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IMPLICATIONS OF BUDDHIST POLITICAL ETHICS FOR THE MINIMISATION OF SUFFERING IN SITUATIONS OF ARMED CONFLICT

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ABSTRACT

This article, drawing on Pali materials, highlights the Buddhist emphasis on minimising suffering, even in the conduct of war, in line with principles of international humanitarian law (IHL). It reflects on the inner roots of conflict and explores ideals of governance and the conduct of war, especially as explored in the *Jātaka* stories and stories about the god Sakka, and then as reflected in the Edicts of emperor Asoka and the *Mahāvamsa* chronicle.

KEYWORDS *Jātakas* (*Bhojajāṇiya* (no.23); *Kulāvaka* (no.31); *Mahāsīlava* (no.51); *Asātarūpa* (no.100); *Dhonasākhā* (no.153); *Asadisa* (no.181); *Nandiyamiga* (no.385); *Kusa* (no.531), *Ummagga* (no.546)); *bodhisatta*; *dharmma-rāja*; *dasa-rāja-dhamma*; Asoka; Duṭṭhāmunu; *Mahāvamsa*; Pasenadi; Sakka; *Sakka-samyutta*; minimizing suffering; non-vengeance; protecting non-combatants; International Humanitarian Law

Introduction

It is evident that the two world wars of the past century have left bitter memories of the kind of suffering brought about by modern warfare. A considerable part of such suffering could be seen as the consequence of disregarding the humanitarian principles that should govern social behaviour even in the context of a conflict. Warfare has generally been subject to certain principles and customs; even ancient civilisations had explicitly or implicitly recognised humanitarian laws or principles to be followed in situations of armed conflict. Although in the remote past they were not always codified as universally agreed upon sets of laws, parties to conflict had generally respected such principles and customs, recognising them as a necessary requirement of social and political ethics. It was only as recently as the nineteenth century that attempts were made at the universal codification of humanitarian law. Resorting to war to resolve problems appears to have been recognised as unavoidable, especially in the context of international relationships. The industrialisation of war, which has increasingly made

weapons of great – indeed mass – destruction available, has increased the suffering of war, both for combatants and civilians; hence the necessity of a set of humanitarian laws that can win international approval, adoption and application in practice.

The two main concerns of international humanitarian law (IHL) relating to situations of armed conflict are the protection of those who are not, or no longer, taking part in fighting, and restrictions on the means of warfare, particularly the kinds of weapons used and the tactics of war resorted to. The intended consequence of these concerns is the minimisation of suffering. There is a rich body of ethical principles and conventions related to the conduct of war preserved in the Buddhist tradition, especially in its body of canonical and commentarial literature, and also reflected in the historical practices of those who have professed to be Buddhists. Although they were not codified as laws in the history of Buddhism, they can be recognised as extremely significant ethical principles that could have an impact on any attempt to develop a system of IHL that is intended to minimise human suffering in situations of war, whether international or civil. The following is an attempt to clarify those principles by examining narratives from the form of the early Buddhist canon preserved by the Theravāda school, along with its commentaries and the school's chronicles, and by considering principles found in the edicts of the mid-third century BCE Buddhist king Asoka (Pali, Sanskrit Aśoka).

Reflections on war and conflict in the *Suttas*, discourses of the Buddha

In the canonical sources referring to the biography of the Buddha, it is mentioned that the motivation of the Buddha as a young prince, before his enlightenment, was to leave the ephemeral pleasures of the household life, and strive to find a way to supreme peace (*anuttaraṃ santivarapadaṃ*; M. I.163). After his enlightenment, when asked about the purpose of his teaching, he explained that it was for avoiding conflict (*viggaha*) with anyone in the world, and to end all tendencies in the human mind to engage in behaviour productive of quarrels that may eventually grow into wars or major forms of armed conflict (*kalaha-viggaha-vivāda ... daṇḍādāna satthādāna*. M.I.108 f.). According to the Buddha's teaching, an unavoidable consequence of wars and conflicts is horrific suffering to humans as well as other living beings through human violence and cruelty. Human suffering that is brought about in situations of violent armed conflict is amply illustrated in the *Mahā-dukkha-kkhandha Sutta*, where a vivid description of the mutual sufferings inflicted on the battlefield by opposing combatants in situations of war is given (M. I.86). The Buddha repeatedly maintained that his teaching has always been for the elimination of all *dukkha*: suffering (M.I.140). His teaching was meant

to overcome suffering at the holistic level, ensuring, for those who could commit themselves to fully practising it, a final end to all suffering, whether gross and obvious, or subtle.

