

Just Where Are We Heading?: Thoughts on the War in Iraq

by Bhikkhu Bodhi

(Transcribed text of a discourse given at the Bodhi Monastery, Lafayette, New Jersey, USA, on March 22, 2003)

Since what has been weighing on most people's minds this past week has been the war in Iraq, today I will depart from the sequence of Saturday talks I've been giving and offer you some of my own reflections on this war. Before I get into my subject, I should stress as a precaution that the views I'm expressing are my personal views and in no way represent Bodhi Monastery as a whole.

According to the Buddha's teaching, to live together happily in society we have to live together amicably and harmoniously. The Buddha taught that the fundamental pillars for establishing social harmony include loving deeds, that is, bodily deeds motivated by loving kindness; loving speech, speech motivated by loving kindness; and loving thoughts, thoughts motivated by loving kindness. Society is further held together by a fair distribution of wealth so that nobody lacks the essential requirements of life, the means for living a healthy and satisfactory life. A healthy society, moreover, requires the widespread observance of wholesome principles of morality.

The Buddha tried to promulgate these ideals for his own monastic order, the Sangha, and also to spread them to the wider society in which he lived and taught. Modern societies differ considerably from the communities in ancient India among which the Buddha traveled. They are composed of many diverse people with their own interests and goals, and thus, because people differ so much from one another, conflicts and disputes become inevitable. But even though conflicts and disputes may be unavoidable, arising as they do from the different views, aims, and biases of people, we still have to find a peaceful way to resolve them. We must resolve disputes in a spirit of mutual good will between all the participants in the conflict; we must resolve them by means of discussion aimed at minimizing antagonism and arriving at mutual understanding. When we seek to resolve disputes we have to recognize the need for compromise and concessions. We can't insist that all the problems be solved on our own terms, that the other party concede everything to us; rather, we have to arrive at harmony through a process of give and take, through compromise and consensus.

As long as we observe these guidelines, then, even though conflicts and quarrels may erupt from time to time, they can be successfully resolved. However, when people can't settle their differences peacefully, their disagreements and conflicts escalate and acquire a sharp edge. Gathering momentum, they lead to hostility, enmity, and violence. In relations between individuals, such violent disagreements often culminate in physical violence, beatings, even murder. When this sequence – of disputes leading to violence leading to murder – takes place on a collective scale, between nations or large groups of people within a nation, we call that “war”.

War is a traumatic moment in history. It marks the point where all the restraining forces that we call “civilization” collapse and give way to barbarism, the original condition out of which civilization emerged. Concisely put, “barbarism” might be described as patterns of action governed by explosive emotions, unconstrained by any rules of civility; it means behavior that completely disregards all consideration for the well being of others.

Barbarism is a kind of regression from order, the state of order in which we normally live, to chaos – a state of anarchy in which rules of restraint are totally lacking.

The great spiritual leaders of humanity formulated their messages not only for the purpose of helping individuals in their quest for truth, enlightenment, and salvation, but also to guide the proper regulation of society. These teachers sought in their teachings to tame the human heart, which means that they set out to civilize human beings, to lead humanity to higher levels of collective life, towards true civilization. In the unfolding course of history we can discern, throughout the centuries, a constant tension between this upward thrust of humanity toward true civilization and the downward gravitational pull – exerted by the forces of hatred, greed, and ambition – back towards barbarism. What happens in war is that the barbaric impulses of the human mind, ordinarily restrained by the laws and moral regulations of civilization, break out from below and come into the open, where they dominate and motivate behavior. Unchecked by the restraining pressures of law and morality, these emotions usually cluster around some sense of our collective identity, which becomes the compulsive force that thrusts us into such patterns of destructive, murderous action. Our sense of our common human identity gives way to the narrow and divisive identification with our nation, our people, our religion, our ethnic group; we see ourselves pitted against other nations, other people, other social groups, and followers of other religions. And we think that the only way we can resolve our differences with others is by trying to eliminate them from the face of the earth.

Though I speak of war as being a regression to a state of barbarism, we have to recognize that within war there are different grades of brutality, ranging from the more civilized conduct of war to the more barbaric. Though it sounds almost like a paradox, “civilized war” is real. This is war that respects certain basic codes of disciplined behavior, for example, not killing injured combatants, not harming civilians, not destroying facilities unrelated to the enemy’s war effort, not causing unnecessary massive deaths, and so on; barbaric war, in contrast, disregards all rules of restraint. But all war, we can say, approaches barbarism in that it represents a falling away from more peaceful and less destructive methods of resolving differences between people, a lapse from the methods for resolving differences characteristic of true civilization.

