Introduction

No doubt we would all agree that world peace is desirable. Yet we live in a world where war is considered by many to be a sometimes necessary evil. General opinion, supported by the media, tends to the view that the use of military force is at times justified. Every country maintains its own defence forces, ostensibly in order to protect itself and its interests.

Yet when conflicts break out, we find that both sides claim that they are acting only to protect their own interests, or that they are responding to aggression from the other side. It is often only with the perspective of time that we can look back and see how misguided these claims are. In times of war, ordinary people are fired by patriotic fervour to participate indirectly by supporting the war effort, or directly by taking up arms in order to kill or maim their fellow human beings. Committing acts of violence against others is condoned on the grounds that we have the right to protect ourselves, our property and our perceived national interests.

In recent times, we have also seen the increasing use of military force by nations on behalf of international organisations such as NATO against other nations. Aggressive interventions are carried out in the name of a higher ideal such as democracy or freedom, the right to self-determination, or even capitalism and free trade. Such actions frequently enjoy the support of many ordinary people who believe that the ends justify the means, that acts of violence can be justified if they bring about a better world.

Of course all the world’s major religions teach that it is wrong to kill, but these injunctions are frequently overlooked or ignored, even by religious leaders. In many countries, priests serve as members of the armed forces to provide chaplaincy services. Religious leaders provide blessings to the armed services, and lead prayers for victory. In extreme cases, religious
leaders call on the government and the people to go to war, claiming divine authority and promising rewards in the afterlife to those who die in the conflict. These and other actions by so-called men of god tend to legitimise war and desensitise us to the moral and ethical imperatives taught by the very religions that they represent.

As far as I have been able to ascertain, there has never been a war that has been waged in the name of Buddhism. Of course, many Buddhist individuals have taken part in wars, and wars have been waged by countries that are nominally Buddhist. But these wars have been waged over territorial, economic or political disputes, not in the name of the religion itself, and the dictates of Buddhism have never been used to justify or rationalise a war.

Many of you would know the story of the great emperor Asoka, who in the 3rd century BC waged war for many years to gain dominion over most of the Indian sub-continent. After his final conquest of Kalinga, he gave up military conquest and followed a sustained policy of reconciliation and peace. The edicts of Asoka have survived in the stone inscriptions he had placed on pillars that were erected throughout his empire. In his 13th Rock Edict, Asoka frankly admitted that abuses of human dignity and violations of human rights are the natural outcomes of war. The emperor expressed his horror of war, and of the cruel and revengeful actions that otherwise decent human beings are led to take in times of war. He declared that he and his descendants would henceforth give up war and follow the law of virtue (Dhamma Vijaya) instead of territorial conquest (Dig Vijaya).

The Buddhist teachings on war

War cannot be vindicated by any of the teachings of the Buddha. This also applies to the use of violent means for whatever purpose, no matter how lofty the supposed ideal or principle at stake. Ordinary Buddhists undertake to follow Five Precepts in guiding their actions. The first of these is:

I take the precept to abstain from destroying living beings

The basic teachings of the Buddha are contained in the Four Noble Truths, which are concerned with the realisation that our objective in life is the pursuit of happiness through the elimination of the factors that create suffering. This applies universally, so contemplation of the Buddha’s basic teachings leads us to the understanding that everyone is in the pursuit of happiness.

In the Dhammapada, we find these famous verses:
Hatreds never cease through hatred in this world
   Through love alone they cease
   This is an eternal law (1).

There is a story in the Buddhist scriptures about a conflict between two clans over water rights. One of the two clans was the Sakyans, the clan into which the Buddha himself had been born, and the other their neighbours, the Kolyans. The dispute had escalated to the point where the armies of the two clans were drawn up in battle array facing each other across the disputed waterway. The Buddha arrived just in time to convince them that human life was more important than water rights, and persuaded them to settle their dispute in an amicable way (2).

**The development of peace and social harmony**

So what can we do to foster peace? Well, Buddhism advises that we should start with ourselves. In the of the Majjhima Nikaya, it is recorded that the Buddha addressed a monk called Cunda with the words:

It is not possible, Cunda, for one who is stuck in the mud to pull out another who is stuck in the mud. But Cunda, it is possible for one who is not himself stuck in the mud to pull out another who is stuck (3).

