



IS VIOLENCE JUSTIFIED IN THERAVADA BUDDHISM?*

Mahinda Deegalle**

School of Humanities and Cultural Industries,
Bath Spa University, United Kingdom

ABSTRACT

Focusing on three kinds of textual sources of Theravada Buddhism (the Pali canon, post-canonical Pali chronicles and medieval Sinhala literature), this paper examines whether there is any justification of violence in Theravada Buddhism. Though Buddhism has recognized the relative merits of the use of mild forms of force in certain rare circumstances, by advocating a path of non-violence as one of its central doctrines Buddhism has rejected the use of violence even as a skill-in-means (Skt. upayakausalya). The paper thus examines justifications both for violence and non-violence within the Theravada Buddhist tradition. It evaluates controversial discussions of violence in the post-canonical Pali chronicle, the Mahavamsa, in which one finds a rare case of justifying violence in the attempt to explain potential war crimes of King Duttagamani. By comparing Mahavamsa's views with Pali canonical literature, the paper argues that both in theory and practice Theravada Buddhism does not profess violence. Asserting that violence cannot be justified under any circumstance, violence and its manifestations in Buddhist societies can be viewed as a deviation from the teachings of the Buddha.

Key Words: Justifications of Violence, Theravada Buddhism, Morality of War, Sri Lanka

INTRODUCTION

Is there a place for violence in Theravada Buddhism? This question is often raised by modern scholars in relation to recent violent events in the context of ethnic problem in Sri Lanka.¹ This question of

violence in religious and cultural practices, religious doctrines and social institutions and extremist movements is, however, not limited to the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. With regard to other Theravada Buddhist societies such as Cambodia, too, which astonished the world with an

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** Author e-mail

m.deegalle@bathspa.ac.uk

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alarming genocide of 2-3 millions Khmers (mostly Buddhists) between 1975 and 1979 by Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge ('Red Khmer')² this very question of the problematic presence of violence has been raised (Ebihara 1994). Both Sri Lanka in South Asia and Cambodia in Southeast Asia are primarily Theravada Buddhist societies. Nearly 70% of the Sri Lankan population claims to be Buddhist. In the last three decades both countries have witnessed a great deal of physical violence³ and faced accusations of abuse of human rights. While the violence in both countries can be attributed to various political problems, civil unrest, growth of communist thinking and fanatical armed groups, corrupted politicians and poor economic infrastructure, at least in the case of Sri Lanka ethnic prejudices stand as the preeminent cause for the turmoil and recent violent struggle.

As a Buddhist, can one justify any form of violence whether it is verbal or physical or whether violence is directed towards the destruction of Buddhists or non-Buddhists? Is there a Theravada attitude towards violence? Either historically or socially, have Theravada Buddhists advocated violence? Is there any evidence within Theravada scriptures or practice advocating violence? On the whole, why has Buddhism not given a prominent place for violence and consequently professed a path of non-violence? How should a Theravada Buddhist react in the face of violence in the modern world? Should he or she resort to violence? Or should he or she let others perpetuate violence on himself or herself? All these are practical questions when Buddhists and Buddhist practices come face to face with real situations in the modern world. The

purpose of this paper is to examine these questions in light of doctrinal discussions and recent events in Buddhist history in Theravada Sri Lanka. I will explore the place and justifications of violence as well as non-violence in relation to Theravada Buddhism in Sri Lanka.

I will argue that Buddhism has discussed the relative value of the use of force⁴ as in the case of a single parent, whose only ambition is his or her child's future welfare—moulding the character of the child in making him or her a civilized citizen—and who would, therefore, use a little force in disciplining a naughty child in the hope of achieving a higher and a noble goal. What I try to convey is that a certain degree of mental and physical pain is inevitable and allowed in achieving a satisfactory goal for the welfare of everyone in society at large. If one has the best interest of the child's growth in mind, one has to take measures to ensure that the child grows in a positive environment. It does not mean necessarily that the parent should resort to corporeal punishment from the very beginning in order to discipline a child. But the child's knowledge of the possibility of physical force, indeed, may prevent him or her from many misdeeds. However, for a well-behaved child, even verbal pressures would not be necessary. Nevertheless, whenever a parent has the best interest of the child's welfare in mind and takes a measure to discipline the child, the parent should keep in mind that one has to establish oneself first in what is proper⁵ before guiding the child to the proper action.