The Buddha himself, growing up in northern India in the fifth century BC, was no stranger to war. He was born in the Sakyan republic as a member of the kshatriya caste. The kshatriyas in ancient India were originally the warrior caste. And so as a youth the future Buddha must have been trained in the various military arts, and since he was being groomed for a leadership position, the position of ruler of the Sakyan republic, if he had taken that course instead of becoming a spiritual teacher, he would have had to execute various responsibilities in conducting warfare.

The time when the Buddha lived was a period of great cataclysmic changes taking place across India. Previously, northern India had been divided into many small republics, but during the Buddha’s time, perhaps starting a century earlier, these states were in process of being consolidated into larger states, the older republican type of government giving way to monarchy. The larger kingdoms, in turn, were swallowing up the smaller republics, expanding their boundaries, and seeking more and more territory. And this sometimes brought them into confrontation with each other.

In the Buddha's time, there were two dominant monarchies in northern India. One was the kingdom of Kosala with its capital city of Sr*vast* ruled by King Pasenadi. Here the Buddha had his favorite monastery, the famous Jeta Grove, where he spent many of his rains retreats. The other major kingdom was the state of Magadha, ruled first by King Bimbis*ra, then by his son King Aj*tasattu, with its capital Rajgir, where the Buddha had another monastery, the Bamboo Grove. The history of this period was characterized by increasing tension between these two monarchies, Kosala and Magadha, tension which sometimes erupted into war. The Buddha was a keen witness of these political developments, and in his discourses he often emphasized the misery that war brings in its trail. He said that victory in war breeds hatred; the victor becomes arrogant and the defeated party lives in sorrow. He saw that war caused the deaths of many innocent people, that it entailed the pitiful waste of valuable human lives. He extolled the one who leaves behind the conquest of others for the task of conquering himself, the lower impulses and appetites of the untrained mind. And he himself was called the Jina, the Conqueror.

Once when the Buddha visited his own home state, the Sakyan republic, a conflict broke out between the people on two sides of the Rohini River. The people on one side were the Buddha's own paternal relations, the Sakyans; those on the other side were his mother's relatives, the Koliyans. They were fighting for command over the waters of the river to fertilize their crops. Both states had amassed armies, arrayed on either side of the river, ready to enter the fray of battle. Just before the call sounded for the armies to meet and begin the fight, the Buddha appeared on the scene. He called the leaders of both armies to his presence and asked them: "What is more valuable, the water of the river or human blood?" They replied that human blood is immeasurably more valuable than the waters of the river. Then the Buddha pointed out that they were about to shed the blood of thousands of innocent men from both communities, all on account of the water of the river. He helped them to work out a method to distribute the waters from the river to both states so that they could all benefit from it without having to resort to war. In this way, the Buddha helped to avert this war.

In his own ethical teaching, the Buddha has stressed that killing is the most reprehensible of all evil deeds. In the five precepts, the first precept is to abstain from the destruction of life. In the ten courses of wholesome karma, the first course of wholesome karma is to abstain from the destruction of life. The Buddha teaches that killing is the worst of all evil deeds because what is most precious to any living being is its own life. Even stealing is not as bad as killing, lying is not as bad as killing, committing adultery is not as bad as killing. With all these other evil deeds the other victim still survives, but when one kills, one deprives that person of life.

Not only does the Buddha emphasize non-killing, he says that in our behavior we should avoid any _expression of violence by body, speech, or mind. Don't injure others physically, don't speak harshly to them, don't speak in cruel or threatening ways, and don't think cruel or violent thoughts about others. Instead, the Buddha says, one should develop a heart of boundless loving kindness and great compassion towards all living beings. One should look upon all beings as though they were your own children, your own parents. And just as a mother would have infinite concern for the welfare of her little baby, so a true Buddhist practitioner should have boundless loving kindness for all beings in the world, thinking of all beings as though they were one's own children; one should have great compassion for all beings as though they were one's own elderly and ailing

parents. Thus, we can see that when one adopts the Buddhist attitudes of nonviolence, noncruelty, and noninjury, when one tries to model one's conduct on the guidelines of limitless loving kindness and compassion, one would, as a matter of principle, be most reluctant to condone any type of war, let alone advocate war as a means of settling differences.

However, we live in an imperfect world, a world in which the behavior of others does not always allow us to maintain a completely peaceful and non-aggressive attitude. This is a tricky issue, because in our private conduct we must always endeavor to conform to the law of nonviolence. But governments must make compromises with the demands of pure private morality, and thus in this imperfect world conditions sometimes arise that make war unavoidable, "the lesser of two evils."

