2014

War and Peace

A BUDDHIST PERSPECTIVE (WITH REPLIES)

Preface

Hello.

Simply put, I've just compiled the letter from Inquiring Mind as well as the replies (although they only exist on the Internet Archive now) into a singular document for ease of reading. I've done some formatting and some cleanup of the text (no text was omitted, just spelling and grammar repairs).

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With much metta,

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War and Peace: A Buddhist Perspective

By Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi

In the century preceding the birth of the Buddha, northeast India underwent sweeping transformations that profoundly reshaped the region's geopolitics. The older tribal states gave way to monarchies ruled by ambitious kings who competed for dominance, leaving behind trails of blood and tears. The Buddha's native land, the Sakyan state, became a tributary of the kingdom of Kosala, and late in the Buddha's life the cruel King Vidudabha, rogue ruler of Kosala, massacred the Sakyans, leaving few survivors. The state of Magadha, with its capital at Rajagaha, became the nucleus of a new empire.

The Buddha's discourses give us glimpses into the tumultuous tide of the era. They tell how "men take up swords and shields, buckle on bows and quivers, and charge into battle… where they are wounded by arrows and spears, and their heads are cut off by swords… and they are splashed with boiling liquids and crushed under heavy weights" (MN 13:12–13). We read of battlefields marked by "clouds of dust, the crests of the standards, the clamor, and the blows" (AN 5:75). Rulers obsessed by lust for power executed their rivals, imprisoned them, confiscated their property, and condemned them to exile (AN 3:69).

Against this backdrop of social chaos and personal disorientation, the Buddha propounded an ethic of harmlessness that rejected violence in all its forms, from its collective manifestation in armed conflict to its subtle stirrings as anger and ill will. He rested this ethic on the appeal to empathy, the ability to imagine oneself in the place of others: "All beings fear violence, all fear death. Using oneself as a criterion, one should not kill or cause death" (Dhammapada v. 129). The First Precept and first course of wholesome action call for abstinence from the destruction of life. The earnest follower "puts down the rod and weapon and dwells compassionate toward all living beings" (MN 41:12). Right Intention, the second factor of the Eightfold Path, calls for non-injury. The practitioner is advised to develop a mind of lovingkindness toward all beings, like a mother toward her only child (Snp 149).

But while the ethic of harmlessness may have served well as a guide to personal conduct, the governance of a state presented a moral quandary, with which the texts occasionally grapple. In a short sutta (SN 4:20) the Buddha ponders the intriguing question: Is it possible to rule a country righteously—without killing and instigating others to kill, without confiscating the property of others, without causing sorrow? No sooner does the question occur to him than Mara the Tempter appears and begs the Buddha to give up his monastic vocation in order to rule. The Buddha spurns Mara's proposal with a statement on the misery of sensual pleasures: "Even a mountain of gold would not be enough for one." Yet, strangely, the sutta does not answer the question with which it began. Perhaps the question was deliberately left hanging because the Buddha (or the compilers) did not think an unambiguous answer was possible. Yet the omission leaves us with this dilemma: What happens to our commitment to harmlessness when the evil of war seems necessary to deter a greater and more destructive evil?

The suttas, it must be clearly stated, do not admit any moral justification for war. Thus, if we take the texts as issuing moral absolutes, one would have to conclude that war can never be morally justified. One short sutta even declares categorically that a warrior who dies in battle will be reborn in hell, which implies that participation in war is essentially immoral (SN 42:3). This decree, however, seems

inconsistent with our present-day norms, which recognize conditions under which the resort to arms is permissible. Are such norms mistaken, then, just further proof of human ignorance and moral fallibility?