At the beginning, I should reiterate that there is no direct validation of violence⁶ either verbal or physical

within Theravada canonical scriptures. However, at least one post-canonical work—the *Mahavamsa* of Mahanama, a Pali chronicle of the fifth century CE—contains a controversial reference to physical violence at times of civil war⁷ and conflict in Sri Lanka which will be discussed in detail later. Here, however, notwithstanding that controversial issue, it is important to emphasize that resorting to violence in Theravada communities is against the Theravada norm prescribed by the Buddha. Violence cannot be used either as a path or goal because of the Buddhist conviction well expressed in the *Dhammapada* (v. 5) that ‘hatred is never ceased by hatred.’ As demonstrated in this paper, thus, it is hard to find even a little importance in violence even as a skill-in-means.

My argument is that both in theory and practice Theravada Buddhism does not and should not profess violence since the basic tenets of Buddhism are completely against imposing pain on oneself or others. There is no room for violence in the doctrine. Whatever violence found in the so-called Buddhist societies is merely a deviation from the doctrine of the Buddha and a misinterpretation of Buddha’s valuable message or not leading one’s life in accordance with the Buddha’s teachings.

In this paper, I use three types of examples to illustrate Buddhist attitudes toward violence: (1) *The Pali Canon*: this corpus is more authentic for Theravada Buddhists than the two resources mentioned below since they believe that it contains the word(s) of the Buddha (*Buddhavacana*) and his message of human liberation from suffering as can be seen through the lives and practices of his

noble disciples. (2) *The Pali Chronicles* written in Sri Lanka starting from the fourth century CE onwards are taken by scholars in reconstructing the history of Buddhism and the historical events of Sri Lanka. They are quasi-historical since they are monastic chronicles with the strong ambition of highlighting sectarian conflicts among monastic fraternities and monastic achievements over other civil matters; as books of an influential literary corpus within Sri Lanka among Buddhists and outside Sri Lanka within the Western scholarship on Buddhism, they focus on the role of Buddhism, Buddhist institutions, and monastic fraternities and their relationships with the king and the State of Sri Lanka. It is rather ironic that they were composed in Pali rather than in Sinhala, the vernacular language of most inhabitants in modern Sri Lanka. As I will illustrate below, certain violent narratives in the Pali chronicles raise crucial moral dilemmas in the reader whether s/he is a Buddhist or a non-Buddhist. The issues they have raised and focused on are practical and the solutions they have suggested are also utilitarian and contextual. And finally, (3) *Sinhala Medieval Literature* which began to be composed from the thirteenth century CE onward for the benefit of Sinhala speakers, as a vast literary corpus remains religious and Buddhist in nature rather than being nationalistic.

HOW DO WE UNDERSTAND VIOLENCE?

The first question is what do we mean by violence? How should we define it? What are its boundaries? In particular, what does it mean in English? Is it something very vague? Its modern usage

demonstrates that 'violence' as a term is used very broadly to include a wide range of negative human actions harmful to other living beings, living organisms, ecosystems and environments. While the aspect of physical assault can be taken as its primary meaning, it also includes minor violations such as verbal abuse. In texts, violence can be understood primarily as physical assault and killing.

