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## Peace: A Buddhist Metanarrative

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**Abstract:** Buddhism is properly regarded as a religion of peace. Peace is a supreme value in the teaching of Siddhartha Gautama. Siddhartha Gautama, revered by the people of his time as the Buddha, namely, the Awakened One, spoke of peace to his followers. His words have been compiled into various works, the Sutta, Vinaya and Abhidhamma Pitaka, that make up the Pali Canon. The contents of the Sutta Pitaka are discourses or sermons of the Buddha. In order to render the discourses intelligible for those far removed in time and to prevent misunderstanding of the message on account of unorthodox exegesis, orthodox explications and glosses were written. They were mostly exegetical commentaries. The commentaries on the Abhidhamma Pitaka in particular highlight the universal nature (*paramatthadesana*) of the Master's teaching. In this essay we seek to explore the nature of the Buddhist discourse on peace. It is our presupposition that it is a metadiscourse or metanarrative. Its insight is that a human person is peace by his/her very nature. The Buddha came to this insight by his relentless search for the cause of suffering and violence in the world.

**Keywords:** *Paramatthadesana*, Abhidhamma, Siddhartha Gautama, Sutta Pitaka, *Buddhism*

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## Peace: A Buddhist Metanarrative

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### Introduction

Buddhism is properly regarded as a religion of peace. Peace is a supreme value in the teaching of Siddhartha Gautama. Siddhartha Gautama, revered by the people of his time as the Buddha, namely, the Awakened One, spoke of peace to his followers. His words have been compiled into various works, the Sutta, Vinaya and Abhidhamma Pitaka, that make up the Pali Canon. The contents of the Sutta Pitaka are discourses or sermons of the Buddha. In order to render the discourses intelligible for those far removed in time and to prevent misunderstanding of the message on account of unorthodox exegesis, orthodox explications and glosses were written. They were mostly exegetical commentaries. The commentaries on the Abhidhamma Pitaka in particular highlight the universal nature (*paramatthadesana*) of the Master's teaching. In this essay we seek to explore the nature of the Buddhist discourse on peace. It is our presupposition that it is a metadiscourse or metanarrative. Its insight is that a human person is peace by his/her very nature. The Buddha came to this insight by his relentless search for the cause of suffering and violence in the world.

### Nature of the Buddha's Discourse

The method of enquiry in the dispensation of the King of Dhamma (*Dhammarajassa sasane*) is characterized by *Pariyayabhasitam*, *Sandhayabhasitam* and *Sabhavabhasitam* in the introductory verses to the *Mendakapanna* in the *Milindapanna*. In his pedagogy his teachings were contextualized. *Pariyayabhasitam* are understood to be those expositions by the Master for the benefit of the one who has directly approached him. The *Sutta* literature is generally assigned to this group. *Sandhayabhasitam* are explanations enjoined on all. It refers to the common regulations in the *Vinaya* literature. Whenever an opportunity (*sandhi*) offered itself, the Teacher spoke what was appropriate for the occasion and enjoined it on all. *Sabhavabhasitam* means teachings that pertain to the nature of all. These teachings are compiled in the Abhidhamma literature. They seem more abstract in their bid to interpret the teaching with a more universal outlook.

The universalist dimension of Buddhist ethics in its psycho-noetical foundation is ascertained to be non-sectarian. Its starting point is in the experi-