The early Buddhist texts are not unaware of the potential clash between the need to prevent the triumph of evil and the duty to observe non-violence. The solution they propose, however, always endorses non-violence even in the face of evil. A case in point is SN 11:4, which relates the story of a battle between the gods, ruled by Sakka, and the titans, ruled by Vepacitti. In the battle, the gods win, capture Vepacitti and bring him to their city. Sakka's servant Matali urges his master to punish his old foe, but Sakka insists that patience and forgiveness must prevail: "One who repays an angry man with anger makes things worse for himself; not retaliating, one wins a battle hard to win." The Jataka stories, too, endorse strict adherence to the law of non-violence, even for a ruler threatened by a foe. The Mahasilava Jataka tells the story of a king who was determined never to shed blood, even though this required surrendering his kingdom and becoming a prisoner of his enemy. Through the power of lovingkindness, the king managed to win release, transform his captor into a friend, and regain his kingdom.

In the real world, however, heads of state are hardly likely to adopt lovingkindness meditation as their principal means of deterring aggressors bent on territorial expansion or global domination. The question then returns: While adhering to non-violence as an ideal, how should a government address real threats to its population? And how is the international community to deal with a nation determined to impose its will by force? While absolute non-violence may be the rule when no contrary circumstances are apparent, specific situations can be morally complex, entailing contrary moral claims. The task of moral reflection is to help us negotiate between these claims while curbing the tendency to act from self-interested expediency.

Governments obtain their legitimacy in part from their ability to protect their citizens from ruthless aggressors bent on conquering their territory and subjugating their populations. The global community as well, through conventions and the mediation of international bodies, seeks to preserve a relative state of peace—however imperfect—from those who would use force to fulfill their lust for power or impose an ideological agenda. When a nation violates the rules of peaceful coexistence, the obligation to restrain aggression may trump the obligation to avoid violence. Thus the UN Charter sees physical force as a last resort but condones its use when allowing the transgressor to proceed unchecked would have more disastrous consequences.

The moral tensions we encounter in real life should caution us against interpreting Buddhist ethical prescriptions as unqualified absolutes. And yet the texts of early Buddhism themselves never recognize circumstances that might soften the universality of a basic precept or moral value. To resolve the dissonance between the moral idealism of the texts and the pragmatic demands of everyday life, I would posit two frameworks for shaping moral decisions. I will call one the liberative framework, the other the pragmatic karmic framework.

The liberative framework applies to those who seek to advance undeterred as rapidly as possible toward the final goal of the Dharma, the extinction of suffering. Within this framework—which proceeds through the threefold training of moral conduct, concentration, and wisdom—refraining from intentionally inflicting harm on living beings (especially human beings) is a strict obligation not to be transgressed through any "door of action," body, speech or mind. A strict regimen of non-harming is inviolable. If one is subject to conscription, one must become a conscientious objector or even go to

prison when there is no alternative. If one is confronted with the choice between sacrificing one's own life and taking the life of another, one must be willing to sacrifice one's own life, confident this act of renunciation will expedite one's progress.

The pragmatic karmic framework serves as a matrix of moral reflection for those committed to Buddhist ethical values who seek to advance toward final liberation gradually, over a series of lives, rather than directly. Its emphasis is on cultivating wholesome qualities to further one's progress within the cycle of rebirths while allowing one to pursue one's worldly vocation. In this framework the moral prescriptions of the teaching have presumptive rather than peremptory validity. One who adopts this framework would recognize that the duties of daily life occasionally call for compromises with the strict obligations of the Buddhist moral code. While still esteeming the highest moral standards as an ideal, such a practitioner would be ready to make occasional concessions as a practical necessity. The test of integrity here is not unwavering obedience to moral rules but a refusal to subordinate them to narrow self-interest.

In time of war, I would argue, the karmic framework can justify enlisting in the military and serving as a combatant, providing one sincerely believes the reason for fighting is to disable a dangerous aggressor and protect one's country and its citizens. Any acts of killing that such a choice might require would certainly be regrettable as a violation of the First Precept. But a mitigating factor would be the Buddha's psychological understanding of karma as intention, whereby the moral quality of the motive determines the ethical value of the action. Since a nation's purposes in resorting to arms may vary widely—just like a person's motives for participating in war—this opens up a spectrum of moral valuations. When the motive is territorial expansion, material wealth or national glory, the resort to war would be morally blameworthy. When the motive is genuine national defense or to prevent a rogue nation from disrupting global peace, moral evaluation would have to reflect these intentions.

