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Three Essays

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Dealing with Aggression

Aggression is rampant almost everywhere nowadays, sometimes in its legal and approved form and increasingly in illegal activities. Where it is approved, it may be called "getting, on in the world," that is, stepping on others' heads so that you can get to the top. This is success in a worldly sense, but not in a Buddhist one. It is also approved of for men (though not by them for women!) as being a mark of mastery and virility, yet it will never bring happiness. For if people are mastered forcibly, then how will happiness follow for the one who inflicts suffering? The rationale is that "progress," that materialistic god so widely worshipped, will not come about unless force and power are used. But this argument does not take into account the fact that, sooner or later, what is won by aggression will surely be lost through conflict.

When has aggression ever achieved any permanent

results? The empires of the world have all been built on aggression. Their founders and rulers were all sure that they would last till the end of time, but all are now like the ruins of Ozymandias. Where is the Thousand-Year Reich of the Nazis now? On the other hand, the non-violent teaching of the Buddha, the king of Dhamma, has outlasted them all. Force leads to counter-force and violence to more violence, but the practise of Dhamma has no harmful backlash. Dhamma well-practised leads only to more peace, contentment and happiness.

What does the Buddha say about aggression?

Here are some verses from the Dhammapada:

> Though a thousand times a thousand
> in battle one may conquer,
> yet should one conquer just oneself
> one is the greatest conqueror.
>
> Greater the conquest of oneself
> than subjugating others,
> that one who's tamed of self
> whose conduct is ever well-restrained.

Neither deva nor minstrel divine,
nor Māra together with Brahma,
can overthrow the victory
of such a one as this.

Victory gives birth to hate,
in misery the defeated dwell:
happily the peaceful dwell
having abandoned victory and defeat.

(103–105, 201)

Let us consider these verses and see how we can train our aggressive impulses into the way of peace. "A thousand times a thousand (men)" the Buddha says. That is a large number to conquer, but he did not think it at all worthwhile. *They* may be prisoners and conquered by us, but *we* are still the prisoners of our own greed, hate, and delusion. When there is conflict in the mind, an internal battle between what I know I should do and what, guided by those unwholesome motives, I actually do, then the unwholesome motives are the conquerors! If they conquer us, then what have we achieved by mastering so many others when we are not even our own masters?

Of course the battlefield is only one place of conflict, only one arena where aggression is let loose. Our "battlefield" may be in the home or at work. We do

not have to go as far as slaying others, but even if the slaying is confined to verbal attack's, that is bad enough: we still create unwholesome karma. Our aggression may be limited in its range to one or two people, or it may affect thousands or even millions, but either way we still have to master ourselves.

The Buddha says:

> Oneself is master of oneself,
> who else indeed could master be?
> By the good training of oneself
> one gains a master hard to gain.
>
> Dhammapada 160

No one else, human or divine, can be the master of oneself: each person has to train his own aggression into peacefulness. Even if one has a meditation master to guide one, it is still necessary to do the work oneself. He cannot do it for you!

There must be a change in direction: the conquest of self instead of conquering others. It is a change that involves looking closely at oneself and one's motivations. We should first see clearly the dangers in the conquest of others. Several dangers are mentioned by the Buddha in these verses. The victor has his false "glory" to indulge in, but what is this except food for pride and conceit? Intoxicated by conquest and drunk

with pride, such people are surely heading for a fall. This is the most obvious danger for the victor. The dangers for the conquered are different. “In misery the defeated dwell” and because of this they will develop strong resentment. Nourishing that resentment by mentally and verbally reviewing the past defeats, they plan revenge. Then, with the combination of resentment and revenge, hatred will never cease.

Examples of this cycle of hatred are all too common in human society. In the sphere of international relations there are many glaring cases, particularly of hatreds kept alive through many generations among people of opposing religions and racial groups: the enmity that breaks out from time to time among Hindus and Muslims in India, the hostility of Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland, the power struggles between Christians and Muslims on Cyprus and in Lebanon. Buddhists would say that by storing up such hatred and keeping it alive, there will be a strong tendency to be reborn in that same aggressive situation, life after life. Some people do learn, but so many learn very slowly.