Suffering is considered in Buddhism to be intrinsically bad, and therefore, at every possible level, it advocates the avoidance, prevention or minimisation of it. This does not mean that Buddhism avoids the kind of suffering involved in the sometimes challenging process of training that one must undergo to achieve a noble and worthy goal. Undergoing such suffering – for example, bodily discomfort at certain times in meditation – is a side effect in the process of working towards the elimination of the psychological roots of all unwholesome traits and actions that produce suffering for oneself and others. The suffering of the path of practice is not valued as an end in itself, but as part of the way to the elimination of all suffering at the individual level. Acting from the roots of greed, hatred and delusion brings suffering to a person themselves and leads to harmful actions towards others. On the other hand, imbuing one's life with the divine abidings (*brahma-vihāras*) of loving-kindness, compassion, empathetic joy and equanimity means that one ceases to inflict suffering on others.

Suffering is brought about by natural disasters such as earthquakes, storms and tsunamis as well as the natural processes of ageing, sickness and death. Besides this suffering, which is necessarily associated with the common predicament of living beings, there is suffering that is brought about by what Buddhism sees as the unwholesome conduct of human beings themselves. The Buddhist teaching deals primarily with the kind of suffering that humans inflict upon themselves as well as others due to not having insight into the unwholesome motivational roots of human conduct: greed (*lobha*) and hatred (*dosa*) conjoined with delusion (*moha*), which can be seen as the perverted cognitive ground for the arising of the first two. Of course, there is a wide variation in the maturity of insight and the level of transformation of the baser emotions that people are willing and able to achieve through the cultivation of calm and insight. Considering this, the Buddha was not so unrealistic as to imagine that all humans are capable of living in the world in perfect peace, and overcoming all the psychological sources of suffering. He recognised the fact that, given the nature of living beings, even though they may desire to live in harmony and peace, they are unable to do so due to being fettered by the two most potent causes of conflict: envy (*issā*) and miserliness (*macchariya*) (D.II.276). As previously noted, the worst kinds of suffering inflicted by humans upon themselves as well as others occur in situations of war.

Interstate war was not a rare phenomenon during the time of the Buddha. Even kings who were his close associates, constantly seeking his advice and guidance on matters connected with the principles of the ethical life, are known to have fought wars. The canonical sources recount how, while

engaged in solitary contemplation, the following question occurred to the Buddha: Is it possible to perform the role of state governance adhering strictly to ethical principles, without engaging in killing, causing to engage in killing, without engaging in military conquest and causing others to engage in military conquest, without engaging in the infliction of sorrow, and causing others to engage in the infliction of sorrow (*sakkā nu kho rajjam kāretum ahanam aghātayaṃ ajinaṃ ajāpayam asocaṃ asocāpayam dhammenāti*, S. I.116)? The text does not provide a definite answer to the question, perhaps because acting in this way was seen to be extremely difficult.

Although, in the past, aggressive wars were frequently fought with the intention of achieving territorial expansion or over resources, in the modern world threats to peace are more complex, not emanating, at least overtly, from such intentions but from other causes. True, the global superpowers constantly suffer from mutual suspicion, often due to competition for the limited material resources of the world. Yet apart from this major cause for conflict, there are also numerous others such as religious or ethnic identities, disputes relating to territorial limits, and disagreements about political ideologies that could threaten peaceful co-existence in the global context. An invariable tendency in situations of conflict is for each party to firmly assert the moral justification for its own stance. It follows that, despite many commendable achievements of modern humanity, the possibility of destructive wars cannot altogether be ruled out. Although Buddhism considers war an expression of the three roots of evil – namely greed, hatred and delusion – the possibility appears to have been admitted of even a just party being drawn into armed resistance in order to defend itself against unjust aggression. All human societies have ethical values, but have also been involved in wars, international and civil; so they need to reflect on any armed conflict in which they are involved in the light of their values. In the face of admission of the fact that the threat of war is constantly present in the contemporary global context, the ethical issues relating to the conduct of war can and must be raised. There is sufficient reason to say that in this respect the Buddhist religious tradition is in a position to make a valuable contribution.