Nevertheless, if one relies solely on canonical statements, the volition of harming others would always be considered "wrong intention" and all acts of destroying life classed as unwholesome. But what moral judgment are we to make when citizens participate in a defensive war to protect their country and fellow citizens, or other peaceful nations, from attack by a vicious aggressor? Suppose we are living in the 1940s when Hitler is pursuing his quest for global domination. If I join a combat unit, is my participation in this war to be considered morally reprehensible though my purpose is to block the murderous campaign of a ruthless tyrant? Can we say that fidelity to the Dharma obliges us to remain passive in the face of brute aggression, or to pursue negotiations when it's plain these will not work? Wouldn't we maintain that in this situation military action to stop the aggressor is laudable, even obligatory, and that a soldier's actions can be judged morally commendable? By the same token, if a policeman, in pursuit of his duty, is compelled to shoot a killer to spare the lives of innocent people, would we not consider his action commendable rather than blameworthy?

Hesitantly, I would have to adopt this latter position. In doing so, I must add that I am not seeking to condone any of the wars in which the U.S. is currently involved under the pretext of "defending our freedom," or to excuse the often brutal behavior of our hyper-militarized police force. Taking life is always the last choice, and a most regrettable one. But it seems to me that in a morally complex world, our choices and judgments must reflect the morally knotty texture of the situations that confront us.

I admit that I can't justify my standpoint by appeal to Buddhist texts, whether canonical or commentarial. It thus seems to me that the ethics of early Buddhism simply do not cover all the

predicaments of the human situation. Perhaps that was never their intention. Perhaps their intention is to serve as guidelines rather than as moral absolutes, to posit ideals even for those who cannot perfectly fulfill them. Nevertheless, the complexity of the human condition inevitably presents us with circumstances where moral obligations run at crosscurrents. In such cases, I believe, we must simply do our best to navigate between them, rigorously examining our own motives and aspiring to reduce harm and suffering for the greatest number of those at risk.

(Abbreviations: AN = Anguttara Nikaya; MN = Majjhima Nikaya; SN = Samyutta Nikaya; Snp = Suttanipata)

Dear Inquiring Mind,

The arguments in "War and Peace: A Buddhist Perspective" by Bhikkhu Bodhi (Spring 2014) are deeply disturbing to anyone committed to living by the Dhamma. Because they muddy the waters around the issue of killing and because confusion on this issue leads to harrowing consequences, I feel it necessary to raise strong objections to them, with particular attention to four points.

1. The arguments present a false dichotomy. When dealing with an enemy who threatens a nation's freedom or survival, why must the choice be between ineffectual, unrealistic methods and premeditated murder? Are there no skillful alternatives in between? Or outside of the box? The common view—that murderous force is an unfortunate but necessary last resort—is what has caused so much money, time and ingenuity to be lavished on that "last resort." If we held to the principle of no intentional killing—with no ifs, ands or buts—it would force us to focus our ingenuity on ways of stopping enemies from harming us without our intentionally killing them. If all the money currently spent on lethal defense were devoted to finding non-lethal ways to protect people's lives and properties, we would end up with a huge arsenal of creative, effective alternative strategies for maintaining or restoring peace. Our police and military, armed with more morally honorable skills, could serve proudly with a genuine code of honor and wouldn't have to suffer from the lifelong moral and psychic damage that comes from being trained to kill other human beings in the "line of duty."

2. The arguments are murky in areas where they should be crystal clear. They claim that there is a line between times when intentional killing is morally repugnant and times when it is morally laudable, but then give no clear indication of when that line is crossed. What sort of calculus would be universally acceptable, both in times of calm reflection and when passions are aroused, to determine which sort of enemy falls into which group: those whose lives must be respected or those who deserve to die? That's a huge line to cross, and if it were valid, it would have to be perfectly clear, even to children—given the number of children forced to fight in wars.

