

Just a Little Peace

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22/12/2003

INTRODUCTION

‘This is peaceful, this is sublime; that is, the stilling of all activities, the relinquishing of all belongings, the evaporation of craving, fading away, cessation, Nibbana.’

We would do well to pause here for a while. This is one of the most important, often repeated descriptions of Nibbana, the ultimate goal of all Buddhist practice. It is perhaps presumptuous to begin at the finish, to present the goal as the starting point. The Buddha himself was reticent in speaking of the end, preferring to focus his attention on the means. It is so seductive to reify the highest good into some metaphysical Absolute, a Cosmic Consciousness, or a Clear Light Diamond Voidness. Yet any such conception is limited and hence inadequate, and so the Buddha studiously avoided such terminology, relying rather on the language of negation to steer us away from false conceptions. Yet Nibbana, while metaphysically negative, is most emphatically psychologically positive. And so this refrain may be taken up in meditation as the ‘recollection of peace’, since the sustained presence of the mere idea of peace in consciousness will slowly settle the mind in true peace. For the Buddha there was no sharp duality between the path and the goal.

‘The Blessed One has well explained to his disciples the path leading to Nibbana, and they coalesce, Nibbana and the path, just as the waters of the Ganges and the Yamuna coalesce and flow on together.’^{xi}

The Bodhisatta (‘one intent on enlightenment’) left his home life to wander forth in search of the ‘unexcelled state of perfect peace’ (*anuttaram santivarapadam*). It is characteristic of his holistic, balanced approach that the path he discovered evolves in reflection of the goal, spiralling ever inwards, away from conflict and towards resolution, away from dissonance and towards harmony. In our keynote quote at the head of this article it is striking that the Buddha described Nibbana as the ‘stilling of all activities’. The word I have translated as ‘stilling’ is in the original Pali ‘*samatha*’, which, being cognate with the English word ‘same’, literally means ‘evenness’. *Samatha*, in the sense of ‘serenity of mind’, is best known in Buddhism as the term for one of the two great wings of Buddhist meditation, the other being *vipassana*, insight or discernment. This saying gently reminds us that peace of mind is not something trivial or incidental; it is not an indulgence or a sidetrack, but is the means by which we embody in our own field of consciousness the highest truth, Nibbana.

All Buddhists are familiar with the story of how the Bodhisatta's idyllic home life was disturbed by the distressing encounter with the signs of suffering – the old man, the sick man, and the dead man – and how the encounter with the fourth sign, a renunciate seeker, prompted him to go forth in search of peace. Yet few are aware that the early texts offer another account of the going forth, an account that, by virtue of its simplicity and directness, may perhaps make a greater claim to authenticity.ⁱⁱ This is the Attadanda Sutta, preserved in one of the oldest portions of the Sutta Nipata, the Atthakavagga, a compilation where conflict and resolution feature as outstanding themes. Here are the opening verses.

‘From violence embraced, fear is born.
See the people fight!
I will declare the inspiration
Which aroused a sense of urgency in me.

‘I saw this generation writhing about,
Like a fish in too little water,
Nursing animosity for each other.
Seeing this, fear descended upon me.

‘All around, the world has no core,
Every direction is trembling;
Wishing for a home for myself,
I saw no place uncontested.

‘Seeing this animosity
Discontent arose in me.
And then I saw a barb –
Hard to see, nestling in the heart.

‘Struck by this barb,
One runs about in all directions.
But having extracted that same barb,
One neither runs about nor sinks down.ⁱⁱⁱ

And so the spiritual quest (*ariyapariyesana*) of the Buddha himself may be seen as a root-level solution to the problem of human conflict. This solution can never be imposed on or derived from the external conditions of human culture and society. It is a deep, inner truth, ‘hard to see, nestling in the heart.’ Why is this? It is because the key problem is suffering, and suffering is inescapably private. No-one can feel another's pain; we can empathise, but can never experience their pain in just the same way as they do. So attempted solutions to the problem of suffering through social engineering can never succeed. Indeed, the naïve belief in worldly Utopias has in practice often led to a kind of brutal absolutism, a cold insensitivity as the suffering of the individual is rendered puny and insignificant in contrast with the needs of the State. We should not forget that the earliest Utopia, Plato's Republic, is a blueprint for a military dictatorship more in harmony with the warlike Spartans than with the democratic Athenians. Nevertheless, just as the Buddha saw the path merging with the goal,

he saw that outer peace converges into inner peace; there is no sharp dichotomy. Sufficient harmony and stability in the external and social environment are essential supports for the development of inner peace through meditation.

THE DISCOURSE ON NON-CONFLICT

So the way of practice includes both the inner and outer elements. The *locus classicus* for this idea is the Aranavibhanga Sutta ('Discourse on Non-conflict').^{iv} This discourse is found in the Theravadin Majjhima Nikaya preserved in Pali, and also the Sarvastivadin Madhyama Agama preserved in Chinese; it is also one of the mere dozen or so early discourses preserved in Tibetan. In both Majjhimas it is included in a chapter called the Vibhangavagga. This chapter is of great historical interest because it is the only chapter that contains virtually the same group of ten discourses in both Majjhimas, and also shares the same title. It must therefore be considered one of the key structural elements in the development of the Majjhima, and might possibly be considered as one of the seeds around which the collection crystallised. The Aranavibhanga is one of two discourses in the Vibhangavagga that explicitly refers back to the Buddha's first discourse at Benares.^v Thus in terms of both its place within the structure of the scriptures and also its content, the Aranavibhanga should be regarded as a key teaching, closely grounded on the wellsprings of the Dhamma.