In the Sakkapanha Sutta of the Digha Nikaya, we have the record of the Buddha’s response to questions as to why people who enjoy living in peace nevertheless act in a way that leads to conflicts. In diagnosing the problem, the Buddha traced the immediate and secondary causes until he arrived at the final root cause, namely craving. According to the Buddha, craving or greed prevents us from pursuing our own best interests even when we clearly see the path leading to our own welfare. Common manifestations of craving are envy and avarice, which in turn are grounded in two more fundamental psychological conditions. Envy arises because we identify things as "I", because we perpetually seek to establish a personal identity for ourselves internally and to project that identity outward for others to recognise and accept. Avarice arises because we appropriate, we attempt to carve out a territory for ourselves and to furnish that territory with possessions that will titillate our greed and sense of self-importance.

As conflict is rooted in envy and avarice, it follows that the path to non-conflict must be a course of relinquishment, of removing the constrictive thoughts and desires that pivot around the notions of "I" and "mine", the drives to identify and to possess. The Buddha’s doctrine of no-soul (anatta) and his emphasis on the interconnectedness of all things can help us overcome our sense of a separate and uniquely important self. These insights expose the hollowness of the notions of "I" and "mine" that underlie envy and avarice. Although this is a daunting task, and although the final liberation may lie far away, the path leading to it is a gradual one, growing out of simpler, more basic steps that lie very close to our feet.
Buddhism advocates the cultivation of compassion (karuna) and loving-kindness (metta) towards all living beings. It teaches that it is possible to live a way of life which is to the benefit of oneself and of others.

It is only by developing his or her own mind to a state where peace and tranquillity are supreme that a person can expect to have any impact on the development of greater peace in the world around us. Social welfare in general, and the ability of individuals in society to help others, depend on the moral and spiritual development of the individuals in society.

Again in the Dhammapada, we learn that retaliation does not lead to peace:

He abused me, he beat me, he defeated me, he robbed me
   In those who harbour such thoughts, hatred is not appeased (4).

In this verse, the Buddha advises us to bear the wrongs done to us by others. The Buddha’s constant advice to his followers is to not retaliate when provoked, but to practice patience and forbearance at all times. Some would argue that to return good for evil is impracticable. But everything the Buddha taught was based on his own experience. He advised us to in effect test the validity of his teachings by trying them out for ourselves, to learn the truth by our own direct experience.

Rather than asserting that some aspect of the Buddha’s teachings are impracticable, we need to make a genuine and sustained effort to apply the teachings in our daily life and then see for ourselves whether greater happiness and well-being follow, as the Buddha said they would. How often do we react with anger when we perceive that a wrong has been done to us? How often do we in fact make a sincere effort to reflect, to exercise restraint before responding? Buddhism teaches that to establish peace and harmony in the world, all of us must first learn the way leading to the extinction of hatred, greed and delusion, the roots of all evil.

The Buddha’s teachings therefore are that war begins in the hearts of men, and that only in the hearts of men can real and lasting peace be established. Interestingly, this concept is now enshrined in the preamble to the United Nations Charter on Peace:

Since it is in the minds of men that wars begin, it is in the minds of men the ramparts of peace
What is Buddhist Perspective on War and Peace?

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should be erected.

This statement echoes the very first verse of the Dhammapada:

Mind is the forerunner of all (evil) states. Mind is their chief; they are mind-made. If one speaks or acts with a wicked mind, suffering follows one, even as the wheel follows the hoof of the draught-ox (5).

There are many references in the earliest Buddhist texts to the futility of war. Again in the Dhammapada, we find this verse:

Victory breeds hatred.
The defeated live in pain.
Happily the peaceful live,
Giving up victory and defeat (Having set winning & losing aside) (6).

There are so many conflicts in the world today to which these verses could apply. Losing a conflict of course brings suffering, but so too does winning as it merely creates resentment and plans for revenge in the losing side. How often do we see the escalation of a dispute into open conflict through a series of tit-for-tat retaliations by each side?