First, let us examine the terms for violence in Indian religious contexts. The most common Indian term for violence was *himsa*; the absence of violence in one's life was rendered in Indian religious contexts as *ahimsa*. *Ahimsa* as a technical term in religious vocabulary emerged with strong relationships with the notions of *karma* that Hindus, Buddhists and Jains hold as dear.⁸ In all three traditions, *ahimsa* plays a crucial role as a religious way of life. These two terms can be taken as the closet words for violence and non-violence, not only in Buddhism but also in all Indian religions—Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. These pre-Buddhist concepts were widely used in Buddhist literature, in particular in the *Jatakas*. Some figurative narratives in this collection highlight and profess a life of extreme non-violence (*ahimsa*). Buddha's previous life as the ascetic Santivadin, in particular, is extremely important in understanding the values attached to non-violence. The ideal that emerges from these narratives is an ideal of extreme patience and compassion. They can be used as an antidote for violence.

In modern Asian languages, there does not seem to be one term for violence. For example, the *English-Sinhalese Dictionary* G.P. Malalasekere translates

'violence' into Sinhala as '*balahatkaraya*' (force⁹) '*sahasikakama*,' '*adantettama*' (assault), '*sarakama*' (severity), and '*ugratvaya*' (severeness). These Sinhala expressions are attempts to convey various nuances of the English term 'violence'; they show difficulties involved in communicating varied meanings of violence. At least in the context of Sinhala language, the very notion of 'violence' in Sri Lankan society is ambiguous and convoluted. What does a Sinhala speaker mean by 'violence'? Will violence include verbal abuses and psychological pressures as equally important as physical assaults? This ambiguity of the meanings denoted by violence in the Sinhala language seems to have left space for certain interpretations of the word that make allowances for the execution of violence in specific contexts, as is discussed below.

CASES FOR VIOLENCE— INTERPRETATION OF DUTTHAGAMANI AND THE RECEPTION OF A PERVASIVE MYTH IN THE HISTORY OF SRI LANKA

Though Pali canonical texts do not contain explicit textual evidence to support violence or remarks to justify violence, certain genres of post-canonical literature, for example one of the Pali chronicles namely the *Mahavamsa* of Mahanama composed in Sri Lanka in the fifth CE, unfortunately contain a narrative which disturbs the pacifist image of Theravada Buddhism. Though the intention of this particular monastic author, Mahanama, is open for debate, this isolated reference is problematic when placed within the early Buddhist Pali canonical textual corpus. This pervasive narrative gives the impression that in certain circumstances

when the ultimate end is noble, the use of a certain degree of violence is not going to harm the Buddha's doctrine of non-violence and pacifist path.

To examine justifications of political violence in Sri Lanka and the growth of nationalism, a careful study of the myth of the battle between King Dutthagamani and King Elara is essential. Steven Kemper has rightly put that: "The Past inhabits the present in a variety of ways—in practices, things and memory" (Kemper 1991, p.1). Such inhibition demonstrates the implications of this myth on both Sinhala and Tamil communities in modern Sri Lanka.

The *Mahavamsa* narrative discusses the war between King Dutthagamani and King Elara. While Dutthagamani was a Sinhala in origin, a native of Sri Lanka, Elara was a Dravidian and an invader. As the text records, in this complex ethnic battle Dutthagamani defends his war as a measure to protect Buddhism from the foreign rule of Elara:

When the king Dutthagamani had... had a relic put into his spear he marched...to Tissamaharama, and... had shown favour to the brotherhood he said: '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 the bhikkhus is a blessing and protection for us' (*Mahavamsa* 25, p.1-4).

In this *Mahavamsa* passage, the reference to "bring glory to the doctrine" can be taken as providing safety and protection to 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* (monks) with him while marching for war is perceived as an act of securing protection for Dutthagamani himself at the time of war. However, the monks who marched with troops perceived their own action "as a penance" (*Mahavamsa*, 25.4). Placing a relic in the spear is an apostrophic action intended to ward off evil forces at times of troubles 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 dual, Dutthagamani killed Elara (*Mahavamsa* 25, p.67-70). After Elara's death, Dutthagamani honoured him by cremating him and marking the place with a monument and instituting a place of worship there.