The article suggests that a decision to kill would be morally valid if one sincerely believed that one was fighting "to disable a dangerous aggressor and protect one's country and citizens," but that's no line at all. People use it to justify wars all the time.

3. The arguments are naïve. They assume that there is a clear way of calculating when doing a lesser evil will prevent a greater evil, but what clear boundary determines what does and doesn't go into the calculus? Can you discount the retaliation that will come from people who want to avenge your "lesser evil"? Can you discount the people who take you as an example in committing their own ideas of what constitutes a lesser evil? How many generations or lifetimes do you take into account? You can't really control the indirect effects of your action once it's done; you can't tell for sure whether the killing you do will result in more or less killing than what you're trying to prevent. But what is for sure is that you've used your own body or your own speech in giving orders—things over which you do have control—to kill.

4. The arguments are misleading in suggesting that the Buddha may not have intended the precept against intentionally killing to apply in all circumstances. True, the arguments do admit that there is no evidence in the Pali Canon for their "pragmatic" view, but there is no basis at all in the Pali Canon for thinking that the Buddha "perhaps" had other, non-absolutist intentions behind his absolutist words.

Anguttara 8:39, Samyutta 1:71 and Samyutta 3:5, among many other canonical passages, clearly rule out that “perhaps.” The Buddha meant the precept—even though it’s not a divine commandment—to be a universal principle.

The arguments are also misleading in that they casually dismiss the precept against killing because it is a moral absolute, as if all absolutes were naïve. Then they claim that there are circumstances in which the government’s need to protect its citizenry trumps the precept against killing. In other words, the need to protect a nation becomes the moral absolute, and yet there is no explanation as to where it gains its absolute authority, or why it’s more moral than not killing.

The arguments are further misleading in portraying their stance as “pragmatic,” implying that the Buddha’s approach is impractical. Actually, the Buddha’s absolutist approach is the only one that works when passions are aroused. A conditional or negotiable precept against killing is easily swept aside when people are overcome by anger or fear. Only a conscience that regards as a moral absolute the principle of no intentional killing—ever, at all—has a chance in holding the line against the passions.

Finally, the arguments are misleading in suggesting that their more “pragmatic” approach is ideal for people who want to approach liberation gradually. Actually, it’s a recipe for turning one’s back on liberation and marching off in the opposite direction. Ask any soldier suffering from the long-term effects of becoming a trained killer, and he or she will tell you that it’s no way to develop wholesome qualities of mind.

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Reply to Ven. Thanissaro by Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi

Ven. Thanissaro's critique of my essay, "War and Peace: A Buddhist Perspective" (Spring 2014), argues as if I were advocating militarism as a routinely acceptable way of settling international conflict. Since I do not take such a position, rather than respond in detail to his specific criticisms, I will instead go directly to the heart of the matter by restating my argument as clearly and simply as I can. I will then leave it to the readers to decide whether my perspective is morally responsible.

As a preamble, I must state that my purpose in writing the essay was not to propose a free-for-all militarism, much less to justify any of America's military adventures over the past fifty years. I am resolutely opposed to warfare as a means of settling differences and hold that conflicts between nations should always be resolved peacefully. I realize completely that warfare brings along the horrors that Ven. Thanissaro mentions in his critique. War sets off an avalanche of destructive emotions; it inflicts lasting trauma on both soldiers and civilians; it leaves behind a trail of death and destruction; it wastes massive amounts of money that could be better used for other purposes; and it usually accomplishes nothing. These are all sound reasons for a nation to desist from war as an instrument of power projection and geopolitical strategy. I was concerned, however, only with the critical problem that arises when a nation or people wishing to live in peace is beset by the ruthless aggression of others. When all attempts at a peaceful resolution fail and a nation faces the bald choice between letting foreign aggressors get their way and militarily defending themselves or others under attack, what is the response that best accords with the Dhamma?

