively when it was bringing about the conversion of others to the movement.

Burma/Myanmar

When we examine the present military government of Burma for the sources of its power, we readily see that it has very little authority (one wonders how many people in Burma at present actually believe their government deserves to rule) but it has an abundance of the other sources of power. The Burmese government has access to all the workers and skills it needs by means of its ability to pay salaries in a country that it itself has impoverished. The government has access to wealth and various commodities by the willingness of certain governments to trade with it. The ultimate source of its power is the ability to inflict dire punishments on any who dare to challenge it.

How can the government's power be weakened? A strict international arms and trade embargo of Burma would go a long way towards this end by weakening the government's ability to punish those who challenge it and its ability to pay those who serve it. Tragically, this seems impossible to effect.

The key to the situation seems to be for the nonviolent opposition to interfere with the government's ability to deliver punishments to those who challenge it; that is, somehow to get the soldiers, police, informers, etc., not to carry out orders to suppress the people. This, of course, is not easily done. Factors weighing against effectively achieving this are substantial: the huge size of the army; the extensive use of forcibly recruited, abused and threatened child soldiers (reportedly one in five Burmese soldiers is a child); the fact that for many people, the security forces are the only viable source of livelihood; and the worry of severe punishment in case of flight or defection.

The Burmese opposition is no doubt well aware that it needs to win over the army, but how is it to be done? One way to achieve this, in Sharp's scenario, would be to induce in the soldiers a change of heart, a "conversion" that would cause them to stop their soldiering and either join the opposition or simply walk away. In fact, little "change of heart" as such may be necessary; how many soldiers can want to attack civilians, much less monks and nuns? What is needed for many is a way out. There are no doubt threats of the severest penalties to any soldier who fails to carry out orders or who deserts. Moreover, such actions by an occasional lone individual do not amount to much; they must be done by a group. But how is that to be engineered when informers are everywhere?

There were somewhat comparable situations in Vietnam and the Philippines that could possibly shed some light on how to bring about a mutiny within the military. In both cases, a nonviolent struggle against a government reached a crucial moment when a part of the army defected from the government to the rebel side. The Philippines is an especially comparable case: there a nonviolent mass movement rose up and successfully deposed a despised dictator, Ferdinand Marcos, with a military mutiny playing a crucial role. Let us briefly examine that case.¹⁰

The undoing of Marcos' control of the military apparently was rooted in a combination of two things: the resentment of officers who were passed over for promotion due to the cronyism of Marcos and his chief lieutenant; and the ambition of reform-minded officers who wanted to see the military be more professional and effective. The military was thus riven by cliques. When the leader of a clique realized that Marcos knew of his disloyalty and planned to arrest or assassinate him, he broke from Marcos, taking with him another leader and troops that were loyal to them both. They then publicly declared their abandonment of Marcos and their support for the opposition leader, Corazon Aquino.

They knew that these steps invited an attack from troops loyal to Marcos. At this critical juncture, they called the local cardinal of the Catholic Church and asked for his help (the Church had already been supporting Aquino). The cardinal then got on the radio and asked Catholics to go where the rebel leaders were and support them. The crowd that gathered was said to number fifty thousand unarmed men, women and children. With praying nuns out in front, the crowd swarmed around the rebel troops and leaders, protecting them with their bodies. As armored personnel carriers converged on them, no one moved. Though the armored vehicles might have plowed right through the crowd, as happened at Tiananmen Square in Beijing in 1989, on this occasion the personnel carriers stopped. The drivers did not want to kill the people. Thereafter, when a colonel who commanded a helicopter attack squadron was ordered by the regime to attack the rebels, he and sixteen pilots flew their helicopters to the rebels' base instead. The colonel later said, "All I wanted to say was we followed our conscience. I have not really done much in my life and for once I wanted to make a decision for my country" (Ackerman and Duvall 390). Citizen and religious groups continued to protect the rebels. Marcos' power was gone.

What can we learn from this? With regard to how defections in the Burmese military might be engineered, we may note that in the Philippines the nonviolent activists were not the ones who organized the military's defections. The defections came from within the military as a result of internal dynamics within the military itself, and hence that aspect of the defection was outside the control of the activists. However, it was the achievement of the activists that they had made themselves the inevitable place for the rebels to turn once they broke with Marcos.

Human nature being what it is, it is highly likely that there are similar dynamics within the Burmese army. This is not something that the opposition can control. What is under the control of the Burmese

opposition is to make themselves an appealing and inevitable place for any rebels to turn and to be prepared to turn out massive public support for any rebels. However, although the civilian support of rebel troops in the Philippines turned out well, there are no guarantees on this point. If there were a mutiny in Burma and Burmese civilians were to interpose themselves between government and rebel forces as in the Philippines, the Burmese tanks might run over them. The Burmese well know that in 1988 government troops did fire on nonviolent demonstrators and thousands of people were killed.

