

war and peace in tibetan buddhism

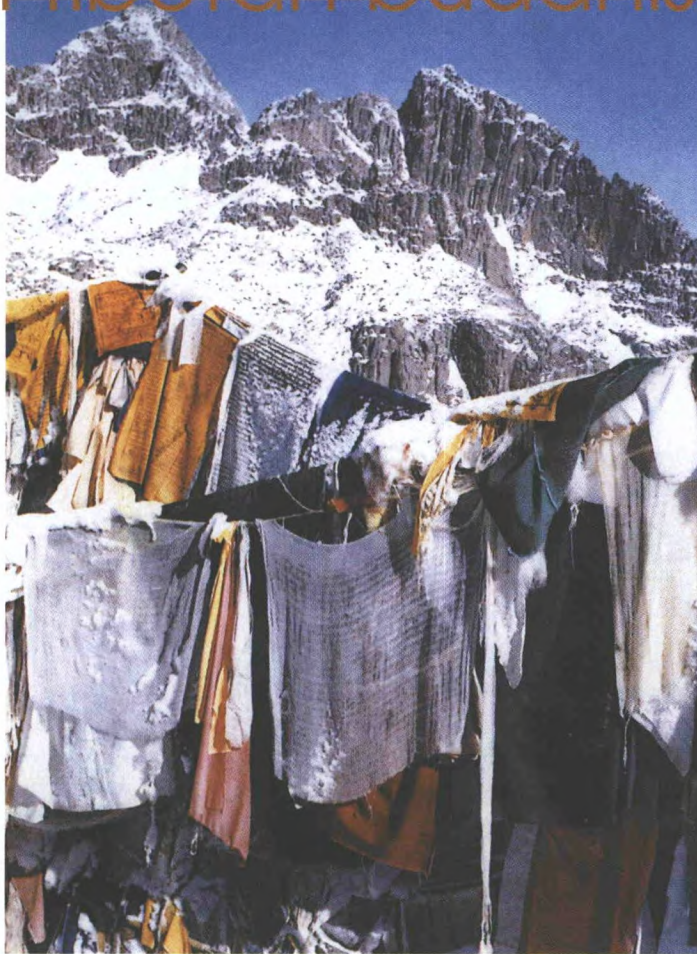
Contrary to popular opinion, the world's oldest profession most probably is not prostitution. It is war. Since time immemorial, humans have relied upon violence and the straight-on attack as the quickest solution to a prickly problem.

All world religions speak of world peace as an ideal, and sometimes even as an achievable quality in certain periods of human history. However, like most spiritual traditions emanating from India, Buddhism does not think that the present era qualifies for that luxury. We live in the Kali Yuga, or dark age, when violence and conflict are norms of human society rather than exceptions to the general rule.

For that reason Buddhism has always placed its emphasis upon an attainable individual peace, or nirvana, rather than an unattainable pie-in-the-sky world peace. As the eighth century Indian master Shantideva put it, "One can never remove all thorns from the world, nor cover the entire world with leather to make it seem less thorny. However, by covering one's own foot with a leather sandal it is as though all the world has been covered with soft leather, and all thorns removed." He goes on to say that this "leather sandal of the mind" is nothing other than the inner peace established through cultivating a mindset deeply founded upon gentleness and non-violence.

It may seem that Shantideva's approach is somewhat ego-centric, and that it ignores the seemingly bigger problem of social responsibility. However, the present Dalai Lama suggests that concentrating on one's own inner peace is also an effective method of contributing to world peace.

As he put it in *Kindness, Clarity and Insight*, "World peace depends upon individual peace. We cannot have world peace



without the individuals who live in the world first becoming peaceful. Therefore the best way to help establish world peace is to cultivate a peaceful mind within oneself. This will then extend outward, and will positively impact family and friends. This in turn increases the peace of the community, and that contributes to the peace of human society in general."

Does this mean that Buddhism has nothing to say about social institutions and their impact upon the emergence of a peaceful society?

Not at all. There is also plenty of Buddhist literature with advice on how the powers

that be can establish those kinds of infrastructures that would encourage peaceful living. However, these remain secondary, and can only work effectively when the individual takes responsibility for his or her own peaceful nature.

