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## Norms of war in Theravada Buddhism

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The use of force has become an important political and international issue among modern states. Recent events in Afghanistan and Iraq demonstrate that the use of force can trigger violent new wars. Over the centuries, wars fought nationally and internationally have caused immense destruction of property and loss of human life in all parts of the world. In the twenty-first century, the most pressing challenge for states is how to protect their citizens by countering the destruction inflicted by well-trained and highly coordinated terrorists who resort to violent means without any fear for their own lives. This is not only a serious security problem for the developed nations such as the United States and the European states but also an equally important concern for developing countries such as Sri Lanka,<sup>1</sup> where the majority of the population claim to be Buddhists. Reflection on the use of force from a Buddhist perspective will thus be immensely valuable for a comparative understanding of the issue at hand. Some questions for reflection are: Can Buddhists join an army? When one is a soldier what happens to one's Buddhist identity? Can a state that has a majority Buddhist population use force to manage a war situation? What is the role of Buddhism in a war-torn country? Can Buddhism justify a defensive war? Within the teachings of the Buddha, is there any consideration of the use of force? This chapter aims to answer some of these questions. Though the resources in other Buddhist traditions will be taken into account, the primary focus in this chapter will be identifying the conceptualization of war and the use of force as theorized in the Theravada Buddhist tradition of Sri Lanka.

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## War and peace: Buddhist approaches in dealing with violence

Peace is central to Buddhism, but war is not. Buddhism is praised by both insiders and outsiders for its doctrines of love and compassion. Some express the view that they have high expectations of Buddhism when it comes to issues of peace and violence in comparison with other world religions.<sup>2</sup> In the early Buddhist tradition, the concept of peace was expressed with the word “*santi*” (tranquillity, peace). It would be worthwhile to reflect here upon the example and words of the Buddha in order to understand the Buddhist approach to peace and war. One of the early Pali canonical texts, the *Dhammapada* (a representative text of the Theravada tradition), states: “There is no bliss higher than peace” [*natthi santiparam sukham*].<sup>3</sup> Highlighting the notion of peace, the Buddha is often identified with the epithet *santiraja* (king of peace).<sup>4</sup> The ultimate goal of the committed Buddhist practitioner is the attainment of perfect inner peace through leading a good life in this world. In their long history, Buddhists and Buddhist institutions attempted to follow the path of the Buddha aimed at achieving inner peace as well as peace in the social and cultural contexts in which they chose to live. The practice of a good life involved harmonious living with one’s fellow beings. Texts denoted this aspect of life by using the Pali term “*sama-cariya*”. Harmonious living, in turn, generated “inner peace” within the individual, which was identified as “*ajjhata-santi*” (*Suttanipata*, verse 837).<sup>5</sup> In the Buddhist tradition, harmonious living (*sama-cariya*) has been identified very closely with the notion of righteous living (*dhamma-cariya*).<sup>6</sup> Righteousness and harmony must go hand in hand to achieve genuine peace within the individual and in the community at social levels.

In general, one can undoubtedly say that national and international peace are important concerns for Buddhists across the world. Like others, Buddhists witness the peaceful lives of ordinary people being destroyed by war and conflicts.

In many ways, Buddhism is realistic in its outlook, recognizing the existence of negative phenomena such as war. War was not an uncommon occurrence even in the Buddha’s day in the sixth century BCE. Indian rulers who were around him, some of whom occasionally sought the Buddha’s advice on governance and spirituality, nevertheless waged war against each other when such conditions suited them for achieving their political and selfish objectives. Throughout the history of Buddhism in Asia, in countries such as Sri Lanka, Japan, Korea, Thailand, Burma, China and Tibet, one can find plenty of examples of war situations. In relation to the use of force, however, an important question is to what extent Buddhism was an agent contributing to those wars.

In the context of military conquests by Japan and China, the peaceful history of Buddhism in Korea seems to have changed drastically during the Choson dynasty (1392–1910). In 1592 a Japanese army under General Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537–1598) invaded Korea. Responding to that military conquest, Buddhist master Kihodang Yong-gyu, a disciple of Sosan Hyujong (1520–1604), gathered 600 monk soldiers and fought against the Japanese.<sup>7</sup> In 1636, when the army of Ch'ing invaded Choson, the monks Pyogam Kaksong (1575–1660) and Hobaek Myongjo were the leaders of the monks' army.<sup>8</sup> From a strictly doctrinal point of view, although the monks' active military engagement on the battlefield is a serious moral problem, the military success of the monks' army in Korea is viewed favourably today since their involvement safeguarded the integrity of the Korean nation in the face of foreign invasions:

When the nation was in danger because of wars or invasions like the Hideyoshi and Ch'ing, Korean monks did not hesitate to sacrifice themselves to protect the nation and the people . . . It was the monk-soldiers who rose up against the invaders all over the nation and, dealing fatal blows, played a major role in saving the nation. As a result of the active and independent participation of monks in both wars, the Buddhist community changed both its internal image and its public image. When the wars were over, the government did not disband the monks' army but had them join as members of the Choson army. The government also praised and rewarded the monks who had rendered distinguished service to the country during the wars.<sup>9</sup>

In medieval Japan, some powerful monasteries in the capital city, Kyoto, had their own armies to protect their own vested material and political interests. The Japanese word *sohei* refers to a monk-army or "warrior monks". Some of the major monasteries that had monk-armies were Enryakuji (the Tendai Buddhist headquarters on Mt Hiei), Onjoji (the Tendai-jimon headquarters in Shiga Prefecture) and Kofukuji (the Hosso headquarters in Nara). By the eleventh century, some of those armies began to attack rival monasteries. The monastic militias were eliminated from Japan by the warlords Oda Nobunaga (1534–1582) and Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537–1598).<sup>10</sup>

In such war situations, the extent to which Buddhist teachings or Buddhist leadership contributed to war is an interesting and ethically worrying question. There have been varying degrees of involvement in war by some of those claiming to be Buddhists and those vowing to defend Buddhist interests or the national interests of countries that they aimed at protecting.

Both Buddhist traditions of South Asia and East Asia contain many classical teachings on war and violence. In analysing conflict situations,

early Buddhism maintains that conflicts, intolerance and disharmony arise when human desire, hatred and ignorance are unlimited. According to the “Ratthapala Sutta” of the *Majjhima Nikaya*,<sup>11</sup> people seek riches and kings want to expand their territories: “A king, having forcibly conquered the earth, inhabiting a land with the ocean its confines, not satisfied with this side of the sea, hankers after the sea’s further side too.”<sup>12</sup> This is one of the classical explanations of the outbreak of war from a pragmatic religious point of view. Texts maintain that kings begin wars for such pragmatic purposes; unfortunately this has the inevitable result of hugely disrupting the daily lives of the common people, who are forced to live in disastrous and unhealthy situations. Their religious life or spirituality does not help them adequately to overcome the power of spreading violence when mighty states are determined to wage war against each other.

The historical Buddha Siddhartha Gautama (566–486 BCE) preached against war. But even the Gautama Buddha himself could not avoid the threat of war. Unfortunately, on two occasions the Buddha was forced to become directly involved in conflict resolution situations. The first was a dispute between his own relatives, the Sakyans and the Koliyans.<sup>13</sup> It was an argument over sharing the rights to the water of the Rohini River, which divided their two territories.<sup>14</sup> A dam was constructed across the Rohini River and the Sakyans and Koliyans used its water for agriculture. In a period of drought, a violent dispute arose between the Buddha’s relatives over the use of the river water. This was a case of aggressive and competitive behaviour by two groups attempting to use force in order to gain possession of limited resources. They were ready to wage war against each other and to be annihilated in the war. At this point, the Buddha decided to intervene to bring harmony to the opposing relatives. After meeting the two sides, he asked them what was more precious for them: river water or their blood. By questioning their intention to wage war with each other, he demonstrated the futility of waging war for the sake of the River Rohini’s water. Through his intervention, the Buddha was able to avert the imminent war. His intervention in the dispute was the compassionate action of a religious leader who cared about the lives of the innocent.

