

No Need for Arms and Armed Forces

Establishing Peace Studies in the Light of Shinran's Thought

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1. Introduction

In this paper, I am going to discuss the issue of war and peace based mainly on Shinran's thought. I will also refer to some of Shakyamuni Buddha's stories, King Ashoka's edicts, Prince Shotoku's Seventeen-article Constitution, some passages from the Larger Sutra and Honen's thought. This paper will attempt to show that realization of our indebtedness to Amida's Primal Vow inevitably leads us to become concerned with the welfare of our neighbors and society, and that our daily life as nembutsu practitioners is closely connected with cessation of armed conflict and creation of peace.

Since the concerted terrorist attack on the United States on September 11, 2001, the world seems to have lost its equilibrium. Nations including Japan have been driven by an urge to step up preparations for war under the pretext of self-defense against terrorism or for the cause of "justice." Some nations seem to have rid themselves of any reluctance to the use of arms and armed forces to revenge what they regard as terrorist attacks and to give their enemies many times as much casualty as they have received. The result is an endless cycle of attacks and counter-attacks.

At this time, as Buddhists and as members of the world community, we must raise our voice and share the wisdom of the Buddha with the entire population of the world that any event is a result of countless causes in the past and that it is wrong to trace it into a single factor. More importantly, people should be reminded that vengeance only calls for vengeance and that only humility and compassion melt enmity.

2. Negative peace and positive peace

David P. Barash, an American psychologist and a leading figure in peace studies, says in his Introduction to Peace Studies that there are two types of peace: negative peace and positive peace.¹ Negative peace refers to a condition in which no active, organized military violence is taking place in society or between nations, but in which a stronger party is employing overt and covert forms of repressive measures against the weaker ones. For example, under the Pax Romana, a number of ethnic groups and ancient civilizations were humiliated and economically exploited. More recently, during the Cold War, almost all the people of the world were subjected to the fear of nuclear war.

On the other hand, positive peace means more than the absence of violent conflict. It refers to a condition in which any elements that are likely to lead to conflict are minimized or are on the way to total elimination from the society or from the world as a whole. The most representative of the "elements that are likely to lead to conflict" is "structural violence." This includes all sorts of discrimination and oppression based on differences in "race," place of origin, culture, color, creed, sex, birth, and social status. In international affairs, what is called "hegemonism," in which a strong nation forces weaker ones to comply with its policies, is a form of structural violence. It can be said that positive peace begins when negative peace is negated. Positive peace is made possible when every constituent member of the community becomes aware of existing problems connected with structural violence. In a sense, positive peace is more spiritual and rational than political, and this is where Buddhists can find common grounds with peace movements in the world, for as the

following discussion will show, the Buddhist effort to attain the Buddha's wisdom and compassion involves identifying inner evils and eradicating them while living through the life that is given.

3. Shakyamuni Buddha's Position about War

In this section, I will examine how Shakyamuni Buddha dealt with armed conflict in his lifetime.

Toward the end of his life, King Vidudabha of the Kingdom of Kosala wanted to exterminate the Shakyas on account of the insult he had received from them. As he approached the border between the territories of Kosala and the Shakyas, he saw the Buddha standing under an almost bare tree on the side of the Shakyas. The king politely asked the Buddha why he was standing there when on the Kosalan side there was a tree with a nice shade under its abundant branches and leaves. The Buddha replied that the shade made by the tree that belonged to his relatives was cool. Upon hearing this, King Vidudabha understood the Buddha's message and retreated. The king advanced toward the territory of the Shakyas and retreated three times in this way. However, the Buddha did not try to prevent the Shakyas' destruction when the king came with his army for the fourth time because the Buddha realized that the Shakyas would not be able to escape from the working of the karma they had created in the past.²

This story indicates that the cause for armed conflict can be traced to past karma and that even the Buddha cannot prevent violence once the cause is activated by deep-rooted anger. The Buddha Dharma aims to prevent the rise of such karma.