Many politicians seem to believe that peace can be built merely on economic readjustments and external political changes. Generals seem to think that peace can be enforced by military action. Religious leaders seem to think that the way to peace is through prayers and rituals. But peace is the result of man’s harmony with his fellow beings and with his environment. This is not to say that economic readjustments should not be pursued. It is clear that a fairer distribution of the world’s wealth and resources, and the establishment of a minimum standard of human rights, education and health for every citizen of the world, would do a lot to bring about greater peace. But Buddhism teaches that these external adjustments will fail unless our craving, our greed for power and profit, is controlled.

According to the Buddha, there is no problem in human life that cannot be resolved with right understanding and right effort. Right understanding and right effort are two of the steps in what we call the Noble Eightfold Path, an interlocking set of virtues that are to be cultivated by all Buddhists.

Peace has to be cultivated in our minds through what Buddhists call right understanding or right thought (samma sankappa). This includes both thought and intention, and in particular refers to
the thoughts that motivate our actions. In the Majjhima Nikaya, the Buddha described right thought in this way:

And what is right thought? The thought of giving up, the thought of love and the thought of helpfulness – this is called right thought (7).

So a principal component of right thought is love, or more exactly loving-kindness (metta), a boundless loving friendship that is extended to all beings, regardless of racial, ethnic, religious or territorial boundaries. In the most famous text on this subject, the Metta Sutta, we are shown how to radiate friendliness, even towards our enemies (8). In another sutta, the four Sublime Abodes (brahma vihara) are described (9). The first two of these are loving-kindness (metta) and compassion (karuna), and the other two are sympathetic joy (mudita) and equanimity (upekkha). Clearly, if we were all able to cultivate these qualities, we would have a world where peace, social harmony and equity would prevail.

The fifth factor in the Noble Eightfold Path is also highly relevant to our discussion, as it deals with right livelihood (samma ajiva). The Buddha taught that we should earn our living by harmless means. Those who follow the Buddhist path are advised to avoid five forms of occupation. In the Anguttara Nikaya, we find these words:

There are five trades that ought not to be practiced by a layman. What five? Trade in weapons, trade in human beings, trade in flesh, trade in intoxicants, and trade in poisons (10).

Buddhists therefore are advised to avoid occupations that are associated with loss of life or harm to other living beings, and this includes dealing in arms or any kind of chemical or biological weaponry.

In this context, it is worth mentioning that the Buddha rejected the idea that was prevalent in his time and which persists even to this day, that is that there are special places in heaven for men who die in war (11).

Conclusion

In summary, the core teachings of Buddhism in relation to war and peace are that:

- The realisation of peace within oneself is a precondition for peace within the world at large, and is in fact a contributing cause to the growth of peace and social harmony
- The principle of non-violence is the basic concept on which the ideal of peace is founded,
as the use of violence is bound to provoke violence in return
   - The development of non-violent modes of thought and action is achieved through the
cultivation of the virtues of loving-kindness, compassion, altruistic joy and equanimity
   - The roots of violence are greed (lobha), hatred (dosa) and ignorance (moha).
   - We will act in a less violent fashion if we can overcome our sense of a permanent and
unique self, and if we can come to see the interconnectedness of all things
   - The realisation that all beings are in a state of suffering generates compassion, even
towards enemies
   - The realisation that all beings are in pursuit of happiness generates patience, tolerance
and forgiveness
   - The elimination of greed, hatred and delusion and the cultivation of their opposites,
selflessness (alobha), compassion (adosa) and wisdom (amoha) brings release from suffering
here and now, not just in some future life or afterlife.
   - The validity of the teachings can be tested in an empirical fashion, by anyone who can
develop the right understanding and apply the right effort.

May we all succeed in finding the path to peace and happiness.

Sources

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Notes

1. Verse number 5 in the Twin Verses (Yamaka Vagga) of *The Dhammapada*,
2. Majjhima Nikaya, Sallekha Sutta (No. 8).
3. Dhammapada, op cit, Verse number 3 in the Twin Verses.
4. Dhammapada, op cit, Verse number 1 in the Twin Verses.
5. Dhammapada, op cit, Verse number 5 in the Sukkha Vagga (Happiness).

6. Majjhima Nikaya III:251
7. Sutta Nipata 151.
9. Anguttara Nikaya III:207
10. Samyutta Nikaya Vol IV, 308 and 310