

Buddhism and Violence: Roots of “religious” conflicts in Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Southern Thailand

By Dennis Tan Chun Yee

Introduction

On July 1, 2014, riots broke out in Mandalay, Myanmar’s second largest city, claiming the lives of two people as well as causing injuries to many others.¹ The riot also led to the destruction of numerous Muslim houses and businesses. Many eyewitnesses reported that such violence was started by news of a Buddhist woman being raped by a Muslim man which later turned out to be false.² The Western media such as *Time* magazine claimed that prominent monks such as U Wirathu are the sole reason for such violent outbreaks as they spread the hatred of Muslims through their sermons.³ They are not wrong though, as in one of his sermons he mentioned that there is a “Muslim conspiracy” to conquer Myanmar through economic exploitation and interfaith marriages.⁴ Meanwhile in Southern Thailand, the ongoing conflict between the state and Muslim insurgents have led to the rapid militarization of Buddhism in the country. Manifestations for such militarization can be seen by the rise of a unit of “military monks” that conduct covert operations in the deep South.⁵ Furthermore, if one were to look at the past conflicts between the Tamil terrorist group, Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), and the Sri Lankan government, there are stories of how mass sermons

¹ Matthew J. Walton and Susan Hayward, “Contesting Buddhist Narratives: Democratization, Nationalism, and Communal Violence in Myanmar,” *East West Center*, Washington, DC (2014), 8.

² *Ibid.*, 8.

³ Hannah Beech, “The Face of Buddhist Terror,” *Time Magazine*, July 1 2013.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁵ Michael Jerryson, “Militarizing Buddhism: Violence in Southern Thailand,” in *Buddhist Warfare*, ed. Michael Jerryson and Mark Juergensmeyer. (New York: Oxford University, 2010), 184.

were conducted by monks for soldiers in the Sri Lankan army before they set out to the battlefield.⁶

These stories express a sharp contradiction between two opposing forces: Buddhism and violence. How could a religion that is well-known for its teachings to propagate peace and compassion towards others be associated with war and hatred? It is excusable for lay Buddhists to commit such acts of hatred given that they are still practising the path to enlightenment. But it is perplexing to hear stories of monks, being ordained with the duty to propagate the Dharma, associating themselves with violence as well. In this essay, I attempt to resolve this puzzle by demonstrating that according to the Buddhist canonical scriptures, the Buddha, though did advocate self-defence in some circumstances, still viewed it as a necessary evil given that committing any act of violence is an obstacle to one's path to liberation.⁷ Hence, Buddhism is not entirely responsible for these violent conflicts. I argue that the causes of conflicts are based on one's economic grievances, ethnicity and national identities. In order to support such a view, cases from Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Southern Thailand will be used to provide a comprehensive picture over the topic.

Buddhist canonical scriptures on violence

There are accounts in the Suttas in which the Buddha mentions about the necessity of violence in the form of self-defence. The definition of self-defence essentially means to produce a counteroffensive act that defends one's property, oneself and the well-being of another from physical danger. This would mean that there are some verses in the Buddhist canonical scriptures that support any actions that protects oneself or others from a potentially

⁶ Ibid., 158.

⁷ P.D. Premasiri, "A 'Righteous War' in Buddhism," in *Buddhism, Conflict and Violence in Modern Sri Lanka*, ed. Mahinda Deegalle. (New York: Routledge, 2006), 85.

dangerous threat. For instance, in the Cakkavatti Sihanada Sutta (The Lion's Roar on the Turning of Wheel) of the long discourses of the Buddha, the Buddha actually allowed the king to retain an army in order to bring security for his people from internal and external threats.⁸ This can be seen in how the Buddha gave advice to the king named Dalhanemi that he "should establish guard, ward and protection according to Dhamma for (his) own household, (his) troops in the army... (and to) let no crime prevail in (his) kingdom."⁹

However, the Buddha mentions that such acts of self-defence, which necessitates the use of violence, would not enable one to fulfil the Buddhist goal of liberation. Even a nation were to engage in violence for a righteous cause it will still be an obstacle for its people to achieve the path to *nibanna*.¹⁰ It is inconceivable for humans to decide what is "right or wrong, just and unjust" while they are being shrouded in the defilements of greed, hatred and delusion.¹¹ A Buddhist path to liberation requires one to be eliminated from these defilements. Thus, the psychology of violence is antithetical to the psychology of Buddhism.