The discourse opens with the famous statement, slightly rephrased from the first sermon:

'One should not pursue sensual pleasure, which is low, vulgar, coarse, ignoble, and pointless; and should not pursue self-mortification, which is painful, ignoble, and unbeneficial. The middle way awakened to by the Tathagata avoids both extremes; it gives vision, it gives knowledge, it leads to peace, to clear knowledge, to enlightenment, to Nibbana.'^{vi}

Notice how this statement is phrased in terms of a trinity – the two extremes and the escape – rather than a simple duality. While it is of course often necessary to speak in terms of dualities – this and not-this – the insistence on dualities as absolute black-and-whites is a potent source of intolerance and conflict, especially in religious dialogue. This kind of language is most characteristic of religions that conceive of the spiritual goal or essence as 'One', and must demonize all else as the threatening 'Other'. The most characteristic Buddhist number is not '1' but '0', a number whose existence and power went unsuspected by all the Western philosophers and whose discovery was facilitated by the Indian philosophical climate permeated by the Buddhist notion of emptiness. While '1' is rigid, unaccommodating, and unyielding, '0' is gentle and embracing.

The two extremes are alike characterized as 'with suffering, vexation, despair, and fever'. Here again the dichotomy is dissolved; we are looking at the common factors underlying two seemingly opposite ways of life. The world entices us to seek gratification through the senses. The Buddha is not advising us to give up our true sources of happiness, but to look more deeply into the suffering inherent in the stimulation and excitement of sense pleasures. Any meaningful spiritual path must acknowledge the limitations inherent in sensual experience. But the ascetics of the Buddha's day often reacted to these perceived drawbacks in a morbidly excessive manner, torturing their bodies in a sadly misguided attempt to find freedom for the soul. In fact such practices, whether pursued by the Indian non-Buddhist

yogis or in the West by certain of the Christian monastics, invariably presume a metaphysic of radical soul/body dualism. They are not merely violent and excessive, but also philosophically crude, totally alien to the gentle and harmonious approach of the Buddha.

In this light it is quite worrying to see that certain of the Buddhist traditions of today actually practice forms of ritualized bodily mutilation, burning their skin with lighted incense, or amputating one or more of the joints of their fingers. The ultimate extension of these practices was viewed with horror all over the world as Vietnamese monks immolated themselves as a political protest. This was not a new innovation invented by those monks; self-immolation was a recorded tradition in some of the Chinese Buddhist traditions. These practices are inspired by certain of the Jataka tales that depict the Bodhisattva offering up his limbs or even his life in his endeavour to attain enlightenment. But many of the Jatakas originated as pre-Buddhist folk tales, and thus sprang from precisely the same religious milieu that the Buddha criticised in his first sermon. These practices of self-mutilation are closer in spirit to the initiation rites of many primitive peoples than to the sophisticated psychology of the Buddha. Can anyone today really believe that the all-enlightened Buddha, so gentle and compassionate, would have asked his followers to do such a thing? I hope that when the non-Buddhist origins of these violent and useless practices are realised such excesses of cultural Buddhism will be left behind.

The middle way that avoids these two extremes is none other than the noble eightfold path: right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, and right concentration. Now, all of these facets of spiritual life can be seen from the perspective of peace or non-conflict. But rather than analysing each in detail, the Buddha focussed on those two that are most intimately concerned with, respectively, outer and inner peace, that is, right speech and right concentration. With regard to right speech he said:

‘One should know what it is to extol and what it is to disparage, and knowing both, one should neither extol nor disparage but should teach only the Dhamma.’^{vii}

This is explained as follows. When one says, for example, that ‘All those indulging in sensual pleasures are full of suffering and vexation and they are practising the wrong way’, then one is extolling some. When one says that ‘All those free from sensual craving are without suffering and vexation and are practising the right way’, then one praises some. But when one says that ‘The indulgence in sensual pleasures is a state of suffering and vexation and it is the wrong way’, then one neither extols nor disparages but teaches only the Dhamma. And when one says that ‘The freedom from sensual craving is a state without suffering and vexation and it is the right way’, then too one neither extols nor disparages but teaches only the Dhamma.

The crucial point here is that one’s words should be phrased in terms of the principle rather than the person. This is a powerful distinction. Let’s say we see a rich man refusing to give when approached by a charity worker. If we respond by saying ‘What a selfish person!’ this stands as a condemnation of their whole being. We have separated them from us, implicitly standing on our own moral superiority. On a psychological level this is hard for that person to bear; when we hear someone making comments like that about ourselves we are likely to get upset, perhaps angry and defensive, or, worse, we might even believe them: ‘Maybe I really am a selfish person!’ On a philosophical level the problem is equally serious, for we

have exceeded what may be legitimately inferred from the actual event, drawing conclusions without sufficient justification and thus drifting away from the truth. Of course all of us will sometimes do the right thing and sometimes not; we should not be tried, convicted, and sentenced just because we make one mistake, or for that matter, because we make many mistakes.