Another element to underline in the undoing of Marcos was the active role played by the Catholic Church. Obviously, there is a clear parallel in Burma in the active role being played by the Sangha. In the Philippines, I note that there was a direct plea from the cardinal of the Church, the highest local official, for people to go where the rebels were and show their solidarity with them. This action was decisive for the positive outcome of the struggle.

The role played by the Sangha in the 2007 “Saffron Revolution” in Burma has been breathtaking. Their courage and leadership has made a huge contribution to the movement. Their actions have publicly held up the moral bankruptcy of the government and made clear that the regime is not accepted by the Sangha. The way that the public responded to the monks and nuns was also critical, as they showed up in huge numbers in appreciation and support, spontaneously gathering whenever the monastics appeared, walking and standing with them.

The monastics’ 2007 public demonstration of their opposition to the regime presented the regime with an unpleasant dilemma. On the one hand, if the regime were to let the monastics continue demonstrating, the demonstrations would grow and grow and the regime would lose more and more power every day. On the other hand, if the government were to attack the monastics, it would call up bitter disgust and deep re-

jection from the public. Ultimately, of course, the regime chose to attack the monastics. That attack should, if Sharp's theory is correct, have called up the "political jiu jitsu" of which we spoke earlier, the regime's show of power rebounding against itself by calling up more deeply dedicated opposition than before, thereby empowering the movement. So far, however, it seems that the power of the government's repression is far greater than the power of any "jiu jitsu" rebound effect.

In taking to the streets it was critical for the monastics to maintain nonviolent discipline. Their goal is at least as much to attract lukewarm supporters of the regime—such as soldiers—to join the opposition as it is to discredit the regime. In order for this to occur, the soldiers cannot be harmed but must be respected and invited in one way or another to stop supporting the regime and join with the opposition.

The Burmese monastic leadership has clearly been mindful of this and has certainly tried to do this. An eyewitness¹¹ to the 2007 Saffron Revolution reported this scene:

The crowd had grown. Maybe things were getting a little bit rowdy. They [the monks] would say, "Okay, let's stop." Everybody sat down. They would lead some meditation, some prayers, some chanting. One monk got up and asked the crowd, "Don't fight! Be disciplined! Be united and join us. Anyone can join, but we don't accept violence at all." And the crowd went crazy. (Asia Society)

The crowd's strong and joyful response to the nonviolent ideals of the monks is, it seems to me, a key point, indicating that it is these ideals, together with the monastics who not only speak these ideals but also embody them in who and what they are, that draw people to the monastics and make them want to support them. These ideals and the monastics who embody them may, therefore, be the ultimate source of the Buddhists' power.

It is not possible for me to speak of a way forward for the Burmese nonviolent opposition. I am by no means qualified to make suggestions that practically require first hand experience of the situation and morally require personal engagement and risk. I can do no more than make a few suggestions from a distance on the basis of Sharp's analyses.

Antipathy to the Burmese regime seems to be at an all time high. On top of everything else, the government was unable to respond effectively to the emergency of Cyclone Nargis and actually interfered with those who were trying to help. Who can be left who actually wants the regime to rule? This antipathy favors the opposition. Unfortunately, as far as I have learned, despair is also very high. This favors the regime.

Immediately after the 2007 demonstrations, Burmese opposition supporters in the West suggested that the time for street demonstrations, which expose people to great danger, was past and expressed the hope that the opposition might turn to tactics that endanger both monastics and laity less than street demonstrations, such as work slowdowns, errors in the production of goods and services for the military, or stay-at-home strikes. In addition, as ever, an ongoing hope is that there will be a mutiny within the army. In fact, in the past there have been some Burmese government troops who have mutinied and joined the opposition, so this is not an unreasonable hope. Loyalty of mid-rank military officers is always potentially volatile. If the Burmese regime at some point comes to be seen as losing power, mid-rank officers with an eye on their status post-regime may desert the regime. In the Philippines, the two officers who deserted Marcos became, respectively, Defense Minister and Armed Forces Chief Of Staff in the succeeding Aquino government. Burmese officers must know that such things are possible. But in order for such a thing to occur, the government must be seen to be seriously challenged. There are still activists in Burma, laying low for

now. This struggle is by no means over, though it remains extraordinarily difficult.

Tibet

It may seem that Tibetan independence or autonomy is the most hopeless of causes when considered from a power perspective. Nevertheless, at this moment in time when the Tibetan leadership is re-evaluating the strategy of their struggle with China, I suggest that it is imperative for the Tibetans to evaluate their struggle in terms of power considerations.