My intention in writing the essay was to inquire whether Buddhist moral reflection can endorse the notion of a just war explored by moral philosophers, legal theorists and theologians of other religions. Since the classical texts are silent on the issue, I had to rely on my own reasoning. The conclusion I arrived at was that war can be justified as a last resort to avoid barbaric cruelty and terrible suffering when there is no clear alternative. It was not pleasant for me to reach that conclusion. To the contrary, as I stated in the essay, I drew it with reluctance and hesitation. As a Buddhist personally committed to non-violence, I would have rejoiced to discover a perfect fit between the Buddha's ethic of non-harming and the demands of national and international policy decisions. Reflection, however, led me to see that when we move from personal ethics to public policy, treating the precept of non-harming as a moral absolute can lead to consequences that we would find morally repugnant. The global stage is populated not only by those intent on promoting the common good, but by those who are driven by national pride, ethnic animosity and insatiable lust for power to trespass on the rights of others. Far from securing the well-being of its citizens, any nation that adopts non-harming as a moral absolute could well expose them to unmitigated mayhem and carnage.

To establish my position, it suffices for me to show that there has been at least one historical case where careful ethical reflection would support the claim that the use of military force was morally justified. Thus I singled out for consideration the Allied campaign to stop the drive for global domination launched by Nazi Germany. This may be the only war in modern history that I regard as meeting the criteria of a just war. I find it intriguing that while I made the campaign against Nazism the centerpiece of my essay, neither Ven. Thanissaro nor any of my other critics picked up on this example and offered a concrete alternative approach to dealing with the Nazis. If we agree that the Allies responded honorably to stem the triumph of Nazism, even if we insist that this was the only just war in modern history, we thereby

admit that there are certain conditions that justify war. If, on the contrary, we assert war to be inherently wrong, "premeditated murder" as Ven. Thanissaro puts it, we would be committed to holding that the Allies should have used only non-violent methods to oppose the Nazis. Such an approach, however, had already been tried and proved futile. Continuing to pursue it would have stood a near-zero chance of preventing the wholesale destruction of innocent human life.

Ven. Thanissaro backs his claim that all war is morally wrong by appealing to the unqualified condemnation of killing in the Buddha's discourses. In my essay, however, I already said that we cannot find any Pali suttas that offer a justification for war. The problem we face, in determining how to apply the Buddhist precept against killing to the case under consideration, is the absence of even a single sutta that deals with the situation I described: one where a defensive war may prevent thousands or even millions of innocent lives from being exterminated by a ruthless aggressor. Thus we face here a dilemma that is not dealt with in the canon.

Ven. Thanissaro interprets this gap in the texts as implying that the basic moral rules should never be transgressed—that there are no "ifs" and "buts" about them. But I don't think he is on secure ground in supposing that precepts laid down as general rules under clear-cut conditions are fully applicable to situations where competing moral obligations are at work. Such an attitude could well lead to a heartless and inflexible dogmatism that puts the letter of the rules above their spirit. In my view, it would be more sensible to see the rules as applicable when there are no compelling contrary moral obligations. Everyday life, however, often confronts us with moral dilemmas that upset the self-assurance of moral absolutism.

For example, telling a trivial lie—a violation of the fourth precept—might prevent a terrible calamity. Suppose a German family in Nazi Germany is sheltering a Jewish family. When the SS agents question them, they choose to lie to the SS agents to lead them astray. In the suttas the rule against lying, like the rule against killing, is also laid down without "ifs" and "buts." Thus if the rule against killing is a moral absolute, so too is the rule against lying, even telling a lie to protect the Jewish family from being caught by the SS agents. Yet is one to adhere inflexibly to this rule when doing so would lead to tragedy? Following on the logic of "no ifs and buts," that would be the conclusion, but it's a conclusion that is morally repellent. It seems to me, therefore, that when we're confronted with situations of moral complexity, we should try to navigate our way through them by using our own powers of reflection guided by the intent of the precepts, which is the minimizing of harm and suffering for both oneself and others.