In smaller units of society, particularly where the Dhamma is practised, there ought to be no victors and no defeated. Such communities would be governed by consensus rather than by the vote of a majority. No one has cause to feel defeated when decisions are

arrived at after patiently talking them over, discussing them thoroughly, and deciding to take action only when everyone agrees. This procedure involves letting go of self, an amiable spirit of compromise, and a willingness not to force one's own viewpoint. This accord is possible where people practise Dhamma, but it would be difficult for it to work elsewhere. Those in the majority have to compromise with the minority, and the minority in turn have to agree to modify their ideas in keeping with the majority. Consensus is, in fact, the way the Sangha (the Order of Buddhist monks and nuns) conducts its formal affairs. It is known that a consensus has been reached by the silence of all who are present.

The individual who tries only to conquer himself should not suffer because of that change in direction. He will not suffer if he acts skilfully in accordance with the Dhamma, but when the methods of the Dhamma are not known, there may be self-inflicted wounds. This is sure to happen if one takes "the conquest of oneself" to be an internal battle. The mind will be the battlefield, but who will be the combatants? There is only one person, not two. It is not "me fighting my mind" although that is the way many people go about it. When they act in such a way, much suffering must result from the internal battle. The conquest of oneself comes about naturally, first by

using mindfulness and second, loving kindness. No force is used with mindfulness so no suppression is involved, while the practise of loving kindness dissolves the accumulated aggression and resentment.

There are various methods for arriving at peace. The worst way of attempting to bring about peace is by aggression or force, for a peace maintained by fear will not endure. Only slightly better is the peace that results from trickery, but that too collapses as soon as the fraud is revealed. Then there is the kind of peace established by negotiation, treaty, rule and law. This has some chance of enduring while the different people involved agree to keep their own parts in it. However, since in any society many people do not practise the Dhamma very much, various penalties must be imposed for breaking this peace.

The peace that exists on the basis of Dhamma-practise is much more secure because Dhamma upholds the principle of non-harming. This is how peace comes about. The more that the Dhamma is practised, the more peace there will be. For when could virtue, meditation, and penetrative wisdom ever lead to war or conflict?

But there is a higher peace even than this, which depends for its existence on continual practise. When that practise has reached the point where all the

defilements of greed, hatred, and delusion have disappeared, what cause for conflict will remain? It is such people the Buddha calls "the Peaceful." The peace won through freedom from defilements is called Enlightenment or Nibbāna. It is the only secure way of having peace within oneself as there is nothing to cause war. It was of a person who has reached this peace that the Buddha said:

> Abandoning likes and dislikes too,
> become quite cool and assetless,
> hero, the all-worlds-conqueror
> that one I call a Brāhmaṇa.
>
> Dhammapada 418

War and Peace

The Sutta:

King Ajatasattu of Magadha, son of Princess Vedehi, mustered a fourfold army [1] against King Pasenadi of Kosala and attacked Kasi. When King Pasenadi heard that King Ajatasattu had mustered an army and had

attacked Kasi, he mustered a fourfold army against King Ajatasattu and marched to Kasi. The two kings battled and King Ajatasattu was the victor. Defeated, King Pasenadi retreated to his royal capital, Sāvatthī.

At that time, in the morning, many bhikkhus took their bowls and robes and went into Sāvatthī on alms round. Having walked for alms there, after their meal they returned and approached the Lord. Having done so, they respectfully saluted him and sat down, and told the Lord about this matter.

(He said to them:) "King Ajatasattu of Magadha is one who has evil friendships, evil companionship, evil comrades, while King Pasenadi of Kosala is one who has good friendships, good companionship, and good comrades. But today King Pasenadi will pass this night in misery (*dukkha*) because he has been defeated.

> "Victory gives birth to hate,
> in misery the defeated dwell
> happily the peaceful dwell
> having abandoned victory and defeat."

Again King Ajatasattu mustered a fourfold army against King Pasenadi and attacked Kasi. This time though, King Pasenadi was the victor and he captured King Ajatasattu.

King Pasenadi then thought: "How is it that

although this King Ajatasattu is my nephew, he is treacherous to me while I am not treacherous to him? Suppose I take away all his elephants, cavalry, chariots and infantry, and leave him only his life?" So that is what he did.

The bhikkhus on alms round learned about this and later informed the Lord about it all.

Then the Lord, knowing the meaning of it at that time, spoke these verses:

"A person may plunder
so long as it serves his ends,
but when by others he is plundered
he plunders them in turn.
'Now's the hour' thinks the fool
so long as the evil is unripe,
but when the evil ripens up,
then to the fool comes suffering. [2]

One who kills, a killer gets,
the victor, one who conquers him,
the insulter is insulted,
the angry one gets one angrier still.

