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Buddhist Diplomacy:

Buddhism as a Positive Force in International Relations and Conflict Resolution



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Two years ago, the People's Republic of China celebrated the success of the 1st World Buddhist Forum. With more than fifteen hundred Buddhist religious leaders and scholars representing over thirty-eight countries, the conference was a shining example of what the country hopes to develop through its elegant vision of a "New and One China". The monumental gathering, organized jointly by the Government of The People's Republic of China, the Buddhist Association of China and China's Religious Culture Communication Association, set the stage for an innovative form of global leadership. The precedence set by the "New China" offers an emergent model for international leadership dedicated to the peaceful dialogue and cooperation among civilizations.

With the launch of the 2nd Buddhist World Forum in November of 2008, China plans to build on its initial momentum. The 2nd Buddhist World Forum will continue to explore how Buddhism might serve as a positive force in the modern world. To quote the theme of the 1st Buddhist World Forum, the Chinese Government strongly endorses the notion that "A Harmonious World Begins in the Mind".

Bearing the intentions of both World Buddhist Forums in mind, the following paper details the ways in which the mainstay of Buddhist theory and practice might be used to positively influence global dynamics via a more comprehensive approach to international relations and conflict resolution. To begin, this paper emphasizes Buddhism's values and systems of inner-technology relevant to modern society. Next, the paper describes why such ideals and practices might be beneficial on a global scale. Lastly, the paper concludes with an articulation of how Buddhist values and praxis can be put to action through the active engagement of *religious diplomacy*. In honor of China's commitment to host the 2nd World Buddhist Forum, the final section of this paper offers the People's Republic several ways in which Buddhist diplomacy might effectively influence three areas of social significance: health, education, and religious outreach.

The authors of this paper fully acknowledge that all religious traditions have a positive role to play in international relations and conflict resolution, however in service of a more detailed analysis we restrict the scope of our paper to include only a Buddhist lens. Buddhism contains several novel characteristics that place it in an optimal position relative to modern sensibilities. As Harvard scholar Harvey Cox point out, "there can be little doubt that despite the nineteenth-century predictions of its imminent demise, Buddhism is a vital spiritual force in the world today... Since Buddhists do not insist on belief in a single deity as essential to their worldview, they may be in a better position than some other traditions to help a skeptical postmodern world in its struggle toward enlightenment."¹ The remainder of this paper follows Cox's lead to demonstrate how Buddhist values and practices are easily translated into global action.

Religion and the Public Sphere

¹ Johnston, Douglas, and Cynthia Sampson. *Religion, the Missing Dimension of Statecraft*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994. P 273

To place Buddhist values into the already complicated mix of ingredients that make up international relations may initially seem to be a convoluted approach. That is to say, much of the Western world views religion as divisive. Some may even argue that religion is one of the primary instigators of global violence.

Until recently, players on the international stage and those in the realm of foreign affairs failed to see religion as a potential vehicle peace. Fortunately, the powerful wave first initiated during the Western Enlightenment that ardently divorced the religious values from the public sphere, is beginning to ease up. The past decade has shown slow but promising progress that religion is beginning gain acknowledgement as a significant factor in world affairs.

Examples to support religion's re-emergence abound. Based on his own experience at Camp David while mediating peace talks between Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin and Egyptian president Anwar El Sadat, former United States president Jimmy Carter consistently argues that "religion can be a potent force in encouraging the peaceful resolution of conflict".² Others, like Douglas Johnston, founder of the *International Center for Religion and Diplomacy*, contend that:

The potential for overcoming the shortcomings of conventional diplomacy in some situations by introducing religious and spiritual factors appears to be substantial. It suggests that foreign policy professionals and religious practitioners should study the possibilities and seek to facilitate and reinforce one another's efforts to resolve conflict wherever it appears sensible to do so.³

A similar premise was foundational for the authors of this paper as they coordinated the Millennium Peace Summit and the subsequent founding of the World Council of Religious Leaders in 2002. In full accord with our fellow diplomats, the authors maintain that the importance of including spiritual leaders on a broad international scale will become all the more significant in the coming decades.

Buddhist Values

The Western world in general and American Foreign Diplomats in particular "inadequately appreciate the transformational possibilities that exist when the parties involved in a conflict can be appealed to on the basis of shared spiritual convictions or values."⁴ Consequently, this paper begins by highlighting several Buddhist values that can be seamlessly translated to the global stage.