Even the historical Buddha failed to prevent war, as illustrated by the following narrative. While on a visit to his relatives in Kapilavatthu, at the age of 16, Prince Vidudabha, the son of King Pasenadi and Vasabhakkhattiya, who later became the ruler of the Kosala and the Sakya, learnt from a contemptuous remark made by a slave woman in the Sakyian kingdom that his mother, who was given in marriage to his father King Pasenadi by the Sakyans, came from a low caste. The Sakyans were too proud to intermarry with King Pasenadi, and instead gave the slave woman to

the king. Prince Vidudabha was furious with the Sakyans because of their deceit in cheating his father and the insult made to him by a slave woman on his first visit to see his mother's relatives. After King Pasenadi's death, King Vidudabha wanted take revenge on the Sakyans for the insult. The Buddha, knowing the danger to his relatives, stood three times on King Vidudabha's route to Kapilavatthu in order to prevent him from waging war against the Sakyans. Seeing the Buddha sitting under a tree with little shade on the boundaries of the Sakyan kingdom, after a brief conversation, King Vidudabha knew the Buddha's intention to protect his relatives from war and returned without waging war.<sup>15</sup> On the fourth occasion, the Buddha did not interfere with King Vidudabha's war effort since he saw that the *kamma* (negative previous action) of the Sakyans was severe. According to the narrative, their negative *karma* (deed) was that in a previous life the Sakyans had conspired to poison a river. In the absence of the Buddha to defend his relatives, King Vidudabha finally destroyed the Sakyans in the war. This karmic explanation and the Buddha's triple intervention demonstrate that even the Buddha had limitations in preventing a war that he witnessed in his lifetime.

Although the historical evidence shows that the Buddha did not encourage kings to go to war, there are also indications that the Buddha was not always especially proactive in taking steps to prevent wars taking place. This is illustrated by the story of Ajatasattu, the king of Magadha and son of Bimbisara, who was a casual visitor to the Buddha. The king wished to defeat the neighbouring Vajjians. Before going to war, Ajatasattu sent his chief minister Vassakara to ask the Buddha's advice about whether the Vajjians were likely to be defeated. In that conversation, the Buddha seems to have refrained from urging the king not to initiate war; instead the Buddha explained that it would be impossible for the king to defeat the Vajjians because they were strict practitioners of the *dhamma* (Sanskrit: *dharma*, righteous law), the seven conditions of welfare (*satta aparihaniya dhamma*), which they had learnt from the Buddha:

So long ... as the Vajjians (i) foregather thus often, and frequent the public meetings of their clan ... (ii) meet together in concord and rise in concord, and carry out their undertakings in concord ... (iii) enact nothing not already established, abrogate nothing that has been already enacted, and act in accordance with the institutions of the Vajjians, as established in former days ... (iv) honour and esteem and revere and support the Vajjian elders, and hold it a point of duty to hearken to their words ... (v) no woman or girls belonging to their clans are detained among them by force or abduction ... (vi) honour and esteem and revere and support the Vajjian shrines in town or country, and allow not the proper offerings and rites, as formerly given and performed, to fall into desuetude (vii) so long as the rightful protection, defence, and support

shall be fully provided for the Arahants [religious persons] among them, so that the Arahants from a distance may enter the realm, and the Arahants therein may live at ease – so long may the Vajjians be expected not to decline, but to prosper.<sup>16</sup>

From this conversation on the statecraft of the Vajjians, we learn that righteous rule became the secret of the ruler's power. Another account suggests that, if the Vajjians became lax in their conduct of business, Ajatasattu would have a chance of defeating them.<sup>17</sup> Subsequently, Vassakara was successful in creating disunity among the Vajjians, which resulted in their defeat in war.

In the contemporary Buddhist world in South and Southeast Asia, one can find prescriptions for rulers and states as well as expectations of rulers derived from Buddhist teachings and classical practices. According to Buddhist conceptions of the ruler as found in the Pali canon of the Theravada tradition, the ideal ruler must govern the country with a modern policy and a just order, and maintain peace without invading neighbouring lands.

Buddhists have conceptualized a universal monarch (Pali *cakkavatti*; Sanskrit *cakravartin*) who rules the land with righteousness. Governance with non-violence is the universal monarch's trademark. One important scripture in the Pali canon, the *Cakkavattisihanada Sutta*, outlines the notion of an ideal king who rules the country on the basis of *dharma*.<sup>18</sup> It must be noted here, however, that even this universal monarch still has a fourfold army (*caturangabalakaya* – the elephant corps, the cavalry, the chariot corps and infantry), and wherever he travels in the country the fourfold army accompanies him. If the king is righteous and does not resort to violence, why does he have a fourfold army accompanying him? Does this suggest that the use of force is an inevitable feature of state power? Can a state run its own business without resorting to punishment and the use of force? By extension, the case of the universal monarch raises the question of whether Buddhist countries are still allowed to maintain armed forces, and whether such forces are merely for defensive purposes.

The concept of a universal monarch might to some extent undermine the necessity of the use of force. As portrayed in Buddhist texts, the universal monarch does not threaten people with force; instead, he forgoes the use of weapons and uses righteousness as the guiding principle. This rejection of weapons seems to empower him. People and local rulers under his power submit to him because of his righteous rule and in the belief that he will not resort to force. As a result of his righteous governance, other countries surrender to him and acknowledge his power without being forced to do so by means of weapons. Texts maintain that

a pious and wise king should conquer the four quarters with virtues and fulfil his duties efficiently. Here emerges a notion of an ideal king who rules his territory without resorting to the use of force and weapons but who rules with the power of righteousness endowed in himself and in his statecraft.

The third ruler of the Mauryan dynasty in India, Emperor Asoka (268–232 BCE), who was probably a Buddhist, is often cited in the Buddhist literature as a model king. Asoka's inscriptions provide the first external evidence for the existence of Buddhist scriptures<sup>19</sup> and, in the tradition of Theravada Buddhism, Emperor Asoka is credited with sending Buddhist missions to countries such as Sri Lanka; he thereby did much to turn Buddhism into a civilizational religion.<sup>20</sup>

In popular Buddhist imagination, Asoka is an ideal king who demonstrated by example the attitudes that a ruler must cultivate towards one's subjects. His inscriptions demonstrate that he conceived his subjects as his own children: "All men [and women] are my children and as I desire for my children that they obtain every kind of welfare and happiness both in this world and the next world, so do I desire for all men [and women]."<sup>21</sup>

The Brahmanical term for the state's use of legitimate force is *danda* (stick). This can be rendered as the use of legitimate forms of violence for effective governance. The Buddhist tradition has not ignored various forms of violence practised in the Indian social milieu. Buddhist scriptures quite often mention punishments used by rulers at the time. What is striking is that, after Asoka's conquest, the tradition maintains that Emperor Asoka renounced the use of military force. At least, he had minimized the use of *danda* as a legitimate measure of governance. It is conceivable that this personal transformation within Asoka's life, which was translated into his public policy, may have occurred after conversion to Buddhism or encountering Buddhist teachings. Asoka's edict addressed to the Buddhist monastic community at Bairat gives the strongest indication of his connection to Buddhism. Asoka commends the Buddha's teachings as the *saddhamma* (good teaching) and mentions seven texts by name.<sup>22</sup>

After his victory in battle in Kalinga (present-day Orissa), a clear transformation is visible both in his change of heart and in the public policies that he adopted for his kingdom. In the battle, although he had enlarged his empire, he seems to have deliberately limited his military pursuit of conquest. Emperor Asoka publicly expressed his moral remorse in relation to the war in Kalinga. The Rock Edict XIII reveals his confession; it is an account of his remorse over the suffering and deaths which occurred in the battle. He dedicated himself to the propagation of *dharma*, and Buddhists believe that Emperor Asoka replaced the mili-

tary drum with the drum of *dharma*. In the fourth Rock Edict of Kalsi, Asoka stated, “no more shall the drums of war (*bherighosa*) be heard in my territories, but the drums of *dhamma* (*dhammaghosa*) shall reverberate throughout the empire”. Nowadays many believe that Emperor Asoka attempted to emulate the ideal of the universal monarch who rules the country righteously. By abandoning the pursuit of war and through personal transformation and the adoption of state policies of social welfare, Emperor Asoka became both a righteous king and the universal monarch that the Buddhist traditions envisioned.

The Buddha believed that it was possible to rule a country by adhering to the *dharma*, and without resorting to “harsh punitive measures or engaging in military conquests”.<sup>23</sup> This situation, however, depends on many other factors. Buddhists would maintain that, when humanity is morally, spiritually and intellectually developed, it is possible for a universal monarch (*cakkavatti*) to rule a country without the use of force. This position, however, relies heavily on the belief that the world goes in cycles of births and deaths rather than in a linear fashion. In the cyclical worldview, human beings operate in a dependent relationship and have the capacity to develop both spiritually and morally.

