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The Morality of Violence from the Buddhist Perspective

“Monks, as low-down thieves might carve one limb from limb with a double-handed saw, yet then whoever sets his mind at enmity, he, for this reason, is not a doer of my teaching.” This quote from a translated version of the Middle Length Discourses of Buddha is important as it helps to fuel the fire of debate amongst Buddhists, that debate being whether war in all circumstances is moral in the Buddhist faith. Buddhism, or Dharma, is synonymous with the teachings of Buddha which are characterized by peace, harmony, and devotion to the eightfold path and these are the characteristics to which many non-buddhists see the religion. As Buddha’s teachings of the four noble truths, the backbone for Buddhist traditions, speak on the cause of suffering and how war is a proponent of suffering and as such should be avoided many in the modern age have wondered if the Buddha’s teachings on loving oneself as well as their enemy should be strictly followed or should there be exceptions for the protection against “unjust violence.” Many Buddhists cite Buddha’s teachings as evidence to why any violence is evil due to the fact that in the universe when violence is used it is perpetuated forever and must be eradicated seemingly putting the blame of the continuation on both those who act as defenders and aggressors. In the modern day however, many debate the validity of “moral” violence with more of Buddha’s words in that they believe if evil in the world is allowed to run rampant leads to destruction and the spread of more evil and as such violence is acceptable only in circumstances where “evil” is spread. The question is whether the use of violence is unacceptable, due to the propagation of violence and suffering in the universe, if it is acceptable,

because moral violence seeks to end indiscriminate and immoral violence, and to that it can be argued that non-violence adheres closest to Buddha's teachings and ethical beliefs.

Firstly, many of those who follow closely to Buddha's visions wholly refuse violence in favor of compassion and guidance as a way to combat the perpetuation of violence. The Second and Third Noble Truth outline the cause of lively suffering as desire and hatred and that the truth of the end of suffering is the cessation of desire and subsequently the end of violent acts in the effort of a goal which is important as it paints any conflict as the result of an act of desire to see their adversaries dead and as such is a violation of one of Buddhism's vital tenets. Many see violence, regardless of whether it is noble or not, perpetuates the suffering of violence and sets humanity down a path of more violence as Buddha references when saying Conquest begets enmity; the conquered live in misery; the peaceful live happily having renounced conquest and defeat" meaning that despite a "noble victory" suffering is still put upon the defeated and as such suffering persists. It is argued that non-violent solutions to conflict is more moral then resorting to the perpetuation of violence and suffering as evidenced by the story of the murderous thief Angulimaala's realization of the irrelevance of his violence is caused not by further violence but through contemplation and arguments with the Buddha.

On the opposite side of the argument, modern Buddhists seek to cite other teachings of the Buddha as evidence that violence, when done morally and nobly, is justified in destroying evil that can cause more suffering. In the modern age the ethnic and religious divide in Sri Lanka between ethnic Buddhists and Muslims has led to the argument that "noble violence" is needed to combat evil violence, which is characterized as crime and terrorism, that may be the cause of

Buddhist suffering. Another argument that some Buddhists have for the need for moral violence is the need for defense of oneself and the teachings of Buddha meaning that Buddhists who resort to violence as a means of defending their faith and values are justified only if they are the defenders and not the aggressors. Finally many Modern Buddhist Theologians reason that the Buddha hadn't thought of the intricacies and specifics of the conflict throughout history and as such many theologians reason that the modern world is too complex to reason that war is completely immoral and as such cannot be argued against as evidenced by the reasoning that the canon texts cannot wholly apply to every war or conflict especially in the modern day and that Buddhism invites followers to question within themselves a solution.

All arguments have valid points, but what could be reasoned as closer to the Buddha's true vision, to that it can be argued that due to the allusion to non-violence and aversion to war in the most important tenets of Buddhism, the Four Noble Truths, that non-violence is more adherent to the core beliefs of the faith. The Four Noble Truths are the main tenet of Buddhism and as such are the backbone for Buddhist belief and because they mention that suffering is caused by desire that may lead to violence it is the cessation of violence in any case is important to achieve Nirvana. Secondly, the story of Angulimala and Buddha teachings from it are important as they outline that a contemplation of the reason for conflict and its consequence is a valid alternative to violence as evidenced by Buddha's saying "I, Angulimala, am standing still, having for all beings everywhere laid aside the stick, But you are unrestrained regarding creatures; therefore I am standing still, you are not standing still." which outlines how non-violence leads to non-violence whereas violence leads to more violence. Finally, when Buddha says "Even if thieves carve you limb from limb with a double-handed saw, if you make

your mind hostile you are not following my teaching.” he means that even in the presence of violence to resist the corruption of violent thought is more important than “solving” the violence similarly to Buddha’s own journey to enlightenment in which desire, which can lead to violence, was resisted in an effort to truly reach peace and enlightenment.

In Conclusion, the morality of war and violence is a divisive topic within Buddhism, is following the Canon closely and rejecting all circumstances of violence morally or using violence to benefit the good and noble and eliminate the bad the better alternative. As seen, many believe violence to be a part of life and as such the only way to eliminate violence is to not participate in it at all. While others also see violence as a part of life and it is necessary in the modern context as the intricacies of the world could not be predicted by Buddha and the Canon. But realizing that non-violence is more religiously sound and moral in Buddhism is important as it is heavily alluded to in the core tenets, non-violence can lead to the elimination of violence, and resistance of violent thoughts, and thereby desire, is a sign that one is on the way to the cessation of suffering and the path to enlightenment.

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