Buddhist researcher Damien Keown notes the three most significant virtues within Buddhist ideology: non-attachment (*araga*), benevolence (*adosa*), and understanding (*amoha*).⁵ "Non-attachment,"

² Johnston, Douglas, and Cynthia Sampson. *Religion, the Missing Dimension of Statecraft*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994. P vii

³ Johnston, Douglas, and Cynthia Sampson. *Religion, the Missing Dimension of Statecraft*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994. P 316-317

⁴ Johnston, Douglas, and Cynthia Sampson. *Religion, the Missing Dimension of Statecraft*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994. P 5

⁵ Keown, Damien. *Buddhism : A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1996. P 100

according to Keown, “means the absence of that selfish desire which taints moral behavior by allocating a privileged status to one’s own needs. Benevolence means an attitude of good will to all living creatures, and understanding means knowledge of human nature and human good as set out in doctrines such as the Four Noble Truths.”⁶ Moving forward, all three of these virtues gain significant weight as we explore the ways in which Buddhism might penetrate the modern world.

The three virtues listed above are naturally designed as perfect antidotes to conflict. According to Buddhist theory violence and disharmony are associated with what Buddhism calls the three roots of evil: greed (*raga*), hatred (*dosa*), and delusion (*moha*).⁷ As a result, each of the three virtues counteracts tendencies that lead to negativity (non-attachment dissolves greed, benevolence dissolves hatred, and understanding dissolves delusion).

Harvey Cox explains an additional virtue significant to our paper. He calls it *critical tolerance*. “Critical tolerance means that one must begin by giving those with whom one differs, even on very vital questions, the benefit of the doubt; it is an attitude shaped by compassion. One accepts all one honestly can of the other’s position.”⁸ Clearly an attitude of *critical tolerance* brings a quality of attention and awareness to both conflict resolution and international relations that might otherwise be absent.

Although critical tolerance is vital it must not be mistaken for mere universal acceptance. “Buddhism does not confuse tolerance with the uncritical acceptance of the others person’s point of view. For Buddhism, tolerance represents that space from within which its own doctrines, as well as those of others, can be examined without prejudice on the basis of their inherent value.”⁹ This more precise explanation of critical tolerance relieves the proponents of Buddhists values from the potential accusation of naivety.

Critical tolerance does not assume that potential rivals will gather together fully willing to take the other person’s point of view. Rather, the Buddhist concept of critical tolerance represents a baseline level of openness that all parties must meet prior to engaging in any form of negotiation. Agreeing to critical tolerance ensures that both parties are willing to leave enough of their prejudices behind to allow at least some degree of perspective taking.

In addition to the aforementioned virtues (non-attachment, benevolence and understanding, and critical tolerance) held sacred by all Buddhists, it serves the intention of this paper well to also list the Six Perfections (*paramitas*) of a Bodhisattva as articulated by the younger Mahayana school.¹⁰ According to the tradition, each of the following qualities should be cultivated by Buddhists as they move forward along the path to Enlightenment: (1) generosity (*dana*) (2) morality (*sila*) (3) patience (*ksanti*) (4) courage (*virya*)

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ Johnston, Douglas, and Cynthia Sampson. *Religion, the Missing Dimension of Statecraft*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994 P 272

⁹ Johnston, Douglas, and Cynthia Sampson. *Religion, the Missing Dimension of Statecraft*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994 273

¹⁰ Although the Theravada tradition does not subscribe to the concept of a bodhisattva per se, the virtues of a bodhisattva, as listed above, easily align with the Theravada philosophical underpinnings.

(5) meditation (Samadhi) (6) wisdom (prajna).¹¹ As we proceed, we must constantly reflect as to how each of the values might shed even greater light on the positive influence Buddhism may have on the international stage. Clearly, notions of generosity and tolerance encourage an open-minded and compassionate approach to potential rivals. Upholding virtues of morality and patience ensure that all parties act ethically and consciously without the detriment of actions made in haste. Finally, cultivating courage and wisdom help international parties to reduce fear and to act from a place of both intelligence and experience.

Buddhist Inner-Technologies

Buddhism doesn't stop with a simple list of suggested virtues; instead it engages practical tools designed to cultivate the desired qualities in the mind of its practitioners. For the purposes of this paper and the potential use of these tools on a global scale, we tease out the fifth virtue of the Bodhisattva listed above (*meditation*) into two specific practical applications.