There are also texts in East Asian Buddhism that are useful in understanding the notion of good governance and the efficacy of the use of force in handling crises. One of the Mahayana Buddhist texts, the *Dharmasamuccaya Sutra*, for example, suggests a technique to prevent war: “even if an army of another country should invade and plunder, a king should know first whether the soldiers are brave or cowardly and then conclude peace by means of expediency.”<sup>24</sup> When the Indian monk Gunavarman (367–431 CE) visited China in 424 CE,<sup>25</sup> the Chinese emperor questioned him: “When foreign armies are going to invade my country, what should I do? If we fight there must be many casualties. If we do not repulse them, my country will be imperilled. O’ master, please tell me what to do?” The monk answered: “just entertain a compassionate mind, do not have hurtful mind.” The king applied his advice, and when the banners were going to be hoisted and the drums beaten, the enemies retreated.<sup>26</sup> This passage suggests that one should not fight against enemies and that the use of force is not the answer. On the contrary, it advises the practice of benevolence. From the Buddhist point of view, the ideal of benevolence has its own power to protect the righteous and prevent imminent danger from conquering enemies. This narrative highlights the importance of cultivating positive values and ethical qualities, which will eventually build trust and confidence and achieve harmony and tolerance.

But in a situation in which enemies are invading a country, what should the state do? As the ruler, the king has a duty to protect the country. If



the king does not take action, the enemies may take advantage of his peaceful attitude. Alternatively, the subjects may rebel against the ruler. The Chinese Buddhist text in the *Taisho* collection explains the necessary expediency on the part of the ruler in detail.<sup>27</sup> Since the king's duty is to protect the country, he has to be ready to repulse the invading enemies. However, the text advises the king not to go to war but to negotiate and reach agreement in order to bring peace to both parties. It offers the king three strategies to safeguard the people and the kingdom. First, if the enemy is as powerful as the king's own army, warfare could inflict great damage on both parties and neither would benefit from it; many would inevitably lose their lives. If the enemy is more powerful than the king's army, then it is likely that the enemy forces would destroy many lives. In that case, the king should make peaceful negotiations and avoid possible war and the death of innocent people. Secondly, the king should try to solve the conflict by showing generosity and giving anything the enemy requires so that violence is prevented. Thirdly, if the enemy seems to be more powerful, the king should try to surprise the enemy king by pretending his own army is a more powerful force. If these three strategies fail, then the king is allowed to take up arms, taking into consideration the following points: owing to the lack of mercy on the part of the enemy, we engage in war and are forced to kill living beings; however, we hope that we will kill as few as possible.

In the case of Sri Lanka, one can cite the story of King Sirisanghabodhi (r. 247–249 CE), who followed the ideal of *bodhisattva* (one who aspires to enlightenment). This is a popular narrative that highlights the importance of the virtuous character of the ruler. *The Mahavamsa* (“The Great Chronicle”), a Pali chronicle written in sixth century CE, describes him as “rich in compassion” (Ch. 36, verse 94)<sup>28</sup> and full of “kindness to the other”, and that he willingly went into solitary exile in the forest “since he would not bring harm to others” (36: 92).<sup>29</sup> *The Dipavamsa* refers to him as a “virtuous prince”,<sup>30</sup> and *The Mahavamsa* mentions that he “reigned two years in Anuradhapura” observing the Five Precepts (36: 73).<sup>31</sup> According to the Sri Lankan tradition as recorded in the Pali chronicles, he was willing to give his head to his aggressive brother, Gothabhaya, who dethroned him. The dethroned King Sirisanghabodhi addressed the beggar who fed him lunch: “I am the king Samghabodhi; take thou my head and show it to Gothabhaya, he will give thee much gold” (36: 95–96). This episode has become a popular theme in temple paintings in Sri Lanka. The story of Sirisanghabodhi is an extreme case of passive resistance. During his reign, he often used *satyakriya* (an act of truth) to resolve difficult problems. On one occasion when there was a drought, “his heart shaken with pity” (36: 75) and with compassion for his people (36: 79), King Sirisanghabodhi lay down on the ground of the

Ratnamali Thupa in Anuradhapura with firm resolve: “Unless I be raised up by the water that the god shall rain down I will nevermore rise up from hence, even though I die here” (36: 76). Instead of punishing criminals by using force, King Sirisanghabodhi took rebels into custody, but “released them again secretly”. Yet to cause terror among the public and to remove their fear of rebels, he replaced them secretly with the “bodies of dead men”, which were subsequently set aflame (36: 80–81). When a red-eyed demon Ratakkhi began to devour his people, King Sirisanghabodhi was in distress and began fasting while observing the eight *uposatha* vows;<sup>32</sup> he resolved that “[t]ill I have seen the *yakkha* I will not rise up” (36: 82–85). By the king’s power, the demon came to him and, instead of giving the life of his citizens, the king was willing to give up his own life: “No other can I give up to thee; take thou me and devour me” (36: 88). Finally, the demon agreed to accept an offering from every village. The life of Sirisanghabodhi illustrates that the notion of *ahimsa* (non-violence) was valued and that some inspired rulers who attempted to follow the Buddhist principles went out of their way to practise them and sacrificed themselves for a good cause that they believed in.

One of the most eminent scholars and Sri Lankan statesmen of the day, D. B. Jayatilaka (1868–1944), attempted in 1939 to explain the significance of Sirisanghabodhi’s narrative for modern statecraft by combining the examples of both Vessantara and Sirisanghabodhi:

The Great One [Buddha in his last life as Vessantara Bodhisattva] renounced a kingdom and a throne, wife and child, and all world comforts, and wandered as a beggar to serve those that suffer . . . This was the spirit that pervaded ancient Lanka, and it was this spirit that King Sri Sangabo, of ancient lore, gave his head and died himself to save the lives of his countrymen.<sup>33</sup>

Sri Lankan kings such as Sirisanghabodhi tried to apply Buddhist principles to statecraft and occasionally were defeated when the aggressor was ruthless. The imperative of self-defence was hardly raised as an issue since, for Sirisanghabodhi and others like him, being righteous and truthful took precedence over worldly concerns. The stories of King Vessantara (*Jataka*, No. 547)<sup>34</sup> and King Sirisanghabodhi both illustrate a willingness to forgo violent resistance in circumstances of adversity. One could argue that they exhibited a fatalism that should not be followed in modern statecraft, because it would result in submission to intruders and enemies. Because of the extreme pacifist dimensions of Sirisanghabodhi’s narrative, some insiders have criticized it. A modern author who wrote to a weekly newspaper about the widespread suicides in Sri Lanka lamented the negative interpretation and the adoption of the Sirisanghabodhi narrative and argued that “Sangabo’s actions regrettably have led some

Buddhists to believe that suicide is laudable, a problem in a country that has the highest suicide rate in the world”.<sup>35</sup>

### Key sources in understanding the use of force in Buddhism

The approach that Buddhism takes to the use of force is rather different from that of other world religions. Because of its focus on the individual human being, discussions about the legitimacy of force concentrate on the obligations of individuals. One can generalize the Buddhist perspective on this issue as follows. Buddhist life involves the use of force inwardly rather than externally. The Buddha often advises his practitioners to “restrain the five senses” (*indiriya samvara*) in order to progress in the path.<sup>36</sup> This instruction is particularly important because it is a case of using force for self-cultivation. In religious practice, one is expected to be firm with oneself in putting oneself on the right path and becoming free from persuasions and enticements. For self-development, firm individual resolutions are essential, yet this should be done without treating oneself violently.

An important question requiring examination is the extent to which the Buddha resorted to the use of force. Various narratives support the view that the Buddha sometimes employed mild force in dealing with his disciples. On one occasion (as recounted in the *Vinaya Pitaka*, a collection of Buddhist monastic rules), the Buddha withheld signalling the beginning of the bi-monthly confession ceremony of reciting the rules given in the *patimokkha* text (2.236–7). After a long period of waiting, the Venerable Moggallana, his chief disciple, asked him about the delay. In response, the Buddha said that one monk in the gathered assembly was not fit to participate in the ceremony (owing to his impurity) and hence should leave. Three times the Venerable Moggallana called upon that person to leave the assembly and, upon receiving no response, Moggallana forced him out of the room. Only then did the *uposatha-kamma* (the recitation of the *vinaya* rules) resume. This episode illustrates that some direct use of force was needed to proceed with the recitation, and that the Buddha approved of Moggallana’s intervention as a proper course of action. It also demonstrates that, even in a religious community, when other means of persuasion fail, some minor use of force is essential.