Reports tell us that more and more younger Tibetans have been losing patience with the Dalai Lama's approach. It seems that their argument for a radically different approach, possibly using violence, is gaining ground, at least among the younger generation. But what does a power analysis reveal? The answer is simple: there is no scenario in which the Tibetans could have enough violent power to win in a violent power contest against China. The Kalon Tripa, Ven. Samdhong Rinpoche, has said this very plainly, and to my mind, unarguably:

If we were not engaged in the non-violent path, but in the path of violence, ... then we should evaluate what sort of result could have been achieved by this. It was absolutely clear that none of the world governments would help the armed struggle nor sympathize with it. And the entire cause would have been completely swept away from the international scenario by this time, fifty years on. The Tibet question would have been completely forgotten and the armed rebellion would have been crushed very easily by the PRC [People's Republic of China]...

[W]e remain firmly convinced that it was the right choice by His Holiness to choose the non-violent path. It is the reason why the Tibet issue is still alive today, and growing stronger, and there is a lot of concern for Tibet. Also, China is not able to ignore

the insistence of the Tibet issue, and they cannot completely ignore His Holiness or the TGIE [Tibetan Government in Exile]. They need to respond, and they need to deal with us. That has been the result of the non-violent struggle. (Samdhong Rinpoche 156-158)

Here the Rinpoche looks at the Tibet situation, and based on an assessment of power, concludes that the non-violent approach was the only possible approach. He points out that it has achieved a certain measure of success—certainly more than violence could have achieved.

What about the use of nonviolent coercion? Who that compares Tibet and China in terms of political, military and economic power would think that Tibet can prevail in that kind of power contest? Moreover, the importation of large numbers of Han Chinese into Tibet has reached the point at which the Tibetan government in exile believes that Han Chinese now outnumber Tibetans within Tibet. This dilution of the Tibetan people with Han people makes it very difficult to take away the power of the local government, since any boycotts, strikes or other non-cooperation on the part of Tibetans would be undercut by the Han Chinese simply continuing business as usual.

What of the Dalai Lama's approach? His Holiness has maintained the strictest nonviolent stance while offering various proposals to resolve Tibet's differences with China and while inviting the Chinese to engage in a dialogue. The Chinese, after fifty years of stone walling, have recently begun to talk with the Tibetans. But we should expect nothing from those talks. Why should talking produce any change when China has so much power and Tibet so little? Where does this leave the Tibetans?

As we have seen, options for the nonviolent use of power ultimately come down to two: conversion or coercion. The Tibetans cannot

coerce, so it seems clear that their only viable option is to try to convert. Those impatient with the Dalai Lama's approach need to see that the Tibetans' strongest source of power—their *only* real source of power—has been their consistently holding the higher moral ground, their ability to represent an ideal and live that ideal. The impeccably nonviolent stance that the Dalai Lama has maintained over the decades, together with the impact of his entire personality, has consistently and powerfully invited conversion from around the world and even within China.

If this analysis is correct, it could be helpful to communicate to the younger Tibetans that His Holiness' approach *is, in fact, amassing power*. His approach is *not* just passively waiting and “doing nothing.” It is actively engaging the struggle by inviting conversion from among the Chinese people. There have been reports out of China for some time of significant numbers of young people who see Tibet as an appealing “spiritual land,” an intriguing alternative to the meaningless materialism they see around them in the PRC. As the older generation of Chinese leaders dies out they will be replaced by a new generation. If that new generation has a positive image of Tibet and sympathetic interest in Tibetan culture and religion, the leadership might ease the repression of the Tibetans such that their culture and religion could once again flourish in their own land. Admittedly, this is at present only a distant possibility; however, it seems to be the only possibility of the Tibetans achieving a condition in which, although they would not have independence, they would be able in other respects to live their lives the way they choose. It seems, then, that the Tibetans' approach thus far aims for the conversion of a sufficient number of the Chinese people and future Chinese leaders such that in the future the Chinese would be willing to grant the Tibetans freedom of religion, the preservation of their culture, and possibly some internal autonomy.

If this strategy is pursued, it must be understood that violence, such as the violence around the time of the 2008 Olympics, is a major setback to the process of inviting conversion. Chinese public opinion reacted very negatively to that violence. The Chinese internal propaganda machine is masterful at taking the smallest incident and using it to stir up public disapproval of the Tibetan cause. The Tibetans and their allies must not give them anything with which to work.

