

# holy wars in buddhism and islam: the myth of shambhala



Often, when people think of the Muslim concept of jihad or holy war, they associate with it the negative connotation of a self-righteous campaign of vengeful destruction in the name of God to convert others by force. They may acknowledge that Christianity had an equivalent with the Crusades, but do not usually view Buddhism as having anything similar. After all, they say, Buddhism is a religion of peace and does not have the technical term holy war. A careful examination of the

By Alexander Berzin

Buddhist texts, however, particularly The Kalachakra Tantra literature, reveals both external and internal levels of battle that could easily be called “holy wars.” An unbiased study of Islam reveals the same. In both religions, leaders may exploit the external dimensions of holy war for political, economic, or personal gain, by using it to rouse their troops to battle. Historical examples regarding Islam are well known; but one must not be rosy-eyed about Buddhism and think that it has been immune to this phenomenon.

Shakyamuni Buddha was born into the Indian warrior caste and often used military imagery to describe the spiritual journey. He was the Triumphant One, who defeated the demonic forces (mara) of unawareness, distorted views, disturbing emotions, and impulsive karmic behavior. The eighth-century Indian Buddhist master Shantideva employs the metaphor of war repeatedly throughout Engaging in Bodhisattva Behavior: the real enemies to defeat are the disturbing emotions and attitudes that lie hidden in the mind. The Tibetans translate the Sanskrit term arhat, a liberated being, as foe-destroyer, someone who has destroyed the inner foes. From these examples, it would appear that in Buddhism, the call for a “holy war” is purely an internal spiritual matter. The Kalachakra Tantra, however, reveals an additional external dimension.



According to tradition, Buddha taught The Kalachakra Tantra in Andhra, South India, in 880 B.C.E., to the visiting King of Shambhala, Suchandra, and his entourage. King Suchandra brought the teachings back to his northern land, where they have flourished ever since. Seven generations of kings after Suchandra, in 176 B.C.E., King Manjushri Yashas gathered the religious leaders of Shambhala, specifically the brahman wise

men, to give them predictions and a warning: eight hundred years in the future, namely in 624 C.E., a non-Indic religion will arise in Mecca. Because of a lack of unity among the brahman people and laxity in following correctly the injunctions of their Vedic scriptures, many will accept this religion when its leaders threaten an invasion. To prevent this danger, Manjushri Yashas united the people of Shambhala into a single “vajra-caste” by conferring upon them the Kalachakra empowerment. By his act, the king became the First Kalki – the First Holder of the Caste.

As the founding of Islam dates from 622 C.E., two years before Kalachakra’s predicted date, most scholars identify the non-Indic religion with that faith. Descriptions of the religion elsewhere in the Kalachakra texts as having the slaughter of cattle while reciting the name of its god, circumcision, veiled women, and prayer facing its holy land five times a day reinforce their conclusion.

The Sanskrit term for non-Indic here is mleccha (Tib. lalo), meaning someone who speaks incomprehensibly in a non-Sanskrit tongue. Hindus and Buddhists alike have applied it to all foreign invaders of North India, starting with the Macedonians and Greeks at the time of Alexander the Great. It carries the derogatory connotation of “barbarian” and indicates ethnocentric ignorance of any high culture the invading people might have.

The First Kalki further predicted that the followers of the non-Indic religion will some day rule India. From their capital in Delhi, their king will attempt the conquest of Shambhala in 2424 C.E. The Twenty-fifth Kalki, Raudrachakrin, will then invade India and defeat the non-Indics in a great war. His victory will mark the end of the Kali Yuga, the age of degeneration of the Dharma, and afterwards, a new golden age will follow during which the teachings will flourish, especially those of Kalachakra.

In Stainless Light, the Second Kalki, Pundarika, explains that the fight with the non-Indic people of Mecca is not an actual war, since the real battle is within the body. The fifteenth-century Gelug commentator Kaydrubje elaborates that Manjushri Yashas’s words do not suggest an actual campaign to kill the followers of the non-Indic religion. The First Kalki’s intention in describing the details of the war was to provide a metaphor for the inner battle of deep blissful awareness of voidness against unawareness and destructive behavior.

The Second Kalki clearly enumerates the hidden symbolism. Raudrachakrin represents the “mind-vajra,” namely the clear light subtlest mind. Shambhala represents the state of great bliss in which the mind-vajra abides. Being a Kalki means that mind-vajra has the perfect level of deep awareness, namely simultaneously arising voidness and bliss. Raudrachakrin’s two generals, Rudra and Hanuman, stand for the two supporting kinds of deep awareness, that of the pratyekabuddhas and of the shravakas. The twelve Hindu gods who help win the war represent the cessation of the twelve links of dependent arising and of the twelve daily shifts of the karmic breaths. The links and the shifts both describe the mechanism perpetuating samsara. The four divisions of Raudrachakrin’s army represent the purest levels of the four immeasurable attitudes of love, compassion, joy, and equality. The non-Indic forces that Raudrachakrin and the divisions of his army defeat represent the minds of negative karmic forces, assisted by hatred, malice, resentment, and prejudice. Victory over them is the attainment of the path to liberation and enlightenment.

