

Buddhism and Peace

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1. Why do We Still have So Much Conflict?

WHENEVER we think of the word “peace”, we are oftentimes faced with a situation of unrest. Unrest is the result of conflict which easily escalates.

In this day and age of globalization, we can easily communicate with one another and get to know each other through the growth of science and technology. So why is it that we still have so much conflict to the point where it results in war? This is when we look for peace.

The strangest thing in all of this is that while our science and technology has been progressing in leaps and bounds, instead of reducing conflict it has actually served to elevate it to new levels of destruction through better weapons, precision guided missiles, drones and nuclear weapons.

If you have been paying attention to the global news, then you will have heard something about the situation in Syria. This began as conflict within the country which eventually turned into an all-out civil war. This in turn escalated further as foreign powers got involved to enact an international intervention. In Afghanistan, war still rages and the superpowers of the world have sent troops. Meanwhile, in Europe there is another battle being fought in Ukraine between rebels and local government as well as the Russian army. This doesn't even include the countless cases of terrorism happening around the globe.

While it is important to note that this is contemporary war, where groups of people kill each other over different beliefs. This is done without limitation towards official standards of security. Hostility is carried out upon innocent people who are not directly involved in the affair in any way.

In addition, this world is caught up in many other kinds of conflict as well. This is seen between some groups in the same country as is the case in many parts of Africa and Asia. While this may still be under control, there is always the possibility that this conflict may erupt into war,

so we must consider it a real threat to peace.

The result of conflict that escalates into war, whether this is declared or not, is a matter of politics between countries that ends up causing a lot of damage. People are hurt and killed in large numbers. People have to deal with broken homes and broken families as they try to escape the country. They must risk life and limb to escape by boat as casualties on the sea are numerous. Now, as refugees, they will have to deal with even more difficulty if they manage to make it to another country. Refugees are often prosecuted as they are seen as liabilities in many other countries. The plight of the refugee is very heartbreaking.

This aforementioned conflict is just a brief summary of the full story. If this were to be told in full detail, there wouldn't be time to discuss anything else. In actuality, international conflict is not a new phenomenon within international politics. If we take a look at the history of the world, we would find that international conflict during the early part of the 20th century resulted in World War I. This conflict came about from personal interests of each nation involved as well as those of their allies. War would be the decisive factor in deciding who would win and who would lose. The losing side, who would have relinquished vast amounts of wealth and population over the course of the war, would then have to pay reparations to the victors after the war as well. Even the victors would have suffered losses as winning can come at a heavy cost.

20 years later, we came to know war again; this time World War II. That some nationalism which brought about World War I would be one of the divisive factors again, though this time on a larger scale. While the war began in Europe, it would eventually extend to include the Americas and Asia as well. The casualties were even more catastrophic than before.

After World War II ended, conflict began right back up again. This time, it was brought about by ideology. Even those from the same country would be at odds dividing their nations into sides. At the forefront were those who supported communism and those who didn't. This idealism resulted in more fighting and killing all over the world. East Germany was communist and West Germany wasn't. In Asia, North Korea was communist and South Korea wasn't, as was North Vietnam and South Vietnam.

Skipping ahead to 1991, some 25 years ago, the Soviet Union and the communist regime in Eastern Europe collapsed. People were tired of war and wanted peace. The Cold War which was also the result of a conflict of ideologies had finally come to an end, bringing about what would be a lasting world peace.

However, 25 years later, we see that international conflict is prevalent as ever. The killing didn't stop. Now there are conflicts involving faith with factions who are willing to die for their cause. This is the first example we have seen that did not encompass borders as seen in traditional conflict. Even those within the same country could fight and kill their own countrymen, if they held different beliefs. Terrorism is another form of this type of conflict that we see today.

These situations I have presented are simply a review scenario of some of the global challenges which we, the world's people must face.

From the 3 cases I have previously mentioned, some of you should have some idea about the trauma people experience in those war zones. For those of you who may not be aware of the sheer extent of each of these situations, I'd like to take this opportunity to go into a bit more detail.

First, the war in Afghanistan, which started in the year 2001 and has been ongoing ever since, is the longest war among three of the examples. This has now been going on for over 15 years and we don't have any clear idea as to when it will be over. The reported casualties are "About 104,000 people have been killed in the Afghanistan war since 2001. More than 31,000 of those killed have been civilians. Additional 41,000 civilians have been injured since 2001." (watson brown. edu)

The second war is that in Syria which began 5 years ago. It started as an uprising against Syrian president Bashar al-Assad, but then soon escalated into an all-out civil war with large casualties leaving more than 300,000 dead and drawing in global powers to intervene. (bbc.com)

A side effect of this war is a huge migration of Syrians seeking refuge in foreign countries. "About 11 million Syrians are on the run, including some 4.8 million who have been forced to seek refugee status in neighboring countries. Inside Syria, more than 6.3 million people are displaced and 13.5 million are still in need of humanitarian assistance." (mercycorps.org)

The third war in Ukraine which occurred in 2014 in Europe has resulted in casualties as well. "The overall number of documented deaths in the war in Donbass which started on 6 April 2014, has been put at 9,758, according to the UN body OCHA." (mercycorps.org)

The situation became worse still when conflict began to severely impact foreigners who had nothing to do with the situation. I'm sure many of us remember the crash of Malaysia Airline flight MH17 in Ukraine on July 17, 2014. This was a commercial airline that was shot down by one of the parties involved in the conflict.

