

THE BUDDHA’S TEACHING OF NONVIOLENCE

By Ven. Dr. H. Saddhatissa, MA.,PhD.

President, British Mahabodhi Society and Head of the London Buddhist Vihara.

Taking for particular examination the Buddhist Doctrine of *Ahimsā*, it must be emphasised that there is nothing obscure or ambiguous in the manner in which this is set forth in the Buddhist Canonical texts. The Buddha categorically denounced *Himsā*, violence, and asked his followers to cultivate and practise *Ahimsā*, non-violence, towards all beings. This sublime Buddhist principle is fully explained in Buddhist literature as *Metta*, loving kindness, and *Karuna* (compassion). In the entire *Tipitaka* there is no single saying of the Buddha in which he advocated or even permitted any kind of killing on any pretext whatsoever. He was, of all teachers, the most compassionate – *Mahākārunika* – and he taught us to spread peace and goodwill among all without any distinction.

Let us consider a few of his many sayings on this particular subject. Stanza 130 of the *Dhammapada* gives us:

“All tremble before violence; to all, life is dear. Comparing others with oneself, one should not slay or cause to slay.”¹

And again in stanza 270:

“A man is no noble in that he does harm to living beings. He who is harmless to all living beings, that one is called ‘noble’.”²

In the *Karanīya-Metta-Sutta* of *Sutta Nipata*, five of the ten stanzas are devoted to the *ahimsā* aspect of metta, which is to say, to the loving kindness which knows no injury and which is ever compassionate:

“What living beings there are, feeble or strong, tall, stout or medium size, short, small or large, seen or unseen, those dwelling at a distance or nearby, those who are born and those who are yet to be born – may all beings be well and happy! Let no one deceive or despise another person anywhere; let no one wish harm

1. Dhammapada v 130

2. Ibid. v 270

to another out of anger or ill-will. Just as a mother protects her only child with her own life, so should there be developed in all living beings a mind without limit. And in all the world let there be developed a mind of loving kindness without limit, above, below, across, without obstruction, without enmity, without rivalry.”³

Of the Pānca Sīla, the Five Precepts, which every Buddhist undertakes to observe, the first consists in the declaration: *Pānātipātā veramanī sikkhāpadam samādiyāmi* – I undertake the precept to abstain from the taking of life. The Buddhist must then neither destroy or cause allow to be destroyed, any living thing. Further, the Buddha says:

“Do not kill a living being. You should not kill or condone killing by others. Having abandoned the use of violence, you should not use force against either the strong or the feeble.”⁴ The *Dhammapada* says:

“He who for a hundred years makes a thousand sacrifices each month is not worth the sixteenth part of a person who is compassionate to (any) living creature.”⁵

Therefore Buddhists all over the world have abstained from killing animals either for food, sport or sacrifice. In ancient India, before the birth of Buddhism, the slaughtering of animals – horses, bulls, rams and cattle was very common. Animal sacrifices are still common in Hindu temples. The *Vedas*, the Brahmanic scriptures, enjoined this as a duty, though every Hindu will quote the saying: *ahimsaa-paramo dharmah*, that is, “non-violence is the greatest religion.”⁶ Moreover, the *Sahassavagga* stanza quoted above occurs similarly at *Manusmṛti*.⁷

But the Buddha condemned these blood sacrifices outright. The great Buddhist emperor Asoka, who reigned from approximately 273 to 232 B.C., which would

3. *Suttanipaata* vv 146-150

4. *Ibid.* v 394

5. *Dhammapada* v 106

6. cf. *Mahaabhaarata*, 1.11.13; XIII, 115 25 (Calcutta Ed.) III, 198,19,69; XIII,116,40; 114,6 (Bombay Ed.)

7. *Manusmṛti* V. v 53

be about three hundred years after the Parinibbana of the Buddha said: “Here no animal shall be slaughtered and sacrificed.”⁸ “A meritorious thing is abstention from slaughter of living creatures”.⁹ The Buddhist appeal to humanity was so strong that it created a horror of the practice of blood-sacrifice which overcame even devout belief in the authority of the Vedas. In all Buddhist lands the love of animals is widespread; for instance, it is not uncommon for rich Siamese to buy live fish in order to gain merit by restoring them to the sea, while in Ceylon people will buy caged birds and restore them to freedom. Buddhists abstain from taking life for one outstanding reason, compassion. They do not consider that man is made in the image of a deity and that he is therefore, separated from other living creatures; on the contrary they consider that man is akin to animals although he represents a higher stage of evolution.

Violence does, of course, occur in Buddhist countries. There have been wars and killings, but this does not mean that such violence is sanctioned. The Buddha made no specific statement concerning war, but the seven conditions of welfare as laid down for the Vajjians and recorded at the beginning of *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*¹⁰ are worthy of close study. The essential point to bear in mind is the Buddhist understanding that we are all responsible for our actions, whether good or bad; if these actions lead to evils we must bear the consequences. Non-violence is the aim, but, since we are all at different stages of development, it is an aim which will not easily be realised. At the same time, the fact that it may not be possible immediately to attain to an entire *ahimsā*, is no excuse or justification for not practising ahimsa on every occasion that in our present state of understanding we deem to be possible; rather must it be so that, by practising *ahimsā* to the greatest extent possible in our own immediate environment, the circumstances under which we should at present deem it impossible to practise ahimsa will never arise. The Buddha’s words spoken in connection with the Vajjians, and addressed to the Brahman who had come to estimate the chances of success of the prospective attackers, were:

“As long as the Vajjians are established in these seven things which do not bring loss and ruin, and remain in concord with them, so long may they be expected to prosper and not go to decline.”¹¹

8. *Rock Edict*, I

9. *Rock Edict*, III

10. *Dīghanikaaya*, II, 72-76

11. *Ibid.* II, 75

Though all the seven things taken literally may not seem to be applicable in modern conditions, at least one does hold definitely: if a community makes a habit of taking the life of other beings, then it can only expect that it will at some time have to fight for its own life as a result.

Extract from Sri Lankaramaya Vesak Annual Year 1977, Published by Singapore Sinhala Buddhist Association, St. Michael's Road, Singapore.