Despite textual disclaimers of calling for an actual holy war, the implication here that Islam is a cruel religion, characterized by hatred, malice, and destructive behavior, can easily be used as evidence to support that Buddhism is anti-Muslim. Although some Buddhists of the past may in fact have had this bias and some Buddhists of today may likewise hold sectarian views, one may also draw a different conclusion in light of one of the Mahayana Buddhist didactic methods.

For example, Mahayana texts present certain views as characterizing Hinayana Buddhism, such as selfishly working for one’s liberation alone without regard for helping others. After all, the stated goal of Hinayana practitioners is self-liberation, not enlightenment for the sake of benefiting everyone. Although such description of Hinayana has led to prejudice, an educated objective study of Hinayana schools, such as Theravada, reveals a prominent role of meditation on love and compassion. One might conclude that Mahayana was simply ignorant of the actual Hinayana teachings. Alternatively, one might recognize that Mahayana is using here the method in Buddhist logic of taking positions to their absurd conclusions in order to help people avoid extremist views. The intention of

this prasangika [consequentialist] method is to caution practitioners to avoid the extreme of selfishness.

The same analysis applies to the Mahayana presentations of the six schools of medieval Hindu and Jain philosophies. It also applies to each of the Tibetan Buddhist traditions’ presentations of the views of each other and the views of the native Tibetan Bön tradition. None of these presentations gives an accurate depiction. Each exaggerates and distorts certain features of the others to illustrate various points.

The same is true of the Kalachakra assertions about the cruelty of Islam and its potential threat. In the late tenth and early eleventh centuries when the Kalachakra teachings first appeared in India, Islamic armies did in fact invade several Buddhist lands. Many Buddhists and Hindus did in fact willingly convert to Islam to avoid paying the required poll tax if they kept their religions. There was a basis for the exaggeration. Although Buddhist teachers may claim that the prasangika method here of using Islam to illustrate spiritual danger is a skillful means, one might also argue that it is grossly lacking in diplomacy, especially in modern times.

Kaydrubje further explains that the predicted war between Shambhala and the non-Indic forces is not merely a metaphor without reference to a future historical reality. If that were so, then when The Kalachakra Tantra applies internal analogies for the planets and constellations, the absurd conclusion would follow that the heavenly bodies exist only as metaphors and have no

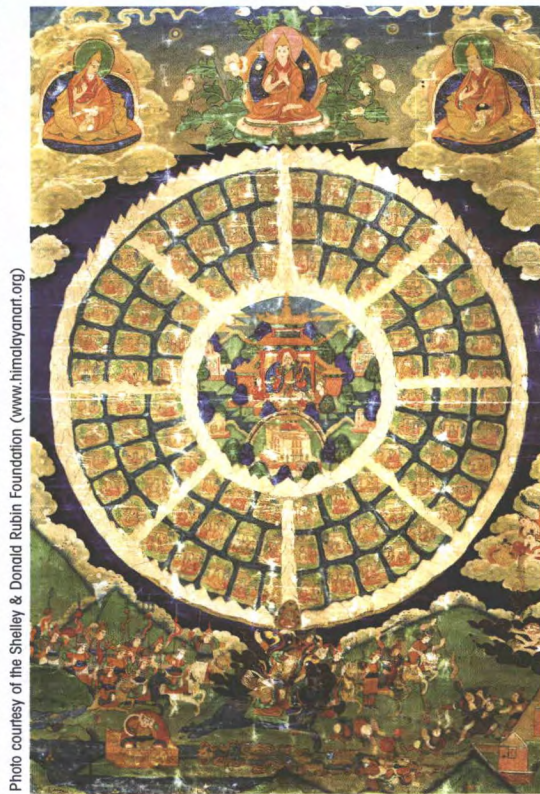


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The Kingdom of Shambhala

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external reference. Kaydrubje also cautions, however, against taking literally the additional Kalachakra prediction that the non-Indic religion will eventually spread to all twelve continents and Raudrachakrin’s teachings will overcome it there too. The prediction does not concern the specific non-Indic people described earlier, or their religious beliefs or practices. The name mleccha here merely refers to non-Dharmic forces and beliefs that contradict Buddha’s teachings.