The Buddhist teaching introduced the concept of an ethical ruler (*dhamma-rājā*), a 'Wheel-turning' (*Cakka-vatti*) universal ruler who is supposed to appear in the world from time to time to uphold an ethical system of governance within which the ruler abstains from the use of weapons of war for the establishment of his state authority and carrying out the functions of governance. However, even such a ruler is supposed to have maintained a powerful army consisting of the fourfold armed regiments and over a thousand warriors who are referred to as his own progeny capable of vanquishing enemy forces (D.III.59). This implies that war may not be altogether avoidable in state governance. Buddhism considered wars of aggression utterly unethical, being an obvious expression of greed and/or hatred. However, as noted

above, the state has to safeguard its citizens from aggressive enemy forces, and the need could on occasion arise when the state has to resist unjustified aggression.

The *Jātaka* stories on conduct in armed conflict

In recognition of such situations, Buddhism has dealt with ethical issues relating to the conduct of war, sometimes through the introduction of mythical episodes as in the case of its description of the god Sakka, seen as a devout follower of the Buddha, engaging in war, but acting in ways that could minimise suffering. The large body of what I would call Buddhist fictional literature, the *Jātakas*, is supposed to contain stories of the past lives of the Buddha while he was engaging in the fulfilment of the perfections for attaining the goal of Buddhahood. They represent ‘the Buddha to be’ (*bodhisatta*), sometimes as a witness to situations of war, and sometimes as a direct participant in fighting. Several narratives from this body of literature relevant to the present discussion are introduced below. There are also instances in Buddhist history in which those who professed Buddhism as their faith have directly participated in war, though paying heed to the implicit ethical principles that should be adhered to as Buddhists in such situations. These instances reflect the ethical norms applicable to situations of war, especially relating to matters concerning the treatment of the innocent victims of war, the avoidance of extremely cruel methods of warfare, and the compassionate treatment of defeated and subdued enemies. The fundamental ethical doctrines enunciated in the Buddhist canonical sources such as the *Dhammapada*, which insist on the conquest of enmity through non-enmity, and hatred through compassion, are clearly reflected in such instances. They are relevant particularly to war situations where hatred and enmity play quite a prominent role.

In any situation where ethics matter, a fundamental question arises regarding the grounds for ethical evaluation. Since ethics deal with what is right or wrong, good or bad, what ought or ought not to be done, the grounds on which such determinations could be made need clarification. According to Buddhism, ethical judgements cannot be reasonably grounded on authority or tradition. Buddhism does not favour any form of commandment theory for making ethical decisions, even in terms of what is supposed to be commanded by God, though what the Buddha taught is certainly seen as very worthy of reflecting on for consideration. From the Buddhist point of view, ultimately humans themselves have to determine what is ethically good. The important issue is not (as a theist might see it) whether ‘what is commanded by God’ is good, but whether ‘God commands’ what is good, and for Buddhism the good can be determined only through autonomous human reflection about the matter. It becomes clear from an examination of the

Buddhist teachings that to be judged as universally valid, any ethical norm must take account of the happiness or suffering that human behaviour is likely to produce.

In all situations where ethical considerations matter, Buddhism insists that minimisation of suffering and maximisation of happiness are our foremost moral responsibilities. This Buddhist ethical ideal is reflected in its definition of the terms *kusala* and *akusala* – generally translated as wholesome or skilful and unwholesome or unskilful – which can respectively be said to be the closest equivalents to the terms ‘ethical’ or ‘moral’ and ‘unethical’ or ‘immoral’ in usual English usage. Unethical (*akusala*) action is that which brings about the long-term suffering (*dukkh’udrayam dukkha-vipākam*) of oneself and others, while ethical action is that which conduces to the long-term happiness (*sukh’udrayam sukha-vipākam*) of oneself and others (M.II.114–115). The humanitarian principle that in all circumstances it is a human responsibility to minimise suffering is evidently recognised in the Buddhist ethical system. No other criterion, such as divine commandment, is prioritised over the principle of minimisation of suffering. Therefore, this principle has its implications for the conduct of war within which infliction of suffering becomes a causally necessary consequence.

During the latter part of the canonical period of its literature, Buddhism formulated a code of political ethics referred to as the 10 principles of state governance (*dasa-rāja-dhamma*), which have quite obvious implications for the subject of our discussion. The most serious violations of ethical conduct in situations of war occur under regimes that act with the motive of seeking vengeance on a defeated enemy, and showing callous disregard for the suffering of the innocent. The Buddhist tradition has been aware of this, and has made a genuine attempt to prevent such actions, in accordance with its advocacy of compassion and forgiveness, by formulating ethical principles to which those exercising state authority ought to subscribe. Buddhist fiction represents the social reality of the cruelties and excesses associated with the abuse of state power by autocratic and tyrannical rulers. Recognising this tendency to the abuse of state power on the part of authoritarian regimes that followed the principle that might is right, the Buddhist tradition appears to have put together these 10 ethical principles to be followed in the exercise of state power as safeguards against acts of oppression and cruelty.