An apt story of a war between the righteous celestial beings, the *devas* and the unrighteous *asuras* highlights the Buddha's view of righteous war or self-defence as a barrier to one's path to liberation.¹² When Sakka, the most devout Buddhist deity that led the battlefront against the evil *asuras*, was experiencing joy when he defeated the latter, the Buddha states that such "joy" is not conducive for one's path to liberation. True joy only happens when it "leads to disenchantment with all worldly things and to the ultimate peace of *nibbana*."¹³

Violence is a necessary evil that must be applied to certain contexts such as defending a city from external or internal threats; as well as, being used as a form of self-defence like killing a

⁸ Basic Buddhism.org "The Lion's Roar on the Turning of the Wheel (Cakkavatti-Sihanada Sutta)," *Basic Buddhism.org*, <http://www.basicbuddhism.org/index.cfm?GPID=29>. Digha Nikaya 26

⁹ Basic Buddhism.org "The Lion's Roar on the Turning of the Wheel (Cakkavatti-Sihanada Sutta)," *Basic Buddhism.org*, <http://www.basicbuddhism.org/index.cfm?GPID=29>. Digha Nikaya 26, vv.5.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 85.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 82.

¹² *Ibid.*, 83.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 83.

serial murderer. The Buddha, however, still insists that the use of peaceful means to settle disputes is of an utmost importance in times of crisis.¹⁴ For it is with such actions of peace that one could attain enlightenment.

The role of ethnicity

If the Buddha's teachings states that self-defence is an obstacle for the path to enlightenment, it seems that teachings of Buddhism is not entirely to blame for the conflicts for those three countries. Violence could also occur in these countries with escalating tensions between ethnic groups in a particular region. An ethnic conflict could result if minority groups have faced centuries of oppression under an ethnic majority. The souring of ethnic relations happen when minority groups have their cultural and language rights removed from them. Furthermore, the ethnic majority would support policies that discriminates these groups such as citizenship rights which in turn affects their chances of getting adequate healthcare benefits, housing and employment.

For instance, such forms of discrimination can be seen in Sri Lanka in which the ruling Sinhalese government established a policy known as "Sinhala only" in 1956, making Sinhala the sole official language for the country.¹⁵ This is problematic as language is crucial for a person's chance to gain employment. Since language is a medium of instruction, the Tamils will be at a disadvantage in gaining access to jobs in the public and private sector if the official language is based on the Sinhala majority.¹⁶ Thus, a major reason for the violence to erupt in the late 1950s stems from the issue with language and the pernicious economic consequences that affects the lives of millions of Tamils in the country.

¹⁴ Ibid., 84.

¹⁵ Richard Gombrich, "Is the Sri Lankan War a Buddhist Fundamentalism?," in *Buddhism, Conflict and Violence in Modern Sri Lanka*, ed. Mahinda Deegalle. (New York: Routledge, 2006), 26.

¹⁶ Ibid., 26.