While all attempts should be made to resolve global tensions peacefully, by diplomacy and other available means, this does not always work, and the Third Reich is a patent case when such an approach utterly failed. The Nazis came to power through deceit, violence, scapegoating and murder, which only increased after Hitler became dictator. The European powers tried everything to appease Hitler and restrain his ambitions, but their appeals fell on deaf ears. His demands grew more audacious, until with his attack on Poland he started all-out war. Within a year, the Nazis had conquered almost all of Europe, from the English Channel to the border of the Soviet Union. If Britain had chosen not to fight back when Germany launched its blitz, Britain too would have fallen under Nazi rule. If the U.S. had not declared war against Japan and joined the Allied front against Germany, then, short of a miracle, the Axis nations would have triumphed and subjected at least three continents to a reign of unimaginable brutality.

Certainly, there were faults in the way the Allies conducted the war—and the use of the atomic bomb against Japan was an ethical and human disaster—but let's not posit a moral equivalence between the two sides. The Nazis tortured and killed some ten million people in concentration camps; millions more lost their lives as victims of German invasions and executions. The Japanese killed twenty-three million people of Chinese ethnicity in China and Southeast Asia. If the Nazis had triumphed, the likely result would have been the liquidation or enslavement of the populations of Europe and Africa, and perhaps eventually North America. On the Asian side, the Japanese would likely have slaughtered millions more in China, Southeast Asia and perhaps Australia.

The question then comes up, "How should the international community deal with a situation like this?" If the aggressor rejects all appeals for a peaceful solution and persists in its predatory attacks, a refusal on moral principle to take military action against them could well usher in a moral nightmare. For a government, not to counter aggression would be an abdication of its responsibility to protect its citizens, who might have to endure a horrific fate. The overriding purpose of the Allied campaign was not to win territory but to stop the spread of totalitarian fascism, whose votaries showed no interest in peaceful solutions. If there had been a peaceful way to block the spread of Nazism, I would disavow my standpoint, but for all practical purposes there were none. Thus when faced with the options of submitting to the triumph of Nazism or resorting to war to stop it, I would have to endorse the latter as the morally superior choice.

When confronted with the example of the Nazis, several great apostles of non-violence recognized the limits of their moral idealism. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "If your opponent has a conscience, then follow Gandhi. But if your enemy has no conscience, like Hitler, then follow Bonhoeffer." King was referring to the brilliant German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a committed pacifist who nevertheless joined a plot to assassinate Hitler—and was executed after he was discovered. Albert Einstein too revised his pacifism when confronted with Nazism, declaring that if he were Belgian, he would volunteer for military service "cheerfully in the belief that I would thereby be helping to save European civilization."

Buddhist leaders and thinkers—including the Dalai Lama, Sulak Sivaraksa and Aung San Suu Kyi—have also struggled with the tension between the first precept and the practical need to prevent crimes against humanity. Their views are documented by Sallie King in her book, Being Benevolence: The Social Ethics of Engaged Buddhism (pp. 188–201). King quotes the Dalai Lama as saying that "as long as there are human beings, there will have to be ways to deal with miscreants"—which is vague enough to escape the conundrum. But Aung San Suu Kyi admits that if she became leader of a democratic Burma, she might have to authorize the use of lethal force. This, she says, is "an occupational hazard" that all government leaders may have to face under certain circumstances (p. 191).

Sallie King puts her finger on the crucial point when she writes: "non-violence as part of a personal ethic has been fairly well worked out in classical Buddhism, whereas non-violence as part of a social ethic was left ambiguous and given slight attention" (p. 198). It seems to me that in a social context, non-violence as a policy has prima facie validity, binding when there are no conflicting moral dimensions to a situation. But we do not live in an ideal world devoid of moral conflict. The real world is a tragic one in which the situations we face often display profound complexity and taunting moral ambiguity. In such a world, with the greatest regret and reluctance, I have to conclude that the obligation to protect and

preserve life, and to prevent harm and suffering of immense proportions, sometimes requires the cautious use of force, even lethal force, to eliminate grave threats to the flourishing of life.