We find these 10 principles listed in the *Nandiyamiga Jātaka* (no.385) in which the Bodhisatta, said to have been born as the leader of a herd of deer, is represented as using his selfless bravery to prevent a king, who engaged in hunting deer for sport, from firing the arrow he was aiming at him. He was then able to exhort the king about the morality to be practised by people with his responsibilities. In this instance it is pointed out that kings should rule without falling into the four modes of unjust behaviour (*agati*) and adhering

strictly to the 10 ethical principles of kingship (*dasa-rāja-dhamma*, Jat.III.274). These – (1) *dāna* (charitability), (2) *sīla* (virtuous conduct), (3) *pariccāga* (sacrifice), (4) *ajjava* (uprightness), (5) *maddava* (mildness), (6) *tapa* (austerity), (7) *akkodha* (absence of anger), (8) *avihiṃsā* (non-injury), (9) *khanti* (patience) and (10) *avirodhana* (non-retaliation) – each have direct implications for the minimisation of suffering in situations of armed conflict. The fictional literature of Buddhism can obviously be interpreted as a Buddhist device to inculcate certain ethical norms, including for the guidance of those who exercise state power in armed conflict. It should also be noted that the ethical ideal represented in those principles came to be adopted even in certain actual historical situations in which Buddhist heads of state had engaged in war.

A story widely known in several Buddhist traditions, which is likely to have had a considerable element of historical reality, makes reference to the wars fought between King Ajātasattu of Magadha and King Pasenadi of Kosala (Jat. II.243, Jat.IV.343).¹ Ajātasattu is represented as a patricide king who had cruel tendencies from the early stage of his life, and was exposed to the evil influence of Devadatta, a monk who happened to be a rival of the Buddha. According to these accounts, the sister of King Pasenadi was the chief queen of King Bimbisāra, who was Ajātasattu's father. After Ajātasattu's cruel act of starving his father to death, the queen died from grief. The revenue of a village, amounting to a hundred thousand *kahāpanas*, had been assigned to the queen as part of the dowry to be paid by her brother, King Pasenadi. After the death of his sister, Pasenadi refused to make that payment. War broke out repeatedly between the two parties over the issue. Pasenadi, after receiving some advice on war strategy that had inadvertently come from the monk Dhanuggahatissa Thera, a former combatant in war, was able to finally emerge victorious. Ajātasattu was taken prisoner and bound in chains. Since King Pasenadi happened to be a person who came under the direct influence of the Buddha's ethical teachings, Ajātasattu was punished with imprisonment for a few days, but later reconciliation was reached. Pasenadi ended up giving his own daughter, Vajirā, in marriage to Ajātasattu, restoring even the revenue of the disputed village as her 'bath-money'. This can be seen an instance illustrative of a number of principles coming under the 10 royal virtues, such as mildness, absence of anger and non-retaliation.

The restraint in conflict of the god Sakka

In Buddhist mythology the god Sakka is represented as an ethical model to be emulated in situations where the victorious party in war is in a position of strength. The collection of texts called the *Sakka-samyutta*, which refers to the wars fought between Sakka and Vepacitti, illustrates in this mythical context how some of the royal ethical virtues such as

mildness, absence of anger, non-injury, patience and non-retaliation can be practised even in the face of severe provocation by the captured enemy. According to the story, the *devas* (gods) under the leadership of Sakka emerge victorious over the *asuras* (a group of evil-minded celestial beings) led by Vepacitti, and Vepacitti is brought to Sakka's territory bound in chains. Vepacitti, being imprisoned in a cell close to Sakka's assembly hall, happens to insult Sakka with harsh and abusive words as he goes in and out of his assembly hall. Mātali, driver of Sakka's chariot, calls upon Sakka to retaliate. In this instance Sakka keeps his calm, and even contests Mātali's view that one who is in a position of strength should show no mercy to the captured enemy. Sakka points out that the practice of restraint and patience while being in a position of strength is the most commendable kind of patience. The Buddha relates this story and states with appreciation that even when Sakka was exercising his sole royal authority over the Tāvātimsa *devas*, he extolled the value of patience (S.I.121–122).