Indologist Richard Gombrich mentions that those involved in the Sri Lankan civil conflict do not fight for religion at all. The LTTE do not identify themselves as Hindus but rather “appear to be largely secular.”¹⁷ Similarly, while Buddhism plays a crucial role in the lives of the Sinhalese majority, there is nearly no one in the ethnic group that had said that such conflict was fought for the sake of Buddhism, instead “it is being fought for the Sinhalese.”¹⁸

One could also say the same for the violent conflicts in the Rakhine state of Myanmar in which the ethnic tensions escalated between the Rohingya Muslim minority and the Burman Buddhist majority. Roots of these tensions could be traced to decades of repression on the Muslims by the Burman majority since the colonial period as they were viewed as foreign entities sharing no common history with the Burmans.¹⁹ Such xenophobic reaction led to the riots of 1938 which targeted largely many Muslims.²⁰ Things start to take a turn for the worse when the Burmese military took control of the central government in 1962 as “religious freedom for non-Buddhists was severely limited.”²¹ Christians and Muslims were met with many difficulties in constructing buildings to carry out their religious activities and even worse, Muslims were excluded from the state military, effecting their chances of employment.²² Therefore, it is with these elements of repression that sow the seeds of tensions and mistrust between the Rohingya Muslims and the Burman ethnic group in present-day Myanmar.

Conflation between religion and state

¹⁷ Ibid., 27.

¹⁸ Ibid., 27.

¹⁹ Matthew J. Walton and Susan Hayward “Contesting Buddhist Narratives,” 6.

²⁰ Ibid., 6.

²¹ Ibid., 6.

²² Ibid., 6.

Apart from conflicts due to ethnic differences, violence between ethno-religious groups also erupt in countries when one's religious and national identity overlaps. When religion and state conflates itself, the former becomes the sole marker of what means for one to be a citizen in that particular country. This creates problems when religious minorities are present within the nation. They will be seen as foreign entities in the eyes of the majority deserving to be discriminated when they are viewed as a threat to the majority's religious and economic interests. Hence, it is with such sentiments that develop the tensions between these ethno-religious groups.

Political scientists Matthew J. Walton and Susan Hayward mention that it is prevalent for political and religious elites in the Theravada Buddhist-influenced kingdoms to “cultivate a worldview in which the health of the religion and the strength of the polity were seen as interdependent.”²³ To Theravada Buddhists, to ensure teachings of the Buddha remains intact or “healthy” as a moral force in the country requires them to “defend” the *sasana*. The *sasana* in Pali refers “broadly to the Buddhist religion” but it also extends its meaning to “the entire Buddhist community (of monks, nuns, laypeople) and the Buddha's teachings themselves.”²⁴ The health of the *sasana* is crucial for Buddhists, as without it, enlightenment would not be achievable.²⁵

To put into the context of Myanmar, defending the nation does not only mean ensuring that the state remains well protected but it also calls for state leaders to “create an environment conducive to the well-being of the religion.”²⁶ Hence, the conflation of state and religion in Myanmar has some negative consequences for religious minorities such the Rohingya Muslims. For instance, U Wirathu tries to justify the discrimination of the Rohingya Muslims as part of his need to defend the *sasana*. He, for example, preaches that Islam is slowly

²³ Ibid., 21.

²⁴ Ibid., 21.

²⁵ Ibid., 21.

²⁶ Ibid., 21.

dominating the influence of Buddhism in the country given that “funds used to forcibly convert Buddhist women come from Saudi oil money.”²⁷ Such sermons produced a narrative among the Burman majority that in order to be a loyal citizen, one has to defend the *sasana* which in turn necessitates the continuous discrimination of the Rohingya Muslims.

On a similar note, the conflation of state and religion is also manifested when monks are being incorporated into the state. Religious scholar Michael Jerryson points out that in Thailand the representation of the Sangha is being closely tied to Thai’s national identity.²⁸ Such intimate relationship between the order of monks and the state could be seen when monks are recruited by the state, more specifically by the order of Queen Sirikit, to sustain the propagation of the Dharma in those Southern provinces as a response to the rise of extremist Islamic sentiments over there.²⁹

However, violent consequences will happen when monks are symbolized or politicized as a sacred figure of Thai national identity. If those Thai monks are being attacked or targeted by any assailant (regardless if it is a Muslim or not), it will cause an outcry on a national scale, triggering many Thai Buddhists to defend the harsh policies against the Muslims in the South. For example, many Thai Buddhists ignored the localized context of the murder of monks in the district of Maikaen in 2004. Those monks were killed by local drug dealers for not paying the drugs they had consumed.³⁰ Instead it blew out of proportions with many accusing the Muslims for those killings, thus further fuelling the conflict in the Southern provinces.³¹

Class conflicts and economic inequality

²⁷ Ibid., 21.