The objection might be raised that permitting the use of lethal force leads to a slippery slope, and with this I agree. But the UN Charter provides us with a few handrails to prevent a slide down the slope. The Charter stipulates that resort to war can be justified only after all attempts at peaceful settlement fail, and then only under two conditions: as directed by the UN Security Council or in self-defense against an armed attack until the Security Council can restore peace and security (see Articles 42 and 51). War under any other conditions is prohibited by international law. A host of other agreements and protocols also exist to protect the innocent and to curb the excesses of warfare. Needless to say, the boundary between a just war and an unjust one is sometimes hard to discern. But as Samuel Johnson said, the fact of twilight does not mean you cannot tell day from night.

To conclude, I must aver that in today's world there are far too many nations and groups ready to use violence in order to get their way, and as champions of the Buddha's teaching we must ardently promote inner and outer peace. As a guiding principle, therefore, I completely agree that nations have a paramount obligation to avoid war and violence, whether across borders or within their borders. It's just that I do not regard war as an absolute moral wrong under all conditions. I believe the war to stop the spread of Nazism stands as the clearest example of a limiting condition to the general prohibition against warfare. And on this I rest my case.

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Ven. Thanissaro Replies

After reading Bhikkhu Bodhi's Response, I would like to add six observations:

(1) The response shows that it is possible to formulate a rationale for just war. It fails to show, however, that such a rationale can be based on the Dhamma.

(2) To say that we are fortunate that the Nazis did not gain world dominion is not the same thing as saying that World War II was a morally laudable way of achieving that result. As the Buddha pointed out, there are many times when breaking a precept brings rewards in this world—but from that fact he never drew the conclusion that those rewards justify breaking the precept.

(3) The concept of "presumptive validity" comes from Talmudic scholarship, and is totally foreign to the Pali suttas. The Buddha never allows for the idea that the precepts are valid only when no other "obligation" conflicts with them. For instance, to say that there are times when it may be necessary to tell a lie to prevent harm, and that it's okay to do so, is to say that there are times when deliberate lies can be told without shame. But as the Buddha taught his son, "When anyone feels no shame in telling a deliberate lie, there is no evil, I tell you, he will not do" (Majjhima 61). And as he said in describing the person whose speech is skillful, "He doesn't consciously tell a lie for his own sake, for the sake of another, or for the sake of any reward" (Anguttara 10:165). So there is no basis in the Dhamma for saying that other, outside "obligations" can take precedence over the precepts.

(4) India by the Buddha's time had known many evil aggressors, many horrendous forms of torture—even "scientific" experiments that involved killing prisoners (see Digha 23). Are we to assume that the Buddha could not have imagined that sort of thing happening on a larger scale in the future? He addressed the issue of whether to kill evil aggressors when he said not to kill living beings, period. The only thing whose killing he condoned was anger (Samyutta 1:71). When King Pasenadi announced to the Buddha that following the precepts gives better protection, in the long run, than having a strong army, the Buddha confirmed the king's insight (Samyutta 3:5). So it's misleading to say that the Buddha didn't recommend the precepts as a policy for governments and society at large.

    This, however, doesn't leave people totally defenseless against evil aggressors. Even monks are allowed to strike others in self-defense—as long as their intention is not to kill (Pacittiya 74). But if your choice is between suffering the loss of your relatives and material wealth on the one hand, or your virtue and right view on the other, it's better in the long run to lose the former than the latter (Anguttara 5:130).

