

MARATHON: ACTIVITIES

The ancient Greeks knew their fill of war. Their civilization began with a poem about a siege and the classical period ended on the field of Chaeronea, in a battle with Philip of Macedon and his son Alexander. Between times the city states were forever at strife with each other. Athens and Sparta fought for almost thirty years in the Peloponnesian War. The defeat of Athens after almost a century of increasingly arrogant ascendancy should not cause us to forget how that ascendancy came about, and how it began in a battle against great odds on the field of Marathon.

‘Pater pantôn polemos’ says the Greek proverb: war is the father of all things. In its long and fecund lifetime it has generated the Trojan Horse, the battering ram and the Roman raven (the grappling bridge used against the more experienced Carthaginian fleet). In World War II it fathered the American Twin Brethren, Fat Boy and Little Boy, who descended on Japan in 1945.

‘War is hell’, said General William Tecumseh Sherman, whose campaign in the American Civil War was one of the most destructive in history. What, if anything, can be said on the other side? Along with the pain and lamentation we also find courage, endurance, self-sacrifice and sometimes also even magnanimity and compassion. Robert E. Lee, a man of higher moral and military stature than Sherman, said, admiring the bravery of some enemy soldiers, ‘It is a good thing that war is so terrible; otherwise we might come to love it too much.’ This is what is so difficult when thinking about war: that some good people have found good things to say about it.

A civil war is the hardest on which to form clear judgments, if one does not take the absolutist position and condemn all wars and see them as differing only in degree of wickedness. Although we westerners tend to romanticize the wars between Greece and Persia, they were at all events in a simpler category: there was invasion and resistance, there was expansion of empire and defense of liberty; and the gods unusually were on the side of the small battalions.

Marathon is an inspiring place. Byron was not the first or the last to find it so; but it is his verses that best convey what it has meant to the western world:

*The mountains look on Marathon—
And Marathon looks on the sea;
And musing there an hour alone,
I dream'd that Greece might still be free;
For standing on the Persians' grave,
I could not deem myself a slave.*

The dream of freedom, *eleftheria*. The ancestors of Byron's insurgents had an idea of freedom that was far from perfect; they were attached to certain attitudes of mind which narrowed the vision even of their highest intellects. The most obvious is their attitude to slaves. Many peoples in ancient and modern times, have sustained the institution of slavery, but some of the most celebrated Greeks seem to have believed that the status of slaves had a subhumanizing effect, setting them somewhere between man and beast. Their conditions varied from city to city, and of course from master to master. In Athens they had more rights than in other places, though in the mines their treatment was notoriously harsh. Most of them would be 'barbarians', foreigners with unintelligible speech, captured in war or imported by dealers; human, evidently, but not as human as their masters.

Even so, Marathon was a victory for men who had a definite if defective idea of freedom. How much it meant to them may be appreciated from the epitaph of the great dramatist Aeschylus. He died far from Athens among the Greek community in Sicily. His dramas are among the supreme products of the human mind. Yet he would not have himself remembered for them. He believed that his glory was to be found not on the stage but on a battlefield:

*This stone at Gela covers an Athenian,
Aeschylus the son of Euphorion.
Let the long-haired Mede recall the prowess
Which he displayed the day of Marathon.*

The invaders sailed into the bay and came ashore. The Greeks – Athenians and a contingent from Plataea – outnumbered as they were, came at a run across the plain. The enemy was driven into the sea with heavy loss. For the time being Athens and Greece were safe. A few years later a greater invading army would march into Greece. It too would fail.

There was no moral question here for the Greeks. Not that all of them resisted the invader. Some submitted if they reckoned it to be in their interest, whether for safety or in hope of a share of the spoils or with an eye to hegemony as the Great King's proxies. Some individuals betrayed their resisting cities. No one, whether submitting, resisting or betraying, thought it wrong to fight. Whatever the first moral principle of the Greeks may have

been, it was not non-violence. The best of them believed they were justified in going to war to preserve their freedom.

How as Buddhists are we to approach this problem?

If any war can be justified in the Buddhist view of things, it must surely be a defensive war waged in defense of freedom, if my understanding of the Dharma is right. This is primarily based on my reading of the Pali Canon, where I found the word *vimutti*, meaning freedom, to be the commonest synonym for nirvana. In secular terms I understand freedom as being the reflex of nirvana in human affairs.

