

BUDDHIST VIEWS ON VIOLENT CONFLICT IN SOCIETY:THE ROLE OF LEADERSHIP IN PEACE BUILDING

by Ven. Lien Vien (Pham Thi My Dung)*

ABSTRACT

Violent conflict is an inevitable aspect of humankind. They arise not only within each individual but a relationship between two or more persons, groups, regions or nations, whatever happen undesirable and disagreement about some factors such as organization, politics, economy, society, culture, and religion. It now seems to be more complex and increasingly prolonged on around the world. No country escape from the war in own historical development. No country keep away from threatening of internal conflict and violence. Nevertheless, human beings always treasure a desire to live in peace, harmony, and solidarity. Our understanding of violent conflict is itself causes injurious and painful to physical and spiritual. The results of violent conflict are ultimately detrimental for both victor and victim alike. The quotation such as the following have been extracted and used to sum up the Buddha's perspective on violent conflict: "*Violence breeds misery, Look at people quarreling, I will relate to emotion agitating me*". "*Having seen people struggling and contending with each other like fish in a small amount of water, fear entered me*". (Khuddaka Nikāya: Sn 4.15). It cannot deny that the Buddha had an intimate knowledge of statecraft. He did not ignore

*. M.Phil student, Pali and Buddhist Studies Department, University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka.

of the political realities but also expose much more about the social contexts with details by using similes and illustrations appropriate to each situation of the faces of society within the sermons of the Buddha. Hence, the relevance of Buddhist thought in the explanation and resolution of violent conflict has made the great impact on society not only in the Buddha's society but in the context of the advancement of scientific knowledge and technological skills. Buddhist thought had offered to humans certain significant insights regarding how their ways of thinking, modes of behavior and responses to the inner and outer reality produced problems at both the individual and societal levels. Important here is the reference to the role of leaders who should have a high degree of moral integrity in order to construct and govern society.

In this paper, I intend to examine how violent conflict effects on human beings or the environment around us, and its causes refer to basic actions such as mental, verbal, and physical through on words, thoughts, and deeds. Then that identifies the leadership qualities according to Buddhist thought resolves this issue and construct harmony and peace for humanity. The approach will be scriptural. It is mainly focused on primary sources as Pāli texts. For purpose of this inquiry, some specific questions may be raised in the framework of this study:

What causes of violent conflict arise? How we can understand violent conflicts as a current social problem? What the root of violent conflict base on Buddhist thoughts?

- i. Whether the Buddhist thought is concerned with the salvation or liberation of the individual and is far removed from social concerns or not?
- ii. What is the role of leadership in this issue?
- iii. Whether the Buddhist ideal of leadership is felt most suitable for a globalized world without violent conflict?

1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, there are multiple forms of violent conflict, declared or undeclared, occurring in all corners of the world. It cannot denied that they arise between the relationships of individuals, collectives,

societies, and nations, even happening within individual selves. Violent conflict is caused by many reasons, related to organization, politics, economy, society, culture, and religion. They may be found disturbing the peace of every country, physically and mentally affecting nations and peoples. Authorities strive to maintain relationships, coalitions, and alliances that help create conditions for peace. They try to analyze and predict causes, impacts, effects, and capacity for conflicts. The first task is discovering the cause of conflicts, which is essential in finding positive resolutions that work for all parties involved.

The relevance of Buddhist thought in the explanation and resolution of current social problems is that it offers humankind certain significant insights into their ways of thinking, modes of behavior and responses to the inner and outer realities that produce problems at both the individual and societal levels. Buddhist thought recognizes that violent conflict has both internal and external causes. The Buddha's teaching instructs people how to restrain the arising of conflict, prevent further escalation of underlying conflicts and to solve the problem internally. In order to attaining those goals, each individual should learn how to control their own actions and emotions through discourses of the Buddha. In particular, leaders need to demonstrate their ability to contribute to community peacekeeping and security. Their duty is to create a condition under which nations can live with fewer frictions and individuals with less conflict. In order to this condition to thrive, each individual should be provided with social, economic, moral and spiritual security. The followings are analyzes of the origins of conflicts from the Buddhist point of view that reference some qualities that leaders need to fulfill their responsibilities.