Nevertheless, before a nation rushes in to initiate a war, it must consider very carefully whether it can claim ethical justification in taking such an extreme approach. So what are the conditions that might justify war? One condition would certainly be dangerously aggressive action on the part of another nation. This leads to what we would call a purely defensive war. A government has a responsibility to protect its people, and thus, if some other country should launch an attack upon a nation or seems likely to do so unless it's stopped in time, a government may only be able to fulfill its responsibility to its citizens by waging war. There are also grounds that might justify an offensive war. One such reason would be to eliminate a tyrannical government that poses a true danger to the rest of the world. For example, in Europe prior to the outbreak of World War II, Hitler was building up his armed forces, re-arming Germany, and swallowing up the neighboring countries. If a country displays an extremely aggressive foreign policy, a preemptive strike against such a potentially dangerous aggressor can be justified. But, if war is resorted to, it should be resorted to only as a last resort, a resort to be adopted only when all other measures fail. It should also be resorted to with a broad base of international support. In the current international climate, it seems highly inappropriate, even a violation of the standards of civilized conduct, for a country with minimal international support to take the initiative in launching attacks against another country while the rest of the world cries out in protest.

That brings me to my reflections on the present war in Iraq. In today's world, a country cannot unilaterally decide to initiate a war on its own or with the support of merely a small number of allies. Nor can it claim to be justified in starting a war if it meets widespread opposition from the international community. To be responsible to the international community, it should work within and through the organization that has been specially created for such purposes, and that organization is the United Nations. In this case, the United Nations was not yet ready to authorize a war against Iraq. In attacking Iraq, it's quite clear that the United States disregarded the will of the UN at a time when the alternatives to war had not yet been exhausted. The UN weapons inspectors in Iraq were in the process of investigating Iraq's weapons capabilities and were prepared to continue with their mission. They had not yet decided that they had reached the end of their mandate; they had not yet given up the hope of Iraqi cooperation, and they were still expecting to make further progress. Moreover, several major powers on the Security Council – France, Germany, Russia, and China – rejected President Bush's quick push for war. Hence, the US decision to go ahead and execute the war strikes them as a slap in their faces, almost as though Bush is telling them that their opinion doesn't count for much. In his eyes, the US is entitled to act unilaterally even

when its decisions have global repercussions. Without consulting its colleagues on the Security Council, it can act in ways that fly in the face of all standards of human decency; as long as it sees a prospect for winning, it can play dice with international stability.

US officials have offered several arguments to justify its attack on Iraq. For one thing, they say, Saddam is a brutal dictator who must be deposed and replaced by a democratically elected government. There's no doubt at all that Saddam is a cruel and brutal tyrant who has brought immense misery to his own people. But it's still a big question whether one nation can arrogate to itself the right to remove the leader of another nation on the grounds that he's a tyrant. If the US wants to remove Saddam Hussein because he's a brutal dictator, well, the US has been supporting brutal dictators since the dawn of the past century and continues to do so today. So why target one and not the others? As long as they comply with American interests, mainly economic interests, no amount of tyranny is enough to move the US to depose them. It's only when they refuse to comply with our demands that we openly declare them to be brutal dictators. When they are compliant, they're our friends and allies in our struggle against evil. We then argue that we should trust in the power of "constructive dialogue" to soften their harsh policies towards their own people.

Next, the United States claims that Iraq has weapons of mass destruction, which they might use to attack other countries. Granted, they might have such weapons – but then they might not. We simply don't know at this point. In any case, the UN inspections team was keeping a close eye on Iraq and did not report any signs of Iraqi aggression towards other countries. As a last resort, if inspections didn't disclose any weapons of mass destruction but the team feared Iraq might build them, the UN could have created a special monitoring committee to keep permanent watch within Iraq and make sure it didn't initiate any weapons programs. If Iraq's behavior was suspect, the committee could have reported this to the rest of the world through the United Nations. The present assessment of Iraq's military capabilities indicates that the nation has been far too weakened by the process of disarmament, as well as by the international sanctions against it, to risk any aggressive action against other countries.

So, what appears to be happening right now is that the United States has assumed to itself the role of policeman for the world: a policeman who writes the laws himself, takes whatever action he wants, and then stands in judgment over his own behavior. The judgment, naturally, is always "Not guilty." This makes one raise the question, what are the motives underlying this reckless behavior of the US administration? Why is it that Bush and his collaborators in the White House have been so eager, so implacably avid, to initiate this war against Iraq? Why did they give Iraq such short and provocative deadlines? Why were they in such a hurry to take to the battlefield?