So by the turn of kamma's wheel
the plunderer is plundered."

Related (Saṃyutta) Collection 3, 14–I5

Comments:

The Buddha could not dissuade King Ajatasattu from his campaigns against old King Pasenadi because the former had allied himself with Devadatta, the Buddha's cousin. Devadatta had advised his royal supporter to kill his own father, King Bimbisara, while he in turn was aided by the king in his plot to murder the Buddha. Ajatasattu did not dare approach the Buddha until the last few years of the Teacher's life, and thus the Buddha had no influence upon him. Because of the king's friendship with Devadatta, he is spoken of in the discourse as "one with evil friendships, evil companionship, evil comrades;" he had no influence of the Dhamma to lighten the dark burden of his crimes. Even when Ajatasattu did pluck up courage and go to see the Buddha, he was so tortured by remorse that he could not fully comprehend the Buddha's discourse. It should be noted, in view of the Buddha's words, "So by the turn of kamma's wheel the plunderer is plundered," that Ajatasattu, the parricide, was murdered by his own son, Udayibhadda.

The uselessness of war as a way of solving conflicts is summed up in the last two lines of the verse. The Buddha saw how fruitless would be Pasenadi's action in confiscating the army of his troublesome nephew. The effect that it had was to harden Ajatasattu's resolve to conquer Kosala, which he did eventually

do. In our times the huge reparations demanded of Germany after the First World War is another good example—our revenge is followed by their revenge as seen in Hitler and the Second World War. Patterns of wars and revenge for wars, as seen in the past with England and Scotland, or between the former with France—and more recently between Greece and Turkey, Arabs and Israel, Pakistan and India—never solve anything, but only exacerbate the bias and tension to provoke new trouble.

The Buddha says that it is not only in the sphere of international politics that these troubles are found, and he might actually have had Ajatasattu in mind when he said, "One who kills, a killer gets," but that is the principle followed by gangsters through the ages. As to victory, that need not involve troops, just the feuding and fighting that goes on in homes and workplaces everywhere; for if one rejoices in victory over a rival, then sooner or later one is sure to be depressed by defeat. And is it not always the case that insulters are insulted? If, of course, they are powerful, the counter-insult takes place only behind their backs, but insults always come back to the one who mouthed them. Anger does not succeed either, because the bully who is accustomed to get his way by anger will surely meet up with someone angrier who can bully him into submission. So wars, of whatever extent and

duration, never bear good fruit.

How is it then that they still go on? This is because wars are the exteriorization of the greed, hatred, and delusion in our hearts. If these three defilements were absent, war would cease. But since not many people are willing to lessen the power these three unwholesome roots hold over their own hearts, the wars continue.

Greed has its part in wars, as when there is the desire to plunder and pillage or when territorial gain is the motive. How foolish all this appears when we compare the evanescent states and empires of this world with the Reign of Dhamma which has lasted now for more than 2,500 years. What is gained by greedy grabbing is lost quite quickly too—this is the way of all the world's countries and their "possessions." But the Reign of Dhamma does not depend upon greed: it teaches people to give up, let go, renounce and not be aggressive, so it lasts for a long time.

As for hatred, its part in war is also well known: the enemy is always evil and there can hardly be any higher good than in killing him. This attitude takes no account of the fact that most enemies are both as good and as evil as we are ourselves—in fact, as ordinary as we are. Still they have to be hated, otherwise a

"successful" war could not be waged. The actual killing, of course, usually involves hatred, particularly when it is hand-to-hand combat. Modern pushbutton warfare, where the target may not even be visible, involves less manifest hate, though some aversion must be present for without hatred the buttons are not going to be pressed.

Delusion is not usually thought of as a factor in war, though it is a powerful cause. Delusion appears as the assumption that war will be the way to end some unpleasant situation. We have all heard of the "war to end all wars" or even of "fighting for peace," but all such notions are heavily deluded. Wars bring more wars and peace cannot be attained by fighting for it, nor even by threatening others. For through fear and threats only a rough and unstable peace can be achieved, and that not for long. In our days the idea that peace (what sort of peace indeed?) can be maintained by keeping up with the other side, balancing our nuclear weapons with theirs, is truly a delusion. Force won't keep peace! Notice also how the nuclear powers are unwilling to do the very thing that would lead to peace: to start dismantling these terrible weapons.