2. CONTENT

Violent conflict is very diverse and manifested in many different forms. At a higher level it could leads world war, regional war, war between two countries, civil war, or violent, political, diplomatic, border disputes, territorial disputes and so forth.

Conflict may be born in the mind of an individual, then gradually enlarging itself into social conflict, national conflict and finally

international conflict culminating in a great war. As there can be no society without individuals, there can be no social conflicts without individual conflicts. Therefore, each individual must have the knowledge and self-awareness to minimize violent conflict. No one likes violence; people fear violence because they fear death and destruction of life and property. The Buddha said the reasons why killing must be stopped are:

*“All tremble at violence,
All fear death,
Putting oneself in the place of another,
One should not kill nor cause another to kill.”⁽¹⁾*

People tremble at violence because it involves bloodshed and torture, pain and suffering. All religions condemn violence. The Catholic Church teaches its followers the commandment “*Thou shalt not kill.*”⁽²⁾ One must love another as oneself.

Violent conflict has existed since ancient times. In fact, it can be said that violent conflict has increased and become more technologically advanced in modern time. People use it as a means to gain their rights and demands, to destroy the enemy. Moreover, violence is self-defense, a vital instinct within every sentient beings.

Then the question in the present circumstances is why there is an increase in violence. Why are people becoming more insensitive to other people and to nature? Acts of violence, are happening even in most civilized societies.

2.1. General views on causes of violent conflict

As mentioned above, there are two perspectives to causes of violent conflicts: internal and external. External causes relate to the structure of world political system, international and regional contexts, as well as problems that arise in the relations between countries, the main parties of international relations.

- i. The first is territorial causes indicative of disputes over borders and territories or territory invasions. This problem

1. Dhammapada: V-129.

2. Exodus 20:13, Deuteronomy 5:17.

often is associated with a long and complicated history between countries and ethnic communities.

ii. The second cause is expressed through conflicts involving ideological differences. Recent political riots and coups in unstable regions such as the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia, are typical examples of political causes.

iii. The third reason is represented through conflict between religious communities or persecution between religious values. Religious conflicts are also complex and difficult to solve, due to the values and ethical standards of ethnic communities, which have a long history and often involve many countries in the different regions in the world.

iv. The fourth cause relates to economics such as trade embargo, blockade of goods, setting up tariff barriers, monopoly of production or method of sales and so forth. In the backdrop of rising uncertainty in the global economy and in the political sphere, economic conflicts will continue at a larger scale and higher level.

v. The fifth cause relates to environmental resources which are manifested through natural resource disputes, especially marine resources, petroleum exploitation causing water pollution, building bridges and dams, irrigation dams, hydropower on rivers causing air pollution and smoke.

According to predictions of Bloomberg Economics, there will be many complications for the global leaders in 2019 when there are countless hotspots at various levels waiting for them ahead.⁽³⁾ When superpowers confront economic and political issues, the impact is not isolated to particular regions but reverberates throughout the world. Of particular concern is the problem of countries possessing nuclear weapons. Rogue nations restart the production of nuclear materials, take aggressive actions, and receive imposed sanctions. Moreover, some countries are still smoldering with protests and small terrorists, but still affect the stability of the country and region.

3. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-10-02/predicting-when-top-central-banks-will-next-raise-rates> (18/01/2019. 10 AM)

Violent conflict also has causes and conditions developing within each country. Among the internal causes leading to conflict, we especially should pay attention to the following factors:

- i. The existence of ethnic, religious or linguistic groups with a clear demarcation of administrative boundaries within the country.
- ii. There is the development of differences between localities combined with the centralized concentration in the capital. A country has the development of disparities between regions that easily leads to the different levels of the citizen, this is an “ideal” condition for the emergence and development of ideologies, separating and secede organizations.
- iii. Political and economic upheavals in a country also lead to the emergence of new political and economic forces. In many cases, the emergence of these forces leads to political and economic instability due to the tendency to protect personal or group interests or to create changes in their favor. Such political and economic instability, in turn, deepens and widens the conflicts further.
- iv. Conflicts can often be resolved, or reconciled if detected early and the necessary structure is there. Such structure includes a strong government, a developed mediation culture, a strong legal system and democratic means.