Samatha (calm-abiding) Meditation

The first type of meditation suggested for use on a larger scale is called Samatha (calm-abiding). Samatha is a type of meditation used to enhance concentration and sustained attention. As Keown notes, "Buddhist sources compare the mind to a monkey which swings through the trees, taking hold of one branch after another."¹² In other words, the quality of awareness in an unpracticed individual is out of control. The mind wanders from thought to thought, always distracted away from the present. Calm-abiding meditation teaches the practitioner to maintain attention on an intended object.

The reader may ask the question: Why is calming the mind so important? It is important to reemphasize that the Buddhist tradition is composed of both theory and practice. Each practice is specifically designed to enable the practitioner to realize and test the theory in his or her own experience. "Through the cultivation of attitudes such as benevolence, using the techniques of calming meditation, a deep moral concern for others is fostered. Based on this concern one begins to act spontaneously for their welfare and to place their interest on a par with one's own."¹³ To fully take the perspective of the "other", is an ideal launching point for successful international relations and foreign diplomacy.

Keown continues: "Results eventually manifest themselves in the form of heightened powers of concentration and an increasing sense of calm and inner stillness, which is carried over into everyday life. Distractions, worries, doubts, and fears lose their hold over the mind."¹⁴ Such positive results are clearly of

¹¹ Keown, Damien. *Buddhism : A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1996. P 64

¹² Keown, Damien. *Buddhism : A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1996. P 89

¹³ Keown, Damien. *Buddhism : A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1996. P 95

¹⁴ Keown, Damien. *Buddhism : A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1996. P 89

a benefit for those engaged in conflict resolution. If only an ounce of fear and doubt were dissolved during intense peace talks, the potential for success would grow exponentially.

Metta (loving-kindness) Meditation

A second type of mediation to be used as a powerful tool in conflict resolution and international diplomacy is called Metta (loving-kindness). “The practice of loving-kindness [*metta*] involves developing an attitude of benevolence, friendship, and goodwill towards all living creatures... The cultivation of this universal goodwill frees the mind from partiality and prejudice, and the meditator begins to act toward others with kindness and without discrimination.”¹⁵ Engaging in loving-kindness meditation has the power to develop strong degrees of compassion, generosity, and patience; all qualities of significant value when engaging in international diplomacy. Because the process of Metta practice can be costumed to each circumstance, practitioners on both sides of the negotiation table during international peace talks could use the practice to enhance feeling of goodwill toward the opposite side. It is the contention of the authors contention that taking small steps to engage world leaders in these types of inner technologies would have a monumental impact on the political ecology of the world.

Religious Diplomacy and its Implementation

In a recent symposium on *Religion and the Future of China* held by the *Council on Foreign Affairs*, Walter Russell Mead explained how religion actively penetrates the global system: “In a lot of ways - sometimes not necessarily the obvious ways, religion is shaping the international system. It often shapes the presuppositions that actors bring to the table. It often shapes the political context in which societies, including our own society, take important decisions.”¹⁶

As he continues, Mead articulates what he has learned through his own exposure to the world of international diplomacy:

Our experience is that many of the people who make decisions in foreign policy, and think about foreign policy, are not particularly conscious about the degree to which religion is quietly, and sometimes invisibly, shaping the context in which they act. And, at the same time, we find that people who are knowledgeable about religion sometimes lack a sophisticated grasp of how the foreign policy world works, and the system works.

We think that if these two groups of experts can become more cognizant of each other's worlds and thoughts, we'll have - the world of religion will be able to make a more positive and a more informed contribution to what's going on in

¹⁵ Keown, Damien. *Buddhism : A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1996. P 91

¹⁶http://www.cfr.org/publication/16537/session_one_of_a_cfr_symposium_on_religion_and_the_future_of_china.html

foreign policy and people in foreign policy will be better equipped to do their work.¹⁷

Mead clearly supports this paper's assertion that the world is in need of religious diplomats.

Religious Diplomacy

The use of *religious diplomacy* by *religious diplomats* is always grounded in the fundamental ideal that a harmonious and peaceful world is possible and is worth pursuing. In general, a religious diplomat has the capacity to play many roles and by necessity must take a pluralistic approach to all major world religious traditions. In some circumstances a religious diplomat may be called upon to educate political leaders who might otherwise be religiously illiterate. In other instances, a religious diplomat may serve as mediator for international conflict resolution, using core values and practices of his or her tradition to offer fertile ground for mutual understanding between two parties. Because religious diplomats are blind the divisions of culture, nationality, race, or ethnicity, they have the unique capacity to focus on the welfare of *all* human beings. This vantage point of universal goodwill allows them to bring a neutral perspective to situations where conflict may otherwise be too polarized to mend. The approach of the religious diplomats transcends yet includes traditional approaches to diplomacy. That is to say, the religious diplomat understands that maintaining materialistic interests and power positioning is vitally important for the well-being and security of nation-states. However, the religious diplomat is not limited to this type of engagement. The religious diplomat sees beyond the narrow view of resource and power to recognize that finding common spiritual values can deepen interactions between human beings. Using this type of emotional intelligence to foster "soft diplomacy", a religious diplomat foresees and skillfully avoids some of the fallout that tends to occur as a result of more limited approaches.