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ence of human beings. All experience is understood to be rooted in the very nature (*sabhava*) of being (Durant, 1927: 80-90). In the history of ethical philosophy, this is an entelecheic perspective in the Orient different from the teleological standpoint. The Abhidhamma philosophy, thus, distinguishes itself as the *Paramatthadesana*, teaching on the ultimate meaning of life and reality. *Paramatthadesana* is generally rendered as 'the instruction in the ultimate nature of things'. *Parama* is the superlative form of *para*, meaning beyond, highest, excellent. It points to the universal principle to analyse human reality. *Attha* conveys the sense, meaning, denotation and significance of Dhamma. The Buddha's role is referred to as *atthassa ninnetar* (M.1.111), bringer of the good; bearer of meaning or value. Literally, it should mean one who leads to meaning, to the ultimate truth. The Buddha then is one who leads to the highest good, to the ultimate realities. He does so through his teaching, *desana*, which is *Dhammadesana*. Thus the discourse of the Buddha can be a metadiscourse, a metanarrative. One of the post-modern thinkers, Jean-Francois Lyotard (1984, xxiii-xxiv) explains post-modern and metadiscourse as:

I will use the term *modern* to designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse . . . making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth. Simplifying to the extreme, I define *post-modern* as incredulity towards metanarratives.

The Buddha's discourse on peace, the concern of the essay, could be con-

sidered a grand narrative. As seen in the preceding discussion the discourse of the Buddha was to bring into focus meaning, value in reference to the human context. It was to suggest the way the Buddha led others to peace and even indicated how all human beings could attain to the ultimate peace (*nibbana*). There seems to be an appeal for peace as a value in a world at war with its understanding of the other and its relationship with the other than oneself. It may be gainsaid that the Buddha was inclined to the kind of incredulity referred to by Jean-Francois Lyotard (MacQueen: 1995) about metanarrative, particularly peace.

### The Buddha's language of peace

From India, the land of its origin, the message of the Buddha spread to different parts of the Eastern hemisphere and continues to do so in the West in our own days. It is, without doubt, a peaceful entry into different cultures. J.B.Pratt studied the peaceful spread of Buddhism and suggested insightfully that Buddhism is remarkable for its elasticity and adaptability:

Buddhism has been emphatically a missionary religion. Its transplanting to new lands has been accomplished never through conquest or through migration but solely by the spread of ideas. Yet almost everywhere it has gone it has so completely adapted itself to the new people and the new land as to become practically a national religion (1928: 719).

Religions of Indian origin manifest similar dispositions of peace and non-violence. With David J. Kalupahana (1993: 115) it is rightly

helpful “... to examine the theoretical underpinnings or this enormously significant practical achievement” of Buddhism in its missionary pilgrimage to other parts of the world. Our author seeks the theoretical underpinnings of “the philosophical foundation of peaceful coexistence and critical tolerance”.

At times the language of the Buddhist discourse on peaceful coexistence and critical tolerance may have a ring of negativity to it. The term for peace is *arana*. It is to be found in the *Aranavibhanga Sutta*, the “Discourse on the analysis of peace” (M.3.235). The term seems to suggest a negative nuance, namely, *arana* as non-conflict. Similarly, the attainment of complete liberation is known as *nibbana*, the cooling of desire, passion. The sense of conflict embodies a struggle within oneself as well as with others. One’s views of reality, whether it is permanent or impermanent; whether eternalist or annihilationist, should they be absolutized may lead to conflict and cause disruption. The idea of non-violence is central to Buddhism. It is more a deep sense of respect for life. Should there be non-compliance with these principles, though expressed in some negative tone or nuance, by individuals or communities, the result may turn out to be an obstacle to people living in peace together, peaceful coexistence or critical tolerance.

In a more positive expression, Jayatillake has rightly pointed out that “[p]eace constitutes a central concept in Buddhism” (Dissanayake 1983: 8). So much so that the Buddha was regarded as the King of Peace (*santi-raya*). After his Awakening he began communicat-

ing his peace. His was a purposeful communication to initiate others in the way of peace and liberation that would lead to peaceful coexistence. The Buddha was concerned about communicating the ultimate meaning of reality. In the *Dhammapada* (Radhakrishnan 1984: 93) we have two valuable verses to highlight the communication of meaning to bring peace to the hearer:

Better than a thousand utterances composed of meaningless words is one sensible word on hearing which one becomes peaceful (8:100).