In practice, the underlying causes leading to conflicts are very typical. There may be just a few of these reasons, but it can also be a combination of many causes. As more and more causes appear at the same time, the complexity of conflict increases and the resolution of conflicts becomes more difficult. Once the origin and direct causes of conflict still exist, conflict continues to emerge and become more severe. The appearance of new forms of conflict with different methods of resolution must be completely different. Basic concepts associated with countries such as security, sovereignty, power, force, the balance of forces need to be adjusted and applied flexibly in relations with non-national actors.

2.2. The roots of violence from the Buddhist view

The relevance of Buddhist thought in the explanation and resolution of violent conflict believes that it also arises from an internal and external perspective. External influences are physical or verbal actions done to others; these actions harm others or prevent the happiness of others. However, in spite of external influences such as physical and verbal that cause inequality and conflict for society, Buddhism thinks that they all arise from the inner consciousness of beings. Violence is considered the least intelligent response to conflict. Physical or verbal violence does not create long-term solutions to the problem. Those who are responsible for violence cause heavy *kamma* through their actions, so they have to receive the resulting consequences. Victims of violence or their family members find a way to take revenge. Thus, it will begin the round of violence. Finally, the root causes of the conflict are still untreated. The Buddha taught that:

“Hatred is, indeed, never appeased by hatred in this world. It is appeased only by loving-kindness. This is an ancient law.”⁽⁴⁾

A cycle of suffering is created by hatred that can go on and on. Human beings are led to constant suffering. As a matter of fact, hatred and mutual distrust have strongly increased by natural resource disputes. The race to withhold natural resources because of greed has made social issues to become more difficult because it not only causes conflict in humanity but also in the natural environment. Moreover, many environmental problems are caused by the ever expanding human population. In any situation, according to the concept of interdependent origination, in order to withdraw from violent conflict, we must destroy its basic causes.

Most of us think that violent conflict arises from the roots of craving (*taṇhā*) or greed (*lobha*) and anger (*dosa*). In fact, the root cause of violence is ignorance (*moha*), a lacking knowledge. All emotions like anger, hatred, resentment, contempt, etc., are rooted and have been brought up by unskillful roots *lobha*, *dosa*, and *moha*.

“Lobha” is the outrageous desires that are drunk with reputation

4. Dhammapada: V.5.

or power; interested in wanting beauty, money, property, etc... Greed is unlimited, so is the desire for ourselves, for our relatives, for our nation and our society. Because of greed, human beings struggle and kill each other as greed often dislikes those with higher achievement.

“*Dosa*” is anger, hatred, annoyance when one is not satisfied, not as wanting. Once offended, one is easily disgruntled and do wrong things (unwholesome). After anger, people are consumed by hatred and find the occasion to take revenge. The main reason for the arising of *dosa* is that people love so much “self” (*atta*) or “mine” (*ākara*). If anyone curses or rebukes us or our relatives, or harms our property, we immediately get annoyed.

“There is no fire like passion; there is no evil like hatred; there is no ill like (the burden of) khandhas; there is no bliss that surpasses the Perfect Peace”⁽⁵⁾

The basic of greed is craving and desire or clinging to everything. Greed has never known satisfaction, it is a companion of hatred, jealousy, disputes that lead to great violent conflicts. Greed and hatred are rooted in the defilement of *moha* (delusion). This delusion is in term of a misunderstanding of impermanence (*anicca*) and non-self (*anattā*). We base our perceptions on an idea of ourselves as a permanent entity, not realizing our true nature, lacking the understanding that condition experiences are interdependent co-arising. Therefore, the more we cling to it, the more we suffer from illusions and sufferings.

Nowadays, outstanding development of science and technology has been led by greed and anger and taken advantage of creating violent conflicts. Because of ignorance or lack of the right view, people are wallow in wastefulness and sensual pleasures; they forget to nurture the quality of life and pursue personal benefits instead. Greed and anger deepened by ignorance thrust humankind into more and more widening crisis. Violent conflict not only starts with the individual self, but also carries to the collective self. A crowd of people is easily instigated to become angry, agitated or fearful; their mental state and actions have been negatively influenced by

5. Dhammapada V.200.

someone. Thus, an individual's influence on a group may spread to the whole community. However, this issue will not happen if everyone has right understanding. *Lobha* and *dosa* will become more serious and difficult if they rely on wrong view and ignorance; in other words, *lobha* and *dosa* will be reduced or suppressed if people have the right view or right understanding.