The death toll of those caught in the cross-fire in Ukraine is currently

listed as: “304 foreign civilians have died: 298 passengers and crews of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17, four Russian journalists, a Russian civilian in cross-border shelling and a Lithuanian diplomat.” (en.m.wikipedia.org)

These conflicts and wars challenge the leaders of the world. These are manmade crises that destroy our way of life. They are catastrophes in their own right. In order to address this problem we have to understand that it is no easy task. That said, a war should not be allowed to go on for 15 years as is the case in Afghanistan or even 5 years as is the case in Syria. A conflict should be stopped as soon as possible to prevent the escalation, as even a short fight can have severe consequences as we have seen in Ukraine. So how can we bring about peace?

2. “Four Noble Truths” and “Ten Guiding Principles for a King”

As a Buddhist, I often think of the Lord Buddha’s teachings. One such teaching was that of the 4 noble truths. These include:

1. “Dukkha” or the truth of suffering
2. “Samudaya” or the causes of suffering
3. “Nirodha” or the cessation of suffering
4. “Magga” or the means to cessation of suffering

(Buddhism.about.com, and dmc.tv)

I believe that we can apply this understanding to help bring about peace. The trauma of war can be thought of as Dukkha or suffering. We must therefore search for Samudaya, the cause in order to bring about Nirodha, the cessation. It is only then that we will achieve Magga, the means to cessation of suffering. War is a manmade incident. In each conflict, there are groups on both sides made up of leaders and followers. We have to find the catalyst in each situation. The leaders are the ones who will make the final decision on whether or not to go into war. This is why it is important to understand them first. If they would choose war instead of peace, we must figure out why. At present, two reasons this might be are:

1) *Interest*

In international politics, we know that the national interests are mentioned as an excuse to do many things for each nation, including war. “A desire for resources” is one such interest and can be a major cause for war. (www.enotes.com)

2) *Emotion*

War is often brought about by some combination of ethnic or religious tensions, or oppressive government fusions. (www.enotes.com) It can be very easy to lose sight of the greater good when our judgment is clouded with emotion. This is what it means to be human.

This is why being a leader of people can be so difficult. Leaders assume a lot of responsibility and in many cases speak for those people they lead. When the decision to go to war rests on the shoulders of one person, it becomes imperative that they make the right decision for their people.

Another aspect of Buddhism we can apply to this situation is “The Tot sa pit raat chatam” or The Ten Guiding Principles for a King. These are the virtues that a righteous ruler or leader should adhere to.

The first is Dana, or “giving”. The ruler should be a giver.

The second is Sila, or “self-conduct”. The ruler has to refrain from doing evil things.

The third is Paricaga, or “giving up”. The ruler should sacrifice something for the greater good.

The fourth is Ajava, or “straightness”. The ruler should behave with honesty in all aspects of work and duty.

The fifth is Maddava, or “gentleness”. The ruler should be humble. This is not to be confused with weakness, but rather politeness and proper conduct.

The sixth is Tapa, or “perseverance”. The ruler must have the courage to do what must be done and carry out the duty with regularity and without laziness.

The seventh is Akkodha, or “non-anger”. Much the same as Maddava, it is important that the ruler refrain from becoming too easily offended and remain calm and cool at all times. It is important to accept people and show mercy.

The eighth is Avihimsa, or “not causing injury”. This means the ruler should not cause trouble to anyone.

The ninth is Khanti, or “endurance or patience”. The ruler must endure unpleasant things like physical and mental pain in order to make the correct decisions.

The tenth, the final principle is Avirodhana, or “not going wrong”. Simply, the ruler should not do the wrong things. People make mistakes, but the ruler should always hold themselves to a higher standard.

(Thailand.prd.go.th)

A leader who is able to utilize these 10 principles is better equipped to not only prevent conflict from escalating but also to avoid it entirely. For example, a group of people may be ready for conflict but may avoid it if their leader disagrees. Similarly, if one leader wants conflict, but another leader is ready to have negotiations and resolve their issues, both sides may avoid a war. Sometimes it only takes one great leader to make a huge difference in the world.

In addition, if we can address these root causes of conflict, then we can bridge the gap between the factions. Only then, can we start paving the way to peace.

Author Biography

Noranit Setabutr is currently chairman of Thammasat University Council and the World Buddhist University Council, a fellow of the Royal Society of Thailand and others. He has also held many important positions including acting rector of the World Buddhist University, rector of Thammasat University, and president of the Constituent Assembly. He was awarded an honorary doctorate from Royal Roads University (Canada, 2005) and Soka University (Japan, 2016).