But this creates a dilemma: if we cannot pass judgement on persons, where stands moral discourse? How is it possible for us to maintain an open and honest dialogue on matters of pressing ethical urgency? The Buddha's point was that dialogue can be sustained if we stick to statements of principle. If we say 'What a selfish thing to do' we are commenting on the observable act, not judging the whole person. Since each of us makes many choices, both good and bad, we imply that our own choices should be measured by the same standard, and that we therefore share a common moral ground. Most importantly, we do not lock that individual into a negative self-image, and thus we invite them to make a better choice in the future. Of course, just making this verbal distinction in dialogue does not alone ensure harmony. We are strongly attached to our acts and ideas, and when they are criticised we will likely still get upset, even if the speaker does not condemn us as a person. The Buddha offered us many other principles that can help lead to peaceful conflict resolution; some of these are discussed below.

In the discourse the discussion has so far been carried on in the context of the two extremes; now the Buddha turns to examine the middle way:

‘One should know how to define pleasure, and, knowing that, one should pursue pleasure within oneself.’^{viii}

The Buddha defines two kinds of pleasure. Firstly, sensual pleasure, ‘a filthy pleasure, a coarse pleasure, an ignoble pleasure. I say of this kind of pleasure that it should not be pursued, should not be developed, that it should not be cultivated, and that it should be feared.’ These are strong words, words that in our materialistic culture many will find unpalatable. We are constantly being sold the image of sensual gratification through our media and culture, and although I think many thoughtful people can, on an intellectual level, see through the triviality of it all, the danger of the lure and the urgent importance of letting go are not easy to appreciate. In the ‘Great Discourse on the Mass of Suffering’ the Buddha gave several of the dangers of sensual craving, some of which are directly connected with the theme of conflict.

‘Again, with sensual pleasures as the cause...kings quarrel with kings, nobles with nobles, priests with priests, householders with householders; mother quarrels with child, child with mother, father with child, child with father, brother with brother, brother with sister, sister with brother, friend with friend. And here in their quarrels, brawls, and disputes they attack each other with fists, clods, sticks, or knives, whereby they incur death or deadly suffering.
Now this is a danger of sensual pleasures...

‘And again, with sensual pleasures as the cause...men take swords and shields, and buckle on bows and quivers, and they charge into battle massed in double array with arrows and spears flying and swords flashing; and there they are wounded by arrows and spears, and their

heads are cut off by swords, whereby they incur death or deadly suffering. Now this too is a danger in sensual pleasures...^{ix}

Here the Buddha points to an undeniable truth: although the overt cause of human conflict is usually anger, lurking just below the surface is often greed in its most vicious and perverse forms. The classic expression of this is those two inevitable companions of war: rape and pillage. While these most savage corruptions of human behaviour remain serious problems, they have been supplemented by the more sophisticated forms of greed underlying modern geopolitics. The long term solution to this will lie in the development of an ethic of universal compassion and contentment that recognizes the oneness of our humanity over the diversity of our nationalities.

So rather than the vain search for happiness through sense stimulation, the Buddha encouraged us to seek pleasure within. Whereas the pre-Buddhist yogis, recognising the limits of sensual pleasure, reacted by asserting that pain is the path to happiness, the Buddha was able to appreciate the subtle distinction between carnal and spiritual happiness. Here as always the prime paradigm for spiritual pleasure is the four jhanas. The two extremes – the pleasures and the pains of the body – are avoided by the middle way, the deep inner happiness of the mind. Elsewhere, too, the practice of jhana is equated with the middle way.

‘Bhante, the Blessed One is not devoted to the pursuit of pleasure in sensuality, which is low, vulgar, common, ignoble, and pointless; nor is he devoted to self-torment, which is painful, ignoble, and pointless. The Blessed One is one who gains the four jhanas which constitute the higher mind, and are a blissful abiding here & now at will, without trouble or difficulty.’^x

In the Aranavibhanga Sutta the Buddha declares that:

‘This is called the bliss of renunciation, the bliss of seclusion, the bliss of peace, the bliss of enlightenment. I say of this kind of pleasure that it should be pursued, it should be developed, it should be cultivated, and that it should not be feared.’^{xi}

So this way of peace treats external peace, whether at a social or an individual level, as a mere preliminary, essential but not sufficient. Anyone who has practiced meditation will understand that what the world calls peace is in fact full of its own kinds of disturbance and agitation. Even in a country such as Australia, which is internally peaceful, and does not try to solve its internal problems through armed struggle, still our society is full of conflicts and difficulties. The politicians and social engineers offer us no meaningful approach with which to develop our social stability into peace of mind. For a meditator, not merely physical struggle, nor even psychological conflicts and traumas are seen as obstructions to peace, but even the ordinary activities of our minds – our thoughts, memories, imaginations – are seen as agitations and disturbances, and must be abandoned. In the deep condition of unified consciousness called samadhi or jhana, the depth of tranquility approaches that of Nibbana itself, which is why jhanas are called the ‘bliss of enlightenment’; here we are approaching the ‘stilling of all activities’.