The problem is that, when an individual lacks the foundations of inner peace, the presence of outer peace merely leads to boredom; then in turn the bored and idle mind naturally becomes frustrated and irritable, and ends up creating conflict with others as a form of distraction.

Buddha nonetheless himself spoke of the important role that political and social institutions play in maintaining world peace. Sutras such as *The Avatamsaka*, or *Discourse on the Vastness of Being*; and also in *The Saddharmapundarika*, or *Sutra of the White Lotus* touch upon the



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BUDDHISM AND ARMED CONFLICT

subject directly. Five hundred years later the Indian master Nagarjuna summarized many of Buddha's essential ideas in his *Suhrlleka*, or Letter in Friendship to a King. Shantideva refers to many of these in his *Shikshasamuccha*, or Compendium of Trainings.

Again in Tibet the Buddhist ideas on social responsibility are well expressed in the *Mani Kabum*, or Precious Vase of Jewel Instructions, a work attributed to King Songtsen Gampo but in fact written down several centuries later as a compendium of the ideals Songtsen Gampo embodied. Sakya Pandita also touches upon the subject in his *Lekshey Rinchen Trengwa*, or Jewel Garland of Good Advice. Songtsen Gampo was the seventh century Tibetan king who made Buddhism the official religion of the country; and Sakya Pandita was a contemporary of Genghis Khan. (Coincidentally, Genghis had once written to Sakya Pandita stating that he had an interest in becoming Buddhist himself, but felt that he should first tame the world, which was a wild and violent place deeply in need of his taming influence.)

Of note here, Buddhism also has a prophecy from the Kalachakra Tantra that speaks of a future emergence of a golden era, a period of a thousand years of world peace, when even the name "war" will be extinct. Because of this prophecy the

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Kalachakra initiation is often given openly to large gatherings of people. The theory is that the more people gain this initiation, the more stable and certain this golden era will be. Kalachakra is the basis of the Indo-Tibetan science of astronomy, and the calculation of the fulfillment of this and other prophecies from the Kalachakra relies upon this science. Most Tibetan astronomers feel that we are still some two centuries away from the emergence of this prophesied "golden age."

Perhaps of note in view of recent events, the Kalachakra Tantra also states that the emergence of the golden age of world peace will coincide with the disappearance of Islam from within the world.

Ordained Sangha and the Community of Laypeople

People were often surprised to see that monks [visiting America] readily ate meat. The monks would patiently explain that it is the motivation that establishes the merit or demerit of any act; Buddha himself ate meat on this basis, as did the early

Buddhist masters. Sometimes the monks would add, "However, it isn't appropriate to kill the animal oneself, or to accept having an animal slaughtered specifically for oneself."

Essentially there are two ways to practice Buddhism: the way of the ordained sangha, i.e., the monk or nun; and the way of the layperson. A monk or nun should not kill an animal in order to eat it, nor should he or she allow anyone else to do so on his or her behalf. This guideline was given to the sangha by the Buddha, and was to be observed during their early morning round of begging food for the day. Were the patron to say, "Wait a moment while I run out back and kill a goat for you," the monk or nun should decline the offer. The situation obviously does not apply to the layperson, who produces rather than begs for food.

Similarly, monks and nuns have taken the precepts of an exceptional lifestyle, one that observes the ways of celibacy and non-violence. Their lifestyle is a social luxury that depends upon the rest of us supporting them in it. If we all were to follow celibacy and non-violence, humans would soon become extinct as a species.

Lamas sometimes put forth the idea that the closer a layperson becomes in lifestyle to that of a monk or nun, the better is their practice.

In fact the reality is quite the reverse. The more monks and nuns follow their own guidelines, the more progress they will make; but as for laypeople, the more they integrate wisdom, compassion and meditation into their daily routine, the more they will progress.

Just as Buddhist laypeople have to kill animals if Buddhist communities are to eat meat, and have to celebrate in romance and sexuality if the human race is to produce candidates for future monks and nuns, in the same way Buddhist laypeople will sometimes have to defend the kingdom by fighting in armies, will occasionally have to stand up for individual rights by defending the weak and powerless against tyranny, and will have to hold the line of culture and civilization when barbarians raise their ugly heads.

