The Possibility of Buddhism for the Future of Humankind

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I have been given the honour and privilege of addressing you for 40 minutes. I have been assigned this title and asked to speak on Buddhism and the future of mankind. Both of those are very large topics, and combining them does not make them any smaller, so I face a formidable task.

Both Buddhism and humankind already have a very long history. I have never heard anyone suggest that mankind owes its survival so far to Buddhism, but on the other hand I think most of us would agree that a substantial part of mankind has benefitted from the existence of Buddhism. It would not be easy to prove this, but let us assume that it is so. I take it, then, that what the organizers wish us to discuss is whether Buddhism has the potential to prolong the future of mankind, and, if it does, whether Buddhism will make it a better future.

How does Buddhism deal with Violence?

Once we ask whether Buddhism might prolong the future of mankind, we are likely first to think of the immediate threats to that future. For most of the second half of the 20th century, the most imminent threat seemed to be annihilation of the human species through nuclear war. I have lived through a period, at its height in the 1960s, when many people were so terrified by the nuclear arms race between the Soviet Union and the West, led by the USA, that they thought that our only hope for survival lay in unilateral disarmament. This meant disarmament by the West, since the Soviet Union was obviously not about to initiate disarmament. Governments were not convinced, and argued that the best hope for peace lay in what they called "the balance of power". We now know that those governments were right: nuclear weapons were not used, and indeed for fear that they might be, the so-called Great Powers avoided direct violent confrontation.

In 1989 the Soviet Union had in effect to give up the arms race because it was too expensive. The Iron Curtain fell, and people in many

countries were released from Soviet tyranny. There was great optimism. Alas, this mood did not last. The diffusion of power led to nuclear proliferation, and deadly weapons fell into the hands of leaders whom it has not been easy to deter from using them. For example, it is not sure that such rational considerations as the balance of power will deter North Korea from using nuclear weapons. That is speculation. But we have recently seen Syria using chemical weapons in a civil war, and only the remains of the dual hegemony of Russia and the United States was able to settle that crisis. As more countries and even smaller units acquire such terrible weapons, prospects are not reassuring.

Many would now argue that bad ecological policies also threaten mankind's survival. They may indeed be right; but despite local disasters it will take a long time before mankind as a whole finds its very survival in doubt. The same goes for our traditional enemies, famine and disease. War and violence are still far the greatest threat.

What part does Buddhism play in all this? When it comes to ecology, there are certainly Buddhist movements which point to the dangers of unbridled consumerism and campaign for saner policies. I welcome them and do not wish to belittle them, but I have to point out that they do not yet play a major part on the world stage. I think it is more urgent to consider how Buddhism is dealing with violence nowadays.

I am afraid the picture is depressing. Non-aggression has been a core value of Buddhism ever since its foundation by the Buddha. The word used is *ahiṃsā*; often it is translated "non-violence", but that is inexact: the precise meaning is "lack of desire to harm"—in other words "non-aggression". In the ancient Pali collection of verses called the *Dhammapada*, we read:

> "Renouncing violence against all beings, who neither kills nor causes to kill, Him I call the truly holy man." (405)

and

> "In this world hatred is never appeased by hatred,
> It is appeased by lack of hate; this is the eternal law." (5)

Moreover, the vow not to take the life of anything that breathes is the first of the five undertakings that every lay Buddhist is supposed always to observe; and there is another standard list of unwholesome acts (*akusala kamma*) from which every layman must abstain which includes harsh or malicious speech (*pharusā*, *pisuṇā vācā*). I specify that these are rules for the laity because the Saṅgha have to observe stricter and

more detailed rules; but everyone who wants to be considered a Buddhist has the duty to observe the general principles.

What is Needed is not to 'Love enemies', but to 'Stop Hating them'

True, one may well go further and argue that every Buddhist must practise kindness and compassion at all times; but in the context of my discussion it may be more helpful to discuss only the more modest demand made by a negative formulation. After all, the minimum requirement for mankind to survive is that we stop killing and hating each other; that we all behave with positive kindness is a noble ideal, but not a necessity for survival, and it is probably unrealistic to expect that it will ever be attained.