In the same mythological context of the *Sakka-saṃyutta* there is an illustration of the Buddhist virtue of the protection of the life of the innocent and refraining from acting in a way that would endanger their lives even at the cost of adverse consequences to an embattled army. As related by the Buddha, on one occasion the *asuras* defeat the *devas*, and the *devas*, led by Sakka, flee from the battleground for the protection of their own lives. As they do so, their chariot poles hit some nests of the Supanna birds and kill some infant Supannas. Learning of this, Sakka orders his army to turn back, despite the imminent threat to his warriors' lives from the pursuing enemies. However, Vepacitti's army, suspecting that Sakka must have turned back with reinforcements to fight them, flees in fear. The Buddha then says that Sakka had become victorious because of his righteous conduct (*dhammeneva jayo*, S.I.225). An allusion to this story is given in the *Kulāvaka Jātaka* (no.31), where in the introduction to the story the Buddha says:

In the past, even the wise rulers of gods, when defeated in war and fleeing over the ocean, resolved that the destruction of life (*pāṇavadham*) for the sake of maintaining one's power was unjustified. To this end, risking their great reputation, they brought their chariot to a stop, saving the life of the fledgeling Supannas.² (Jat.I.198).

This represents especially the royal virtue of self-sacrifice (*pariccāga*), along with others such as non-injury (*avihiṃsā*).

More from the *Jātakas*

The *Jātaka* commentary consists of many stories that contain substantial material reflecting Buddhist war ethics. As pointed out above, it is in this body of literature that the 10 royal virtues came to be formulated. There are several *Jātaka* stories that make reference to wars fought between rival kings where the Bodhisatta is represented as the key character exemplifying Buddhist virtues. In some instances, kings are addressed by wise animals (in some cases the animal in question happens to be the Bodhisatta himself) giving them instruction regarding the ethical norms that they should not violate when they participate in battles. The *Bhojājāniya Jātaka* (no.23) is one such instance. There the Bodhisatta is represented in his past life as a well-trained horse belonging to King Brahmadatta of Benares. Brahmadatta faced the threat of war from seven neighbouring kings, and was under siege by their joint forces. The horse is chosen by a knight to lead a charge. Despite the horse being fatally injured, he enables the knight to defeat the armies of the seven kings. The horse, approaching death, instructs King Brahmadatta not to kill the defeated kings but to release them after making them commit a binding oath of allegiance (Jat.I.180).

The *Mahāsīlava Jātaka* (no.51) narrates the story of the Bodhisatta born in a previous life as King Mahāsīlava (Immensely Virtuous), who ruled the kingdom of Benares practising patience (*khanti*), loving-kindness (*mettā*) and sympathetic concern (*anuddayā*) (Jat.I.261). He treats even criminals with sympathy. Plunderers are given gifts so that they will transform themselves once they have acquired wealth with which to make a living. A certain person is expelled for his wrongdoing by Mahāsīlava, and then incites the king of Kosala to conquer his kingdom. Mahāsīlava, although he has sufficient strength to easily defeat the Kosala king, orders his powerful army not to fight due to his dislike for harming human life. The king of Kosala takes over the kingdom, but Mahāsīlava through the power of his virtue and goodness, and using strategies that do not harm life, makes the usurper regret his misdeed and so return his kingdom to him.

The *Asātarūpa Jātaka* (no.100) is a good example of the Buddhist disapproval of unethical war strategies such as starving a civilian population in order to gain military objectives. It narrates the story of a king of Kosala who slew the virtuous king of Benares, the then Bodhisatta. The slain king's son escapes and after a time, having gathered a mighty army, challenges the usurper. The mother of the young prince advises the latter to adopt the strategy of blockading the rival king's territory, depriving the civilian population of all the requisites of life such as firewood, water and food, so that the war could be won even without a battle. After seven days' blockade the starving populace revolt against the king, killing him and bringing his head to the prince. On the face of it, this story seems to recommend siege practice,

until we learn that the Buddha narrated this story with reference to Suppavāsā, a female lay disciple of his who is said to have remained pregnant for seven years, going through acute labour pains over seven days, unable to deliver the child. The acute suffering of both mother and child is explained by the Buddha as a consequence of the bad karma of the past resulting from adopting an unethical war strategy involving the starvation of the civilian population (Jat.I.409). (The pregnancy ends well, according to the commentary, after she sends a message to the Buddha regarding her faith in him and the Buddha wishes her well in response.)