The remorse that Dutthagamani had after the battle was quite severe and similar to the one that Emperor Asoka had after his battle in Kalinga. Like 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. Their intervention in removing Dutthagamani's remorse can be seen as a 'rehabilitation strategy' for an evil king who had inflicted 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 a noble one, the justifications that the monks provided in consoling the king are controversial and problematic. They bear serious implications for the issue as to whether there are justifications for violence within Theravada Buddhism.

The *Mahavamsa* (25, p.104) states that the arahants in Piyangudipa knowing Dutthagamani's remorse sent a group of eight holy monks to comfort him; when Dutthagamani confessed that he had slaughtered millions, what they said to Dutthagamani to eliminate his remorse is highly problematic:

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 (*Mahavamsa* 25, p.109-112).

As this *Mahavamsa* passage demonstrates, Dutthagamani's remorse is eliminated by telling him that killing 'evil unbelievers' carries no more weight than killing animals. As practitioners of 'loving kindness' (*metta*), Buddhists have an obligation to protect all forms of life. It is important to note that not only human beings but killing even animals is not encouraged in Buddhism.¹⁰ When contrasted with canonical doctrines and early Buddhist practices, this fifth century chronicle position is rather controversial. This passage in the *Mahavamsa* seems to suggest that certain forms of violence such as killings during war can be allowed in certain circumstances as illustrated in the case of threats to the survival of Buddhism in Sri Lanka during the time of Dutthagamani. However, it is hard to justify this *Mahavamsa* position either through Buddhist practice or doctrinal

standpoint as found in the Pali canon of the Theravada Buddhists.

However, a different and an alternative explanation of this 'rehabilitation strategy' is also possible. This unusual statement can be interpreted differently as an instance of skill-in-means. In the long run, it would not help the Buddhist monastic community to keep the victorious king in remorse or in a depressed condition. Rather than aggravating the conditions, as spiritual advisers, the monastic community would have made every effort to console the king. Up to that moment, whatever sin 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: their rehabilitation strategy was to identify that positive dimension, a sphere of potential growth and creativity. However, 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."

Nevertheless, this reductionist explanation is problematic for Theravada Buddhist teachings and traditions. Justifying the killing of Tamils during the war as not being a *papa* (sin) 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 depending on one's caste, race, or ethnic group the severity of one's negative acts vary.

The complexity in the way in which this single, controversial myth is interpreted, perpetuated and received both as an inspiration and a justification is well illustrated by a comment made in Ananda Wickremeratne's recent work *Buddhism and Ethnicity in Sri Lanka*. Wickremeratne comments on the way a monastic member sees this pervasive myth and explains it as a historical document of self-righteousness:

According to another monk, it 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 his purpose, waging a purely defensive war. He does not cross over to India to chastise the Tamils and refrains from wrecking vengeance on Tamils who were living in Sri Lanka, side by side with Sinhalese as its inhabitants' (Wickremeratne 1995, p. 294).

It seems that 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.¹¹ These nationalist readings demonstrate the pervasive power of myth-history in Sri Lankan society whether it is Sinhala or Tamil.

CASES AGAINST VIOLENCE

The overwhelming consensus among the scholars of Buddhism is that Buddhism is against violence. This scholarly consensus is not either a confessional view or an exaggeration of the real situations. The pacifist image of Buddhist teachings and historical practices of non-violent actions in Buddhist communities are very much supported by and grounded on Pali canonical scriptures.

Presenting an *emic* view of the pacifist image of Buddhism, Venerable Dr. Walpola Rahula (1907-1997) the renowned Buddhist scholar monk of Sri Lanka, has articulated well the Buddhist non-violent perspective in one of his early popular writings:

This spirit of tolerance and understanding has been from the beginning one of the most cherished ideals of Buddhist culture and civilization. That is why there is not a single example of persecution or the shedding of a drop of blood in converting people to Buddhism, or in its propagation during its long history of 2500 years. It spread peacefully all over the continent of Asia, having more than 500 million adherents today. Violence in any form, under any pretext whatsoever, is absolutely against the teachings of the Buddha (Rahula 1959, p.5).