Given these principles, people who have never given the matter much thought tend to assume that for Buddhism non-aggression is a straightforward matter, and that, in a word, Buddhism advocates pacifism. When they discover that Buddhists, even Buddhist leaders, have often committed acts of violence, their disappointment often leads them to swing to the other extreme and say that Buddhist claims to non-violence are simply hypocritical, and that Buddhists have been, and continue to be, just about as violent as other people. It is therefore necessary to analyse the matter further.

The application of Buddhist values to public affairs is unforgettably recorded by the Emperor Asoka, who ruled most of the Indian subcontinent for the middle third of the third century before Christ. In his thirteenth Major Rock Edict, dated approximately 255 B.C., he records how his reign began with a war against Kalinga (modern Orissa) in which very many people were killed, wounded and deported. Expressing his deep remorse, he says that never again will he wage aggressive war, although he does reserve the right to defend himself if he should be attacked. The text of this Edict is one of the finest public documents in human history, and should be taught to schoolchildren all over the world. It is somewhat ironic that some Indian nationalist historians have suggested (and it can even be found in textbooks) that Asoka's successors lost power because of this non-aggressive policy. There is no evidence to support their claim, but people are reluctant to believe that non-aggression can be effective.

Since the achievements of Mahatma Gandhi, however, such a reluctance can seem almost absurd. We all know that Gandhi not only achieved spectacular success himself, causing the British to give up their rule of India, but also inspired other great leaders who have compelled universal admiration—think of Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela

—, leaders whose non-violence did sometimes lead to short-term setbacks, but who in the end achieved far more than could have been obtained by violence.

How a Government can Minimise Violence

In the case of Asoka which I have just cited, I have really conflated two issues. One issue is the difference between attack—initiating violence—and defense—responding to it. If someone attacks me, I may decide not to respond, even—in the words of Jesus Christ—to turn the other cheek. But the situation changes if the people attacked rely on me to protect them. The commonest and most obvious instance of this is that parents must do whatever they can to protect the lives of their children, and indeed *vice versa*.

This issue of responsibility for others takes us into an even broader issue, the enormous arena of public life, and the range of new situations that it may confront us with. In the Buddhist tradition, monks are not supposed to play any significant part in public life, so—if they follow that tradition—they do not face any moral dilemmas consequent on taking public roles. But laymen certainly do. It is worth remembering that even the pacifist Gandhi did not require Indian soldiers to desert or otherwise forsake their military duty. More than two thousand years earlier, the *Vinaya*[1] tells us, the Buddha's friend King Bimbisāra had trouble on his borders and sent troops to deal with it. But these soldiers decided that if they were to kill anyone they would be guilty and later suffer for it; so they became monks. A minister advised the king that anyone who thus deprived him of his soldiers deserved to be executed. The king of course did not follow that advice, but he did warn the Buddha, who took the hint, and laid down a rule that soldiers were not to be ordained.

Countries need defense forces to deter attack, and potential aggressors need to know that those forces may be used. (I recall my remarks near the beginning of this lecture of how governments during the Cold War followed the pragmatic doctrine of the "balance of power".) Asoka told the world how much he regretted having waged war on the people of Kalinga, and expressed the hope that he never would have to do such a thing again. But he also warned his neighbours that while he would "tolerate what could be tolerated" (his words), they should not provoke him. That surely is the right way for a government to minimise violence.

War is by no means the only area of public life in which violence is sometimes considered legitimate and even ethically justified. Just think of capital punishment. Capital punishment is still used in some countries

which claim to be Buddhist. In my view a political leader who claims to respect Buddhism but refuses to apply Buddhism to politics is a despicable hypocrite. The great religious traditions all teach that people should love each other, be kind and compassionate. By this, they mean that one should love *everybody*, not just those whom it is easy to love. Loving someone who is always kind to you is no more than most animals do by instinct. Love becomes an ethical accomplishment when it is directed to our enemies, or others whom it is hard to love.

