The Buddha is famous for having refused to take a position on many of the controversial issues of his day, such as whether the cosmos is finite or infinite, eternal or not. In fact, many people—both in his time and in ours—have assumed that he didn't take a firm position on any issue at all. Based on this assumption, some people have been exasperated with the Buddha, accusing him of being wishy-washy and indecisive, while others have been pleased, praising him for being tolerant and refreshingly free from ideas of right and wrong.

Both reactions, however, are misinformed. The early texts report that a group of wanderers, in a discussion with one of the Buddha's lay disciples, once accused the Buddha of not taking a position on any issue, and the disciple replied that they were mistaken. There was one issue on which the Buddha's position was very clear: what kind of behavior is skillful, and what kind of behavior is not. When the disciple later reported the conversation to the Buddha, the Buddha approved of what he had said. The distinction between skillful and unskillful behavior lies at the basis of everything the Buddha taught.

In making this distinction, the Buddha drew some very sharp lines:

> What is unskillful? Taking life is unskillful, taking what is not given... sexual misconduct... lying... abusive speech... divisive tale-bearing... idle chatter is unskillful. Covetousness... ill will... wrong views are unskillful. These things are called unskillful….
>
> And what is skillful? Abstaining from taking life is skillful, abstaining from taking what is not given... from sexual misconduct... from lying... from abusive speech... from divisive tale-bearing... abstaining from idle chatter is skillful. Lack of covetousness... lack of ill will... right views are skillful. These things are called skillful.—MN 9

Killing is never skillful. Stealing, lying, and everything else in the first list are never skillful. When asked if there was anything whose killing he approved of, the Buddha answered that there was only one thing: anger. In no recorded instance did he approve of killing any living being at all. When one of his monks went to an executioner and told the man to kill his victims compassionately, with one blow, rather than torturing them, the Buddha expelled the monk from the Sangha, on the grounds that even the recommendation to kill compassionately is still a recommendation to kill—something he would never condone. If a monk was physically attacked, the Buddha allowed him to strike back in self-defense, but never with the intention to kill. As he told the monks,

> Even if bandits were to carve you up savagely, limb by limb, with a two-handled saw, he among you who let his heart get angered even at that would not be doing my bidding. Even then you should train yourselves: 'Our minds will be unaffected and we will say no evil words. We will remain sympathetic, with a mind of good will, and with no inner hate. We will keep pervading these people with an awareness imbued with good will and, beginning with them, we will keep pervading the all-encompassing world with an awareness imbued with good will—abundant, expansive, immeasurable, free from hostility, free from ill will.' That's how you should train yourselves.—MN 21

Photo artwork by Chris Talbott

When formulating lay precepts based on his distinction between skillful and unskillful, the Buddha never made any allowances for ifs, ands, or buts. When you promise yourself to abstain from killing or stealing, the power of the promise lies in its universality. You won't break your promise to yourself under any conditions at all. This is because this sort of unconditional promise is a powerful gift. Take, for instance, the first precept, against killing:

> There is the case where a disciple of the noble ones, abandoning the taking of life, abstains from taking life. In doing so, he gives freedom from danger, freedom from animosity, freedom from oppression to limitless numbers of beings. In giving freedom from danger, freedom from animosity, freedom from oppression to limitless numbers of beings, he gains a share in limitless freedom from danger, freedom from animosity, and freedom from oppression. This is the first gift, the first great gift—original, long-standing, traditional, ancient, unadulterated, unadulterated from the beginning—that is not open to suspicion, will never be open to suspicion, and is unfaulted by knowledgeable contemplatives & brahmans.—AN VIII.39

If you make exceptions in your promise to yourself—trying to justify killing in cases where you feel endangered or inconvenienced by another being's existence—your gift of freedom is limited, and you lose your share in limitless freedom. Thus the gift of freedom, to be fully effective, has to be unconditional, with no room for exceptions, no matter how noble they may sound, of any kind.

The dynamic of this kind of gift, of course, depends on an important principle, the teaching of karma and rebirth: If you act on unskillful motivations, the act will result in your suffering, now or in lives to come; if you act on skillful intentions, the act will result in your happiness now or in lives to come. If you don't kill anyone, you are not creating the circumstances where anyone or anything will cut short your life span. Your past karma may still leave an opening for your murder or accidental death—you can't go back and undo what you've already done—but once you make and follow through with the promise not to kill again, you are creating no new openings for having your life cut short. As the Dhammapada says,

> If there's no wound on the hand,
> that hand can hold poison.
> Poison won't penetrate
> where there's no wound.
> There's no evil
> for those who don't do it.—Dhp 124

This is why the Buddha listed virtue as one of a person's greatest treasures. Kings and thieves can steal your material belongings and even take your life, but they

can't take your virtue. If it's uncompromising, your virtue protects you from any true danger from now until you reach nirvana.

Even if you're not ready to accept the teaching on karma and rebirth, the Buddha still recommended an absolute standard of virtue. As he told the Kalamas, if you decide to act skillfully at all times, harming no one, then even if it turned out that there was no life after death, you'd still come out ahead, for you would have been able to live and die with a clear conscience—something that no amount of money or political influence can buy.