As the Buddha and the early Buddhist masters point out, however, they should not do so out of anger or hatred, but rather out of great love and compassion. And not out of a compassion felt solely for the direct victims of the injustice, but also out of compassion for the perpetrators of the injustice. For example, the spiritual layperson should defend a woman being raped, perhaps even killing the rapist in order to save the day; he or she should do so not only out of concern for the victim, but also out of compassion for the rapist. This compassion understands those doing evil are harming themselves as much as they are harming the ostensible victim. Lama Tsong Khapa gives the example of how a parent might have to forcibly restrain a child who had gone mad with a violent mental disease, and



perhaps even kill that child in order to save the situation; the parent would do so with love and compassion for the object of their violence, and not out of anger or hatred. For that reason Buddhist literature does not refer to someone killed in this way as “a killing” or “a murder,” but instead uses the term *drolwa*, or “liberate.”

Traditional Buddhist literature gives an example of how the layperson should act in situations of this nature by drawing on a Buddha Jataka, or Previous Life of the Buddha. According to this tale, long ago in a previous lifetime as a layperson the Buddha was on a boat with five hundred merchants, when he learned that one of the five hundred was a thief who planned to rob and scuttle the boat, thus killing all onboard. Buddha took the responsibility upon himself and attacked the would-be thief and murderer, liberating him on the spot.

These and a thousand similar stories demonstrate how over the centuries Buddhist laypeople have taken up the mantle of difficult tasks that are inappropriate to the ordained sangha, and have safeguarded the world so that monks, nuns, old people and children can live in safety and security.

I can sense that some readers might be shocked to think of Buddhism as referring to “killing” as “liberating,” and that quite rightly there will be apprehensions that the principle could easily be misused.

The potential for misuse is always there with every human activity. Just as monks and nuns can abuse their own privileged positions in society, such as by accepting the support of the lay community and then not delivering by maintaining their precepts, in the same way the laypeople will occasionally make mistakes and fall short of what is expected by the buddhas and bodhisattvas. The important thing is that we all try and do our best, without being too critical of one another.

For that reason in Tibet the monk lamas rarely interfered directly in the ways of the kings and chieftains. Instead they would promote the basic Buddhist values of individual responsibility, patience, compassion, meditation and wisdom, and hope that the lay leaders would do thus be empowered to always do the right thing in a given situation.

The essential message is that Buddhism has something to say, both in times of peace and in times of war.

A Policy Approach

What about governments and governmental policies? A leader must be sufficiently wise to gauge the means that will be most effective.

The fourfold methods in Buddhism are known as the four trinley, or enlightenment activities: peace, increase, power and wrath. Each of these can equally be expressions of love and compassion, for they depend not on the act that is done but rather upon the inner motivation and vision of the actor. In one of Atisha’s tales, Prince Lhakyey relied upon the first two types of trinley – peace and increase – in his approach; he revealed the trinley of peace by maintaining an absence of any

hint of violence and war in his deeds, and bringing peace to King Krishna; he revealed the trinley of increase by relating to King Krishna only in a manner that would increase Krishna’s good qualities.

In stark contrast to the story of Prince Lhakyey, the life of King Songtsen Gampo is characterized by violence and war. In other words, he relied mostly upon the third and fourth trinleys, those of power and wrath, in order to accomplish his goals and fulfill his destiny.

The Tibetans paint a picture of King Songtsen Gampo as being a man strongly devoted to Buddhist practice. He inherited the throne at the age of thirteen, and almost immediately took to the task of empire building. Within a decade he had become the terror of Asia, and by the time of his death his territory extended east into modern-day China, south into India, north into the Mongolian grasslands, and west almost to the Persian frontier. At the peak of these activities he was undoubtedly the most powerful man in Asia, and Tibet was one of the largest empires in the world. He can rightly be called the father of Tibet, for although his empire fragmented several generations later, the culture that he propagated became a unifying force that gave the peoples of Central Asia a collective identity that has endured until today.

The Tibetans explain that Songtsen Gampo’s interests in Buddhism were inspired by two women. As the story goes, after he had solidified his empire he decided that it would be expedient to establish positive relations with his two principal neighbors, Nepal to the south and China to the east. Therefore he requested and was granted the hand of Princess Dritsun, the daughter of the Nepali king Amushvarman, and a few years later the hand of Princess Kongjo, the daughter of the Chinese emperor T’ai Dzung.