From here the Aranavibhanga returns to further discuss right speech. The sequence is unusual; normally the Buddha sticks fairly consistently to a graduated teaching from the simple to the profound, yet here the simple ethical teachings are revisited after the more

profound teachings on meditation. Perhaps there has been a confusion in the editing; comparison with the Chinese and Tibetan versions should clarify this point. But there might be another reason for the sequence. All the passages until now have been phrased explicitly in terms of the middle way that avoids the two extremes. From here on, however, the middle way is not invoked. This variation might have served to justify saving this material for presentation together at the end. The next section is as follows.

‘One should not utter covert speech, and one should not utter overt harsh speech.’^{xiii}

The Buddha then proceeds to qualify his statement in the following manner. In both these cases, if one knows that either covert speech or overt harsh speech is:

Untrue and unbeneficial – then one should definitely not speak;
True but unbeneficial – then one should try not to speak;
True and beneficial – then one may speak, knowing the right time.

Now on a surface level, the Buddha has directly contradicted himself. First he says not to utter speech that is covert or overtly harsh, then he says, well okay, you can utter it sometimes. But on reflection we can see that this is not a contradiction, but a more nuanced approach to right speech, which cannot be captured in a simple phrase. The Buddha is treading a delicate path between the extremes of moral absolutism and naïve relativism. This is an important issue, perhaps the most pressing general moral question of our time. We are emerging from a culture of moral absolutes. On the world scale the effects of this were made manifest during the colonial era as one particularly arrogant culture attempted to impose its values on the world, with disastrous results. We have come a long way in recognizing the value of all cultures and the contextual appropriateness of particular ethical prescriptions. But this can lead to what could be called ‘naïve relativism’, the idea that all moral principles are culturally dependent and hence subjective, and that therefore it is wrong to evaluate or judge anyone else. The Buddha would agree that ethical principles are relative and contextual; but he would point out that the most important ethical principles relate to universal contexts equally appropriate for all people. All people love life and fear death, love happiness and fear pain, and it is here, in our common humanity, that we should seek ethical principles of universal validity. In our current context of right speech, therefore, the Buddha distinguishes between ethical principles that must never be violated and those that must be judged in context. In some cases – speech that is untrue and unbeneficial – we can lay down a black and white rule: never. In other cases we leave it to the individual to judge according to the complexities of context, time and place.

There are obvious reasons for warning against covert speech – backbiting, slander, gossip, and so on – and against overt harsh speech – abuse, yelling, painful, and critical speech. These often come from the wrong place in us, and are potent sources of conflict. Yet human dialogue is a complex affair, and sometimes it is necessary to speak, even though it may be difficult. This is a point that is sometimes overlooked in Buddhist circles. Sometimes we would prefer to remain silent, to ignore difficult issues, to let them lie unresolved. This attitude is really coming from a place of fear. Some may feel this is justified by the negative manner in which the precept on right speech is framed, that is, ‘refraining from false speech.’ But the Buddha often emphasized the positive side of right speech:

‘...One speaks truth, adheres to truth, is trustworthy and reliable, no deceiver of the world...one who reunites those who are divided, is a promoter of friendships, enjoying harmony, delighting in harmony, rejoicing in harmony, a speaker of words that promote harmony...speaking words that are gentle, pleasing to the ear, loveable, going to the heart, courteous, desired by and agreeable to many...one speaks at the right time, speaks on what is fact, what is good, on the Dhamma and the Vinaya; at the right time one speaks such words as are worth remembering, reasonable, moderate, and beneficial.’^{xiii}

So right speech is not no speech. There is an interesting passage in the Vinaya, placed prominently at the beginning of a chapter, when a group of monks came to see the Buddha. He asked them if they were well and practicing diligently, and they replied that indeed they were well and comfortable; they had been carefully observing the various rules and practices required under Vinaya, and in addition they all undertook a vow of silence. The Buddha’s reply was unusually forceful.

‘So, these foolish men, having spent an uncomfortable time, say they have spent a comfortable time. Living together like beasts...like sheep...in indolence, they say they have spent a comfortable time. How can these foolish men observe a vow of silence, the practice of other sects?’^{xiv}

The Buddha then went on to lay down a procedure for mutual invitation to admonition. At the end of the rains retreat, the monks are supposed to invite each other to mention anything they may have done that may have caused offence, whether deliberately or inadvertently; this practice is still followed today. It is essential for us as social animals to speak; abstention is not an option.

Returning to the Aranavibhanga Sutta, the two key criteria are whether speech is true and beneficial. Notice that one of the possible combinations of these two is pointedly absent: speech that is untrue but beneficial. In the wider context of the Buddha’s philosophy this would be a pure nonsense. The normal word used for ‘false speech’ is *musā*, literally confusion or delusion, a term closely related to the word *moha* in the famous triad of greed, hatred, and delusion. It is axiomatic that the elimination of all forms of delusion and the arrival at an unperverted apprehension of the truth is the central purpose of the Buddha’s teaching. In no way could the Buddha allow that a kind of speech that directly increases the confusion in being’s minds could be beneficial. The usual way to justify use of false speech is to imagine some bizarre and improbable scenario, such as little children playing happily in a burning house, and then argue that if a lie is all that can get the children to leave the house, is that not justified? Of course, once the principle is established it will quickly be applied in all kinds of less extreme and urgent circumstances. I think it is far more useful to expend our energies in figuring out how to preserve truth rather than to justify lies.

The next piece of advice on speech is that one should speak ‘unhurriedly, not hurriedly’.^{xv} This is straightforward enough; not only should the content of our speech be conducive towards harmony, but the manner in which we speak should itself be peaceful and gentle, clear and distinct.