Better than a thousand verses composed of meaningless words is one word of a verse on hearing which one becomes peaceful (8:101).

Evidently the goal of one’s communication is to bring peace to the other, the hearer. Then peaceful coexistence and harmony are distinct possibilities. This was the goal of the Buddha’s discourse. It manifests the metanarrative character of the Buddha’s teaching.

The initial reluctance of the Buddha to undertake a metadiscourse after his Awakening is quickly overcome by his decision to share his *dhamma* with the five ascetics. In the “Discourse on the setting in motion the wheel of righteousness” (*Dhammacakkapavattana Sutta* - S.5) he advocated the Middle Path to attain the ultimate peace, liberation. The Middle Path is an explicit appeal to a grand narrative concerning the human quest. It is set in the context of the two extreme forms of individualistic behaviour of the self-indulgent materialist on the one hand and of the self-mortified, life-negating, ascetic on the other. The Buddha opines that the nature of their discourse is painful, not worthy of human beings and incapable

of achieving the ultimate liberating peace which is the yearning of the human heart. He advised those ascetics to avoid the extremes and follow the Middle Path which brings insight, knowledge, peace and full enlightenment.

## The Search of the Buddha

The *dhamma* of the Buddha highlighted the deeper conflict of suffering in the world. His quest was to understand the tendency in humans to disrupt the peace of our nature – the inner harmony. Humans also manifest the inclination to cause disharmony in human relationships. There is a trend in the textbooks on Buddhism to advocate the idea that Siddhartha Gautama's renunciation of the world was because he saw four visions, namely, of a man feeble with old age; of another worn out by illness; of a corpse being carried to the funeral pyre; and a peaceful mendicant. The first three are portrayed as images of suffering and the last as an image of something sublime. However, in the early Pali texts (Hazra 1984: 34; Ambedkar 1974: I, 14-16) present Siddhartha Gautama as opposed to war among the Sakyas and Koliyas over irrigation rights. His role as a peacemaker is seen more in averting the conflict. He was opposed to any war for thereby seeds are sown for other wars. The outcome of any war is that 'a slayer gets a slayer in his turn; the conquerer gets one who conquers him; a man who despoils is despoiled in his turn'. Such an opposition of the young Siddhartha was not acceptable to the minister of Siddhartha's father. Since the young Siddhartha would not relent his position, it was suggested that he goes into exile

till the issue of irrigation rights is resolved by war to be waged on the Koliyas by the Sakyas.

Mara, the prince of evil, had tried in vain to entice the aspirant Siddhartha from his search for the cause of pain and suffering by tempting him with the offer of a great empire 'without conquering, without causing pain, devoted to justice' (S. 4, 20). The latter resolutely declined the offer in order to avoid causing any inadvertent aggression (Gensichen 1987: 80).

In the final days of the Buddha's life there is another incident which brings us face to face with the Master and his teaching on peace. King Ajatasattu of Magadha plans a military campaign against the neighbouring states of the Vajjians. The latter were a republican confederation. He asks the Buddha to predict the outcome of such a campaign. The Buddha points to the democratic ways among the Vajjians. So long as the Vajjians continue to hold their regular public meetings, take decisions in consensus, and respect their institutions and traditions, they will not only survive but prosper. Such is the response of the Buddha. He enjoins the Buddhist Sangha to do likewise and prosper (Ling 1981: 144-150). It is incidents of this type that aid our understanding of the Buddha's path. It is the issue of war and peace that led him into exile. The exile became an occasion to search for an understanding of war and peace. It is the story of Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha's search for the metadiscourse on the cause of suffering and what might in fact guarantee peace among humans.