Thus Rahula has clearly reiterated that violence has no place either within Buddhist teachings or cultural practices in Buddhist communities. He has highlighted that in the expansion of Buddhism from India to Sri Lanka, to southeast Asia (Burma and Thailand), to East Asia (China), Korea and Japan and to the north (Tibet and Central Asia), Buddhist monks and nuns have embraced the principle of 'tolerance'

towards pre-Buddhist religious practices and beliefs while injecting intellectual and spiritual resources to enrich and nourish whatever culture, civilization or ethnic group that Buddhism came to encounter.

Buddhist teachings maintain that under any circumstance, whether it is political, religious, cultural or ethnic, violence cannot be accepted or advocated in solving disputes between nations. All Buddhist traditions unanimously agree that war cannot be the solution to disputes and conflicts either. Even for achieving a religious goal, violence cannot be used and justified. A Buddhist cannot imagine a principle of 'Just War.' How can a 'war' become a 'just' one? How can the slaughter of human beings be justified as 'morally right'? As P.D. Premasiri has convincingly asserted by examining early Buddhist standpoint even in the case of solving social conflicts such as war, Buddhism "does not advocate violence under any circumstance"(Premasiri 1985). When 'insider' perspectives are examined across Buddhist cultures and combined with doctrinal understandings, one can create a context in comprehending Buddhist abhorrence for violence and encouragement in seeking creative strategies for a non-violent path in overcoming violence.

BUDDHIST COMMITMENT TO THE TEACHING OF LOVING-KINDNESS AND COMPASSION IN A VIOLENT WORLD

Several narratives in the Pali canon illustrate that Buddha's disciples adhered to the Buddha's teaching of loving-kindness. The story of Venerable Punna,¹² for example, demonstrates that Venerable Punna desired to live in

a remote province called Sunaparanta, which was notorious for cruelty and violence. When the Buddha questioned Punna how he would respond if the residents there revile, abuse and assault him, he replied that he would not show anger and ill-will towards them:

Punna, the people of Sunaparanta are fierce...If the people of Sunaparanta are vile..., how will it be for you there, Punna? If the people of Sunaparanta are vile and abuse me...I will say, 'Goodly indeed are these people of Sunaparanta...in that they do not strike me a blow with their hands... If the people of Sunaparanta deprive me of life with a sharp knife...I will say, 'There are disciples...disgusted by the body...looking about for a knife...I have come upon this very knife without having looked about for it' (The Middle Length Sayings, p.320-321).

This single narrative clearly demonstrates the tolerant attitude towards violence of an early disciple of the Buddha. In this narrative what attracts most is Punna's deep commitment to non-violence and his practice of patience even in the case of losing his own life.

Buddhist attitude towards violence stands out as an extreme non-violent position: a path leading to total abstention from engaging in violent activities. Even in the cases of extreme aggression and violence, Buddhism seems to advocate moral restraint and kindness towards those who commit the crimes. This is because of the belief that only an action based on loving-kindness (*metta*) will in the long run generate a stable and a peaceful environment.

Several canonical and non-canonical sources elaborate the appreciation of the non-violent path. One of the *Jataka*

narratives, for instance, illustrates the Buddhist standpoint towards violence and non-violence. It discusses the policies of two kings and their strategies in overcoming violence and other social problems. One king has a reactionary approach in which he meets force with force, mildness with mildness, he wins over the good with good and conquers the evil with evil. The other king has a completely different strategy of pacifist nature. In responding to social conflicts and other problems, rather than repeating violent actions, he conquers wrath with kindness, evil with good, greed with charity and falsehood with truth. His state policy seems to be based on the principles proposed in the following *Dhamampada* verse 223: "Hatred should be conquered by non-hatred. Unrighteousness should be conquered by righteousness. Miserliness should be conquered by generosity. A person who speaks untruth should be conquered by truth".