A similar message is found in the *Dhonasākha Jātaka* (no.153), which narrates the story of a cruel king, Brahmadatta Kumāra, who performs torturous acts and suffers the consequences of his cruelty. On ascending the throne, he thinks of committing aggression against all neighbouring states. He then succeeds in capturing a thousand kings, after which he tries to seize the kingdom of Takkasilā as well. When he fails in this endeavour he is advised by his cruel family priest to perform a ritual sacrifice, pulling out the eyes of the already captured kings and using their flesh to make sacrificial offerings. According to the narrative, he had finally to succumb to the law of karma and was reborn in hell (Jat.III.157).

In the *Asadisa Jātaka* (no.181), the Bodhisatta is a king of Benares who is very skilled in warfare, and able to defeat an enemy with practically no damage to life. Although he was the older prince in the family, he renounced kingship in favour of his younger brother, who believed in the words of conspirators and betrayed him. However, when his brother came under attack surrounded by 10 kings who wanted to capture the city of Benares, the Bodhisatta, who happened to be an extremely skilled archer, dismissed the enemy armies just by warning them of his prowess. The intention in this case was to avoid bloodshed in war. Power was used in the most skilled manner to bring about minimum harm. The Bodhisatta in this instance did not mind his brother's betrayal, helping him in a time of need (Jat.II.87).

The *Kusa Jātaka* (no.531) narrates the story of Kusa, the Bodhisatta born as an extremely ugly looking prince. Kusa, somehow concealing his looks, wins the most beautiful princess of the time, Pabhāvatī, as his wife. When she becomes aware of the looks of her newly obtained husband, however, she becomes resentful and abandons Kusa, going back to the home of her father, King Madda. When seven neighbouring kings then go forth to battle against King Madda, each one demanding to have Pabhāvatī as his wife, King Madda is compelled to seek the help of Kusa to defeat them. Kusa, a valiant fighter, defeats all seven in battle and thereby wins over Pabhāvatī. Although King Madda permits Kusa to slay the seven kings, Kusa, being the virtuous Bodhisatta, seeks reconciliation and proposes instead that they give in marriage to each one of the defeated kings one of the seven other daughters of King Madda, each almost equal in beauty to Pabhāvatī (Jat.V.278).

The *Ummagga Jātaka* (no.546) excels among Buddhist fiction that illustrates the ethical virtue of minimising harm in situations of war. It narrates the story of the Bodhisatta as Mahosadha, the wise advisor to the king of Videha. According to this narrative, Mahosadha is hated by the other four advisors to the king due to their feelings of jealousy. They attempt several times to create a rift between the king and Mahosadha. On one occasion, the king realises that the advisers are giving him false information in order to bring about a conflict with Mahosadha. The king wishes to punish the four advisers by executing them. Mahosadha, however, pleads with the king not to impose such harsh punishment and persuades him to give them only mild punishment. After the king proposes milder forms of punishment, finally Mahosadha persuades the king to forgive them and reinstate them in their original ministerial positions (Jat.VI.389).

The *Ummagga Jātaka* also includes the story of a king called Brahmadatta and his chief adviser, Kevaṭṭa. Kevaṭṭa hatches a plan for the king to conquer his neighbouring countries in order to become king of all Jambudīpa (India). Kevaṭṭa plans to get the less powerful kings out of the way first, plotting to poison all 100 of them as a first step in a larger military venture against the king of Videha. The latter king's adviser, the *bodhisatta* Mahosadha, foils the plot through skilled espionage. He intervenes to prevent the cruel death of the 100 kings, even though they had been aligning themselves with Brahmadatta to attack the king of Videha. After this setback, Brahmadatta remains determined to defeat the king of Videha despite being cautioned against it by Kevaṭṭa, and he goes to war. Mahosadha then succeeds in trapping Brahmadatta, but spares his life and avoids a battle that could have brought about immense destruction of life. Finally, he reveals his skills to Brahmadatta, and tells him that if he so wished he could become king of the whole of Jambudīpa, but that wise people do not approve of gaining kingship by killing others. Mahosadha reconciles all the kings, and they all become happily united (Jat.VI.460).

The conduct of King Asoka, from his edicts

Apart from the Buddhist fiction discussed above, there are impressive real and historical events that illustrate the influence of Buddhist principles on the ethics of war. The finest example is of King Asoka of India (268–39 BCE), who renounced his earlier violent and militaristic mentality after he became a devout Buddhist. After establishing his empire through violent military conquest including a massacre in the war in Kāliṅga (modern-day Orissa), Asoka became extremely remorseful about the suffering he had inflicted on people during the battles.