Finally we come to another of those pieces of advice that seem on the face of it quite obvious, yet conceal a depth of understanding of the nature and function of language.

‘One should not insist on local language and should not override normal usage... How is there insistence on local language and overriding of normal usage? In different localities they call the same thing a “dish” (*pati*), a “bowl” (*patta*), a “vessel” (*vittha*), a “saucer” (*serava*), a “pan” (*dharopa*), a “pot” (*pona*), a “mug” (*bana*), or a “basin” (*pisila*). So whatever they call it in such and such a locality, one speaks accordingly, firmly adhering and insisting: “Only this is right, everything else is stupid.”^{xvi}

A bowl is, of course, one of the basic belongings of a Buddhist monastic, and this passage reflects the conditions in the wandering Sangha at the Buddha’s time. They would have continually been coming across different dialects in different regions, no doubt causing considerable difficulties and confusion in communication. It has been suggested, in fact, that travel and the encounter with people of different beliefs and languages was historically a crucial factor in human development as one’s traditional values, gods, and ideas are questioned in radically new ways, leading to a new independence, a new self-consciousness, and to a humanistic rather than tribal ethic. If this is true then we can hope that our current age, with its unprecedented level of international travel and multicultural encounters, will lead to the supersession of outdated nationalism and the emergence of truly global consciousness.

The need for this emphasis on the pragmatic and contextual use of language is particularly acute in religious contexts. Most religions seem to nurse an overwhelming need to exalt their holy texts beyond all reason. It is not enough that they are true; they must be infallible. It is not enough that they are good; they must be perfect. It is not enough that they were inspired; they must be the literal word of God. Some of the ancient Brahmins were so infatuated with their sacred Vedas that they asserted that they were actually woven into the fabric of being at the start of the cosmos. Some today make comparable assertions about the Bible. Such claims are, of course, a kind of fundamentalism and, due to their narrowness and intolerance, are a potent source of conflict.

Even such a clear assertion of the pragmatism and relativity of language, however, did not prevent the emergence of linguistic fundamentalism in Buddhist circles. One of the most obvious, not to say embarrassing, examples occurs in the *Visuddhimagga*, the central treatise of the Theravada school. This states that Pali is the ‘intrinsic essence language’, the root language of all languages, hardwired into the circuitry of reality.^{xvii} If a child is brought up without any external influence they would naturally speak Pali. This is perhaps the most extreme example of a fundamentalist tendency that the Theravada is sometimes guilty of. On the good side, the Theravadins have undoubtedly preserved the most accurate complete recension of an early Buddhist canon available to us and have, at least to some degree, maintained an authenticity of practice in line with the early teachings. On the other hand, they can be dismissive of other schools of Buddhism, sometimes without very much knowledge. For example, few Theravadins are aware that the Chinese canon contains a greater quantity of early and authentic material of both Suttas and Vinaya from various early schools than are contained in the Pali canon. The claim that the Pali material was all literally the word of the Buddha cannot be sustained, nor that the Buddha himself spoke in Pali. Unless the Buddha did not follow his own advice in the *Aranavibhanga Sutta*, he would have adapted his speech to suit the dialect of his audience.

THE LESSONS OF HISTORY

The Aranavibhanga Sutta offers us a lofty ethical standard to aspire to. The historical record of Buddhists in maintaining this lofty standard is patchy. There are many inspiring examples from the past of Buddhist rulers who genuinely attempted to live up to such standards. The towering figure of Asoka is, in my admittedly biased view, the greatest monarch of all time. The amazing story of his conversion to Buddhism, renunciation of violence, and maintenance of a vast empire on pacifistic Buddhist principles should be taught to all schoolchildren. And it is not difficult to think of Buddhists today whose strength and moral integrity shines like a beacon for the world – the Dalai Lama of Tibet, Ang San Suu Kyi of Burma, Maha Ghosananda of Cambodia.

But we must have the courage and the honesty to admit that Buddhists have not always stood up for peace. It is frequently claimed that Buddhists have never fought wars for their religion; but this is at best a partial truth. As far as I know, Buddhists have never gone to war in order to spread their religion. They have not invaded other countries and forced them to either submit to Buddhism or die. But they have frequently fought aggressively on behalf of Buddhism, Buddhist nations, or ideologies. Theoretically this can be distinguished from a holy war of conquest and conversion; but the distinction is unlikely to matter very much to the victims. While I do not wish to dwell excessively on this uncomfortable topic, I do believe that it is important for Buddhists to be aware of their past, to humbly acknowledge our faults, and to determine to do better in the future. A few examples will illustrate how Buddhist ideas have been twisted to justify war and violence.

Probably the greatest conflict that was aided by Buddhism was the Pacific theatre of the Second World War; the Buddhist complicity has been documented in the excellent book *Zen at War* by Brian Victoria.^{xviii} From the foreword.

“The ideas and people I encountered in this subterranean realm of Buddhism were the exact inverse of those on the surface. Down below, warfare and killing were described as manifestations of Buddhist compassion. The “selflessness” of Zen meant absolute and unquestioning submission to the will and dictates of the Emperor. And the purpose of religion was to preserve the state and punish any country or person who dared interfere with its right of self-aggrandizement.