Implementation

Religious diplomats in general and Buddhist Diplomats in particular have the capacity to successfully bring spiritual values and practices into the global sphere. As we hinted in the beginning of the paper, it is often commonly assumed that religion and politics should be kept separate. "It has been the strong conviction of secularists political thinkers that basing public policy on religious values nearly always causes division and rancor, but this opinion is based on the belief (for which there is more than a little evidence) that religion is *essentially* divisive. However, there is evidence to suggest that when religion is appropriately related to the public sphere, it can contribute to healing."¹⁸ Reminded again of the theme of the 1st World Buddhist Forum "A Harmonious World Begins in the Mind", Buddhism is uniquely design to develop the inner well being needed to manifest a more peaceful external world.

¹⁷ibid.

¹⁸ Johnston, Douglas, and Cynthia Sampson. *Religion, the Missing Dimension of Statecraft*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994 P 273

The inclusion of Buddhist values into the realm of international relations and diplomacy is able to transpire in countless ways. Although we only explore two specific ways of implementation in the next several paragraphs, the mission of the religious diplomat is to directly and creatively foster as many channels of implementation as possible.

Primarily, Buddhist Diplomats offer their services in areas of international conflicts that involve at least one party who identifies themselves along religious lines. Using our Buddhist lens, an ideal potential for Buddhist diplomacy presents itself in the current war on the island of Sri Lanka between the Hindu Tamil Tigers and the Sinhalese Buddhists. Buddhist diplomats could help influence the conflict in a positive direction in several ways. In such situations, Buddhist diplomats can first remind their Buddhist brothers and sisters about some of the virtues so vital to its tradition (generosity, benevolence, courage, patience, critical tolerance, etc.). Second, Buddhist diplomats can call on their comrades to engage in loving-kindness meditations for their enemies. Third, the diplomats might also encourage those involved to practice a daily Samatha (calm-abiding) meditation. It is likely that violence instigated in Sri Lanka by Buddhist could be significantly curbed if the individuals involved gained strict control of their own minds; preventing them from being stirred to violence by their own overpowering emotional states.

A second approach to be taken by religious diplomats is to help introduce Buddhism's inner technologies to non-Buddhist world leaders. The practices of *calm-abiding* meditation and *loving-kindness* meditation can be cultivated by all individuals, whether secular or of a different religious persuasion. The meditations themselves are religiously and culturally neutral. Buddhist diplomats, familiar with teaching such techniques, could make an enormous impact on the world if they simply begin to instruct global leaders about the great benefits of mediation and awareness training.

China: A Plan of Action

The Chinese government stands in a remarkably privileged and unique position to use Buddhist diplomacy to its strategic advantage. In the following few paragraphs we tackle three categories that are all be immediately available to be influenced by Buddhist diplomacy: (1) Health, (2) Education, (3) Religious Outreach.

Health

UNAIDS estimates 700,000 people within China's population are currently living with HIV or AIDS.¹⁹ Although this number is relatively small compared to China's total number of residents (close to 1.3 billion), it represents a number that will grow exponentially if the issue is not carefully addressed. The Chinese government acknowledged the seriousness of the issue and consequently asked all local government to "integrate HIV/AIDS into the routine government agenda as an important item ... and urgently and effectively respond to HIV/AIDS, which is a priority linked to the interest and benefit of

¹⁹http://www.unaids.org/en/KnowledgeCentre/HIVData/GlobalReport/2008/2008_Global_report.asp

China and its people".²⁰ To begin tackling the problem head on, the State Council Document No. 7 of the Government of China recommends "mass education campaigns among the general population, to teach people how to avoid infection and to counter stigma and discrimination."²¹

To this end, Buddhist diplomacy can help China's HIV/AIDS epidemic in at least the following three ways: (1) Educating the population and instilling Buddhist values such as compassion, loving-kindness, benevolence, and understanding can help China's population overcome the overwhelming discrimination and stigma currently imposed on infected individuals. (2) By promoting and teaching the fundamental truth that life (as normally lived) is full of discontent (1st Noble Truth) and the Buddhist doctrine of impermanence, Buddhist diplomats may help infected individuals cope with the reality of a disease that may otherwise be too overwhelming to handle. (3) Finally, the state of inner peace derived from Buddhist practice, as promoted by Buddhist diplomats, might serve a preventative function. That is to say, individuals consciously cultivating inner states of peace and tranquility may be more likely to avoid high-risk situations in which exposure to the virus is more likely.