Another narrative, the *Abhayarajakumara Sutta* of the *Majjhima Nikaya* (M.1.391f.), indicates how harsh words could be put to effective use by the Buddha.<sup>37</sup> Pointing at the infant son on Prince Abhaya’s lap, the Buddha said: “What do you think Prince? If, while you or your nurse

were not attending to him, this child were to put a stick or a pebble in his mouth, what would you do to him?" The prince responded by saying: "Venerable Sir, I would take it out. If I could not take it out at once, I would take his head in my left hand and crooking a finger of my right hand, I would take it out even if it meant drawing blood. Why is that? Because I have compassion for the child."<sup>38</sup> The fact that the Buddha did not object to this response shows that he might allow for some harsh action, if it served a good purpose.

*A classical account of defensive war*

Over the centuries, Sri Lankan historiography, frequently written in Pali, has constructed an image of a distinct Sinhala Buddhist ethnic identity. It also has assigned to the Sinhala communities the historical role of protecting the "message" (*sasana*) of the Buddha (a collective term used nowadays in the meaning of Buddhism in Sri Lanka). Over the 2,300-year history of Sri Lanka, one can find many references to various types of war: internal battles, external conquests, coups and liberation struggles.

The most troubling question in relation to Buddhism is whether war can ever be justified within its doctrinal setting. In this connection, the most controversial historical episode was a battle between King Dutthagamani (r. 161–137 BCE) and King Elara in Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka, which is recorded in *The Mahavamsa*.<sup>39</sup> The chronicle shows King Dutthagamani, a patriotic Sinhala prince from southern Sri Lanka, defeating King Elara, an elderly Tamil from South India who had ruled Sri Lanka for four decades. This narrative of their battle presents a powerful myth that has contributed to what Tessa J. Bartholomeusz has identified as the foundation of the "just war ideology" in modern Sri Lanka: "The war exploits of Dutugemunu suggest that by the time *The Mahavamsa* took shape, Buddhist thinking had developed criteria that served as a framework for debates about which wars are justified and which are not."<sup>40</sup> Since "[t]he past inhabits the present in a variety of ways – in practices, things, and memory"<sup>41</sup> – there is no doubt the battle narrative of *The Mahavamsa* has had a formative influence on the imaginations of many in contemporary Sri Lanka.

The way the chronicler presents the battle narrative demonstrates an attempt to identify King Dutthagamani closely with Buddhism and the national interests of the majority Sinhalese community of modern Sri Lanka. This identification is reinforced by departing from the previous practices of kings; the chronicler records that King Dutthagamani invited Buddhist monks (*bhikkus*) to accompany him onto the battlefield:

I will go on to the land on the further side of the river to bring glory to the doctrine. Give us, that we may treat them with honour, bhikkhus who shall go on with us, since the sight of bhikkhus is blessing and protection for us. As a penance, the brotherhood allowed him five hundred ascetics; taking this company of bhikkhus with him the king marched forth. (25: 3)<sup>42</sup>

For a modern reader, this passage suggests that the political authorities at that time were using religious symbols, institutions and persons to further their war efforts. It is thus not difficult to read this passage as indicating a Buddhist involvement in war. This view is further strengthened when the chronicler mentions that King Dutthagamani himself had “a relic put into his spear” when he marched onto the battlefield (25: 1).<sup>43</sup>

In the passage quoted above, the reference to “bring glory to the doctrine” can be taken to mean safeguarding and protecting the Buddhist teachings, practices and institutions in Sri Lanka. “Brotherhood” refers to the Buddhist monastic community collectively known as the *sangha*. Having a company of *bhikkhus* with him while marching to war is perceived as an act of securing protection for Dutthagamani himself at the time of war. However, the monks themselves perceive it “as a penance” (25: 4). Placing a relic in the spear is an apotropaic action intended to ward off evil forces in times of trouble, as believed in many pre-modern societies.

Nevertheless, the task at hand for Dutthagamani was a rather difficult one since the text represents Elara as a righteous king. In a duel, Dutthagamani killed Elara (25: 67–70). After Elara’s death, Dutthagamani honoured him by cremating him, marking the place with a monument and instituting worship there.

The remorse that Dutthagamani felt after the battle was quite severe, and similar to that Emperor Asoka had experienced after his battle in Kalinga. As in the case of Emperor Asoka, a transformation occurs, though not so dramatic, in the life of Dutthagamani through the intervention of the Buddhist monastic community. In removing Dutthagamani’s remorse, their intervention can be seen as a “rehabilitation strategy” for an evil king who had caused a lot of suffering in pursuing a battle. In this case, the rehabilitation strategy is used to direct the king to Buddhist works. Though the “rehabilitation” of the king is noble, the justifications that the monks provided in consoling the king are controversial and problematic. They have serious implications for the issue of whether there are justifications for violence within Theravada Buddhism.

Though King Dutthagamani won the battle, there were many deaths in the battle. He was very unhappy about this. *The Mahavamsa* states (25: 104) that the *arahants* (religious people) in Piyangudipa, knowing of Dutthagamani’s remorse, sent a group of eight *arahants* to comfort the king.

To them, the king confessed: “How shall there be any comfort for me, O venerable sirs, since by me was caused the slaughter of a great host numbering millions?” The *arahants*’ response to Dutthagamani’s confession has become severely problematic from the point of view of Buddhist doctrines:

From this deed arises no hindrance in thy way to heaven. Only one and a half human beings have been slain here by thee, O lord of men. The one had come unto the (three) refuges; the other had taken on himself the five precepts. Unbelievers and men of evil life were the rest, not more to be esteemed than beasts. But as for thee, thou wilt bring glory to the doctrine of the Buddha in manifold ways; therefore cast away care from thy heart, O ruler of men! Thus exhorted by them the great king took comfort. (25: 109–112)<sup>44</sup>

Dutthagamani’s remorse is eliminated when he is told that killing “evil unbelievers” carries no more weight than killing animals. It is important to note that the killing not only of human beings but even of animals is not encouraged in Buddhism.<sup>45</sup> As practitioners of “loving kindness” (*metta*), Buddhists have an obligation to protect all forms of life. Thus, when contrasted with canonical doctrines and early Buddhist practices, the position adopted in this fifth-century chronicle is rather controversial. This passage seems to suggest that certain forms of violence, such as killing during battle, can be allowed in certain circumstances, for example threats to the survival of Buddhism in Sri Lanka during the time of Dutthagamani. It is hard to justify this position either through Buddhist practice or from a doctrinal standpoint, as found in the Pali canon of the Theravada Buddhists.

This unusual statement, however, can be interpreted differently as an instance of Buddhist “skill-in-means”. In the long run, keeping the victorious king remorseful or in a depressed condition would not help the Buddhist monastic community. Rather than aggravating these conditions, as spiritual advisers the monastic community had to make every effort to console the king. Up to that moment, whatever wrongs the king had committed became his own *karma*. The monastic community as a group could not change his past *karma* but, as a community who believed in free will and individual effort, it was possible for them to direct and channel the king in a positive direction. The unforeseen consequence of that strategy was a “gross calculation” of the victims of war as “only one and a half human beings” and “unbelievers and men of evil life”.

Making the justification that killing Tamils during war is not a *papa* (unmeritorious action) is a grave mistake, even if it was used in *The Mahavamsa* as a skill-in-means. Such violations of the tolerant sensibilities found within post-canonical Pali chronicles cannot be justified or

harmonized, since Buddhist scriptures do not maintain that the severity of one's negative acts may vary depending on one's caste, race or ethnic group.

This battle episode still shapes the thinking of some monks and lay people of Sri Lanka. The complexity in the way in which this single, controversial myth is interpreted, perpetuated and received as both an inspiration and a justification is well illustrated by a comment made in Ananda Wickremeratne's *Buddhism and Ethnicity in Sri Lanka*. Wickremeratne interviewed a Buddhist monk about the importance of this episode. He explained it as a historical document of self-righteousness:

[I]t was King Dutthagamani who best exemplified the idea of self-imposed limits in the exercise of violence. The king gathered his forces to wage war against an enemy who had invaded the land, and threatened the secular order of things on which the very existence of Buddhism depended . . . "He prevails over the Tamil invaders and kills their leader, Elara, in single combat. He honours the fallen foe and immediately stops his campaign, as he had achieved its purpose, waging a purely defensive war. He does not cross over to India to chastise the Tamils and refrains from wreaking vengeance on Tamils who were living in Sri Lanka, side by side with Sinhalese as its inhabitants."<sup>46</sup>

The myth of Dutthagamani and Elara is reinterpreted not only by Sinhala communities in Sri Lanka but also by Tamil communities, with different emphases. Tamil communities seem to have appropriated this myth in their own way by highlighting the role of the Dravidian King Elara for their own nationalistic ends.

