

Facing Conflict with Nonviolent Weapons: The Shared Qualities of Buddhism and Nonviolent Struggle

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Introduction

The world is at a breaking point. Violent conflicts between nations have erupted in Europe and the Middle East, while Asian populations face the ongoing threat of authoritarian regimes. Although peace may be achieved through conflict resolution and compromise, some conflicts are acute, “in which fundamental issues are, or are believed to be, at stake.... not deemed suitable for resolution by any methods that involve compromise” (Sharp, 2006, p.1-2). Issues related to territorial sovereignty, human rights, human dignity, and freedom are just a few examples of acute conflicts.

When faced with these types of conflicts, populations – having exhausted all other options- may feel trapped between passively accepting their fate or engaging in armed struggle. However, both choices fail to resolve conflicts. Passivity allows the injustice at the root of the conflict to continue, while violence only worsens the cycle of violence and suffering. Unless the causes of these conflicts are adequately addressed and people possess an effective technique to resolve these conflicts, then attempts to create ‘peace’ will likely fail. For Buddhists, who adhere to ahimsa (nonviolence), it is essential that they have an effective method to wage conflict which actively rejects the taking of human life.

Nonviolent struggle is this method. It is the strategic and collective use of nonviolent, non-institutional social and political actions (protests, strikes, boycotts, the creation of parallel institutions, etc.), which seek to empower groups and populations by reforming or removing existing political structures (Sharp, 2005) (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011). Although nonviolent struggle is mostly associated with M.K. Gandhi’s (and India’s) victory over British Colonialism, a great body of literature has emerged showing its effectiveness in a variety of different social and political conflicts. Nonviolent struggle has changed unjust laws, removed dictators, resisted foreign occupations, prevented coup d’etats, and has shown potential in repelling foreign invasions (Ackerman & DuVall, 2000).

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This form of political action is neither a kind of passivity nor cowardice, but an active method of struggle, employing “nonviolent weapons”, which requires participants to have courage, discipline, and the willingness to endure hardship – the same qualities necessary for soldiers in war (Gandhi, 1961, pp. 380-381) (Sharp, 2005, p. 242). Although it is commonly assumed that violence is more effective than nonviolence in achieving political change, a groundbreaking study (which analyzed 323 violent and nonviolent resistance campaigns between 1900 and 2006) concluded that “nonviolent resistance campaigns were nearly twice as likely to achieve full or partial success as their violent counterparts” (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011, p. 7). Nonviolent struggle empowers ordinary citizens and causes a broader distribution of power throughout society. This makes peaceful and democratic outcomes more likely than political violence, which often leads to centralization of power (Sharp, 2005, p. 427-428).

Buddhism and nonviolent struggle share powerful connections. The Buddha himself utilized nonviolent interventions against direct physical threats, including the enraged elephant Nālāgiri, the serial killer Aṅgulimāla, and even against the warmongering armies of Koliya and Kapilavatthu. In recent times, a movement known as “Engaged Buddhism” has encouraged Buddhist populations to merge spiritual practices with nonviolent social activism in democracies (King, 2009b, p.11). However, when faced with acute conflicts against authoritarian regimes (in Tibet, Vietnam, and Myanmar) Sally King concludes that “... there have been no successes, no victories in Buddhist nonviolent struggles” (King, 2009a, p.105). The reason for these failures is not because nonviolence is inherently weak or doesn’t work against authoritarian regimes, but because Buddhists may have attempted to employ nonviolent struggle without a clear understanding of how it works and how it relates to their own Buddhist teachings and practices. A major literature gap exists in that there has yet to be a cross-discipline study between Buddhism and nonviolent struggle which identifies their shared characteristics.

Methodology

This was a qualitative study which drew primarily from the four Nikāyas and the literature of nonviolent struggle. The objective was to identify qualities and factors which contribute to success for both the individual seeking nibbana (Buddhism) as well as the population seeking peace or democracy (nonviolent struggle). Qualities found in one discipline were cross-checked to see if they were also relevant in the other discipline. This comparison was not for intellectual purposes but practical ones: if Buddhists can cultivate those factors leading to success in nonviolent struggle which are already embedded in Buddhist teachings, then they may be more effective at engaging in conflict, seeking its resolution,

and creating peaceful outcomes. Of course, the limitation of such research is that it must be tested in real life conflicts.

Results and Discussion

While a discussion of every similarity is beyond the scope of this paper, this research identified seven factors which both Buddhism and nonviolent struggle recognize as contributing to success.

1. Unity: uniting groups without falling victim to internal disputes or external pressure.
2. Strategy: the ability to identify the problem, the causes of the problem, to select achievable goals, and to formulate a comprehensive plan to achieve these goals.
3. Maintaining Nonviolent Discipline: remaining nonviolent despite receiving violence or provocation.
4. Self-Reliance: relying on one's own efforts. Cultivating external help without being dependent on it.
5. Inclusivity: attracting a broad spectrum of members representing all aspects of society.
6. Adaptability: flexibly adjusting to new challenges, circumstances, and environments.
7. Humor: the ability to employ satire to reduce fear, demystify "all powerful" opponents, and point out the ridiculousness of certain beliefs and behaviors.

Conclusions

For Buddhists wishing to adhere to ahimsa, nonviolent struggle is a viable alternative to either passivity or armed struggle in resolving conflicts and generating lasting peace. Furthermore, the qualities necessary for success of this method (unity, strategy, self-reliance, etc.) are already embedded in Buddhist teachings and practices. Thus, Buddhists seeking conflict resolution through nonviolent means should become familiar with nonviolent struggle and continue to identify how their own spiritual practices can be adapted to suit this form of political struggle. Potential future studies might include 1) how the application of Dependent Origination to political structures might create a deeper understanding of how political power works (which would be essential to formulating a nonviolent strategy), and 2) how the democratic structure of

the Sangha could be adapted to improve the cohesion of social movements. If the Buddha can directly engage in nonviolent conflict with wild elephants and men, transforming them into friends (and arahants), then it is also possible that the effective use of nonviolent “weapons” by Buddhist populations can lead to conflict resolution, create lasting peace, and even transform dictatorships into free and vibrant societies.

Keywords: Acute Conflicts, Ahimsa, Armed struggle, Nonviolent Struggle

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