Those who say that they want to keep religion out of politics usually mean that they do not want to accept the moral values proposed by a religion, but prefer other values, such as those of communism or nationalism. One of the most famous sayings in world literature is the line of poetry by the Roman poet Horace, published in 23 B.C.: "It is sweet and fitting to die for one's country."[2] Politicians usually prefer that sentiment to the anti-war views prominent in the great religious traditions.

Discussing controversial cases like defensive war or capital punishment is important, but I venture to claim that it is still too cautious an approach to our topic. Unfortunately, an honest observer must admit that, even in the so-called Buddhist world, there are many more cases where the use of violence by the organs of the state is very difficult or impossible to justify; one only has to think of how, regardless of what the law may say, police forces commonly behave towards poor and powerless people. Similarly, there are cases where the violence is being spontaneously exercised or supported by Buddhist populations, including members of the Sa?gha, while the state at best does little to prevent it.

Learning from the Buddha's Pragmatism

In this terrible situation, I am going to take a different tack. In my book *Theravada Buddhism: a Social History* I have recorded some of the Buddha's recommendations for how rulers should rule and how people should live in society, and I have on several occasions made speeches to draw attention to his wonderful advice. One could, and indeed should, cite and discuss many fine passages from the Canon to show the whole world how our lives might be improved, and mankind might look forward to a better future. But the Buddha was a pragmatist, and I venture to say that we are now so distant from the kind of society that he envisaged that we need to consider any suggestion on how to tackle the evils which we can watch on television news any day of the week.

Therefore, rather than produce more quotations from the texts, I am going to make such suggestions. I firmly believe that if I had a great deal more time, I could show my suggestions to be based on what the Buddha taught.

Individual Responsibility and Its Implications

We must go back to the basic teaching of karma, which is a teaching of individual responsibility. The Buddha taught that all thoughts, words and deeds derive their moral value, positive or negative, from the intention behind them. This does not make the effects of actions irrelevant: Buddhism is no less familiar than is modern law with the idea of negligence. But the basic, invariable criterion for morality is intention. Morality and immorality are mental properties of **individuals**. They have a dominant influence on how one is reborn, and are a central component of every personality. One is the heir to one's own karma—and not to anyone else's!

Since karma is an essential property of every sentient individual, there is no trace in the Buddha's teaching of such a thing as "collective karma". This fact has profound moral implications.

Since karma is a matter of individual responsibility, being born into a family or being a member of any social group which one has not joined voluntarily does not entail any karmic result. On the other hand, one's karma cannot be decided for one by a greater power, whether divine or human. I cannot lay the blame for my own intentions on a god, on my father, on a teacher—in fact, on anyone. (I cannot here discuss this further, but the fact that I am responsible for any decision to do what my father or teacher tells me sets Buddhism at odds with Confucian ethics.)

What are the implications of the fact that karma is always individual, never collective?

There are still plenty of societies on this earth which believe in vengeance, the principle referred to in the Bible's Old Testament as "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth." If you have insulted me, I have the right to insult you; if you have given me a bloody nose, I have a right to bloody yours. Well, I have already cited the verse in the *Dhammapada* which says that hatred never ceases through hatred, so it seems elementary that we cannot accept the "eye for an eye" principle. But wait a minute! If you have insulted my mother, do I not have the right, or even the duty, to insult yours? Or, if she is not available, perhaps your sister or your wife? But then, why stop at insults? If a principle applies to insults, should it not apply in the same way to other, more serious forms of aggression, even to killing? If your grandfather killed my

father, is it not right for me to try to kill your father, or perhaps you?

Once we get into this territory, we see how morally problematic are the concepts of family honour and of loyalty to a family or other group.

We may think that we ourselves are no longer so uncivilized as to believe in vengeance. We have laws and police forces, so we know that if someone has killed a member of our family, the correct thing to do is to inform the police and let them catch the criminal and apply the law. Our society frowns on what is called, under such circumstances, "taking the law into your own hands", and that disapproval is certainly an essential feature of a civilized society.