In addition to the two great temples constructed for his Nepalese and Chinese queens, he commissioned the Red Mountain Palace, upon which a thousand years later the Fifth Dalai Lama was to construct the Potala Palace.

There is no doubt that King Songtsen Gampo remained firmly committed to his fierce approach to royal administration throughout his life. For example, we read that when the Nepalese master Shilamanju arrived in Lhasa he was shocked to hear that his patron the king was in the habit of having dozens of men beheaded on a daily basis. He went to him and proclaimed, “I am sorry, sir, but I cannot teach the Dharma to

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BUDDHISM AND ARMED CONFLICT

you when you behave in this manner. It would be pointless.”

The king smiled and said, “O venerable one, please let me explain what is happening here. When I decided to incarnate in this land of barbarians in order to tame the people and place them on the path to enlightenment I knew that it would not be an easy task. I could not bring myself to harm other living beings, and therefore simultaneous to my incarnation here I also emanated ten thousand forms of myself, each of whom had the purpose of breaking my laws and consequently being punished by me as an example to the people. The ten thousand men I have beheaded during my rule are mere emanations of myself. With the death of each one it is solely myself who experiences the pain.” He then lifted up his turban and showed the Nepalese monk the image of Amitabha Buddha in his halo, and as well pointed to the ten thousand scars on his neck, each of which had mystically appeared when one of his emanations had been beheaded.

Tibetans have no problems whatsoever in thinking of both King Songtsen Gampo and Prince Lhakye as having equally been emanations of the Avalokiteshvara, the Buddha of Compassion. In Tibetan eyes, both were equally motivated by great compassion, and directed by the wisdom characteristic of the great bodhisattvas.

The Dalai Lamas: War and Peace in More Modern Times

The Seventh Dalai Lama (1708-1757) was born into one of the most chaotic and violent periods of Tibetan history, an era in which internal and external wars had raged for the better



was in fact run on a day-to-day basis by a cabinet, with most important government positions being filled by two people, one lay and the other monastic. The Dalai Lama's temporal leadership emanated from his spiritual authority, rather than any particular political instruments. The Thirteenth was something of an exception, and from 1913 until his death in 1933 he took more of a direct interest in secular matters; and of course the present Dalai Lama has been thrown into the midst of political events by the Chinese takeover of Tibet.

There is no doubt that in general all these Dalai Lamas promoted peace and no-violence whenever and wherever possible. However, when peaceful methods failed there is no doubt that they accepted the use of violence by a military formed of laypeople. For example, when General McKinnley led a British military force into Southern Tibet in 1888 in order to try and force the Tibetans to accept the 1876 Sino-British treaty at Chefoo (that in effect gave Tibet to China and gave Burma and Thailand to Britain), the young Thirteenth Dalai Lama sent a Khampa army of 10,000 soldiers to the region to halt the British advance. Fifteen years later, while in the middle of a three-year Yamantaka retreat, he sent a similar army to halt the Younghusband invasion. Moreover, after the Manchu invasion of 1909, when the Great Thirteenth fled to India and led a government-in-exile from there, he oversaw the activities of Tibet's underground resistance, successfully forcing the Chinese in Tibet to surrender in 1913.

The present Dalai Lama, for better or worse, has followed a very different line, and strictly adheres to a policy of non-violent resistance to the Chinese occupation in Tibet.

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part of a hundred years. However, by the time he passed away he had managed to bring it all to a state of peace, and see the beginning of Tibet's classical golden age and a period of near-peace that endured for almost two hundred years.

From that time onward the Dalai Lama incarnations remained on the golden throne in Lhasa. The success of their rule, and their popularity with the people, is evidenced by the fact that the tradition remained until the Chinese Communist invasion of the 1950s forced the present Dalai Lama to escape into India in 1959.

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Thus the Thirteenth more closely followed the path demonstrated by King Songtsen Gampo in the story told earlier, whereas the present Dalai Lama is following the path exemplified by Prince Lhakye. ☸

Glenn H. Mullin is the foremost Western expert on the lives and teachings of the Dalai Lamas. His most recent book, *The Fourteen Dalai Lamas*, is published by Clear Light Publishers 2001.



Photo: Trinley