### Defensive war and the *dharma yuddhaya* discourse in modern Sri Lanka

In the recent publication "A 'Righteous War' in Buddhism", the Sri Lankan Buddhist academic P. D. Premasiri has outlined how Buddhist teachings on the conduct of defensive war can take into account the legitimate and pragmatic concerns of the current war situation in Sri Lanka. He draws attention to the righteous party's ethical conduct in a defensive war:

Where one of the parties engaged in war is considered as righteous and the other as unrighteous, the Buddhist canonical accounts highlight the ethical qualities of the righteous party by showing that although they are compelled by circumstances to engage in war for the purpose of self-defence, they do not resort to unnecessary acts of cruelty even towards the defeated. The righteous party in war avoids harm to the innocent and is ready to pardon even the de-

feated enemy. Skilful methods are adopted in order to cause the least harm. Texts such as the *Ummagga Jataka* (J.IV.329ff) illustrate cases where the enemy could be defeated without injury to and destruction of life.<sup>47</sup>

Apart from Premasiri's exposition on ethical conduct in a defensive war, there are few systematic treatments of just war theory in the South Asian Buddhist tradition. Unlike Christian church fathers such as St Augustine (354–430 CE), who explicitly discussed just war and the grounds for declaring a holy war, Buddhist thinkers in Asia have rarely engaged in such an analysis. Though there are occasional arguments about war and self-defence issues in the modern period, South Asian Buddhist traditions still lack a systematic, philosophical reflection on the nature of war and its justifications.

There are military metaphors in the texts of the South Asian Theravada tradition. In explaining the spiritual achievements of individual practitioners, texts occasionally use military metaphors. The purpose is to compare a true Buddhist practitioner to a conqueror in the battlefield in terms of conquering defilement. Defilements that pollute the mental condition are seen as enemies. One popular text, the *Dhammapada*, comments: "One may conquer in battle a thousand times a thousand men, yet he is the best of conquerors who conquers himself" (verse 128). This emphasis on the inner transformation of the individual that runs through the military metaphor is relevant in discussing Buddhist views on war and its justifications.

It is very clear that early Buddhism and its followers disliked war and violence. Buddhist monks were prohibited from watching military parades and soldiers were not allowed to be ordained as monks. The Pali canon of Theravada Buddhists completely lacks any textual resource that could be used as the basis for developing a just war theory.

As mentioned above, however, one can nevertheless detect the seeds of justification of war in the particular unstable political context in Sri Lanka, as can be found in the post-canonical sixth-century chronicle *The Mahavamsa*. Owing to the disruptive political unrest in modern Sri Lanka, some nationalist thinkers, both lay and monastic (such as Nalin De Silva and Athureliye Rathana), have sought to justify the existence of military forces in primarily Buddhist countries and in particular have supported the prosecution of a defensive war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).<sup>48</sup>

On the contemporary Buddhist discourse concerning defensive war, Tessa J. Bartholomeusz writes:

For the monk, it does not logically follow that the Buddhist teaching of non-violence must always – in every case – lead to a conclusion of pacifism; real life



does not allow for such as an interpretation. The monk thereby distinguished between the ideal situation of the text and the situation “on the ground”. Moreover, for the monk the CSS [*Cakkavattisihanada Sutta*] provides the contemporary Sri Lankan government with the Buddhist justification it needs to proceed with the war against the LTTE.<sup>49</sup>

In recent years, the Sanskrit term *dharma yuddhaya* (righteous, or religious, war) has gained currency in academic writings in the West and in popular writings in the East. The term and its related derivations do not have much history within Sri Lankan writings. Its first appearance was during the period of British colonial rule in the late nineteenth century, when Sri Lankan Buddhists sought to defend Buddhist ideas, values and practices vis-à-vis the widespread Christian (mainly Protestant) missions and cultural intrusions. In Sinhala publications, the term had two significations, one spiritual and the other political.

The spiritual signification referred to the inner victory over defilements that the Buddha had achieved when he conquered the Mara (the personification of death). *Dharma yuddhaya* was thus used figuratively to designate the mental struggle over negative mental conditions such as greed and hatred, as conceptualized in Buddhist doctrinal terms. In this way, military metaphors may be found both in monks’ sermons and in popular Buddhist publications. For example, on 28 October 1898, *Sarasavi Sandarasa*, a Sinhala newspaper launched by the Buddhist Theosophical Society, published the following letter received from a reader. In the letter, the term *dharma yuddhaya* was mentioned and the war was spoken of figuratively:

We, too, have a war to fight; but we do not need weapons such as guns. Our war is a “*dharma yuddhaya*”. It is an opportunity to fight the demon of *mi-tyadrsti* (false belief). Although we have been fighting this war for a while, victory is not yet ours because our weapons are old. We should get new weapons.<sup>50</sup>

In this period of revival under British colonialism and the Protestant Christian hegemony, ideas emerged for the necessity of an army and the permissibility of war with real weapons.<sup>51</sup>

According to its political signification, *dharma yuddhaya* refers to the struggle that one faces in attempting to protect Buddhism in an incompatible political and religious environment. Even then, and until the mid-twentieth century, it referred to non-violent social struggle. This usage of the term may be found for instance in the writings of Venerable Baddegama Wimalawansa (1912–1992), who was principal of Sri Lanka Vidyalaya, a monastic school in Colombo. A member of the monastic fra-

ternity of Ramannanikaya, he was a monk of both nationalist and leftist political leanings. In the early 1950s Wimalawansa published a series of pamphlets under the title *Dharma Yuddhaya* that exposed the anti-Buddhist and anti-Sinhala activities of the Sri Lankan government and the Christian missionaries.<sup>52</sup> The first pamphlet in the series focused on “The Future of the Buddhist Monk”. It argued that Christian missionaries had undermined the social significance of the Buddhist monk in Sri Lankan society. The second pamphlet was on “The Government and the Power of the Missionaries”. The third one focused on “Buddhism Today”. The seventh of the *Dharma Yuddhaya* series was on “The Activities of the Christian Clergy”, who had immense power and influence over education and health services.<sup>53</sup>

In a similar vein, writing to a Sinhala publication, *Bauddha Lokaya* (Buddhist World), in 1951, the Pali scholar G. P. Malalasekera (1899–1973) used military metaphors to encourage people to get involved in social welfare activities:

We should gather the weapons of *maitri* [loving-kindness], *karuna* [compassion] and *santi* [peace] and prepare for a *dharma yuddhaya* [righteous war]. We have to prepare for a religious fight, a long fight. This is not a revolution but an attempt to protect our ancestral religion – Buddhism. Thus, this is a *dharma yuddhaya*. This is not a war fought with the aid of weapons. We are fighting for the truth and the *dharma*. We have to start with loving-kindness and compassion. We have to fight to the end.<sup>54</sup>

In this quotation, it is clear that the term *dharma yuddhaya* is used in the sense of spiritual renewal rather than a war against another group or religion. Significantly, in the *English–Sinhalese Dictionary* that Malalasekera compiled and published in 1948 – a dictionary widely used today by students of English in Sri Lanka – the English term “holy war” is translated specifically with the term *agama udesa karana yuddhaya*, a war fought for the defence of religion. *Dharma yuddhaya* is not used in this context.<sup>55</sup> It might be noted that the dictionary contains no entries for “just” or “righteous” (Sin. *dharmistha*) war.

However, in Bartholomeusz’s discussion of just war ideology in Sri Lanka, she attempts to show that there was a drastic shift in meaning from one sense of *dharma yuddhaya* to another:

Significantly, the Sinhala writer’s 1898 spelling of “war”, transliterated as *yudhaya* [without the initial “d”], contains a Sinhala letter that is not used in contemporary spellings of the Sinhala term. The shift in spelling coincides with a shift in its expression: prior to the 1980s, when the literary spelling was commonplace, *dharma yuddhaya* most frequently referred to figurative war. In

other words, the literary spelling betrays the abstract referents of war, its mental and social dimensions in the Buddhist context. The vernacular spelling, *yuddhaya*, on the other hand, reinforces the concrete realities of military conflict.<sup>56</sup>

A close examination of the dictionary shows that Bartholomeusz had misread the Sinhala characters, since Malalasekera had accurately spelled the term in question. Her argument of a shift in meaning on the basis of a missing letter – “d” – is quite weak and stands in need of further investigation.