At the end of his life, we read, the Buddha found himself mediating between his people, the Sakyans, and a king who was threatening them with war. His name was Vidudabha. His father had sought a bride of the Sakyans and they had given him a lady of modest station and mixed race, being too proud to marry a woman of their best blood to a stranger, even a king. When the couple's son came to the throne, his first thought was of punishing the Sakyans for what he considered an unforgivable indignity. Three times the Buddha dissuaded him from drawing the sword. That might have been the end of it had the Sakyans wished it so. Instead they went and poisoned the river flowing through Vidudabha's lands. Once again he gathered his army. This time the Buddha did not intervene.

There may be some legendary material in this story, but taking it as it stands what are we to make of it?

Vidudabha had shown himself amenable to persuasion in the matter of parentage. That was personal. When the Sakyans poisoned the waters it was something else. His first expedition to their borders was aggressive. This time it was defensive – better: protective. They had in effect begun hostilities, and in a manner bound to attract the harshest retribution. Through pride and ill-will they had put their freedom at risk. When no longer under threat they had allowed their animus against Vidudabha and his people so to dominate their judgment as to mean more to them than anything else. One might say that in giving their freedom a lesser value they had become unworthy of it.

The Athenians did not fall into that error. They put their freedom above all else. The Persians had many fine qualities, love of truthful speech pre-eminently, but their form of governance was incompatible with the Athenian ideal. Accordingly, a small battle on a Grecian strand gave us the first of those names to which free men turn for inspiration when their freedom is threatened by an overwhelming power. The second Persian war would give us Thermopylae.

To return now to the First Principle of the Buddhadharma, which is non-violence. It enjoins that the believer refrain from killing or injuring any living being, not only man. In the tradition it is understood as applying more absolutely to the monk than the layman. The monk was expected to defend himself by the emanation of lovingkindness, as the Buddha did on a famous occasion. The story tells how the wicked Devadatta, who desired to usurp the leadership of the Order, made various attempts on the Buddha's life, one of which was to set an enraged elephant at him. The animal was overcome by the power of *metta* emanating from the Buddha. A beautiful story, but one whose message the ordinary layman and, one guesses, the ordinary monk might find difficult to apply.

The First Principle says 'I will refrain from taking the life of any living being.' It is also expressed as 'laying aside the cudgel'. The forms of the undertaking suggest that it refers particularly to active or aggressive violence, rather than to measures taken in self-defense. As said in an earlier section, some Chinese monks developed ways of turning an aggressor's force against him. One can learn such techniques here in the West today, and hopefully stay on the right side of karma should the need for self-defense arise. But for those who do not acquire them there is nothing in the Precepts which denies them the right to other forms of self-defense. I may choose not to exercise the right for myself, but if I have responsibility for others I am surely bound to defend them to the best of my ability, even to the injury of the aggressor. Proportionality is, of course, desirable in any such encounter; but in judging the action the benefit of any doubt should surely be given to the intended victim or to the protector.

What then of violence in the relations between states? No country has the right to deprive another of its freedom, and every country has the right to defend itself against attack. A country which attempts to enslave another shows itself to be disrespectful of freedom, for the freedom of another land ought to be as dear to it as its own. The difficulty arises when a free people looks in dismay at a country which is manifestly unfree, perhaps oppressed, even brutalized, whether by an invading power or by a tyrant of its own. If it believes that freedom is a right that all should enjoy, it will feel a generous desire to bring it to that country. Let us assume that it tries by non-violent means to improve the lot of those oppressed, and only meets with refusal by the ruling power, or even with a defiant intensification of the oppression. Should it turn away, saying 'In a choice between the ethic of non-violence and the extension of freedom, as we understand it, we choose non-violence.?'

Tolstoy has a story which bears upon this question. Called *The Godson*, it is a folktale retold. Its burden is non-interference. Every time the protagonist does what he considers a good deed by interfering in the lives of

others he brings about more trouble than if he had not. Each interference, even if violent, seems to be perfectly justified, and none is in the least selfish, yet the results are calamitous. Our proverb says the way to hell is paved with good intentions. Tolstoy's story suggests there may be a second way, paved with well-meant actions.

Once violence is released no one can tell how it will develop. A body of idealistic Parisians storm a disused prison; the following quarter-century will see the Terror, the despotism of Napoleon, the immense bloodletting of his campaigns, and at the end of it all the return of the dynasty overthrown by those idealists. Two shots from the pistol of a youth in Sarajevo set off the Great War and indirectly led to the rise of communism. All who took part in these events believed they had right on their side; none of them could foresee what their violent actions would lead to. Some say, history repeats itself. Yes, but as farce, say others, thinking perhaps of the ancient drama, in which tragedy was followed by the satyr play. It might be well to reflect that some Greek tragedies came in three parts and that the spectators had to wait a long time for their laughs. Who can say but that we may right now be taking our seats for the first part of history's latest extended production?