It's certainly not the case that we were facing a real imminent threat from Iraq, that Iraq might have attacked us or some other nation in the next few weeks. It seems to me that one factor that underlies the rash conduct of our government is a strong lust for power and domination in the world, a sense that now that the Soviet Union is gone and the United States is the only remaining superpower, we are entitled to act in any way we want. We no longer have to consider ourselves accountable to other countries.

In addition, the US harbors a long-simmering resentment against Saddam Hussein, perhaps a feeling of frustration over our failure to remove him from power twelve years

ago and the failure of the economic sanctions to weaken his control over his country. The new drive against Saddam Hussein was sparked off by the September 11th terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, but the only thing the two have in common is origins in the Middle East. Even though the Bush administration contends that there's a connection between Saddam and the Al Qaeda organization, the rest of the world just laughs at the so-called pieces of evidence it has brought forward to prove its point. Its case is completely untenable.

But what is most worrisome above all, in the attitude of our President and his administration, is the simplistically dualistic view they take of the world. It is a view that sees the relationship between the United States and the countries we consider our enemies as a stark conflict between Good and Evil, with the US representing the forces of Good and those countries inimical to our interests representing the forces of darkness, the forces of Evil. As a staunch Christian, Bush seems to sincerely believe that God is on our side and will support us in any struggle that we launch against the inimical nations who are the agents of darkness. But in the present age, when we have emerged from centuries of religious and ideological wars, this is a puerile pretext covering up what seem to be shameless economic interests.

What lies even deeper than this sense of a battle between Good and Evil is an unexpressed, unacknowledged supposition that the source of all our problems is external to us and thus requires eradication rather than resolution. So, if America is beset by daunting economic and social problems, rather than face these problems directly and tackle them with effective remedies, we try to deflect attention away from our own ineptitude by locating the source of our discomfort in some other country elsewhere in the world. Trying to mobilize the people against another country is a way of quieting their complaints. Tyrants throughout history have persistently found that the best way to unite an internally divided people is to direct their attention towards a common enemy – and that is what seems to be taking place now. So instead of attending to the real inner sources of our insecurity and discontent, we focus upon some external cause, and we assume that by eliminating this external cause all of our problems will be solved. The curtain closes and we'll be able to live happily ever after.

But I'm afraid it ain't so simple. We got rid of the Taliban, yet Al Qaeda still roams the Afghan hills threatening to regroup. Then we find Saddam Hussein is still around to haunt us. Now we'll knock out Saddam and for a while we'll celebrate, but then we look out the window and there's North Korea. If we get rid of the North Korean government, we look around and Iran is still a thorn in our side, so why don't we knock out their government -- they're now the evil one. We get rid of the Iranian government, and then who are we going to look for? Maybe we'll have to reassemble the Soviet Union.

I next want to take a brief look at the likely long-term consequences of these policies. Though my thoughts about this are necessarily hypothetical, the problems that might arise are real ones, real and grave, certain to determine the course of world affairs through much of the new century.

One consequence, already visible, is that the rest of the world now regards the United States as the world's number one bully. We have become like the strong kid on the block who pushes the other kids around to get his way. He might get the toys, but he doesn't make friends. By acting without regard for the opinions of our old friends like Germany

and France, by neglecting potential friends like Russia and China, by spurning the developing world, America is antagonizing potential partners that would be helpful in maintaining world order. We seem to think that on the stage of world politics, no one counts seriously but ourselves.

Large numbers of citizens within those countries supporting our drive against Iraq – in the US itself, in Britain, in Spain – have lost trust in the leadership of the US. Our policies are alienating people within our own borders and people in countries that have traditionally been friendly to us. We have a situation where it's not the United States as a whole, but the ruling elite of the US and its allies, who are deciding all these important matters of international policy, to the disregard of the opinions of many other countries and of many segments of their populations.

On account of America's rashness, the United Nations, the organization created to maintain international order, has been weakened almost to the point that it's literally become irrelevant. Up to this moment, though it has often been weak, the UN could still make its voice heard, could still speak up on behalf of sanity and restraint. Now it is weak, not because it decided to continue with the inspections rather than take the tough line of endorsing a war against Iraq, but because the American president has disregarded its authority. Bush disregarded its authority just at a critical moment when the future of the world hung in the delicate balance between cooperation to achieve collective security on the one hand and submission to the hegemony of a single nation on the other.