For Malalasekera, in the Buddhist case, spiritual renewal through the development of sublime qualities was essential and crucial to raise the profile of the Buddhists at the time. He used militaristic metaphors for that purpose; for him, non-violent engagement with Buddhism was essential for the Buddhist renewal in a colonial context.

In the political writings of Buddhist monks produced after the independence of Sri Lanka in 1948, one can detect quite frequent use of the term *dharma yuddhaya* and one can attribute violent dimensions to its usage as opposed to the spiritual and moral meanings that it contained earlier. A 1978 publication attempts to define *dharma yuddhaya* by outlining its spiritual dimensions: “Any battle that protects the truth is *dharma yuddhaya*. Fighting for a fair and just society is *dharma yuddhaya*.”<sup>57</sup> In the Buddha Jayanthi year in 1956, *Bauddha Peramuna* (Buddhist Front) published an article in Sinhala entitled “Dharma Yuddhaya”. It used the term *dharma yuddhaya* quite frequently, as follows: “Since he [the prime minister] has not obeyed the monks’ pleas [not to hold elections in the Buddha Jayanthi year], they [the monks] are launching a *dharma yuddhaya*”; “To save this *dharmistha* [righteous] land we have to launch a *dharma yuddhaya*. Its leaders are Buddhists monks.” The fact that the notion of defensive war gradually emerged in their writings is demonstrated in the following statement by a Buddhist monk on 27 April 1957: “Buddhism has always been a tolerant religion . . . Although tolerance is advocated, at this time of emergency when it is attacked in various ways, Buddhists cannot be tolerant; . . . Buddhists have to fight to save their lives.”<sup>58</sup>

Likewise, by 1961, the use of force in defence of *dharma* came to be justified. An article published in *Bauddha Peramuna* on 11 March 1961 claims that, “[a]ccording to Buddhist principles, believers should always practice *maitri* [loving-kindness]; however, in order to protect the religion we have to peacefully fight our enemies. When Buddhism is threatened, we cannot merely practice *maitri*.”<sup>59</sup> Finally, towards the middle of the 1980s, the notion of justified war emerged in the context of terrorism and the protracted civil war in Sri Lanka. Writing on “Terrorism and War”, a Sri Lankan layman named D. G. Kulatunga comments:

Buddhism and war are a contradiction in terms. Like oil and water they do not mix . . . No Government, however *dharmistha* [righteous] it may be, can afford to remain static and insensitive to an uprising against the State and cease to use fire-arms in highly explosive situations threatening the security of a country. It is the bounden duty of the State to protect at any cost the life and property of its citizens.<sup>60</sup>

This is a justification of the state-led use of the armed forces to bring peace in a war context. It allows defensive war when the state acts in the interest of the well-being of the majority of its citizens.

Most recently, at a conference in 2002, Athureliye Rathana, now the parliamentary leader of Jathika Hela Urumaya,<sup>61</sup> the political party of Buddhist monks, pointed to the potential inefficacy of some Buddhist doctrines, such as loving-kindness, for resolving war and other contemporary political problems. In presenting his paper “A Buddhist Analysis of ‘The Ethnic Conflict’”, Rathana stated: “There are two central concepts of Buddhism: compassion and wisdom. If compassion was [sic] a necessary and sufficient condition, then the Buddha would not have elaborated on wisdom or *prajna*. Hitler could not have been overcome by maitriya [loving-kindness] alone.”<sup>62</sup>

Examining the notion of just war proposed by monks such as Rathana and closely examining Sinhala publications of the twentieth century, Tessa J. Bartholomeuz conclusively remarks:

Sinhala Buddhism is ambivalent about war, depending on the context (and depending on the Buddhist), the Buddhist tradition of Sri Lanka condemns, with as much frequency as it justifies, war and its violent legacies in defense of the *dharm*a or the island.<sup>63</sup>

## The agonies of the Sri Lankan ethnic war

There are two major parties to the current conflict in Sri Lanka: the LTTE militants and the armed forces of the Sri Lankan government. Both parties give justifying reasons for their engagement in the war. The LTTE presents its militancy as a “just” or “righteous” war against the oppression of the minority Tamil community by the Sinhala majority government. The government of Sri Lanka, drawn from all ethnic and religious groups, contains a Sinhala majority. The Sinhala majority controls the legislative and executive power of the state. For the best part of the last two decades, and even though some areas of the north and east of Sri Lanka have been under rebel control, public services such as education, health, transportation and the postal service have been provided by the

central government in Colombo. Owing to the growing unrest and dependency, there is a Tamil claim that a separate state is the solution to the problem and that it can be achieved through armed struggle. This provides the ammunition for the Tamil terrorism and war that has resulted the death of nearly 70,000 people over the last two decades alone.<sup>64</sup>

War is a costly business. Disregarding the casualties from the Sri Lankan Air Force and Navy, the Sri Lankan Army alone lost 10,688 soldiers from 1983 to June 1999 in the Sri Lankan government's confrontation with the LTTE.<sup>65</sup> In addition, in the context of the protracted civil war and as a result of the revolts by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna in the late 1980s, a culture of disappearing people has emerged. A recent publication, *An Exceptional Collapse of the Rule of Law*, has collected some of the narratives of the disappeared victims in the period 1987–1991.<sup>66</sup> The damage the war has done to human lives on both sides is immense and cannot be measured. For over two decades, since July 1983, Sri Lanka has experienced the agonies of a protracted war. The military expenditure of the Sri Lankan government is nearly Rs 100 billion although it was reduced to 4.0 per cent of GDP when the ceasefire agreement was signed in 2002.<sup>67</sup> The escalation of war again in November 2005 threatens to further increase the unbearable military expenditure. The cost of war for the Sri Lankan government is immense; in the ground attack on the Katunayake International Airport in July 2001, the LTTE destroyed 12 aircraft (half of the Sri Lankan Airlines fleet) and killed 21 people. Sri Lankan Airlines alone lost US\$350 million.<sup>68</sup>

With the air strikes by the LTTE in March and April 2007, the war in Sri Lanka gained new momentum. For the first time, the Tamil Eelam Air Force (TAF) of the LTTE launched an air strike on the air base of the Sri Lankan Air Force (SLAF) at Katunayake International Airport on 26 March 2007, killing three Sri Lankan Air Force personnel and injuring another 20 people. This terrorist attack and the air attack capabilities of the LTTE pose serious security threats to Sri Lanka as well as to neighbouring India.<sup>69</sup>

The war situation and the terrorism of the LTTE have paralysed private businesses in Sri Lanka. The air attack on the Shell company storage facilities at Kerwalapitiya, Colombo, on 29 April 2007 damaged almost all the fire-fighting equipment, costing Rs 700 million.<sup>70</sup>

Apart from the damage to the resources of the country, there are serious implications for religion. When one considers the importance of religion for all the ethnic and religious groups in Sri Lanka, and that Buddhists comprise nearly 70 per cent of the population, the use of force in a war situation becomes a problematic issue. When one conceptualizes the Buddhist tradition as a religious tradition that advocates pacifism and

the cultivation of “loving-kindness” towards all sentient beings, a whole range of relevant questions emerge.

### Contemporary poetic visions of war and peace

Modern Sri Lanka has been embroiled in an ethnic war for over two decades. It is appropriate to end this chapter with a discussion of war and peace. To demonstrate the moral crisis that has arisen in the context of the current war in Sri Lanka, I will analyse a popular Sinhala song (translated below),<sup>71</sup> which demonstrates that war as a theme has captured the creative imagination of modern artists. The song raises moral dilemmas that have arisen in the context of war and the absence of any visible and immediate solution to the problem. It also presents the challenges that have arisen to the Buddhist approach and the Buddhist way of life.

The Buddhist monk Rambukana Siddhartha composed the song “Bana Kiyana Ratak” (“A Country Where Buddhist Sermons are Preached”) for the audio CD *Nasena Gi Rasa*.<sup>72</sup> The famous Sri Lankan vocalist Edward Jayakody sings the song accompanied by H. M. Jayawardhana.