Though humanity has had a long and bloody history of wars, we do not learn from the past at all, it seems, but keep repeating those mistakes in ever more

disastrous ways. The wise words of the Buddha and other great teachers of peace have been around for a long time, but the thick delusion of so many people still stirs them to "right" wrongs by means of war.

The Buddha himself prevented one war between his relatives the Sakyas and the Koliyas over the waters of the river Rohini. He managed twice to stop his relatives, the Sakyas, from being massacred though even he was not able to prevent the fruition of the evil kamma that they had made for themselves. Apart from this, he tirelessly taught people the way to live in peace—in their homes, at work, in society in general and within their own hearts. He had no trace of anger or resentment and taught others how they could also rid themselves of these destructive tendencies. His Dhamma was wholly one of peacefulness of body, speech and mind, and was directed towards finding the great Peace of Nibbāna:

> Of peaceful body, peaceful speech,
> peaceful, well-composed of heart,
> having spewed out the world's desires,
> "truly peaceful" that bhikkhu is called.
> Peaceful his mind and peaceful
> his speech and action too,
> perfect in knowledge of freedom,
> one "Thus" is of utmost peace.

As the Sangha of bhikkhus has always been the guiding light for Buddhists and for those who want to know about the Dhamma, and as that Sangha in its laws and discipline was instituted as an example of peacefulness, so the history of Buddhism has not been blotted by "religious wars." Actually, this phrase is a contradiction in terms for Buddhists, for the Dhamma as a religious path means peace and loving kindness. For Buddhists, no war can be religious, and if others see that such a thing is possible then there must be very great failings in that religion which allows or condones such a thing. There have been, of course, Buddhist kings in Asia who were greedy for power and fame, and cruel in their territorial ambitions, but they could not claim even one word of support from either the Buddha's words or from good members of the Sangha. No bhikkhu would ever praise the virtues of war; he might see the inevitability of conflict and the need to protect his country against aggression, but he would never praise war. He would not count as a good bhikkhu if he did so.

The Sangha in Buddhist countries is in fact the refuge for pacifists of the best kind, for bhikkhu-life involves not harming oneself or others with body, speech and mind. The renunciation of the bhikkhu

makes such pacifism both practical to one who undertakes it and impressive to others. You really profess peace? All right then, give up the causes of war within yourself! Live a disciplined and compassionate life: this is the best way to bring about peace.

Settling Conflicts

The Sutta

This happened at Sāvatthī. (The Buddha said:)

"Long ago, monks, a battle was raging between the gods and the demons. Then Vepacitti, lord of the demons, said to Sakka, lord of the gods, 'Let victory be according to the wisdom of speech, O lord of the gods!'

'Let it be so, Vepacitti.'

So the god and the demon arranged their companies, thinking, 'They will judge what is wisely or unwisely spoken.'

Then Vepacitti, lord of the demons, said to Sakka, lord of the gods: 'Chant a verse, O lord of the gods.'

When this was said Sakka replied to Vepacitti, 'You are the older god, Vepacitti. Therefore you should chant a verse.'

At this, Vepacitti spoke as follows:

'Fools become more violent
if none are there to stop them,
so by heavy punishment
the wise restrain the fool.'

When this was said the demons approved but the gods were silent.

Then Vepacitti said to Sakka: 'Chant a verse, O lord of the gods.' Sakka then spoke as follows:

'But here's the way that I conceive the foolish person should be stopped: that other's anger having known, the mindful one is quite allayed.' [3]

When this was said the gods approved but the demons were silent.

Then Sakka said to Vepacitti: "Chant a verse, Vepacitti."

"An error I see, Vāsava, [4]
in your forbearance, for the fool

who knows of that then understands
that you forbear from fear of him,
then the idiot will overwhelm you,
as bull goes faster as you flee."

When this was said the demons approved but the gods were silent.

Then Vepacitti said to Sakka: "Chant a verse, O lord of the gods." Sakka then spoke as follows:

"Let him think as he likes—or not,
that you forbear from fear of him,
It's the means of one's highest good—
what's better than patience is not found.

That one who, being strong indeed,
forbearing always with the weak,
is ever patient with those who're weak:
the highest patience that is called.

Who says the strength of fools is strength [5]
will say the strong one is not strong;
that a strong one, Dhamma-guarded,
is overturned-cannot be!

With one who's angry, one is worse
who angered is in turn
but one who pays not back in kind
wins a battle hard to win.

For benefit of both he lives—
for himself and the other one,
knowing the other's anger,
mindful he is, allayed.