On the other hand, it seems to have become generally accepted in our society that those who suffer directly from a crime, such as the family of a murdered person, have a moral right to see that retributive justice is meted out to the criminal. I am here speaking only of Britain, and indeed only of Britain as presented to me by the media: I have no other source of information. A concept called "closure" is used. When, for example, the murderer is sentenced to life in prison, everyone says that now the family of the victim "at least have closure", which seems to mean that they can now stop brooding about their loss; on the other hand, if the accused is found guilty but given a sentence which they think inadequate, the family have not found "closure", and if the accused is in fact acquitted, and the hunt for the guilty party has to continue, their lack of "closure" is considered to be a grave misfortune. I have never heard it suggested that another way to attain "closure" would be to forgive the perpetrator or, if that is impossible, to try at least to attain some emotional distance from the tragedy.

I am by no means suggesting that when a serious wrong has been done to someone, it is an easy thing for the victim, or those close to the victim, to forgive it. Jesus exhorted his followers not just to forgive but even to love those who harmed them, and that is the standard prescribed for all Christians to follow. In my view, this is unreasonable and therefore impractical. Notice that the *Dhammapada* verse recommends not hating those who hate you; it does not say that you must go so far as to love them. I think that if only we could not attempt heroism but simply stop hating, a huge amount of the wars and violence which are so prevalent that they endanger the very survival of humankind would melt away.

The Cancer of "Identity"

In order to introduce this line of thought I have taken the very simple example of being the victim of a serious crime, such as rape or murder.

But I wish to extend this line of reasoning far, far more widely, and in doing so I do not flinch from saying something which some will find shocking. People do not identify only as members of a family, but as members of far larger groups, for example of a nation, or of a religious group like a church or sect. I was born British, and that is part of my "identity", which means that that is how governments, for example, label and categorise me, and in some circumstances others too will so categorise me. In the past, the British government ruled the whole of Ireland and at times behaved with great cruelty and injustice to the Irish, especially to their Roman Catholic majority. A minority of Irish Catholics have continued to resent what the British did to their ancestors, and a few have taken that resentment so far that they formed an organization called the Irish Republican Army (IRA) which tried to kill British people, sometimes indiscriminately. They were believers in collective karma: that any British person could be held responsible for what other British had done to the Irish. Even children, even British people who were recent immigrants and could have no blood relationship to those who did wrong long ago, were held to be appropriate targets for vengeance.

The aim of those who committed these acts of violence was to create widespread hatred between British and Irish, so that the violence would multiply; I am glad to say that in this aim they had very little success. But think of parallels round the world and you will see that more often than not those tactics are successful: they light fires which are very difficult to put out. For lack of time to broach this huge subject, I cannot here name or discuss specific examples; but I need to make some general observations. In many cases those who actually carry out the violence are a comparatively small group whom the rest of the world calls "terrorists"; but usually their organisation cannot survive for long unless they have gained the sympathies of many of those who share the same identity; that much larger group protects them from the forces who try to maintain law and order, such as the state's army or police. In the Irish example which I have given, many Irish Roman Catholics did not approve of what the IRA were doing, but on the other hand did not hand them over to what they saw as "the other side", the British and/or Irish Protestants. In other words, what most people do in that kind of extreme situation is to think in terms of "them" and "us", and feel that they must be guided by loyalty to "our side", even if the behaviour of those they support is barbarous: not to support your own side is seen as an act of "betrayal", which is considered a worse crime than such things as blowing up children.

Once the majority of members of a society have become polarised into opposing groups, "them" and "us", the whole society is likely to be devastated and a huge number of lives will be lost. The further that this process has gone, the more difficult it is to avoid being caught up in it. In 1983 a small group of Tamils, provoked by many years of discriminatory behaviour on the part of the government elected by the Sinhala Buddhist majority, managed to blow up a lorry carrying 13 Sinhalese soldiers, and this in turn provoked anti-Tamil riots in the south of the island. This rapidly led to a full scale war, which lasted 26 years. Some individual Tamils who did not agree with the war were killed by the Tamil terrorists; on the other hand, many innocent Tamils were assumed by the Sinhala army to be terrorists and killed for that reason. The only safety available to a Tamil was to manage to escape from the country. Similar impossible dilemmas faced many Sinhalese, though, being in the majority, some of them suffered less. All this horror was due to the belief in collective responsibility, even though the great majority of individuals affected were not responsible at all.