This latter king's approach represents a Buddhist approach and a Buddhist solution to overcoming unhealthy social problems; its strength is love, kindness, charity, truth and forbearance. It is a virtuous approach in overcoming violence through a path of non-violence. Because of the wholesome aspects in the approach, the state policy of the latter king is considered to be superior to that of the former. This appreciation is based on the fundamental conviction that only a non-violent path will generate a long lasting solution in any violent situation.

During his lifetime, the Buddha himself faced both verbal and physical violence. As the Pali canon records, some had verbally abused him; some others, like his

cousin Devadatta, had even physically abused the Buddha attempting to kill him. This is not the whole story of the Buddha's encounter with violence during his teaching career. In the Buddha's own life, there were a few rare cases in which he himself had to intervene when some of his relatives waged war against each other over a dispute regarding the sharing of water. After considerable deliberation, the Buddha intervened in the war between the Sakyas and Koliyas to prevent bloodshed over the inability to reach a settlement regarding the sharing of water taken from River Rohini. In that context, the Buddha had pointed out that human life is worthier than what they were fighting for. It was because of the Buddha's fundamental conviction that human life is intrinsically valuable than any other material or ideological thing. From the textual sources of the Pali canon, it is clear that an appropriate method of conflict resolution is possible only through reconciliation of the parties involved.

According to Buddhist teachings, a viable solution to conflicts is less likely through the use of violent means. This is because of the belief rooted in Buddhist doctrinal foundations that violence breeds hatred. Thus victory achieved through violence is not a permanent solution to any conflict. As the *Samyutta Nikaya* puts it, "Victory arouses enmity and the defeated live in sorrow" (*Samyutta Nikaya* 1.83). By causing pain to others, one cannot achieve happiness: one always has to think how one's actions affect others around oneself. The *Dhammapada* verse 131 asserts that one's happiness is derived from the happiness of others: "Whoever, seeking one's own happiness,

harms with a rod other pleasure-loving beings, experiences no happiness thereafter”.

The most outstanding and famous Buddhist pacifist attitude is found in the *Dhammapada* verse 5: “hatred is never ceased by hatred in this world.” From a Buddhist point of view, reconciliatory methods of conflict resolution are more useful than coercive methods. As Buddhists, we are encouraged to seek peaceful solutions for any conflict by abandoning force, intimidation and threat. In the short run, those who are involved in violent activities in the hope of liberating the masses might think that violent means are very effective. However in the long run only a peaceful solutions will bring harmony to society at large.

This pacifist standpoint of the *Dhammapada* has been elaborated and extended in the thirteenth century Sinhala prose text *Saddharmaratnavaliya* (‘The Jewel Garland of the Good Doctrine’) written by Dharmasena Thera. Since this late medieval textual attitude is useful in understanding the Sinhala-Buddhist worldview, let us now look at the *Saddharmaratnavaliya*’s positions towards hatred and its reaffirmation of the power of loving-kindness and compassion. The narrative of the Demon Kali illustrates several things: it demonstrates (1) the Theravada attitude towards violence and (2) the way, as a thirteenth century vernacular text, it still maintains the early Buddhist pacifist doctrine without recommending violence and completely ignoring the controversial position of the Pali chronicles. The *Saddharmaratnavaliya* maintains that hatred can be overcome only with compassion. This important narrative

begins with a cliché: “As a bush fire burning out of control stops only when it reaches a vast body of water, so the rage of one who vows vengeance cannot be quelled except by the waters of compassion” (Dharmasena 1991, p.98).

Thus from a Buddhist point of view, anger and violence have to be met with their opposite, compassion. By meeting anger with anger, one adds fuel to fire. This crucial message is clearly expressed to a Buddhist audience in a very simple language. Its moral position is: “vengeance is an extremely vile sin. Therefore, give it up” (p.105). Following the canonical standpoint, it also reiterates that through violence one cannot overcome violence:

When your body is filthy with spit . . .
 . you cannot clean it with that same spit . . . So when you abuse those who abuse and revile you, or kill or beat up those murderers who beat you . . . it is like adding fuel to fire; enmity on both sides never ceases. . . . hatred that burns on the fuel of justifications must be quenched with the water of compassion, not fed with the firewood of reasons and causes. Compassion is fundamentally right, free of malice, and is the source for all good actions. Good, founded on compassion, destroys evil and puts out the fire of enmity (p.103).