In this context, it is useful to note how important to this strategy it is to communicate the Tibetan perspective to the Chinese people. There are projects underway now with the aim of opening up more communication between Tibetans and Chinese via the internet in order to provide an alternative to the Chinese government's propaganda. Efforts of this nature must by all means grow, along with more intentional efforts to develop understanding regarding the Tibetan struggle among Chinese studying abroad.

In addition, a natural ally of the Tibetans will be movements within China for increased political freedom and rights for the Chinese themselves. It would be natural for the Tibetans to attach themselves to those struggles. Those Chinese who want more freedom and rights for themselves should be able to become sympathetic to the Tibetans' cause once they come to understand the Tibetans' perspective and experience.

In short, I believe that a power analysis of the Tibetan situation persuasively demonstrates the correctness of the Dalai Lama's approach thus far, the necessity of continuing and extending it, and the imperative of avoiding violence. It is a painfully slow process, but there is hope for the Tibetans in pursuing such a strategy.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I propose that it can be helpful to examine the struggles in Vietnam, Burma and Tibet in terms of power dynamics. On the other

hand, having considered these situations from a power perspective, I find myself drawn to the conclusion that there is something beside the dynamics of a power struggle that should remain as a central focus in the Buddhist community.

In my view, in Tibet, it is abundantly clear that Buddhists' greatest source of power is their ability to represent an ideal and live that ideal. In fact, the same was probably true in Vietnam and seems true today in Burma. In Tibet, Vietnam and Burma, Buddhism's strength and ability to lead a national struggle lies in two facts: (1) it is the only non-government national organization with widespread public sympathy and respect; and (2) it represents the ideals of the people. If it were ever to stop representing those ideals, its power would vanish.

I earlier raised a question about the way that some monks speak about their struggles, for example, the way Ashin Nayaka spoke during the Saffron Revolution. To quote him once again, "From a Buddhist point of view, the Saffron Revolution is not a power struggle. We came out to the street just to speak out. We came out in the street just for chanting for peace, for loving-kindness, for compassion." From Sharp's point of view, if this is really how the leaders of a nonviolent struggle think, perhaps this attitude prevents them from looking at the power issues that they need to examine in order to succeed. However, in responding to Sharp from a Buddhist point of view, it seems crucial to recognize that it is exactly the ideal embodied in this way of speaking that is so attractive to the people. It is the Sangha's ability to represent this ideal that makes the Burmese, Tibetan and Vietnamese people embrace the Sangha's leadership; it gives the Buddhist nonviolent movements power. If the Sangha were ever to stop embodying these ideals, it would have little to offer the struggle. I suggest that although it is helpful to Buddhist nonviolent struggles to adopt a power analysis of the kind that Sharp suggests—critical in the case of Tibet—the Buddhist nonviolent strugglers also have

something to teach Sharp about the importance and power—at least to the Buddhist nonviolent struggles—of spiritual ideals.

Notes

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the International Buddhist Conference on the United Nations Day of Vesak Celebrations in Bangkok, 5 May 2009. This earlier version was published in the UNDV Conference Volume, *Buddhist Approach to Political Conflict and Peace Development*, 4-6 May 2552/2009 Thailand. Republished with permission.

² For more information, see Peter Ackerman and Jack Duvall, *A Force More Powerful: A Century of Nonviolent Conflict* (New York: Palgrave, 2000).

³ The following summarizes Sharp, *Politics*, pp. 10-12 and portions of Chapter 1.

⁴ For this section, I draw mostly upon Sharp, *Politics*, pp. 705-768. See also his *There are Realistic Alternatives* (Boston: Albert Einstein Institution, 2003), pp. 13-14.

⁵ Kahin cites CIA, Memorandum for the national Intelligence Board, SNIE 53-65, “Short Term Prospects in South Vietnam,” February 2, 1965.

⁶ Gene Sharp makes brief reference to a number of the Struggle Movement’s forms of action in *Politics*. They are scattered throughout the book.

⁷ Wimark reports that there were one hundred or more self-immolations during 1970-1971 but during that time the power of the South Vietnamese government was not seriously shaken by the Buddhist movement (Wimark, 22).

⁸ Gandhi, cited in Sharp, *Politics* 709, quoted from Nirmal Kumar Bose, *Studies in Gandhism* (Calcutta: Indian Associated Publishing Co. 1947), p. 162.

⁹ Memorandum for the President from Dean Rusk, "Political Situation in South Vietnam" April 2, 1966 (Kahin 421).

¹⁰ For my account of the Philippines, I draw upon Ackerman and Duvall, Chapter Ten.

¹¹ The eyewitness was Patrick Shank of the U.S. Campaign for Burma. He was reporting at a conference held at the Asia Society on October 5, 2007 (Asia Society).

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