So the Buddha's position on the precepts was uncompromising and clear. If you want to follow his teachings, there's absolutely no room for killing, stealing, or lying, period. However, in our current climate of terrorism and counter-terrorism—where governments have claimed that it's their moral duty to lie, kill, and torture in order to prevent others from lying, killing, and torturing—a number of Buddhist teachers have joined in the effort, trying to find evidence that there were some occasions, at least, where the Buddha would condone killing or offer a rationale for a just war. Exactly why they would want to do this is up to them to say, but there's a need to examine their arguments in order to set the record straight. The Buddha never taught a theory of just war; no decision to wage war can legitimately be traced to his teachings; no war veteran has ever had to agonize over memories of the people he killed because the Buddha said that war was okay. These facts are among the glories of the Buddhist tradition, and it's important for the human race that they not be muddied in an effort to recast the Buddha in our own less-than-glorious image.

Because the Pali Canon is such an unpromising place to look for the justification of killing, most of the arguments for a Buddhist theory of just war look elsewhere for their evidence, citing the words and behavior of people they take as surrogates for the Buddha. These arguments are obviously on shaky ground, and can be easily dismissed even by people who know nothing of the Canon. For example, it has been argued that because Asian governments claiming to be Buddhist have engaged in war and torture, the Buddha's teachings must condone such behavior. However, we've had enough exposure to people claiming to be Christian whose behavior is very unchristian to realize that the same thing can probably happen in the Buddhist world as well. To take killers and torturers as your guide to the Buddha's teaching is hardly a sign of good judgment.

On a somewhat higher note, one writer has noted that his meditation teacher has told soldiers and policemen that if their duty is to kill, they must perform their duty, albeit compassionately and with mindfulness. The writer then goes on to argue that because his teacher is the direct recipient of an oral tradition dating back to the Buddha, we must take this as evidence that the Buddha would give similar advice as well. This statement, of course, tells us more about the writer's faith in his teacher than about the Buddha; and when we reflect that the Buddha expelled from the Sangha a monk who gave advice of this sort to an executioner, it casts serious doubts on his argument.

There are, however, writers who try to find evidence in the Pali Canon for a Buddhist theory of just war, not in what the Buddha said, but in what he didn't. The arguments go like this: When talking with kings, the Buddha never told them not to engage in war or capital punishment. This was his tacit admission that the king had a justifiable duty to engage in these activities, and the kings would have understood his silence as such. Because these arguments cite the Pali Canon and claim a historian's knowledge of how silence was interpreted in the Buddha's day, they seem to carry more authority than the others. But when we actually look at the Pali record of the Buddha's conversations with kings, we find that the arguments are bogus. The Buddha was able to communicate the message to kings that they shouldn't kill, but because kings in general were not the most promising students of the Dhamma, he had to bring them to this message in an indirect way.

> The Buddha's position was uncompromising and clear. If you want to follow his teachings, there's absolutely no reason for killing.

It's true that in the Pali Canon silence is sometimes interpreted as acquiescence, but this principle holds only in response to a request. If someone invited the Buddha to his house for a meal and the Buddha remained silent, that was a sign of consent. However, there were many instances in which the Buddha's silence was a sign, not of acquiescence, but of tact. A professional soldier once went to the Buddha and said that his teachers had taught the existence of a heaven awaiting soldiers who die in battle. What did the Buddha have to say about that? At first the Buddha declined to answer, but when the soldier showed

the sincerity of his question by pressing him three times for a response, he finally replied:

> When a warrior strives & exerts himself in battle, his mind is already seized, debased, & misdirected by the thought: 'May these beings be struck down or slaughtered or annihilated or destroyed. May they not exist': If others then strike him down & slay him while he is thus striving & exerting himself in battle, then with the breakup of the body, after death, he is reborn in the hell called the realm of those slain in battle. But if he holds such a view as this: 'When a warrior strives & exerts himself in battle, if others then strike him down & slay him while he is striving & exerting himself in battle, then with the breakup of the body, after death, he is reborn in the company of devas slain in battle,' that is his wrong view. Now, there are two destinations for a person with wrong view, I tell you: either hell or the animal womb.—SN XLII.3

The soldier then broke down and cried—not because he felt that the Buddha's words were cruel, but because he believed their truth and was upset at his earlier teachers for having lied to him. In this case, the Buddha's reticence and tact helped to make his teaching effective. A similar set of events happened when an actor asked the Buddha if there is a special heaven reserved for actors. The Buddha's reticence and tact in informing the actor of a hell for actors who incite their audiences to greed, anger, and delusion inspired the actor to respond in the same way as the soldier.