Just before the Buddha departed for his last journey from the Eagle Peak near Rajagriha, the capital of the kingdom of Magadha, King Ajatashatru sent one of his ministers and asked the Buddha about the feasibility of attacking Magadha's powerful neighbor, the state of the Vajjis. The Buddha first confirmed with his disciple Ananda that the Vajjis observed the "Seven Precepts that prevent decline and fall," and then told the minister that as long as the Vajjis observed the Seven Precepts, even the king of Magadha would not be able to conquer the Vajjis.³ The Seven Precepts consisted of the following:

The Vajjis often met in an assembly to discuss their issues and policies;

They cooperated with each other to achieve their common goals;

They respected and complied with ancient laws;

The Vajjis respected their elders and followed their advice well;

They treated women with respect and kindness;

They showed reverence to their holy places;

They paid homage to all the holy men that resided in their territory.

All these stories point to the Buddha's peace-loving personality. Especially the "Seven Precepts that prevent decline and fall" emphasizes the importance of dialog and discussion to solve problems and of cooperation to achieve the organization's goals. The message we receive from these stories is that we should always make efforts to solve problems by peaceful means and that achieving internal peace and harmony is the best way to protect the organization from decline and fall due to foreign invasion.

4. King Ashoka's Position about War

King Ashoka (circa 273-232 BCE) of the Maurya dynasty is known for governing his realm based on the spirit of the Dharma. His numerous rock edicts and pillar edicts mention the importance of respect of family members, relatives, friends and acquaintances as well as teachers, Brahmans and Shramanas. He also recommends kind treatment of servants and slaves as well as domestic and wild animals. In the Rock Edict XIII, he expresses his deep remorse for the destruction caused by his conquest of the ancient kingdom of Kalinga. His remorse was not only for the great number of people who were killed, injured and carried away captive in the war, but also for the destruction of the culture, tradition, religion and morality of that area. The king says that he desires security, self-control, impartiality, and cheerfulness for all living creatures. He further declares that he considers the conquest by the Dharma as the most important conquest. For that purpose he had a great number of rock- and pillar-edicts inscribed all over his realm and sent missionaries of the Dharma to neighboring countries as well as to the far away Hellenistic countries in the west. He also sent out supervisors of the Dharma throughout his dominion to make sure that his ideal was carried out.

Judging from his words expressed in his edicts, he considered it as his duty to minimize and eliminate any factors that might lead to conflict. He adopted the Dharma as his guiding principle and tried to put it into practice.

However, King Ashoka shows a dilemma in doing this. Because he professed the Dharma to be his guiding principle, he tried to treat everyone equally as long as people followed his order to respect the Dharma. When some people disrupted the rule by the Dharma, the king was in a position to punish them, even though he made efforts to be understanding and forgiving. The king says:

King Priyadarshi (Ashoka) seeks to induce even the forest peoples who have come under his dominion to adopt this way of life and this ideal. He reminds them, however, that he exercises the power to punish, despite his repentance, in order to induce them to desist from their crimes and escape execution. (Rock Edict XIII)

In the end, as a secular ruler, King Ashoka had to be satisfied with being a benevolent despot.⁴

The Buddha and Buddhists used the terms normally associated with armed conflict, such as fight, struggle, conquest, destruction, confrontation, attack, and so on, against one's internal enemies such as anger, envy, jealousy, grudge, pride, desires for fame, possessions, and power, not against one's external enemies. In a strict sense, the Buddha and Buddhists had no external enemies, because even those who physically harassed them were to be pitied and guided into the path of the Four Noble Truths. In this way, for good Buddhists, engaging in armed conflict was unthinkable.

5. Prince Shotoku's Position about War

Now we will briefly look into the governmental ideal of Prince Shotoku (573-622; as Prince Regent 593-622). Prince Shotoku is known for creating a centralized government in ancient Japan and attempting to govern the country in accordance with the Buddhist ideal. Shinran called Prince Shotoku as the founder of the Buddha Dharma in Japan and regarded him as an incarnation of Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara (Kannon Bosatsu). Although Shotoku's reforms were short-lived, we can see his attempt to minimize elements of conflict within the country and make the country a peaceful and prosperous place for its residents.