In Rock edict XIII, Asoka expresses his remorse and greatly regrets the sorrows and sufferings he had caused:

- (1) The Kalinga country was conquered by King Priyadarśin [Asoka] ... when he had been consecrated eight years. One hundred and fifty thousand persons were carried away as captives and one hundred thousand slain and many times that number died.
- (2) After that ... Devānāmpriya [Asoka] is intensely devoted to Dharmapālana (the protection of Dharma) ...
- (3) Devānāmpriya, the conquerer of Kālīṅga has remorse now, because of the thought that the conquest is no conquest, for there was killing, death or banishment of the people ... That is keenly felt with profound sorrow and regret ...
- (6) Now, even the loss of a hundredth or even a thousandth part of all the lives that were killed or died or carried away captive at the time when Kālīṅgas were conquered – is considered deplorable by Devānāmpriya. (Murti and Aiyangar 1951, 39ff.)

In Kalinga Edict I, Asoka says:

... All people are my children. Just as I desire on behalf of my own children that they should be fully provided with all kinds of comfort and enjoyment in this as well as in the other world, similarly, I desire the same (happiness and enjoyment in this world and in the next) on behalf of all people. (Murti and Aiyangar 1951, 53–55)

In Rock Edict II, it is said that in the conquered territories as well as the borderlands Asoka initiated a number of benevolent measures, such as the establishment of medical services for both humans and animals (Murti and Aiyangar 1951, 5). Rock Edict V refers to the appointment of officers called Great Ministers of *Dharma* to look into the needs of the people and to see that they are instructed properly regarding the principles of ethical living (Murti and Aiyangar 1951, 15). The sentiments expressed in the above edicts undoubtedly reflect the influence of the ideal of the ethical ruler (*dharmiko dhamma-rājā*) in the Buddhist canonical teachings with which Asoka appears to show familiarity. Although the term *Dharma* was in common use in the context of political doctrine in almost all Indian systems of political thought, the Buddhist concept of *Dharma* was characteristically different. In Buddhism, *Dharma* was not interpreted merely as 'Law' divested of its ethical connotation. This becomes clear from the fact that where Buddhism speaks of *Dharma* in relation to state governance, it is supposed to exclude the infliction of any suffering through the use of weapons of war. A king committed to *Dharma* engages not in armed conquest, but in conquest through the exclusion of the use of armaments (*adaṇḍena asatthena dhammena abhivijjīya*). Asoka's edicts also reflect to a considerable extent conformity with the royal ethical principles implicit in the standard list of 10 that came to be established in the later period of Buddhism. Conformity to such principles on his part was probably a result of the transformation of his character through the influence of Buddhism.

The *Mahāvamsa* chronicle of Sri Lanka on conduct during war

Buddhism was introduced to Sri Lanka during the reign of King Asoka, and according to the Sri Lankan chronicles and commentaries to the Buddhist canon, from its introduction it was established as the dominant or state religion. Subsequently, through a gradual process, a distinct ethno-religious identity that came to be referred to as 'Sinhala Buddhist' developed in the country. The Sri Lankan chronicles give the impression that during the formative period of this identity Sri Lanka confronted the threat of continuing military aggression from her southern Indian neighbour, inhabited by people having a different ethnic and religious identity.³ The *Mahāvamsa*, the chronicle that has played a prominent role in creating the distinct Sinhala Buddhist ethno-religious identity, gives an account of what it conceived as a major threat of that kind that occurred around two centuries after the introduction of Buddhism to Sri Lanka. According to this account, the main capital city of the country was conquered by a powerful ruler of South Indian descent. This resulted in resistance from those who gave primacy to the preservation of Sinhala Buddhist identity, resulting in what is historically known as the battle between Duṭugāmuṇu and Elāra. In this battle Duṭugāmuṇu (Pali Duṭṭhagāmaṇi, 101–77 BCE) is said to have fought a fierce war against Elāra, with the *Mahāvamsa* proclaiming that the former fought not to gain political power for himself, but for the glory of the Buddha-dhamma (Geiger, 1912 *Mahāvamsa*, XXV, vv.2–3, 111), hence the protection of Buddhism in the country.