²⁸ Michael Jerryson, *Buddhist Fury: Religion and Violence in Southern Thailand* (New York: Oxford University, 2011), 70.

²⁹ Ibid., 66.

³⁰ Ibid., 74.

³¹ Ibid., 74.

Another key source of conflict or violence could also rest on the economic grievances that are prevalent among individuals and communities within a country. One ethno-religious group might be perceived to have or have a disproportionate amount of wealth compared to the other. This leads to much resentment and jealousy for the latter as they could not achieve similar opportunities to amass their wealth compared to those “foreign entities”. This in turn would further worsen tensions between these ethno-religious groups if such grievances are left unchecked.

For example, in Myanmar, the Burman majority held a popular perception that the Muslims are wealthy and leading a privileged lifestyle as they are historically part of the mercantile class.³² This widely held belief is reinforced by many Muslims holding professions such as businessmen, shopkeepers and money changers.” Thus, resentment arises among the Burmans as they are jealous that do could not perform well economically compared to the Muslims.³³

There are some instances, however, when violence or riots that erupt in cities cut across ethnic differences. For example in Colombo, Sri Lanka’s largest city, reports of both Sinhalese and Tamil perpetrators were involved in looting and arson during the riots of July 1983.³⁴ There were reports of how gangs stopped and destroyed many cars without enquiring whether the owner was a Tamil or a Sinhalese.³⁵ The violent looting and arson could be a result of the huge poverty rate in Colombo as the city contains large areas of slums surrounding the rich communities. Years of anger and envy have been building up among the poor culminating to this period of violence when the opportunity arises. Therefore, it is over-

³² Matthew J. Walton and Susan Hayward “Contesting Buddhist Narratives,” 14.

³³ Stephen Gray and Josefine Roos, “Intercommunal Violence in Myanmar: Risk and Opportunities for International Assistance,” *Adapt Research and Consulting*, (April 2014), http://www.themimu.info/sites/themimu.info/files/documents/Report_Intercommunal_Violence_Adapt-MercyCorps_Apr2014.pdf, 9.

³⁴ Gombrich, “Is the Sri Lankan War a Buddhist Fundamentalism?,” 29.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 29.

simplistic to paint the riots in Sri Lanka as an ethno-religious conflict when factors such as economic grievances are not accounted for.

Conclusion

To sum up, I have shown that it is simplistic to view the violent conflicts in Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Southern Thailand as a battle over one's religious identity. Though religion has a part to play in these conflicts, we have to look at other root causes for the escalation of tensions between these ethno-religious groups to get a complete understanding. I have also brought up the textual evidences from the Pali Buddhist texts to highlight that the act of any form of violence in Buddhism, regardless if such actions are righteous or not, will be an obstacle to the path of liberation. As such, it is ultimately problematic for Buddhists if they follow suit with the sermons of monks who justify violence in defence of the *sasana*.

The rise of the new-atheist movement and Islamic terrorism in this day and age have paint religion in a bad light. It is then no surprise that Buddhism has been conflated with violence by the media when *Time* magazine labelled Wirathu, as a Buddhist terrorist.³⁶ Though I am not denying that the prominent Buddhist monk is partly complicit in the rise of ethnic violence in Myanmar and the writer did not depict Buddhism as a violent religion, there is a fear that labelling him as the "face of Buddhist Terror" would perpetuate the misunderstanding that Buddhism is a cause of violence in the country. I hope that my essay would dispel such misconceptions for the situation is far more complex than any of us would think.

³⁶ Hannah Beech, "The Face of Buddhist Terror," *Time Magazine*, July 1 2013.