Prince Shotoku's governmental ideal is best discerned in his famous Seventeen-article Constitution. The first article states that the most precious thing is peace and harmony and its essence lies in the absence of conflict. It is important that the persons in the ruling class should have a kindly heart toward the ruled and the ruled should have a friendly heart toward the rulers. If they discuss problems without ego-attachment, the problems will settle rationally by themselves. The tenth article says that one should not become angry at another who has a different thought from one's own. Every person has his own preferences and attachments. One may not agree with what another considers right, and another may not agree with what one considers right. One is not necessarily a wise person, and another is not necessarily a fool. Both are just ordinary persons.⁵

In this outline of Prince Shotoku's Seventeen-article Constitution, we can see that he emphasized the importance of humility and mutual respect as the essential factor for avoiding conflict.

6. The Position of the Larger Sutra about War

Since the main theme of the Larger Sutra is Amida Buddha's establishing of the Pure Land as the place of supreme happiness and bliss for everyone, it is obvious that the sutra disapproves of any form of conflict. A passage describing Amida's Pure Land goes as follows:

When the Buddha of Immeasurable Life expounds the true and exquisite Dharma for sravakas and bodhisattvas who have gathered in the hall decorated with seven kinds of treasures, their hearts are filled with bliss and they all attain enlightenment.... They all spread flowers and incense, and play many kinds of music; when they come meet on the road, they yield their ways to each other. At that time, all the residents of the Pure Land, with soft and tender hearts, are filled with supreme joy and happiness.⁶

This passage points to the ideal form of society, in which people live with compassionate care for each other. There is no room for any conflict to arise. In another part of the Larger Sutra, there is a passage with the expression "No need for using arms and armed forces." It goes as follows:

The countries, towns and villages which the Buddha travels through and visits all receive his benevolent guidance. Every place under heaven is peaceful and the sun and the moon are clear and bright. The wind and the rain come at the proper time and no natural calamities and epidemics break out. The country is blessed with abundance, and the people live at ease; there is no need for using arms and armed forces.⁷

This passage projects a country guided by the Buddha Dharma as a place which is blessed with abundance and prosperity and whose people are living in peace; hence there is no use for arms and armed forces.

7. Honen's and Shinran's Position about War

Having established the Buddhists' basic position for peace and against war, we will now look into Honen's and Shinran's thoughts about peace and war. Their main concern was that everyone in the world should awaken to the Primal Vow and be saved, and so they did not make a direct statement about this issue.

However, it is important for us to confirm that the Pure Land teaching they embraced was not at all "world-rejecting." They took a positive attitude toward the real life in this world. Honen said in one of his Dharma talks as follows:

We should live our lives in this world in such a way that we can say the nembutsu easily. We should reject and discard anything that comes in the way of our nembutsu life... Everything we do relating to our clothing, food, and housing is a supportive act for our nembutsu life. By this I mean that in order that we can successfully attain birth in the Pure Land, every aspect of life is a supportive act for the nembutsu. Our bodies are dear to us even though they commit offences that lead us to the three evil realms. Then we should even more nourish and take good care of our bodies that enable us to say the nembutsu as the essential act leading to birth. If we try to satisfy our bodies' needs without thinking that all worldly acts should be supportive acts for the nembutsu, they become acts leading us to the three evil realms. If we try to satisfy our bodies's needs so that we can say the nembutsu leading to the birth in the Pure Land, those acts will become supportive acts for birth.⁸

This means that Honen positively recognized every aspect of our worldly acts as supportive acts for birth in the Pure Land. They certainly exclude those acts that are connected with the five fundamental precepts for Buddhists, that is, abstention from killing, stealing, engaging in illicit sexual relations, telling lies and drinking intoxicating beverages. Therefore, engaging in armed conflict is naturally not considered as supportive acts for the nembutsu.