There has been much contemporary discussion about the problem of justification of such violence in terms of Buddhist ethical principles. In the discussion above, it was noted that in Buddhist literature the Bodhisatta himself is represented as a combatant in situations of war. The crucial point here is not about the justification of war, for Buddhism recognises the fact that in secular social relationships there could be situations when war becomes unavoidable. The relevant issue here is about the ethical principles to be followed in the conduct of war itself, which is the principal question addressed in this article. There are indications in the account given in the *Mahāvamsa*, regarding the war between Duṭugāmuṇu and Elāra, that certain Buddhist ethical principles like non-hatred (*akkodha*) were observed by the victorious Duṭugāmuṇu. The remorse that he is supposed to have felt after his victory reflects the Buddhist ethical concern about destruction of human life and the ethical value of non-injury (*avihiṃsā*). This situation is described in the *Mahāvamsa* thus:

Sitting then on the terrace of the royal palace, adorned, lighted with fragrant lamps and filled with many a perfume, magnificent with nymphs in the guise of dancing-girls, while he rested on his soft and fair couch, covered with costly draperies, he, looking back upon his glorious victory, great though it was, knew no joy, remembering that thereby was wrought the destruction of millions (of beings). (Geiger, 1912, *Mahāvamsa*, XXV, vv.101–103)⁴

Another notable event associated with the Chronicler's account of the war was Duṭugāmuṇu's response to the defeated enemy. It is said that upon his victory, he paid respect to the fallen enemy:

When he had thus been victorious in battle and had united Laṅkā under one rule he marched, with chariots, troops and beasts for riders, into the capital. In the city he caused the drum to be beaten, and when he had summoned the people from a yojana around he celebrated the funeral rites for king Eḷāra. On the spot where his body had fallen he burned it with the catafalque, and there did he build a monument and ordain worship. And even to this day the princes of Laṅkā, when they draw near to this place are wont to silence their music because of this worship (Geiger, 1912, *Mahāvamsa*, XXV, vv.71–74).

Conclusion

In concluding this discussion, it could be maintained as a general observation with adequate support from historical evidence that instances of military aggression on the part of Buddhist communities with imperialist motives have been extremely rare in India and Sri Lanka. Such an attitude can be attributed to the emphasis in Buddhist teachings on the ethically defiled psychological sources of such conduct, as well as the priority given in the system to love and compassion. As we have noted above, the criterion that is prioritised in Buddhism in determining the ethical quality of human conduct is the long-term happiness or suffering produced by any mode of behaviour. Accordingly, even in situations where the use of violence is necessitated for achieving what may be called just ends, Buddhism has called upon persons who wield power and authority to act in such a way that they minimise suffering. Moreover, many examples of such behaviour can be found in the Buddhist teachings and history.

Notes

1. Cf. Harris' article in this volume.
2. Translation adjusted for modern readership.
3. Sri Lankan scholars in the 1990s were able to show that this is a retrospective interpretation. After all, there were Tamil Buddhists, and Tamil is often mentioned by the commentator Buddhaghosa as one of the languages that might be the mother tongue of a candidate for Buddhist ordination. Analysis also indicated that different ethnicities were fighting in Duṭugāmuṇu's army.
4. The 'millions' translates *akkhohinī*, which Cone (2001, 7–8) explains as 'a complete army (or ... millions)'.

Abbreviations

- D. *Digha-nikāya*, edited by T. W. Rhys Davids and J. Estlin Carpenter, in 3 vols. London, Luzac and Co., 1890–1911. Reprinted, London: Pali Text Society.
- Jat *The Jātaka, Together with its Commentary*, edited by V. Fausboll, 6 vols. London, Luzac and Co. (vol.1), & Tibner and Co. (vols. 2–6), 1877–1896. The Pali, and English translations of all of them, are available at: <https://jatakastories.div.ed.ac.uk>. The translations are those done by various hands under E. B. Cowell, *The Jātaka or Stories of the Buddha's Former Births*, 6 vols., London: Pali Text Society, 1895–1907. Newer translations are the following: Naomi Appleton and Sarah Shaw, *The Ten Great Birth Stories of the Buddha; The Mahānipāta of the Jātakavaṇṇanā*, Chiang Mai: Silkworm, 2 volumes, 2015; this translates the final 10, and longest *Jātakas*: nos. 538–547. Sarah Shaw, *The Jātakas: Birth Stories of the Bodhisatta*, New Delhi: Penguin, 2006, translates 26 of the *Jātakas*: nos. 1, 9, 20, 37, 48, 55, 75, 94, 95, 99, 106, 108, 121, 128, 248, 273, 313, 316, 385, 402, 407, 476, 506, 538, 539, and 540. Nos. 385 and 546 are discussed above.
- M. *Majjhima-nikāya*, edited by V. Trenkner and Robert Chalmers, 3 vols. London, Luzac and Co., 1888–1899. Reprinted, London: Pali Text Society.
- S. *Samyutta-nikāya*, edited by Leon Feer, 5 vols. London, Luzac and Co., 1884–1898. Reprinted, London: Pali Text Society.

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