

At War with the Dhamma

There's a depressing pattern in human behavior that Mark Twain noted more than a century ago, and it's with us still: The powers-that-be want a war. Politicians and the media start beating the drum, denouncing the evil intentions of the enemy and calling for all patriotic citizens to attack them. At first, people are reluctant to go along, but then religious leaders jump on the bandwagon, telling their followers that it's their sacred moral duty to support the war machine. Soon the whole country is aflame with the moral need to fight the enemy. Those few who question this need are branded as traitors.

Young men march off to battle, only to find how ghastly war actually is. They realize that they were duped, and that their side is not as virtuous as they had been led to believe. Many of them are killed. Those lucky enough to return home tell their families and neighbors: Never again will they be tricked into going to war ever again.

But then, after a while, the powers-that-be want another war. Politicians and the media start beating the drum. If the arguments for the last war no longer work, they find new ways of raising the emotional pitch of their rhetoric so that soon the whole country is swept up in war fever all over again.

The only way to keep yourself from getting sucked into this pattern is to have strong principles against killing, principles you hold to no matter what. This is one of the reasons why the Buddha formulated the precept against killing in the most uncompromising way: Don't intentionally kill anything or anyone. Ever. Don't tell other people to kill. And don't condone the act of killing. When asked if there were anything at all whose killing he would approve of, the Buddha answered with just one thing: anger (SN 1:71).

That's as clear-cut and absolute as you can get, and it's clear-cut for a reason: Clear-cut rules are easy to remember even when your emotional level is high—and that's precisely when you need them most.

If you approach every argument for war with this precept in mind, then no matter what reasons people might cite for supporting the war, always putting the precept first will protect you. If you leave room in your mind for exceptions to the precept, someone will find a way to exploit those exceptions, and you'll be back where you were before you had the precept, fooled into supporting another war.

The precepts are like a fence around your property. If there's a gap in the fence, anything that can fit into the gap—or enlarge it by wriggling through—will be able to get in. It'll be as if there weren't a fence there at all.

Now, it's important to remember that the Buddha never forced the precepts on anyone. Instead of calling them obligations, he called them training rules, and the training is something you take on voluntarily. Your moral behavior is a

voluntary gift of safety to the world. If you can make that gift universal, with no exceptions, you can have a share in universal safety as well (AN 8:39). If you actually break a precept, the safe course of action is not to try to redesign the training to justify what you've done. Instead, you honestly admit that your training has lapsed, and do your best to get back on course.

Given that the texts are so clear and unequivocal on the issue of killing, it's hard to conceive that anyone would even think of trying to formulate a Buddhist theory of just war. Yet there have been such attempts in the past, and they're with us again now. If we have any concern for the Dhamma at all, it's important to reject these theories outright. Otherwise, we find ourselves quibbling over when and where it's right to issue a Buddhist license to kill. And no matter how strictly we try to restrict the license, it's like running a tank through the back of our fence and putting up a sign next to the resulting hole, saying that only those thieves and bears who promise to behave themselves nicely will be allowed to enter, and then leaving them to police themselves.

Because the early texts rule out killing in all circumstances, attempts to formulate a Buddhist just-war theory ultimately have to fall back on one basic assertion: There's something wrong with the texts. Because this assertion can take many forms, it's useful to examine a few of them, to see how misleading they can be. That way, we won't fall for them.

The big one is this:

- *The moral ideals expressed in the early texts may be inspiring, but they offer no practical guidance for dealing with the complexities of real life. Real life presents situations in which holding strictly to the precepts would entail loss. Real life contains conflicting moral claims. The texts recognize none of these issues. They teach us no way of dealing with evil aggressors, aside from passivity and appeasement, hoping that our loving-kindness meditation will inspire in the aggressors a change of heart. So on this issue, we can't trust that following the texts will protect us.*

Actually, the early texts are not silent on issues of moral complexity. They do answer questions about the losses that can come from holding to the precepts and about the desire to meet obligations at odds with the precepts. It's just that their answers aren't the ones we might want to hear.

Of course, these answers are based on the teaching of karma and its effect on rebirth, teachings that many modern Buddhists view with skepticism. But the Buddha dealt with skeptics in his own day. As he told them, no one can really know the truth of these teachings until awakening, but if you take them on as working hypotheses in the meantime, you'll be more likely to be careful in your behavior than if you didn't (MN 60). If it turns out that they're not true, at least you can die with a clear conscience, knowing that you've lived a pure life free from hostility or ill will. When you discover that they are true, you'll be glad that you kept yourself safe (AN 3:66).

The Buddha readily acknowledged that there are times when following the precepts will put you at a disadvantage in terms of the world. You might lose your wealth, your health, or even your relatives. But those losses, he says, are

minor in the long run. Major loss would be to lose your virtue or to lose right view. Those losses could harm you for many lifetimes to come. Here the lesson is obvious: For the sake of your long-term benefit, be willing to suffer the lesser losses to keep from suffering the major ones (AN 5:130).