## The Middle Path of Peace

In the *Dhammacakkapavattana Sutta* the middle path is recommended to be followed in order to overcome the cause of suffering. The middle path declared by the Buddha in the first discourse is of universal significance. Here he lays bare the compulsions of the human spirit and suggests a way to overcome them. The way is the Middle Path which is eightfold. Often human conflict is due to the lack of knowledge about the true nature of reality. He points to a human tendency to regard things and states of becoming as permanent. They are in fact impermanent, subject to change. Human greed, anger, tension, conflict and violence lead to disharmony in relationships. They disturb peace within the human network of relationships. Such networks could be between nation-states too as he himself had been a witness to. The presence of such vitiated disharmony is the seedbed of wars, then and now. The antidote to such war mongering and harbouring of violence is to know the truth of reality. Right understanding deals with the fact that every state of mind and feeling is subject to change (*anicca*). It does not belong to any permanent self. Neither does the world we live in belong to us nor are we its masters, possessors [*anatta* is rightly understood as *na'ham* (not I); and *na mama* (not my)], however much we may desire it to be so. In short, right understanding awakens in humans an awareness of the nature of their self and the nature of their relationships.

The ethics of the Middle path, central to the Buddhist metadiscourse, prohibits acts of violence and retaliation. After having understood reality for what

it truly is, humans are encouraged to entertain the right type of thoughts, namely, thoughts of benevolence and compassion worthy of them. In elucidating on moral action the Buddha laid down five precepts (*sikkapadas*). The first enjoins: "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" (Saddhatissa 1970: 88). Even one's livelihood is to be attained only by honest means and never by harming others. An excellent analysis of non-conflict is provided in the *Aranavibhanga-sutta*. Non-conflict is paraphrased rightly as peace by Kalupahana (1993: 118).

Buddhist ethics of peace and non-violence has been brilliantly portrayed by Emperor Ashoka (273-232 BCE) in his rock edicts. Those edicts announced the state policy of Ashoka after he accepted Buddhism. He exhorted the citizens to live together in peace and harmony. A. L Basham (1974: 55) observes accurately that the humanitarian ethics of Buddhism was modified by Emperor Ashoka to 'gain the moral leadership of the whole civilized world'. In the reign of Ashoka was seen a new orientation for people of different religions and creeds to live together in peace. The notion of such an empire was the result of the understanding from the early Buddhist texts wherein the Buddha was regarded as the *Dhamma-raja*, the king of Dhamma; *Chattapatti*, the Emperor; and *Dhammarajassa-sasana*, the reign of the king of Dhamma.

Peaceful coexistence in the domain of the Emperor or elsewhere would be-

come a success story if only the four social emotions, the climax of the Buddha's teaching on harmony in society, were adopted by the citizens. They are *metta* (loving kindness), *karuna* (compassion), *mudita* (sympathetic joy), and *upekkha* (equanimity). The cultivation of these social emotions, known in Buddhism as *Brahmaviharas* (the sublime states of relationship), would enhance harmonious living. *Metta* is the friendly disposition of one's being toward everyone and everything. *Karuna* is the frame of mind that understands the condition in which others are, their suffering, and helps them to overcome suffering. *Mudita* is the participative joy. It is a reciprocal emotion. One shares in the joy of others and brings joy and happiness to others. *Upekkha* is the sense of equanimity. A well-integrated person has the ability to encounter with equipoise joy and sorrow, success and failure, triumph and failure. Thus the *Brahmaviharas* present us a paradigm for social harmony and peaceful living.

## Peace, a Metanarrative in Buddhism

Buddhism as it spread through the sub-continent raised the discourse about the nature of humans and human predicaments to a universal level from the earlier ritualistic perspective of birth or caste-based stratification. The Hindu ethos in which Siddhartha Gautama was brought up had its areas of nonintelligibility. The inequality of humans, and the lack of fellowship could not stand the test of rational investigation. The latter was employed by Siddhartha Gautama to understand the

social ethos of his day. By employing a criterion of verification about the manner of the birth of children, of the high or of the low, through the birth channel of a mother, the Buddha demythologized the Hindu notion that the Brahmins are born from the mouth of Brahman and so on. All humans are born the same way, with the exception of contemporary caesarian procedure.