A belief, or rather a sentiment has developed in the West that Buddhism is virtually a form of pacifism. On the evidence of both history and scripture this is open to question. Buddhist countries have engaged in war, and the texts, while making non-violence the first of the Five Precepts, do not specifically forbid war. The concept of the *Dharmaraja*, the Righteous Ruler, is of great importance in Buddhist political thinking. He is conceived as essentially a protective figure, but not as relying on goodwill only. He has an army which is commanded by the best general of the age.

Two centuries after the Buddha, the Emperor Asoka, victorious in a bloody campaign, would convert to Buddhism and renounce aggressive war. This is a great moment in the history of non-violence. But it does not mean that Asoka forswore his duty to defend his people were they to be attacked. His dedication to non-violence could not be that absolute. Had the neighboring rulers thought it was, they would have made short work of his empire. The famous Rock Edicts have much to say about the slaughter of animals and abstention from causing death or injury to living beings generally; they tell how the king had his huntsmen and fishermen desist from their pursuits. Asoka truly repented of the destruction his war had wrought; he renounced the prevailing theory of aggressive statecraft; but he did not disband his army.

A great many words have been written about the Buddha's Enlightenment. One aspect of it seems, to my knowledge, to have gone unremarked. Shortly before the great event his five companions left him,

disgusted at his abandoning their severe regimen, and went to Benares. He found a spot which he deemed suitable for the final effort. It was near a place named Uruvela, described as an army town. When he had achieved Enlightenment, the Buddha did not go there, but, after a period of reflection, set off on the long road to Benares to find his former companions and tell them the good news. It was in the Deer Park of Isipatana that the Wheel of Dharma was set in motion, not in the barrack square of Uruvela. The Buddha might have persuaded those warriors to put away their weapons and follow him. Instead he went alone to preach to a group of harmless ascetics. Later, in the *Vinaya*, he would ordain that monks should have as little as possible to do with armies.

This does not mean that the warrior did not continue to be recognized as an essential part of society. He was, and not only that: he was a source of inspirational imagery for the discipline of the monkish life. For all the contrast between their two kinds of life, the monk and the warrior, at their best, are devoted to the idea of freedom, as spiritual state or as social duty.

Buddhism is the Doctrine of the Middle Way. Originally this meant the avoidance of the extremes of indulgence and asceticism, but it can be applied to many other 'pairs of opposites'. Here a middle way has to be found that takes account of the First Principle, non-violence, and what I see as its supreme value, freedom, in worldly applications. Non-violence and freedom are not pairs of opposites, of course. They are different from each other in a way that indulgence and asceticism are not, these being extremes on either side of moderation, whereas non-violence and freedom are ideas which decisions and circumstances may bring into occasional opposition. For them another form of Middle Way has to be found, one which is not simply an avoidance of extremes. Perhaps it is to be found in being able to hold in mind those two ideas, non-violence and freedom, with honest acknowledgement that they may occasionally be contradictory, and to do justice to them both while living with the contradiction.

However, when war is acknowledged as sometimes inevitable and justified, the problem is to bring moderating influences to bear upon activities that all too readily slip into excess. A Buddhist turns to the *Pañcasila* for counsel. Its five principles give the basis of an honorable code. They may be interpreted as follows.

Under the First Sila, the violence inherent in war should be kept within the strictest bounds. This is contrary to the spirit of the modern age, what with the doctrine of total war and the concept of 'mutually assured destruction'. Now there is the practice of 'shock and awe', more modest by comparison but still terrible.

Under the Second Sila, there should be no theft of the enemy's natural assets or cultural heritage. This, of course, is different from the extraction of compensation from an aggressor, or even the occupation of land which facilitated the aggression.

Under the Third Sila, there should be no use of lies to incite hostility against another country, nor to justify the mistreatment of a beaten foe.

Under the Fourth Sila, there should be no toleration of sexual malfeasance as a means of waging war nor of sexual license as a reward for victorious forces.

Under the Fifth Sila, it should be recognized that the intoxication induced by a too fervent devotion to race, nation, ideology or religion may be a danger to peace. It allows any violence, theft, lie misconduct to be perpetrated with a clear conscience, or should one say, with no conscience, for the perpetrators have sacrificed that most precious part of their humanity on one or more of those altars. 'The sleep of reason produces monsters', and nothing induces that sleep so thoroughly as fanaticism, which by its nature is incompatible with Buddhism as the doctrine of the Middle Way. In dealing with extremists, however, we must not become extremists ourselves, even on the side of the good.