At the same time, there are many occasions when breaking a precept brings short-term rewards in this world, but from that fact, the Buddha never drew the conclusion that those rewards justified breaking the precept (SN 42:13).

As for conflicting obligations, the texts tell of the case of a person who, finding that he's about to be thrown into hell for breaking the precepts, pleads with the hell wardens for leniency: He broke the precepts because of his social obligations to family, friends, or king. Does he get any leniency? No. The hell wardens throw him into hell even as he's making his plea (MN 97).

The Buddha said that if you want to help others, you can provide them with food, clothing, shelter, or medicine as needed. Better yet, you get them to follow the precepts, too (AN 4:99). By this token, if you tell others that there are times when it's their moral duty to break the precepts, you're actually working for their harm. If they act on your recommendation and are thrown into hell, will you be on hand to plead their case? And will the hell wardens give you a hearing?

So when the texts tell us to stick with the precepts in all cases, they're actually teaching us how to protect our long-term well-being.

This doesn't mean that the precepts leave you totally defenseless against an enemy, just that they force you to think outside the box. If you're determined not to kill under any circumstances, that determination forces you to think in more creative ways to keep an adversary from taking advantage of you. You learn methods of self-defense that fall short of killing. You put more store in diplomacy and don't look down on intelligent compromise.

• *The ideals of the texts are for those who want to go straight to liberation undeterred: They are the ones who should hold to the precepts no matter what, even being willing to die rather than to kill. However, there has to be guidance for those who want to take the longer road to liberation, through many lifetimes, at the same time fulfilling their social obligations, such as the duty to kill in defense of their country.*

Actually, the early texts do describe a slow route to liberation, and a prime feature of that route is holding to the precepts in all situations (AN 8:54). Don't do anything that would land you in the lower realms.

By this standard, it's hard to see how an even slower route, one that allowed for theories of just war, would count as a route to liberation at all. As the Buddha pointed out, if you're in battle with the enemy, trying to kill them, your mind is immersed in ill will. If you get killed at that point, your mind-state would take you to hell. If you have the wrong view that what you're doing is virtuous, you can go either to hell or to rebirth as an animal (SN 42:3). Neither of these destinations lies in the direction of nibbāna. It would be like flying from Las Vegas to San Diego via Yemen, with a long layover in Afghanistan, during which you'd probably forget where you were going to begin with.

- *The texts are obsessed with the letter of the precepts, but it's important not to let the letter get in the way of their spirit, which is to cause the least harm for the greatest number of people. Sometimes you have to kill people to prevent them from doing greater harm.*

This “spirit” is never expressed in the texts, and for good reason. It assumes that there’s a clear way of calculating when doing a lesser evil will prevent a greater evil, but what clear boundary determines what does and doesn’t go into the calculus? Can you discount the retaliation that will come from people who want to avenge your “lesser evil”? Can you discount the people who take you as an example in committing their own ideas of what constitutes a lesser evil? How many generations or lifetimes do you take into account? You can’t really control the indirect effects of your action once it’s done; you can’t tell for sure whether the killing you do will result in more or less killing than what you’re trying to prevent. But what *is* for sure is that you’ve used your own body or your own speech in giving orders—things over which you *do* have control—to kill.

A principle that’s actually closer to the precepts, and allows for no misapplication, is that you never use other people’s misbehavior as justification for your own. No matter what other people do, you stick to the precepts.

- *Maybe the texts are hiding something. Maybe the Buddha didn’t intend the precepts to be taken as absolutes. There must have been times when kings came to consult with him on when war might be morally justified, but for some reason the texts never tell us what he said.*

This conspiracy theory is probably the most dangerous argument of all. Once it’s admitted as valid, you can turn the Dhamma into anything you want. I personally find it hard to believe that, after painting the picture of the soldier destined for hell when dying in battle, the Buddha would have privately discussed with King Pasenadi the grounds on which, for reasons of state, he could rightly send people into that situation.

The texts tell us that he once told Pasenadi that if you break the precepts, then no matter how large your army, you leave yourself unprotected. If you keep the precepts, then even if you have no army at all, you’re well protected from within (SN 3:5). Was this teaching meant just for public consumption? Are we to assume that the Buddha was a two-faced Buddha who taught a secret doctrine to kings so completely at odds with what he taught in public?

The Buddha had so many chances to make exceptions to the precept against killing, but he always stuck by his principles: No intentional taking of life. Period. When you try to cast doubt on these principles, you’re working for the harm of many, leaving them unprotected when they try to determine what should and shouldn’t be done (AN 3:62).

That’s much worse than leaving them without a license to kill an aggressor, no matter how bad.