Education

There are three fundamental ways in which Buddhist diplomacy can positively influence China's educational initiatives: (1) Just as many Christian and Islamic schools help to provide top level education while simultaneously spreading the noble values of their traditions, Buddhist diplomats can help the Chinese Ministry of Education to open Buddhist schools. Because religious diplomats already embrace a pluralistic and inclusive view of all religious traditions, they can help to ensure that Buddhist schools educate the students in all religious traditions. Comprehensive religious literacy will ensure that the schools do not fall into any sort of exclusivist or fundamentalist viewpoint. Raising subsequent generations of youth to embrace the importance of religious values while simultaneously committed to a view of religious pluralism provides the momentum needed to cultivate a harmonious world. (2) Religious diplomats can train both youth and adults in specific practices for inner well being. With the sponsorship of the Chinese Government the inner technologies developed in Buddhist meditations can be offered as public courses to the Chinese population at large. (3) Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it is the responsibility of religious diplomats to train China's foreign policy leaders in the basic skills of meditation and Buddhist virtues. Because the Chinese leaders have the broadest reach and the most powerful international influence, their education should be a top priority.

Religious Outreach

²⁰ State Council Document (2004) No. 7, State Council Notice on Strengthening HIV/AIDS Prevention and Control

²¹ <http://www.avert.org/aidschina.htm>

In writing, China appears to have a large degree of religious freedom. “Article 36 of the Chinese constitution says that Chinese citizens ‘enjoy freedom of religious belief.’”²² Accordingly, the constitution “bans discrimination based on religion, and it forbids state organs, public organizations, or individuals from compelling citizens to believe in—or not to believe in—any particular faith”²³ However, as the Council on Foreign Relations points out, “religious freedom is still not universal in China.”²⁴ Currently, “the state only recognizes five official religions—Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Catholicism, and Protestantism—and considers the practice of any other faith illegal.”²⁵ If China is truly dedicated to a harmonious future, it would serve the country well to extend their formal acceptance of all traditions (Hinduism, Judaism, Sikhism, Jainism, among others.)

Buddhist diplomats can aid religious outreach in two ways: (1) Buddhist diplomats can use Buddhist history to build a case for the embrace of religious diversity. In India, Buddhism existed along side Hinduism, Jainism, Sikhism. In Japan Buddhism exists along side the Shinto Tradition. In the Europe and the United States, millions of Buddhist thrive in a society where the majority of the population subscribes to Abrahamic traditions. One could even argue that religious pluralism is implicit in the Buddha’s teachings. (2) Through education and exposure to Buddhist values and practices Religious Diplomats can instill the values of open-mindedness and critical tolerance into the Chinese population and its leaders. Viewing other religious traditions as adding to the richness of cultural tapestry of the country will help to ensure that religions outside of the “approved five” are taken seriously.

Conclusion

As the complexity of our world’s problems continue to grow, so too must our solutions. The more we can work together on meta-systemic approaches that help us to transcend our limiting beliefs, the more we will find ourselves embodying integral and comprehensive perspectives that use every facet of human knowledge as fuel for a more harmonious future. The current global landscape provides a ripe environment for China to help strategically unite the world under more transcendent values of peace and cooperation. Buddhism’s “emphasis on human effort as the path to liberation, as opposed to a reliance on divine assistance”²⁶ ensures that its practitioners take the future into their own hands. Cultivation of benevolence, generosity, compassion, and wisdom are fundamental to a brighter tomorrow. Buddhist Diplomats, with their toolkit of practices for inner well-being, may very well be able to offer the world a push in the right direction.

²²http://www.cfr.org/publication/16272/religion_in_china.html?breadcrumb=%2Fpublication%2Fpublicatio%2Fn_list%3Ftype%3Dbackgrounder

²³ *ibid.*

²⁴ *ibid.*

²⁵ *ibid.*

²⁶ Johnston, Douglas. *Faith-Based Diplomacy: Trumping Realpolitik*. Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2003. P 84-85