The early Buddhists were convinced of the fact that the phenomenal personality was in a constant state of flux, and that there was no eternal soul in the individual. On the other hand the perfected being had reached *nibbana*, and nothing could be meaningfully predicated about him. The clear concept of the constitution of a person among the Buddhists is that he/she is essentially *nibbana*, ultimate peace. Besides early Buddhism understood that a person is also a *pudgala*, a psycho-physical entity (the five *skandhas*). When the psycho-physical personality is analyzed, the original *nibbana* is realized. 'Physical forms are like foam; sensations like bubbles; perceptions like mirage; mental constructs like the flimsy trunk of a banana tree; and consciousness like phantoms'. This view of the Buddha is eminently apophatic. De Smet has insightfully appreciated that "he (the Buddha) stands forever as a warning against any facile solidification of man according to the constructs of his desires and instinctual drives. Only the ego belongs to the realm of naming, the true person cannot be reached by the modes of speech" (De Smet 1974: 64). The way to the realization of the ultimate nature of a person, namely, sublime peace, is the eightfold middle path,

particularly the five precepts (*pancasila*). They awaken in a person the meaning of life and instruct one to desist:

- from taking life;
- from speaking contrary to the truth;
- from the abuse of sexual relationship;
- from stealing the goods of others; and
- from using intoxicants.

In spite of the precepts, humans can follow a path of extremes in the matter of each of them. Such a way of life can lead to disharmony in society and disrupt peaceful living. Life is an inviolable value in the teaching of the Buddha. Violence to life, in any form, human or otherwise, is a violation of peace. So is the violation of the other precepts. On account of the significance for peace of each of the precepts, Buddhism teaches us to uphold non-violence. Buddhism believes that there is a just moral order in the universe. Humans reap the way they sow. If they sow goodness they reap goodness, and if they sow evil they reap evil (S. I, 227). If they sow peace, they would only be true to their ultimate nature. Thus, they would uphold the just moral order in the universe to ensure peace and peaceful living (De Silva 1989: 39-40).

## Conclusion

In this essay we explored the nature of the Buddhist discourse on peace. Our presupposition that the nature of the Buddhist discourse on peace is a metadiscourse or metanarrative has been investigated on the basis of the Buddhist canonical texts and the commentaries. Whenever an opportunity offered itself, the Teacher spoke what was appropriate for the occasion. The issue in hand

was addressed to the very nature of human beings. The relentless search for the cause of suffering brought him the insight that the nature of human beings is sublime peace but we have lost sight of it in the following of various opinions and lifestyles, often drawn to their extremes. These block our vision of our true nature. We tend to lose sight of what we are and what we ought to be, namely, persons who are peace. The middle path is the way the Buddha taught all those who sought peace in this life.

The universalist dimension of Buddhist ethics in its psycho-noetical foundation is also ascertained to be non-sectarian. Its starting point is in the experience of human beings. All experience is understood to be rooted in the very nature of being. Such is the entelecheic perspective of the oriental ethics. The discourse of the Buddha is, thus, a teaching on the ultimate meaning of life and reality. The true test of the Buddha's teaching on peace was proved to be a fruitful state policy by Emperor Ashoka nearly two centuries after the Master.

We discussed the Buddha's discourse on peace as a grand narrative to bring into focus meaning, value in reference to the human context. In the sharing of his insight he led others to peace and even indicated how all human beings could attain to the ultimate peace (*nibbana*). There is an appeal for peace as a value in a world at war with its understanding of the other and its relationship with others, the entire universe. The Buddha ardently carried on a metadiscourse on peace after his enlightenment. His language of peace was



apophatic at times to bring home to us      mystery of the human person as well as  
that we have to be humble before the      his/her ultimate experience of peace.

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(Pali texts referred to are from Pali Text Society, London.)

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