Shinran, in one of his letters, stated as follows:

Since the prohibition of the nembutsu [in the past] led to the arising of disturbances in society, on this occasion I hope that everyone will, deeply entrusting themselves to the nembutsu and firmly embracing prayers [for the peace] of the world in their hearts, together say the nembutsu.

... In the final analysis, it would be splendid if not only you, but all people who say the nembutsu do so, with no thoughts of themselves, for the sake of the imperial court and for the sake of the people of the country. Those who feel uncertain of birth should say the nembutsu aspiring first for their own birth. Those who feel that their own birth is completely settled should, mindful of the Buddha's benevolence, hold the nembutsu in their hearts and say it to respond in gratitude to that benevolence, with the wish, "May there be peace in the world, and may the Buddha's teaching spread!" Please consider this carefully.⁹

In this passage, Shinran attributes the arising of disturbances in society to the misgovernment by the ruling class that manifested in the form of the oppression of the nembutsu. He further makes it clear that the nembutsu-centered life does not mean indifference to society, but active concern for the prosperity of the country and for the happiness of other people. Entrusting ourselves to the Primal Vow entails a degree of selflessness and of compassion for other people. Therefore, the "wish" for the peace in the world mentioned in the above passage involves some positive efforts to achieve that goal, even if it means paying more conscientious attention to our daily work than before our awakening to the Buddha's benevolence.

In another letter, Shinran says, "Signs of long years of saying the nembutsu and aspiring for birth can be seen in the change of heart that had been bad and in the deep warmth for friends and fellow-practicers; this is the sign of rejecting the world. You should understand this fully."¹⁰ The phrase "the sign of rejecting the world" contains dual meaning: one of dissociating ourselves from seeking fame and worldly gains and the other of making efforts to live our lives as respectable persons in society. Thus, in Shinran's thought, creation of peace is not separate from deepening our understanding of the teaching and living the nembutsu life. Creation of peace is also closely connected with doing our daily work to help ourselves as well as our neighbors. Shinran is telling us that we should engage in our daily

activities with the wish for the prosperity of society and happiness of the fellow beings with whom we share life.

8. Conclusion

In the foregoing discussion, I have tried to propose that for Shin Buddhists, cessation of armed conflict and creation of peace originate from awakening to the benevolence of Amida Buddha and living the nembutsu life. More generally, this means realization of the preciousness of life and interdependence of all human lives. On the level of ethics and morality, we are advised to live with minimum concern for our own gains and with much care and respect for our neighbors.

However, with regard to the issue of war and peace, the most important thing is completely discarding the thought of using arms and armed forces as an alternative means for solving international disputes. When those who are in the government leadership as well as the majority of the world population agree on this point and attempt to solve differences by respectful discussion and negotiation, the world will be on its way to establishing positive peace. This may sound like a dream story, but we Buddhists are in the position to propose this ideal to the entire world.

[1] David P. Barash, *Introduction to Peace Studies: The Meaning of Peace* Edited and annotated by Kyoko Okumoto and Aiko Saito. Tokyo: Eihosha, 2001

[2] SUGANUMA Akira, *Buddha to sono deshi, 89 no monogatari, or Buddha and His Disciples, 89 Stories.* p. 50. Kyoto: Hozokan, 1990.

[3] *Buddha Saigo no Tabi, or The Last Journey of the Buddha*, translated from Pali into Japanese and annotated by NAKAMURA Hajime. pp. 9-16. (A Japanese translation of Mahapari-nibbana-suttanta) Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1991.

[4] *The Edicts of Asoka*, translated and edited by N.A. Nikam and Richard McKeon. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1966.

[5] *Jodo Shinshu Seiten, or Jodo Shinshu Scriptures.* pp. 1433-1438. Translated by Arai from the original Japanese into English.

[6] Ditto, pp.49, 50.

[7] Ditto, p. 73.

[8] *Shinshu Shogyo Zensho, Vol. IV.* pp. 683, 684. Translated by Arai.

[9] *The Collected Works of Shinran, Vol. I.* p. 560. Slightly revised by Arai.

[10] Ditto, p. 561.