In the Third World, especially in Muslim countries, the US action is intensifying hatred against us to an alarming degree. This hatred will almost inevitably escalate in the months ahead, leading to more shocking terrorism and violence against American citizens. By our forceful attempts to establish security we are actually making ourselves more and more insecure. Thus we are unwittingly locking ourselves into a shrinking cell of fear and suspicion; on all sides we are beset with anxiety that we will be subject to terrorist attacks. People abroad don't distinguish so easily between innocent US citizens and our government. They identify any American with our government's policies and thus US policy endangers the lives of its own citizens, indeed to a greater degree than Saddam Hussein has ever done. And when there's more fear and anxiety on the home front, this leads to more government surveillance of American citizens within our territories, more limitations on our civil liberties, more encroachments on our privacy. The ultimate consequence could well be the establishment of a police state.

After the war we will eventually have to reconstruct Iraq, and this will require vast amounts of funds, money that could be used in this country much more beneficially for positive purposes: to build up a more effective education system, a more effective health care system, and better social services – all of which are in decrepit conditions. This will be money that could have been used, or should be used, to render assistance to other countries whose economies are almost in shambles, countries whose people live in unimaginably degrading poverty, perhaps most saliently in Africa. But now the US comes to our rescue and tells us that the funds for reconstruction will come from Iraq's oil revenues. Don't think that this idea is going to endear us to the people of Iraq, whom we claim to be liberating.

Now when we look at this situation as Buddhists, we have to view it not from the narrow perspective of "Where do my personal interests lie?", nor even from the standpoint of

where do the interests of my nation lie, but we have to take a universal perspective, to look upon the world with its countless people and other living beings as though they were identical with ourselves. We have to widen our hearts to embrace the whole world, considering everyone as our own parents and children, in this case, especially the ordinary people of Iraq who will suffer indescribable misery. Think of the many who will die: the parents who will lose their sons; the women who will lose their husbands; the children who will lose their parents. So, in the ceremony that we will perform, we will pay homage to the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, and chant the name of Guanyin Bodhisattva, who represents the great compassion of all the Buddhas. In doing so, we'll try to extend our loving kindness and compassion to all who will be affected by this conflict. We should think especially of those who will feel the bitterness of grief and sorrow most intensely, the people of Iraq, as well as all the soldiers fighting in this war, locking horns with death and injury, whether they be American, British, Iraqi, or any others. Let us extend the wish that hatred and fighting cease, that the leaders of this nation regain their sanity and submit to the decrees of the world community.

In the end, this conflict should make us carefully consider the direction that our country is taking. What is to be the future role of the USA? Is it to be the arm of a small, powerful, privileged elite, who rule to advance their own interests, who pillage and destroy, using the media to manipulate public opinion in their favor? Or is the United States to live up to its original ideals, to become a country led by a truly moral leadership based on the ideals of generosity, compassion, and benevolence? Those are the marks of a true statesman, the type of person we need most urgently. The United States should be a true benefactor of the world, not an exploiter; an exemplar of patience and rationality, not a blistering aggressor. This war is costing billions upon billions of dollars. For what purpose? To destroy, to decimate, to kill. Think what might be done with a mere fraction of that money: to eradicate poverty and disease, to alleviate hunger, to ensure the world's poor of more satisfactory living conditions. America should be a leader in the pursuit of global justice, not a transgressor of international law. It should be a leader in the drive for ecological preservation, not a profligate that devours the natural environment, creating so much pollution and waste. And above all, the United States should be a model of dignified and restrained conduct, not a nation whose behavior in international affairs is self-willed and self-centered. In short, it should be a herald and symbol of civilization.

Thank you for listening, and may the blessings of the noble Triple Gem be with you all.

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Drawn to Buddhism in his early 20s, after completing his university studies he traveled to Sri Lanka, where he received novice ordination in 1972 and full ordination in 1973, both under the late Ven. Ananda Maitreya, the leading Sri Lankan scholar-monk of recent times.

He was appointed editor of the Buddhist Publication Society (in Sri Lanka) in 1984 and its president in 1988. Ven. Bodhi has many important publications to his credit, either as author, translator, or editor, including *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha -- A Translation of the Majjhima Nikaya* (co-translated with Ven. Bhikkhu Nanamoli, 1995) and *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha -- a New Translation of the Samyutta Nikaya* (2000).

In May 2000 he gave the keynote address at the United Nations on its first official celebration of Vesak (the day of the Buddha's birth, enlightenment, and passing away). He returned to the U.S. in 2002 and since July 2002 has been living and teaching at Bodhi Monastery, Lafayette, New Jersey. He is currently the president of the Sangha Council of Bodhi Monastery and the chairman of Yin Shun Foundation.