People usually blame others without seeing their fault or responsibility, which is also one of the causes of conflict. Therefore, the Buddha advises us to determine our responsibilities and treat others well. By seeing clearly how we cause harm to others by our own selfishness, we can take personal responsibility for reducing the suffering in our environment. We should practice loving-kindness (*mettā*) to all sentient beings even our enemies, are peaceful, straightforward and gentle in speech, humble and not conceited (*mettāpubbāghāgapaṭipadā*).

2.3. Buddhist perspective on the model role of leadership

Buddhism advocates non-violence and harmony. Buddhism does not agree with violent conflicts in any form because conflict often results in war, which is similar crime, brings about poverty, disease, loss, separation, and so on.

In the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta (DN 16), the Lord Buddha gave some advice for King Ajātasattu when he sent his minister, Brahman Vassakāra, to ask the Buddha whether Ajātasattu's attack on his adversaries, Vajjī, would be successful. The Lord Buddha did not answer this question directly. He asked Ananda about Vajjī's virtues and thereby indirectly exposed the power of Vajjī to King Ajātasattu. Here, the Buddha's discernment and reasonableness can clearly be seen. If the Buddha advised Ajātasattu to send the army to slaughter Vajjian, then He would have been directly advising the King to destroy living beings, which is contrary to His own compassion. Ven. Ananda answered that the Vajjian often gathers for public meetings; assemble and disperse peacefully and attend to their affairs in concord; neither enact new decrees nor abolish existing ones, but proceed in accordance with their ancient constitutions; respect, honor, esteem, and veneration towards their elders, their shrines, and protect the Arahants. It should be

understood that the words of the Buddha contain instructions for King Ajātasattu himself. After listening to Ven. Ananda presenting the life and virtues of the Vajjian, the ambassador of King Ajātasattu, Brahman Vassakāra, concluded that his King could not defeat Vajjī. The King decided to cancel his plans to attack and to strengthen his own kingdom.

The Buddha is neither a politician nor a sociologist. He neither advocates the expansion of territory, nor sets up state regulations and building legal system. The Buddha is a Master, a moralist, and an educator. He contributes to all living beings, not limited to any nation or country. His guideline and direction are not based on politics, power, or smart of ego; on the contrary, they are based on morality and spirituality. His only purpose is to bring peace and happiness to all sentient beings. For national leaders who govern the country, His teachings help them bring happiness and harmony to citizens.

i. The leader has visions of grandeur

A leader should have the most essential ingredient in leadership, which are vision and mission. Like the captain of a ship, a leader must have a clear purpose, then they can draw their route and drive the ship in the right direction. In *Āṅguttara Nikāya* 4.70, *Adhammasuttaṃ* (unrighteousness), the Buddha gave an example of a herd of cattle, if the leading bull goes straight, all followers go straight. Similarly, among humans if the one considered the chief is righteous, all his/her followers also become righteous. The Buddha pointed out that the role of the leader is to set the pattern and conduct the whole country. If the leader is talented and virtuous, gives positive and right directions, and brings benefit to all, then everyone can have a happy, prosperous and peaceful life. On the contrary, if the leader is not capable and lacks moral leadership, misleading direction, then there will be the disastrous consequences and countless negative things. The leader knows how to overcome obstacles, acts as the guideline and draws a bright path for followers to move forward. He also creates opportunities for all successes.

ii. The leader as a role model

A leader must be a model, whom we can respect and follow. He should be able to create ideal initiatives for any goal which

they wish to achieve. By his reputation, he can convince others to share the same vision together. The leader always keeps virtue and righteousness in every thought, word, and action. His words and deeds are always in unity which will create a deep belief in others. Moreover, a ruler first must be a filial and righteous person, one who stays away from perversion. Ruling authority and power must be accompanied by mindful rule, not coercive rule.