‘Disturbing as such sentiments were, I was even more disturbed to learn who was making them. Ichikawa quoted at length, for example, from D. T. Suzuki’s writings on war. With his oft-pictured gentle and sagacious appearance of later years, Suzuki is revered among many in the West as a true man of Zen. Yet he wrote that “religion should, first of all, seek to preserve the existence of the state,” followed by the assertion that the Chinese were “unruly heathens” whom Japan should punish “in the name of religion.” Zen master Harada Sogaku, highly praised in the English writings of Philip Kapleau, Maezumi Taizan, and others, was also quoted by Hakugen. In 1939 he wrote: “[If ordered to] march: tramp, tramp, or shoot: bang, bang. This is the manifestation of the highest Wisdom[of Enlightenment]. The unity of Zen and War of which I speak extends to the highest reaches of the holy war [now under way].” ’

Tens of millions died in this conflict, in the main supported and encouraged by institutional Zen. The atrocities in places such as the infamous Rape of Nanking are said to have appalled even the Nazis. The total number killed may well compare with the Crusades and Jihads. And why indeed should these 'Buddhists' not have acted in this way when they were taught that 'it is the precept against killing that wields the sword'? A book published in 1937 by Komazawa University Professor Hayashiya Tomojiro and Shimakage Chikai offers a doctrinal justification.

'The reason that Buddhism hasn't determined war to be either good or bad is that it doesn't look at the question of war itself but rather to the question of the war's purpose. Thus if the war has a good purpose it is good, while if it has a bad purpose it is bad. Buddhism doesn't merely approve of wars that are in accord with its values; it vigorously supports such wars to the point of being a war enthusiast.'^{xix}

This statement offers an ethic of war based solely on its purpose, ignoring entirely the question of the actual conduct of the war itself. As such, it falls far beneath not merely the Buddha's own moral standard, but even the internationally accepted norms for the conduct of war. Apparently, if the purpose is just, anything goes.

An excellent review of *Zen at War*, written by Josh Baran, was included in the summer 1998 edition of *Tricycle*, the American Buddhist Review magazine. The reviewer concludes:

'For many Zen students, the most difficult aspect of Victoria's haunting book will be how to face the words and actions of these highly esteemed Zen masters. How can we absorb these overwhelming contradictions? These were the living Buddhas of the Zen tradition – men regarded as "fully enlightened" ...And at the same time...they participated in the deaths of tens of millions of people.'

Compare these words in an article by Sienna Craig titled 'Riding in the Rain Shadow' in the very same issue of *Tricycle*:

'Perhaps the most famous of such god-horses is Kyang Go Karkar, the mount of Gesar of Ling, Tibet's famous warrior-king, whose life is recounted in epic song across central Asia. As the story goes, a tulku (reincarnate lama) was sent from the realm of the gods to become Gesar's mount. Endowed with the wisdom and compassion required of dharma warriors, this pair fought many battles against evil, illusion, and ignorance, emerging victorious in what must be seen as a brilliant expression of both Tibetan Buddhist precepts and the banditry and fierce mounted combat that is as much a part of Tibetan history and culture as butter tea.'

Such myths, when viewed in the clear light of history, strike me more as chilling than brilliant. While the apologists play with words, people are dying. Even today, Buddhists are invoking nationalist mythologies to justify war. Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah's *Buddhism Betrayed?*^{xx} explored the instrumental role of Buddhist nationalism, and in particular the institutional monastic Sangha, in precipitating Sri Lanka into the devastating civil war from which it has not yet emerged. The book was, depressingly, banned in Sri Lanka. He comments on the roots of Sinhalese Buddhist national identity.

Many writers on Sri Lanka in recent times have inevitably cast a retrospective look at these ancient chronicles (the Mahavamsa was written around the 6th century AD) and have remarked on their powerful message of conflating a people, religion, and territory as a historical mission. In this retrospective gaze cast on the past, the story of the exemplary hero of the Mahavamsa, Dutthagamani, who is characterized as the Sinhala champion who united the kingdom by defeating the hated and marauding Tamil invaders and thereafter built edifices on behalf of Buddhism, has been examined and re-examined. In the original version, while the Tamils are regarded in this negative manner, there are two complex and moving subthemes: the declaration that the Tamil King Elara was a virtuous and just king though not a Buddhist...and the death scene of Dutthagamani, whose troubled conscience at having killed so many Tamils in his victorious war, was consoled by a group of Buddhist arahants (world-renouncing saints) that no hindrance in his way to heaven arose since in reality he had killed only one and a half human beings, one who “had come into the [three] refuges, and the other had taken unto himself the five precepts.”^{xxx}

We are struck, not merely by the grossness of perverting Buddhism to justify war, but by how crude and unintelligent such apologetics are. How could they ever have convinced anyone? But as the above extract reminds us, we have to be careful about drawing one-sided conclusions. As in the past so today the situation is too complex to be reduced to a simple formula. Tambiah comments on the Buddhist context leading to the current Sri Lankan civil war:

“The phenomenon of the late eighties may be seen by some observers as the final shift of “political Buddhism” from a more localized religiosity of earlier times primarily enacted among monk-laity circles in villages and towns in terms of ethical teachings, moral concerns, and gift-giving (dana) to a vocal and sloganized “religious-mindedness”, which has objectified and fetishized the religion and espoused a “Buddhist nationalism”, even as regard the monks themselves, so that important tenets of their religion regarding detachment, compassion, tranquillity, and non-violence and the overcoming of mental impurities are subordinated and made less relevant to Sinhala religio-nationalist and social reform goals. In this changed context, Buddhism in its militant, populist, fetishized form, as espoused by certain groups, seems to some observers to have been emptied of much of its normative and humane ethic, denuded of its storytelling homilies through the Jataka stories, and to function as a marker of crowd and mob identity, as a rhetorical mobilizer of volatile masses, and as an instigator of spurts of violence...Though this judgement is on the mark, it is incomplete. A serious study of the polemical comments and critiques of activist monk-ideologues definitely reveals that there is a Buddhist content and a Buddhist-inspired evaluation that colors the Buddhist nationalism advocated today.”^{xxxii}

Such policies were not restricted to just a few renegade states. It is interesting to consider the position of Japan’s wartime ally Thailand regarding war. Following is a paraphrase of a speech made by the Supreme Patriarch of Thailand in 1916 in praise of the then current king’s wise governance in fostering the warrior spirit. It is taken from *Buddhism, Imperialism, and War* by Trevor Ling, Professor of comparative religion at Manchester University.

“Defence against external foes is one of the policies of governance and is one that cannot be neglected.”... “Wars must be prepared for even in times of peace, otherwise one would not be in time, and one would be in a disadvantageous position towards one’s foe.” He [the

Supreme Patriarch] quoted some words of the Buddha in support of this: “ ‘As a town situated on the frontier must be prepared internally and externally, so too should you be prepared.’ ” Thailand, he continued, had “enjoyed great prosperity because all her citizens used to be warriors.” But now the civilians and the military had become separate classes. The civilians, he lamented, had “become totally inexperienced in warfare, and even the military were none too proficient.” Now, however, things were changing; and he congratulated His Majesty on the measures he had recently taken to promote the welfare of the army.’^{xxiii}

As we become more conscious of the ways in which the institutionalized schools of Buddhism have been compromised by history, of how widespread this is, and how deeply it is embedded in the mythologies of sectarian identity, the task of seeking a more principled future for Buddhism becomes all the more urgent. One of the problems that stands out in all the accounts of Buddhism at war is the issue of Buddhist nationalism. When a religion becomes a state ideology, its interests are identified with the interests of the state. Sooner or later it will be in the state’s interests, or at least perceived interests, to go to war. When this happens the religion will be called on to provide moral and spiritual justification for war, and history tells us that a state will not find it difficult to recruit apologists, even among ordained Buddhist renunciates. The solution is obvious: don’t make Buddhism into a nationalist ideology. In this respect the modern, pluralist, secular state offers a model that is actually closer to the social and political context in the Ganges valley in the Buddha’s day than is the nationalized Buddhism of the medieval sects. Buddhism should stand as an independent and incorruptible moral voice. It must have the courage to speak out on behalf of peace even when this is unpopular or politically inexpedient.

CONCLUSION

Several times in the above essay I have referred to the fact that important early Buddhist scriptures are held in common between various schools. The main analysis has been essentially a commentary on one of those common texts, the Aranavibhanga Sutta. I hope to have shared with you my belief that such teachings should be studied, not just for their historical significance, but for their practical guidance and their philosophical depth. I also believe that these teachings will increasingly be recognized as a major unifying force among the schools of Buddhism. It is becoming more apparent that each of the 18 or so early schools would have had its own, slightly varying, recension of the Suttas and Vinaya, and that no one recension has any *a priori* claim to primacy. Each version derives the bulk of material from the period before the first schisms, about 100-150 years after the parinibbana, but the final additions, arrangement, and editing was carried out by the various sects. The study of the various sectarian canons, especially the four Nikayas in Pali and the four corresponding Agamas in Chinese,^{xxiv} demonstrates the vast mass of teachings accepted in common by all Buddhists since the pre-sectarian period. This research is only in its infancy, and constitutes an exciting frontier in Buddhist studies. It promises to focus and clarify our understanding of the historical Buddha’s teachings, and provide us with a perspective from which to more meaningfully assess the contributions of the schools.

I think the concordance of the Nikayas and Agamas implies nothing less than the total dissolution of sectarian pretensions. No longer can any one school claim to preserve the ‘original, unadulterated’ teachings of the Buddha. All of the schools should be re-examined

as an ongoing evolutionary process where the fundamental teachings of the Nikayas/Agamas are adapted and applied in ever-changing historical and cultural circumstances. We will have much to learn from both the successes and failures of all the previous generations of sincere, devoted Buddhists. Our question remains the same – how do we apply the Buddhadhmma to address the pain in our lives – yet in terms of the social and cultural aspects of religion our answer will be different.

In recent years it has become fashionable to speak of ‘non-sectarian’ Buddhism. But when we look at the practices and beliefs at ‘non-sectarian’ Buddhist centres we cannot help but notice that one day there is Zen meditation, the next a Tibetan lama, the next a Pure Land puja, and then a Theravadin monk. This seems more like ‘all-sectarian’ Buddhism! Non-sectarianism is a lofty ideal; but it can become a label in denial, a mere excuse for neglecting our duty to discernment, to distinguishing true from false, useful from useless. We are still letting the sects set the agenda, and think in terms of tolerating or at best synthesizing the various sectarian perspectives. There are many who are happy to voice opinions on the sects, usually either: ‘Only this is right!’ or else: ‘It’s all the same in the end!’ But quite frankly, until we have a firm grounding on the teachings of the Nikayas/Agamas we should have the humility to accept that we are not in a position to make meaningful statements on such subtle and complex matters.