A country where Buddhism is preached!  
 A country where Buddhist preaching is listened to!  
 How did it become a battlefield?  
 A path that can resolve it  
 A world full of blossoming flowers  
 When do we see it again?  
 A heart bent on accumulating merit  
 A hand that never committed misconduct  
 How did go to the battlefield?  
 An attempt to find out the reason  
 There is no sign of such an attempt  
 Thus became a battlefield.  
 A path to peace  
 Flower to battlefield  
 There is no one to take an initiative  
 An eye to see it  
 A path to heal hearts  
 Nothing remains; the entire country is cheated.

This Sinhala song demonstrates that recent literary and artistic works in the Sinhala language have attempted to capture the frustrations and dilemmas that prevail in a predominantly Buddhist society. The ongoing

ethnic conflict has challenged the very existence and future survival of Buddhism in Sri Lanka.

Both in theory and in practice, war is incompatible with Buddhist teachings and the Buddhist way of life. The war situation in Sri Lanka endangers the peaceful existence of Buddhist communities and institutions, and since war is an extreme form of the expression of violence it needs an urgent and peaceful solution. The manifestations of war and conflicts have raised many questions and challenge the way the fundamental Buddhist teachings and practices are communicated in Buddhist society. This popular Sinhala song illustrates well the concerns of war and the growing public eagerness to seek peace.

In contemporary teachings and practices there is a range of views on war and violence, in particular with regard to the current protracted conflict with the LTTE. There are debates and arguments within Buddhist communities on the approaches that should be adopted. Since 2005, the permissibility of using armed force against the LTTE has received much public support. Some recognized politically motivated Buddhist groups, such as the Jathika Hela Urumaya, have made statements in support of the use of force to deal with the insurgents. On 26 April 2006, in the context of the attempted attack by a female LTTE suicide bomber on the Army Commander in Colombo, the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) urged the government to place Sri Lanka on a war footing and to withdraw from the ceasefire agreement signed in 2002.<sup>73</sup> The leader of the JHU, Venerable Ellawala Medhananda, stated that patience and flexibility had proved to be a costly mistake and a new strategy should be put into effect. He urged the government to respond strongly to the LTTE violence.

There have been many accusations of human rights violations in Sri Lanka. For example, in 2005 the *UN Human Rights Committee Decisions on Communications from Sri Lanka* documented six well-known cases.<sup>74</sup> Another publication, *An Exceptional Collapse of the Rule of Law: Told Through Stories by Families of the Disappeared in Sri Lanka*, brings together 19 stories from surviving family members of disappeared victims during 1987–1991.<sup>75</sup> These violent incidents and episodes in Sri Lanka cannot be justified at all in light of the basic Buddhist principles.

In the past, Buddhist scholarship has been very keen to demonstrate the recognition of human rights and humanitarian laws by both the Sri Lanka government and Buddhist leaders and by Buddhist teachings. In 1991, L. P. N. Perera, a former professor at Sri Jayawardenepura University, published a very useful book entitled *Buddhism and Human Rights: A Buddhist Commentary on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, which attempts to interpret all the articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights from a Buddhist angle.<sup>76</sup> This demonstrates an eagerness

to show the compatibility of Buddhist teachings with humanitarian and secular concerns raised in international contexts.

In today's world, it is common to resort to the use of force to settle territorial disputes. In many developing countries, one can witness groups asserting their rights to secure recognition for their ethnic, religious or national identities. Based on various rationalizations, threats to global peace are emerging rapidly. Particularly in developing countries, threats to peace are hindering the goals and strategies of development and thus denying the essential goods for life to a majority of the population. Those countries also have to bear an expensive war budget instead of developing the infrastructure of their societies. Countries such as Sri Lanka face a realistic choice: is war a viable option and can the state resolve existing conflicts by the use of force?

## Notes

1. Here I am reminded of the terrorist attack by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) on Katunayake International Airport near Colombo on 24 July 2001. The 14 members of the LTTE Black Tiger suicide squad destroyed eight military aircraft on the tarmac and damaged another five K-8s and one MiG-27. They also destroyed two civilian aircraft (Airbus A340 and A330) and damaged two A320s and one A330. They were able to damage a significant portion of the Sri Lankan Airlines fleet of 12 aircraft. The airport was closed for 14 hours and flights were diverted to India. The cost of replacing the military aircraft was estimated at US\$350 million, half of Sri Lanka's military budget. The terrorist attack caused a slowdown in the economy of Sri Lanka of about 2.5 per cent. On 26 March 2007, for the first time, using a light aircraft the LTTE launched an air strike on the Sri Lankan Air Force base adjoining Colombo's international airport.
2. Anthony Reid has said that people have high expectations of Buddhism when it comes to issues of violence such as suicide bombing. He expressed his opinion when presenting a response paper entitled "Religion, the State and Violence: Is Buddhism Different?" at the International Workshop on "Buddhism and the Crises of Nation-States in Asia" held at the National University of Singapore, 19–20 June 2008.
3. Narada Thera, *The Dhammapada*. Kuala Lumpur: Buddhist Missionary Society, 1978, verse 202.
4. K. N. Jayatilleke, *Buddhism and Peace*. Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1983, p. 2.
5. D. Andersen and H. Smith (eds), *Sutta-nipata*. Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1990, p. 164.
6. Jayatilleke, *Buddhism and Peace*.
7. The Korean Buddhist Research Institute (ed.), *The History and Culture of Buddhism in Korea*. Seoul: Dongguk University Press, 1993, p. 192.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 198. The premises of Dongguk University, Seoul, South Korea, contain a statue of the Son master Seo San. The bottom panel illustrates the master and his disciples with prayer beads as well as soldiers with weaponry.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 200.
10. William M. Bodiford, "Monastic Militias", in Robert E. Buswell (ed.) *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, vol. 2. New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 2003, pp. 560–561, p. 561.
11. R. Chalmers (ed.), *The Majjhimanikaya*, vol. II. London: Pali Text Society, 1898, p. 72.



12. I. B. Horner (trans.), *The Collection of the Middle Length Sayings*, vol. II. London: Pali Text Society, 1957, p. 265.
13. Jayatilleke, *Buddhism and Peace*, p. 6.
14. Helmer Smith (ed.), *Suttanipata Commentary*, vol. I. London: Pali Text Society, 1916.
15. F. L. Woodward (ed.), *Udana Commentary*. London: Pali Text Society, 1926; M. E. Lilley (ed.), *Apadana*. London: Pali Text Society, 1925.
16. See T. W. Rhys Davids and J. E. Carpenter (eds), *The Digha Nikaya*. London: The Pali Text Society, vol. 2, 1903, pp. 73–75. Quoted in Mahinda Deegalle, “Buddhist Principles of Democracy: An Exploration of Ethical and Philosophical Foundations?”, *Buddhist Studies*, 26, 1997: 89–107, pp. 92–93.
17. *Samyuttanikaya*, ed. M. Léon Feer. London: Pali Text Society, 1888, vol. 2, p. 268.
18. See R. O. Franke (trans.), *Dighanikaya*. Gottingen and Leipzig: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht and J. C. Hinrichs’sche, 1913, pp. 260–272.
19. Richard F. Gombrich, *Theravada Buddhism: A Social History from Ancient Benares to Modern Colombo*. London and New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1988; revised edition, 2006, p. 20.
20. Frank E. Reynolds and Charles Hallisey, “Buddhist Religion, Culture and Civilization”, in Joseph M. Kitagawa and Mark D. Cummings (eds) *Buddhism in Asian History*. New York: Macmillan, 1989, pp. 8–9.
21. Jayatilleke, *Buddhism and Peace*, p. 5.
22. Ibid.
23. *Samyuttanikaya*, vol. 1, p. 116.
24. *Taisho shinshu Daizokyo*. Tokyo: Daizokyo Kankokai, 1924–1935, vol. 50, p. 340b.
25. Gunavarman was a prince of Kashmir. He refused the throne, travelled and visited China in 424 CE and made 10 translations. He is said to have started the order of Buddhist nuns in China.
26. *Taisho shinshu Daizokyo*, vol. 50, p. 340b.
27. Ibid.
28. See Mahanama Thera, *Mahavamsa or The Great Chronicle of Ceylon*, translated by Wilhelm Geiger. Colombo: Ceylon Government Information Department, 1950, p. 263; available at <http://lakdiva.org/mahavamsa/> (accessed 9 October 2008).
29. Ibid., pp. 260–261.
30. Hermann Oldenberg (ed.), *The Dipavamsa: An Ancient Buddhist Historical Record*. New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1982, p. 219.
31. The Five Precepts that govern daily Buddhist life are: abstention from destroying life, from theft, from misuse of sex, from lying and from the use of intoxicating drinks.
32. These are the Eight Precepts that Buddhists observe on full moon days: abstinence from killing any living being, from taking what is not given, from the misuse of one’s senses, from lying, from consuming intoxicating drinks, from taking meals at inappropriate times, from dancing, singing, playing instrumental music or watching comics, and from using comfortable bedding and seating.
33. D. B. Jayatilaka and V. de Silva, “Dawn of a Great Day”, *The Buddhist*, 10(1), May 1939, p. 1.
34. V. Fausbooll (ed.), *Jataka with Commentary*, vol. 6. London: Pali Text Society, 1877–1896.
35. E. M. G. Edirisinghe, “Suicide in Sri Lanka: Incidence and Remedy”, *The Island* (Saturday Magazine), 15 August 1998; Tessa J. Bartholomeusz, *In Defense of Dharma: Just-War Ideology in Buddhist Sri Lanka*. London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002, p. 120.
36. “Indriya Sutta”, *Samyuttanikaya*, vol. 4, p. 365.
37. V. Trenckner (ed.), *The Majjhimanikaya*. London: Pali Text Society, 1888, p. 392f.
38. Bhikkhu Nanamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi (trans.), *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*. Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1995, p. 499.