In one story from *the Jātaka*, the Buddha pointed out tenfold virtue of the ruler (*dasavidha-rājadhamma*), ten qualities needed by a national leader to rule his country well. The duties compose of: generosity (*dāna*), morality (*sīla*), self-sacrifice (*paricāgga*), honesty (*ājjava*), kindness (*maddava*), self-controlling (*tapa*), non-anger (*akkodha*), non-violence (*avihimsa*), forbearance (*khanti*), uprightness (*avirodhana*). These are not only the qualities a king needs but also the qualities of the head of government, leaders of ministries and sectors of the state apparatus.

iii. The leader as a manager

A good leader must know how to manage human resources with a deep understanding, to realize the strengths and weaknesses of the surrounding people, thereby dividing the work accordingly. Regarding the method of leadership, management and administration of an organization, to benefit the majority, the Buddha taught Four Methods of Guidance (*cattāri-saṃgaha-vatthūni*). They are:

- Giving (non-greed)
- Kind speech (pleasant speech)
- Beneficial action (meaningful action)
- Identity action (consistency)

These four instructional methods form a useful framework for learning how to guide oneself in conduct with others. They are signs that we are oriented towards social harmony on a small and large scale. These four methods of guidance can be used separately or in a clever combination together.

iv. The leader as the role of guardian

A leader should be responsible for protecting his followers.

A good leader needs to act impartially and should not be biased and discriminate. He has a clear understanding of the laws that are enforced. It should not be enforced only because the ruler has the right to enforce the law. It must be done reasonably and with common sense. Sometimes, it can say that the Buddha is a social reformer. Among other things, he condemned the class system; recognized human equality, and mentioned the need to improve socio-economic conditions; acknowledging the importance of a more equitable distribution of wealth between the rich and the poor; creating opportunities for women; and all of above, He taught that the leader should not run society by greed, on the contrary, governs with care and compassion for all.

In the Cakkavatti-Sihanāda Sutta, the Buddha said that immorality and crime, such as theft, crime, violence, hatred, and cruelty may arise from poverty. Therefore, the leader only needs to improve the economy, reduce poverty, and pay attention to educate knowledge and morality to prevent and reduce social evils. On the other hand, using penalties such as executions, dismemberment, imprisonment, exile, penal servitude, etc., can neither effectively bring changes nor decrease social evils and political instability.

According to the experience of wise leaders who lead the smartest people, you need to become a “generous protector” rather than a traditional boss.

3. SUMMARY

Buddhism aims to guide everyone a noble life without harming anyone, to cultivate humane qualities in order to maintain human dignity, to radiate all-embracing kindness without any discrimination, and to train the mind to avoid evil and to purify the mind to gain peace and happiness. Leaders should be morally integrated and compassionate and must have a clear vision and mission. They should not abuse their authority for their own honor or personal gain.

Buddhism’s approach to political power is moral and utilizes the responsibility of public power. Buddha preached nonviolence and peace as a universal message. He does not accept violence or destruction of life, and claims that nothing is called a ‘right’ war. He taught:

“Victory gives rise to hate, those defeated lie in pain, happily rest the Peaceful surrendering victory-defeat.”⁽⁶⁾

The Buddha not only taught nonviolence and peace, he was also the first religious master to go to the battlefield to stop the outbreak of war. The leader who applies the Buddha’s teaching will be a virtuous and wise man, revered by all. Society will be powerful, peaceful when army and people unite as one hand.

*“Sukhino vā khemino hontu
Sabbe sattā bhavantu sukkhitattā.”⁽⁷⁾*

May all beings be happy and secure, may all beings in their hearts be happy!

6. Dhammapada V. 201.

7. SN 1.8 Karaṇīya Mettā Sutta.

Bibliography

- Bodhi, B., 2000. *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya*. Boston: Wisdom Publications.
- Bodhi, B., 2012. *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Aṅguttara Nikāya*. Boston: Wisdom Publication.
- Bodhi, B., 2012. *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Aṅguttara Nikāya*. Boston: Wisdom Publications.
- Chakravarti, U., 2008. *Social Dementions of Early Buddhism*. New Delhi: Manoharlal Publishers.
- Harris, E. J., 1994. *Violence and Disruption in Society: A Study of the Early Buddhist Texts*. Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society.
- Jonathan M. Harris, Timothy A. Wise, Kevin P. Gallagher, and Neva R. Goodwin, 1995. *A Survey of Sustainable Development: Social and Economic Dismensions*. London: Island Press.
- Tin, D. M., 1986. *The Dhammapada: Verses and Stories*. Yangon: Editorial Committee, Burma Tipitaka Association Rangoon.
- Walshe, M. O., 2012. *The Long Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Dīgha Nikāya*. Boston: Wisdom Publications.