He is indeed healer of both—
himself and of the other one
yet people who know not Dhamma
think he is a fool."

When this was said the gods approved but the demons were silent. Then the companies of gods and demons spoke as follows: "The verses spoken by Vepacitti, lord of the demons, are words about force, words about weapons, quarrelling, strife and contention. But the verses spoken by Sakka, lord of the gods, are words about persuasion, words about gentleness, concord, amity and harmony. Sakka, lord of the gods, is by wise speech the victor."

In this way, monks, did Sakka, lord of the gods, by wise speech become the victor."

Related (Saṃyutta) Collection, 11, 5.

Comment:

This discourse is called, "Victory by Speech" and perhaps its message should be introduced to the international conference scene, for by means of it no

wars occur and no cannon-fodder is needed, besides which it is perfectly non-violent. However, in the present political climate neither of the major powers would win and there might even be some difficulty in finding a set of suitable judges. How good to win a "war" by such non-violent means! There are some who would say that it is not practical, for the big brass will not be pleased, the weapons contractors will have no work, and thousands will lose their jobs. Moreover, they would argue, powerful enemies will just not agree to such a contest, or if they do, they would not be sincere and would not follow up their words with the appropriate actions.

In fact, these people would probably agree with Vepacitti that the only way to stop fools from becoming more violent is to make it really hard for them, as the threat of vast arms-piling does among countries, or as the prison system does for criminals.

Whether international conflicts are being considered or lawbreakers within one's country, Vepacitti's prescription is "deterrence," rule by fear of punishment. Such a violent method is not consistent with the Buddha's Teachings.

Sakka's reply to Vepaciti points to non-violence as the one effective method to cure aggression. This seems to be most practical in the field of personal

relations, where restraint towards an angry person can calm him down, while replying with more anger will only exacerbate the trouble.

Vepacitti's second verse puts the worldly point of view across very well. He is sure that non-violence will only make things worse, not better. As he says, the fools who want to make trouble will be delighted if you take no action against them. They are sure to think that you do nothing because you fear them, and thus they will make matters much worse for you. There is some truth in this, for this is the way that a defiled mind thinks. And it seems to be true that some can only be induced to behave themselves by threats and punishments, though this is usually because better methods have not been tried. Threats on one side produce fear on the other, so the fearful think it right to protect themselves with their own strong-arm tactics. The result is the continuing—indeed, never-ending— violence which makes up human history.

Sakka's reply, again couched in terms of personal Dhamma-practise, praises patience as a quality that cannot be excelled. Patience is especially characteristic of a person who is both strong *and* wise, for he will always be patient with those who are weaker— such is the strength of those who practise Dhamma and cannot be overwhelmed. A fool's strength is only his anger and he cannot be called really strong as the

Dhamma-practitioner can overcome him. Sakka notes that if one does not become angry in the presence of an angry person, then it is as though one wins a war. He goes on to point out that such a person is truly compassionate, living both for his own and others' benefit, a healer of both sides. Still, those who do not know Dhamma think that such a non-violent person is a fool. Well, times have changed but not defilements!

The question has been raised whether it is compassionate to allow others to do acts of violence, and whether force or punishment should be employed and then to what extent. Can it not be said that sometimes this is the only thing that fools will take notice of? So compassion, it is argued, should include forceful action. But no such doctrine is included anywhere in the original collections of the Buddha's discourses. Such a doctrine is obviously dangerous, as it can become a useful cover for all sorts of violence. After all, many violent acts can he dressed up as compassion. When violence is deemed necessary, it must not be disguised. Even though apparently necessary, it cannot he called Dhamma-practise, which does not recognise such means.

Means are important if ends are to be attained, but only Dhamma-means will lead to Dhamma-ends. Violent means can never lead there; on the contrary, they only make for more conflict. The idea that the

“end justifies the means” can never be held by Buddhists: the means, Dhamma-practise, must be in line with the end, the good results of Dhamma. So if one would have peace—at home, at work, between groups and parties, states and countries— then the means of loving kindness and compassion must be employed.

Notes

1. Elephants, cavalry, chariots and infantry. [Back]
2. Very strong words to speak about a king! The Buddha could do so because the king was a devoted supporter and his words are obviously true. [Back]
3. ”Allayed:” Laid down his own anger, become peaceful. [Back]
4. Another name for Sakka. [Back]
5. There is punning here, which cannot be reproduced in English, between *”bāla”* strength, strong person; and *“bala”* a fool [Back]

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