This single narrative in the *Saddharmaratnavaliya* clearly states the Buddhist position towards violence. Violence, no matter in what form it manifests, has to be met with non-violent measures. Solutions to conflicts should be found only through non-violent means. Violence cannot solve problems. Only non-violence brings peace.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has explored whether violence is justified within Theravada Buddhism. Through a close examination of three kinds of textual resources, it has come to the conclusion that as a Buddhist one cannot justify violence under any circumstance. Examining a pervasive myth used for violence, it has demonstrated that the position of the Pali chronicle, the *Mahavamsa*, is rather contradictory to the fundamental Buddhist teachings of the Pali canon. Buddhist canonical texts highlight that Buddhists cannot justify violence. The challenge for a modern Buddhist today is to meditate on the *Saddharmaratnavaliya*'s message that "the rage of one who vows vengeance cannot be quelled except by the waters of compassion."

NOTES

1. For a sustained discussion on Buddhism's role in the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict see Deegalle, M. (2006). *Buddhism, Conflict and Violence in Modern Sri Lanka*. London: Routledge.

2. For a detailed understanding of Khmer Rouge atrocities in Cambodia see Harris, I. (2005). *Cambodian Buddhism: History and Practice*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

3. An interesting account of a personal encounter of an anthropologist with a Sinhala youth who is caught up between violence and nonviolence is given by Spencer, J. (2000). On Not Becoming a 'Terrorist': Problems of Memory, Agency, and Community in the Sri Lankan Conflict. In Veena Das, Arthur Kleinman, et al. (Eds.) *Violence and Subjectivity*. (pp. 120-40). Berkeley: University of California Press.

4. In this case, I will qualify 'force' as 'harmless.' I do not mean the use of abusive mental, verbal or physical pressures but instead creating a context in which the child becomes aware of the gravity of one's own actions. The purpose of the use of force is to make an 'awakening' state of mind.

5. The *Dhammapada* (v. 158) reminds us that a wise person who advises others first establishing oneself in the proper practice will not lose his or her dignity.

6. For Buddhist attitudes towards violence see Deegalle, M. (2003). Buddhist Attitude to Violence. *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, 10. Retrieved from <http://www.jbe.gold.ac.uk>.

7. Tessa J. Bartholomeusz (2002) has used these post-canonical Pali chronicles to argue for an ideology of Just War in Buddhism in her work *In Defense of Dharma: Just-war Ideology in Buddhist Sri Lanka*. London: Routledge Curzon.

8. For historical developments of these notions, see Chapple, C. K. (1993). *Nonviolence to Animals, Earth, and Self in Asian Traditions*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

9. These corresponding English equivalents are my translations of the Sinhala originals in G.P. Malalasekere's *English-Sinhalese Dictionary* published in 1978.

10. Schmithausen, L. (1999). 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* (pp.57-58). Leiden: E.J. Brill has pointed out that it is possible that this adjustment of precepts for violence could have been influenced by certain Mahāyāna thoughts developing two centuries earlier where the transgression of the precepts including the killing of living beings is allowed in certain exceptional circumstances.

11. When I delivered an early version of this paper at *Thinking Together II in Florida* at St. Petersburg, Wesley Ariyaratne pointed out that Tamil narration of this myth highlights that it was King Elāra, who proposed a dual battle, as opposed to King Duttagamini who is credited with that suggestion as recorded in the *Mahavamsa*. These diverse nationalistic readings of this pervasive myth by Sinhalese and Tamils need detailed further investigation.

12. See *The Middle Length Sayings* (trans.) I.B. Horner (1959). (pp. 319-322). London: PTS.

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