39. See chapter 25 of Mahanama Thera's *Mahavamsa* (pp. 170–178) for this controversial episode. For the justifications of war within the Theravada Buddhist tradition, see Mahinda Deegalle, "Is Violence Justified in Theravada?", *Current Dialogue*, 39, 2002: 8–17.
40. Bartholomeusz, *In Defense of Dharma*, p. 53.
41. Steven Kemper, *The Presence of the Past: Chronicles, Politics, and Culture in Sinhala Life*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991, p. 1.
42. Mahanama Thera, *Mahavamsa*.
43. *Ibid.*
44. *Ibid.*
45. Lambert Schmithausen, "Aspects of the Buddhist Attitude towards War", in Jan E. M. Houben and Karel R. van Kooij (eds) *Violence Defined: Violence, Non-violence and the Rationalization of Violence in South Asian Cultural History*. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1999, pp. 57–58. Schmithausen has pointed out that it is possible that this adjustment of precepts for violence could have been influenced by certain Mahayana ideas developing two centuries earlier where the contravention of the precepts, including the killing of living beings, is allowed in certain exceptional circumstances.
46. Ananda Wickremeratne, *Buddhism and Ethnicity in Sri Lanka: A Historical Analysis*. Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1995, p. 294.
47. P. D. Premasiri, "A 'Righteous War' in Buddhism", in Mahinda Deegalle (ed.) *Buddhism, Conflict and Violence in Modern Sri Lanka*. London and New York: Routledge, 2006, pp. 78–85, p. 84.
48. The LTTE is a separatist movement that has waged civil war since the late 1970s for an independent state for Tamils in Sri Lanka. Details of the LTTE can be found in two recent works by M. R. Narayan Swamy: *Inside an Elusive Mind: The First Profile of the World's Most Ruthless Guerrilla Leader*. Colombo: Vijitha Yapa Publications, 2004; *Tigers of Lanka: From Boys to Guerrillas*. Colombo: Vijitha Yapa Publications, 2006.
49. Bartholomeusz, *In Defense of Dharma*, p. 40.
50. Quoted in Bartholomeusz, *In Defense of Dharma*, p. 70.
51. *Ibid.*, p. 71.
52. The *Dharma Yuddhaya* pamphlets were printed at Sigiri Press in Colombo from 1953 to 1956.
53. K. N. O. Dharmadasa, "Buddhism and Politics in Modern Sri Lanka", in Maduluvave Sobhita et al. (eds) *Bhiksuva saha Lanka samajaya* [Buddhist monk and Sri Lankan society]. Colombo: Paravahara Sri Pannananda Nahimi Upahara Kamituvva, 1997, pp. 259–260.
54. Quoted in Bartholomeusz, *In Defense of Dharma*, p. 76.
55. G. P. Malalasekera, *English Sinhalese Dictionary*. Colombo: M. D. Gunasena, 1978, p. 437.
56. Bartholomeusz, *In Defense of Dharma*, p. 71.
57. Quoted in Bartholomeusz, *In Defense of Dharma*, p. 83.
58. *Ibid.*, p. 77.
59. *Ibid.*, p. 82.
60. *Ibid.*, p. 98.
61. For a detailed study of the political circumstances that led to the birth of the Buddhist monks' political party, Jathika Hela Urumaya, see Mahinda Deegalle, "JHU Politics for Peace and a Righteous State", in Mahinda Deegalle (ed.) *Buddhism, Conflict and Violence in Modern Sri Lanka*. London and New York: Routledge, 2006, pp. 233–254.
62. Athureliye Rathana, "A Buddhist Analysis of 'The Ethnic Conflict'", paper delivered at the "Buddhism and Conflict in Sri Lanka" International Conference, Bath Spa University, 28–30 June; see *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, 10, 2003, available at <<http://www.buddhistethics.org/10/rathana-sri-lanka-conf.html>> (accessed 23 October 2008).

63. Bartholomeusz, *In Defense of Dharma*, p. 102.
64. Since the escalation of the war in November 2005, the number of casualties on both sides has increased dramatically (estimated at nearly 5,000 within a one-year period).
65. Bartholomeusz, *In Defense of Dharma*, p. xxi.
66. *An Exceptional Collapse of the Rule of Law: Told Through Stories by Families of the Disappeared in Sri Lanka*. Hong Kong: Asian Legal Resource Centre (ALRC) and Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC), 2004.
67. Frederica Jansz, *The Consequences of Another War in Sri Lanka: February 27–May 5 2006*. Colombo: The Foundation for Co-Existence, 2006, p. 29.
68. “LTTE Terrorists Attack Colombo Airport”, *Sinhaya.com*, 2007, <<http://www.sinhaya.com/airport.htm>> (accessed 9 October 2008).
69. See B. Raman, “LTTE’s Air Strike: An Assessment”, *International Terrorism Monitor Paper No. 2185*, 27 March 2007, <<http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/papers22/paper2185.html>> (accessed 9 October 2008).
70. “Shell Assess LTTE Air Strike”, *BBC Sinhala.com*, 12 May 2007, <[http://www.bbc.co.uk/sinhala/news/story/2007/05/070512\\_shell.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/sinhala/news/story/2007/05/070512_shell.shtml)> (accessed 9 October 2008).
71. To aid English readers’ comprehension, I have translated the song freely without limiting myself to a literal translation (the literal translation can become abstract and may not communicate fully the original intention of the composer of the song). For readers who are interested in the original Sinhala version of the song, I have given the transliteration below.

“Bana kiyana ratak”  
*bana ahana ratak*  
*yuda bimak une kelesa*  
*eya nivana mangak*  
*mal pipuna lovak*  
*api dakinu itin kavada*  
*pin purana hitak*  
*pav nodutu atak*  
*yuda bimata giye kelesa*  
*eya soyana bavak*  
*nodanuya ivak*  
*yuda bimak elesa*  
*samayata mangak*  
*yuda bimata malak*  
*geni yanna kenek natuva*  
*eya dakina asak*  
*sit nivana mangak*  
*notibuniya ratama ravata*

72. Rambukana Siddhartha Thero, *Nasena Gi Rasa*. Nugegoda: Singlanka Ltd. Audio CD, song no. 14, “Bana Kiyana Ratak”.
73. Wijeya Newspapers, “JHU Calls for War-footing”, *LankaNewspapers.com*, 26 April 2006, <<http://www.lankanewspapers.com/news/2006/4/6618.html>> (accessed 9 October 2008).
74. *UN Human Rights Committee Decisions on Communications from Sri Lanka*. Hong Kong: Asian Legal Resource Centre, 2005.
75. *An Exceptional Collapse of the Rule of Law: Told Through Stories by Families of the Disappeared in Sri Lanka*. 2004.
76. L. P. N. Perera, *Buddhism and Human Rights: A Buddhist Commentary on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. Colombo: Karunaratne & Sons Ltd, 1991.