If the pride of soldiers and actors required special handling, even more care was required in the handling of kings, for their pride was often coupled with an unrestrained sense of power. A remarkable feature of the Pali Canon is that even though the Buddha was a member of the noble warrior caste, the discourses generally show a low regard for the spiritual standing of kings. In many passages, kings are mentioned in the same breath with thieves: They confiscate property and show little regard for the rule of law. The Canon does recognize exceptions—King Bimbisara of Magadha achieves stream-entry the first time he hears the Dhamma, and he never engages in war—but for the most part, kings are depicted as spiritually stunted. King Ajatasattu, on first seeing the Buddha sitting surrounded by monks, can't tell which person in the assembly is the Buddha, a sign of his spiritual blindness; this blindness is later proven by his asking the Buddha's advice on how to defeat his innocent neighbors in war. As one of the discourses suggests, this sort of blindness is an occupational hazard for rulers, in that the unfair exercise of power can make a person unfit for learning the truth.

> Because of having wrongly inflicted suffering on another person through beating or imprisonment or confiscation or placing blame or banishment, [with the thought,] 'I have power. I want power,' when told what is factual, he denies it and doesn't acknowledge it. When told what is unfactual, he doesn't make an ardent effort to untangle it [to see], 'This is unfactual. This is baseless.'—AN III.90

Even King Pasenadi of Kosala, the king most closely associated with the Buddha, comes across as well-meaning but somewhat dense. An entire discourse, MN 90, is a satire of how his royal position has thwarted his ability to learn the Dhamma. He can't phrase his questions properly, has trouble following a discussion for more than a few sentences, and is unable to come to any certain conclusions about the truth. Still, in other discourses he has his occasional moments of spiritual clarity, and the Buddha uses those moments as opportunities to teach the Dhamma. The Buddha's approach here is twofold: to try to expand the king's perspective on life at times when the king is willing to be frank; and to encourage the king when the latter gains insights on his own.

Spiritual blindness is an occupational hazard for rulers: the unfair exercise of power can make a person unfit for learning the truth.

For example, there's the famous discourse (SN III.25) where Pasenadi comes to visit the Buddha in the middle of the day. The Buddha asks him what he's been doing, and the king replies—in a moment of rare and wonderful frankness—that he's been involved in the sort of activities typical of a king intoxicated with his power. The Buddha takes this moment of frankness as an opportunity to teach the Dhamma. Suppose, he says, that four mountains were rolling in inexorably from the four directions, crushing all life in their path. Given that the human birth is so rare and hard to achieve, what should be done? The king's reply: What else should be done but living in line with the Dhamma? The Buddha then draws the lesson: Aging and death are rolling in inexorably. Given that the human birth is so rare and hard to achieve, what should be done? The king draws the obvious conclusion that, again, the only thing to be done is to live in line with the Dhamma. He then goes on to make the observation that when aging and death are rolling in inexorably, there is no role for armies, wars, clever advisors, or great wealth to prevent their rolling in. The only thing to do is to live in line with the Dhamma.

In another discourse, Pasenadi comes to the Buddha and reports his own independent observation:

> Those who engage in bodily misconduct, verbal misconduct, & mental misconduct leave themselves unprotected. Even though a squadron of elephant troops might protect them, a squadron of cavalry troops, a squadron of chariot troops, a squadron of infantry troops might protect them, still they leave themselves unprotected. Why is that? Because that's an external protection, not an internal one. Therefore they leave themselves unprotected. But those who engage in good bodily conduct, good verbal conduct, & good mental conduct have themselves protected. Even though neither a squadron of elephant troops, a squadron of cavalry troops, a squadron of chariot troops, nor a squadron of infantry troops might protect them, still they have themselves protected. Why is that? Because that's an internal protection, not an external one. Therefore they have themselves protected.—SN III.5

It's highly unlikely that Pasenadi would have come to this conclusion if he hadn't spent time in conversation with the Buddha. From that conversation, he would have learned the meaning of good bodily, verbal, and mental conduct: the ten forms of skillful action. As a tactful teacher, the Buddha simply concurred with the king's insight. The discourses suggest that this strategy encouraged the king to spend time in reflection of this sort, for in other discourses the king reports many similar insights for the Buddha to confirm.

We learn that the king did not always follow through with his insights, but that's not because the Buddha encouraged him to view killing as his duty. In fact, there is one striking example where these insights had at least a partial effect. Ajatasattu once attacked Pasenadi's kingdom, and Pasenadi responded by raising an army to fight him off. After an initial setback, Pasenadi was able to capture Ajatasattu. He could have killed him in revenge, for that was allowable under the rules of engagement during his time. But he chose not to, and it's hard not to see the Buddha's impact on this decision. When told of the battle, the Buddha said:

> A man may plunder
> as long as it serves his ends,
> but when others are plundered,
> he who has plundered
> gets plundered in turn.
>
> A fool thinks,
> 'Now's my chance,'
> as long as his evil
> has yet to ripen.
> But when it ripens,
> the fool
> falls
> into pain.
>
> Killing, you gain
> your killer.
> Conquering, you gain one
> who will conquer you;
> insulting, insult;
> harassing, harassment.
> And so, through the cycle of action,
> he who has plundered
> gets plundered in turn.—SN III.15

Benighted as he was, Pasenadi still got the message. The question is, why can't we?

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