## BUDDHISM AND ARMED CONFLICT



Thus, the prediction is that destructive forces inimical to spiritual practice – and not specifically a Muslim army – will attack in the future, and an external “holy war” against them will be necessary. The implicit message is that, if peaceful methods fail and one must fight a holy war, the struggle must always base itself on the Buddhist principles of compassion and deep awareness of reality. This is true despite the fact that in practice this guideline is extremely difficult to follow when training soldiers who are not bodhisattvas. Nevertheless, if the war is driven by the non-Indic principles of hatred, malice, resentment, and prejudice, future generations will see no difference between the ways of their ancestors and those of the non-Indic forces. Consequently, they will easily adopt the non-Indic ways.

The Arabic word *jihad* means a struggle in which one needs to endure suffering and difficulties, such as hunger and thirst during the holy month of fasting. Those who engage in this struggle are *mujahedin*. One is reminded of the Buddhist teachings on patience for bodhisattvas to endure the difficulties of following the path to enlightenment.

Is one of the non-Indic ways the Islamic concept of jihad? If so, is Kalachakra accurately portraying jihad, or is it using the non-Indic invasion of Shambhala merely to represent an extreme to avoid? To avert interfaith misunderstanding, it is important to investigate these questions.

The Arabic word *jihad* means a struggle in which one needs to endure suffering and difficulties, such as hunger and thirst during Ramadan, the holy month of fasting. Those who engage in this struggle are *mujahedin*. One is reminded of the Buddhist teachings on patience for bodhisattvas to endure the difficulties of following the path to enlightenment.

The Sunni division of Islam outlines five types of jihad. (1) A military jihad is a defensive campaign against aggressors trying to harm Islam. It is not an offensive attack to convert others to Islam by force. (2) A jihad by resources entails giving financial and material support to the poor and needy. (3) A jihad by work is honestly supporting oneself and one’s family. (4) A jihad by study is to acquire knowledge. (5) A jihad against oneself is an internal struggle to overcome wishes and thoughts counter to the Muslim teachings. The Shi’ah divisions of Islam emphasize the first type of jihad, equating an attack on an Islamic state with an attack on the Islamic faith. Many Shi’ites also accept the fifth type, the internal spiritual jihad.

The Kalachakra presentation of the Shambhala war and the Islamic discussion of jihad show remarkable similarities. Both Buddhist and Islamic holy wars are defensive tactics for stopping attacks by external hostile forces, and never offensive campaigns for winning converts. Both have internal spiritual levels of meaning, in which the battle is against negative thoughts and destructive emotions. Both need to be waged based on ethical principles, not on the basis of prejudice and hatred. Thus, in presenting the non-Indic invasion of

Shambhala as purely negative, the Kalachakra literature is in fact misrepresenting the concept of jihad in the prasangika manner of taking it to its logical extreme to illustrate a position to avoid.

Moreover, just as many leaders have distorted and exploited the concept of jihad for power and gain, the same has occurred with Shambhala and its discussion of war against destructive foreign forces. Agvan Dorjiev, the late nineteenth-century Russian Buryat Mongol assistant tutor of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama, proclaimed that Russia was Shambhala and the Czar was a Kalki. In this way, he tried to convince the Thirteenth Dalai Lama to align with Russia against the “mleccha” British in the struggle for control of Central Asia.

The Mongols have traditionally identified both King Suchandra of Shambhala and Genghis Khan as incarnations of Vajrapani. Fighting for Shambhala, then, is fighting for the glory of Genghis Khan and for Mongolia. Thus, Sukhe Batur – leader of the 1921 Mongolian Communist Revolution against the extremely harsh rule of the White Russian and Japanese-backed Baron von Ungern-Sternberg – inspired his troops with the Kalachakra account of the war to end the Kali Yuga. He promised them rebirth as warriors of the King of Shambhala. During the Japanese occupation of Mongolia in the 1930s, the Japanese overlords, in turn, tried to gain Mongol allegiance and military support through a propaganda campaign that Japan was Shambhala.

Just as critics of Buddhism could focus on abuses of Kalachakra’s external level of spiritual battle and dismiss the internal level – and this would be unfair to Buddhism as a whole – the same is true regarding anti-Muslim critics of jihad. The advice in the Buddhist tantras regarding the spiritual teacher may be useful here. Almost every spiritual teacher has a mixture of good qualities and faults. Although a disciple must not deny the negative qualities of a teacher, to dwell on them will only cause anger and depression. If, instead, a disciple focuses on a teacher’s positive qualities, he or she will gain inspiration to follow the spiritual path.

The same can be said about the Buddhist and Islamic teachings regarding holy wars. Both religions have seen abuses of its calls for an external battle when destructive forces threaten religious practice. Without denying or dwelling on these abuses, one can gain inspiration by focusing on the benefits of waging an inner holy war in either creed.

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