I look forward rather to the coming of ‘post-sectarian Buddhism’. The term ‘post’ implies the emergence from a historical period, not the denial of the obvious fact that there are sects. We have outgrown the historical circumstances that gave rise to the sects. The cultures, languages, political systems, economic conditions, and national identities that defined the particular forms of Buddhist sects simply do not exist any more. The persistence of the sects is a historical anachronism that tells us more about the conservatism of religious institutions than it does about the real teachings of the Buddha or about the genuine spiritual needs of human beings today. But as Buddhists of all sects speak to each other, listening with an open and sympathetic heart, we will tend to notice and emphasize those principles we share in common. In the most important, inner, dimension, those shared principles will be whatever speaks most directly and effectively to the universal human condition. But we should not neglect the outer dimension, the Dhamma-Vinaya we have miraculously inherited from the Buddha himself, thanks to the selfless labours of countless generations. In this way we can, sharing a common understanding of the fundamental principles, move towards a more meaningful and rewarding dialogue based on Dhamma, not on sectarian identities.

Peace is not just a pretty slogan – it is an incitement to action. The peace of delusion, like the bliss of ignorance, is easily won and even more easily lost. The peace of truth is hard work. It demands commitment and unremitting self-honesty. In this essay I have explored some of the Buddha’s teachings regarding peace, and in particular the connection between peace and truth. The main textual source has been the Aranavibhanga Sutta. In my treatment of the subject I have tried to exemplify the principles of the sutta itself. So I have quite deliberately brought up some difficult matters, not shying away from controversy. I hope to show that such matters should not be taboo, nor should they be a source of divisiveness. When approached from the perspective of principle, of Dhamma, such breaking points are a source of wisdom. I noticed this when exploring mountains in search of caves and remote dwelling places in Malaysia. While most will walk by, content to remain on the surface, if you want to penetrate to the heart of the mountain you must look for the fissure, the split, the

crack, and follow that fracture to the quiet place at the centre. And so by asking the hard questions and accepting the answers fearlessly we can slough off the inessential and arrive at the essential, the true state of peace, for the sake of which all Buddhist ethics, meditation, and wisdom are taught.

ⁱ DN 19.8/DA 3

ⁱⁱ The account of the four signs, the ‘divine messengers’ is found in no text earlier than the Mahapadana Sutta (DN 14.2/DA 1/EA 48.4). This discourse is found, not only in the existing collections of the Theravada, Dharmaguptaka, and Mahasanghika schools, but also in the list of contents of the no longer existing Sarvastivada Dirgha Agama. It must therefore be regarded as belonging to the pre-sectarian period, although I do not know of any detailed study of the exact contents. Nevertheless, the unusual complexity of the literary form and flamboyance of the contents do not argue in favour of the authenticity of the existing compilation, although many of the individual textual elements (pericopes) may be authentic. In any case, here the story of the four signs is found only in the context of the legendary Buddha of the past, Vipassi. It is not told of ‘our’ Buddha, Siddhattha Gotama, until much later; the Jataka Nidana might be the earliest source. I might note in passing here that here the PTS Pali and the translations err in claiming that Vipassi found the ‘vipassana path’ to enlightenment (DN 14.2.21); the word ‘vipassana’ was inserted from the commentary and can claim no manuscript support.

ⁱⁱⁱ Sn 941-945

^{iv} MN 139/MA 169

^v The other is the Saccavibhanga Sutta (MN 141/MA 31/EA 27.1). This is the only text in the Theravadin Vibhangavagga that is not in the existing Sarvastivadin Vibhangavagga. However, Roderick Bucknell has argued plausibly (in an unpublished essay) that it did originally belong in this chapter and should be restored.

^{vi} MN 139.3

^{vii} MN 139.6

^{viii} MN 139.9

^{ix} MN 13.11-12/MA 99/EA 21.9

^x DN 28.19/DA 18 Note: this paragraph is mistakenly numbered as 20 in the PTS Pali.

^{xi} MN 139.9

^{xii} MN 139.10

^{xiii} MN 27.13/MA 146 etc.

^{xiv} Mv 4.12

^{xv} MN 139.11

^{xvi} MN 139.12

^{xvii} Vsm 14.25

^{xviii} Brian Victoria: *Zen at War*, Weatherhill Inc. 1997

^{xix} *Zen at War*, pg. 88

^{xx} Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah: *Buddhism Betrayed?* University of Chicago Press, 1992

^{xxi} *Buddhism Betrayed?* Pg. 130

^{xxii} *Buddhism Betrayed?* Pg. 92

^{xxiii} Trevor Ling: *Buddhism, Imperialism, and War*, George, Allen, and Unwin, 1979, Pg. 137. The text says, on page 136, that this speech was delivered in 1910; but at the top of page 138 the date 1916 is given, which I take to be the correct one.

^{xxiv} There are, unfortunately, few early texts preserved in Tibetan and Sanskrit.