Attribution of collective responsibility is the same as what Buddhists call belief in collective karma. We all know that this is extremely widespread. If you are a Jewish Israeli, you may totally disapprove of how your government treats Palestinian Arabs, but that will do nothing to save you in this life, even if your good intentions make you likely to have a better rebirth. A recent development is that there are now violent confrontations between the Buddhist majority and the Muslim minority in Myanmar, Thailand and Sri Lanka. The struggle between Sunni and Shia Muslims, currently focused mainly in Syria, but spreading ever wider, is so virulent that within twenty years it could almost annihilate both sides. Thus we can actually see before our eyes how belief in collective karma may destroy a segment of the human race. Were those people to understand and accept the Buddha's view of karma, they might yet survive to live in peace. But one cannot be optimistic.

Never Indulge in Guilt, Concentrate on Purifying Yourself

How could we start moving in the opposite direction? I think we need to tackle not merely aggression, but also guilt.

Buddhists cannot, as it were, wipe out a former bad intention. The Buddha taught that bad karma cannot be cancelled out, even by remorse. But of course this does not mean that one is in any sense the prisoner of one's past karma. One can, and should, improve, and have better intentions in the future. So if I have done something bad, no ritual can in any way remedy the situation, and in that sense penance is pointless; but I

should acknowledge that I have been wrong, and bear that in mind if it helps me to become a better person, which in Buddhist terms we can express as accumulating better karma.

A famous *sutta* in the Pali Canon[3] recounts that the Buddha was once approached by a murderous brigand called Aṅgulimāla, but converted him. After Aṅgulimāla had become a monk, people were terrified of him, but he was so kind and gentle that he was able, purely by the power of his character, to save a woman who was having a difficult childbirth. Aṅgulimāla did not deny his wicked past, but he apparently felt no guilt; he simply turned over a new leaf and became a kind of saint.

Acknowledging that one has been wrong is not valuable in itself: its value lies in using that thought in order to improve. Guilt is a useless emotion. Many people make themselves miserable by indulging in guilty thoughts: Have I been at fault in the past? Certainly, if one has wronged someone, one should apologise. But beyond that, brooding over what one has done is quite pointless. In fact, it is worse than pointless, because it takes up time and energy which would be much better spent on becoming a good person, consigning the past to oblivion.

What I now have to say may offend all those who consider that the top priority must always be to see justice done and the wicked punished —those, in fact, who believe in "closure". But I think that Buddhism can teach us that we need more forgetfulness, so that we may in effect forgive others, rather than seek vengeance, and forgive ourselves, rather than succumb to debilitating guilt.

There are a few encouraging examples of what I mean. Perhaps the most remarkable is going on in Cambodia. As we know, under Pol Pot in 1975–9 about 2 million people were killed. How can a society survive such a cataclysm?

Pol Pot is dead, and so are some of his leading henchmen, but the United Nations have for a few years now been trying to run a war crimes tribunal to put on trial and to punish the guilty. I am told that it has been making very little progress because the government has been extremely inefficient about supplying documents. I wonder whether this inefficiency is not in fact a kind of wisdom.

Nelson Mandela behaved slightly differently when he came out of prison and led his country out of the dark night of apartheid. True, he did set up a "Truth and reconciliation" commission in which people were encouraged to apologise to individuals they had wronged. But surely that could only account for a tiny fraction of the wrongdoing. The main emphasis had to be on burying the past and making a fresh start. On a smaller scale, I think that a similar combination of reconciliation

and willed amnesia has been achieved in Northern Ireland.

I repeat: what is needed is not that people should learn to love their enemies, only that they should stop hating them. Buddhism does have potential for helping mankind to survive if it can persuade people to abandon their obsession with righting past wrongs, and instead for each one to concentrate on purifying their own mind and conduct.

NOTES

[1] *Vinaya* I, 73–4.
[2] Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori.
[3] *Majjhima Nikāya* II, 97–105.