(5) The Buddha never said that the intention underlying the precepts was something as vague as "reducing harm and suffering" or "the preservation of life." Those principles can be used to justify all sorts of evil. The only general principle he expressed for ideal actions is one that he expressed both negatively—that such actions not afflict oneself or afflict others (see Majjhima 61)—and positively: that they benefit oneself and benefit others (Anguttara 4:99). As this latter

sutta makes clear, you benefit yourself by abiding by the precepts. You benefit others by encouraging them to abide by the precepts. When you try to get others to believe that there are times when it's morally laudable to kill, you're working for their affliction.

(6) Majjhima 22 tells of a monk who claims that what the Buddha describes as an obstruction on the path is not really an obstruction at all. The Buddha calls this monk's view "evil" and admonishes him sternly in front of other monks to make sure that such a view doesn't spread. To say that killing in defensive war, instead of being an obstruction, would be part of a path to awakening is, by the Buddha's standard, an evil view. That may be a harsh term to use, but it indicates how seriously the Buddha took issues of this sort—and how seriously any person committed to the end of suffering should take them as well.

My purpose in raising this point is so that if, in the future, any Buddhist wants to claim conscientious objector status, he/she can do so without any doubt about the absolute clarity of the Buddha's absolute precept against killing.

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Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi's Comments on Thanissaro Bhikkhu's Additional Observations

Since Ven. Thanissaro has added some new observations on my response to his Letter to the Editor (LTE), I feel obliged to add my own comments on his further observations. My comments will be longer than his, but I believe these points merit an extended discussion.

(1) In my original essay I already admitted that my position is not expressly supported by the texts of early Buddhism, but the point I made several times was that the canonical texts do not explicitly consider situations marked by conflicting moral dimensions. Insisting that precepts laid down under clear-cut circumstances, prescribed as guidelines for personal training, can be readily adopted as state policies is as much an assumption that goes beyond the texts as my own. Public policy decisions must often respond to situations of immense moral complexity. To judge them, I held, we have to rely on moral reasoning guided by the intention of the precepts, which is the minimizing of human harm and suffering. The Buddhist ethical code gives us principles with presumptive validity, that are not to be lightly transgressed even for purely utilitarian reasons. But we sometimes encounter situations of such moral gravity that to impose Buddhist ethical principles on them as moral absolutes could open the door to suffering and harm of huge proportions. In such situations, I hold, moral reasoning helps us negotiate between competing moral claims while curbing the tendency to base our actions and judgments on self-interested expediency.

    This applies especially to the formulation of public policy. Now one of the foundations of a state's normative legitimacy, as expressed in the U.S. Constitution, is to "provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity." Other modern states uphold similar principles, differently expressed but tending to the same ends. Given this basis for normative legitimacy, we can ask whether a state could provide for the common defense and promote the general welfare if it adopted strict non-harming as an unconditional basis of policy. If a country committed to such an agenda possessed valuable resources or a strategic location, it would be in constant danger of attack by more bellicose nations intent on pillaging its wealth or taking advantage of its position. Quite possibly, too, the country would be overrun by invaders who claim its land, enslave its men, and rape its women. Thus a state that adopts a policy of absolute non-injury invites calamity upon its own people and abjures one of the foundations of its own legitimacy. To provide for the common defense and promote the general welfare, a government must be ready and willing to safeguard the nation's population from vicious actions by external aggressors and internal transgressors.

    Virtually all operational modern states maintain armies, which usually have a mainly defensive function, at least in theory. Historically, all the major Buddhist kingdoms in pre-modern times had armies. While Buddhist rulers who used their armies for purposes of conquest would be judged adhammika, "acting contrary to the Dhamma," it would be an extreme view to hold that in maintaining and employing armies for defensive purposes they were thereby violating the standards of rulership accepted as dhammika, normative and ethical for rulers, by the Buddhist

communities over whom they reigned. I am unaware of any occasions in Asian Buddhist history when groups of Buddhist monks petitioned their kings to disband their armies or discard lethal weapons on the grounds that this was entailed by the precept not to take life. Even King Asoka, the ideal Buddhist ruler, did not diminish the strength of his army or weaken the defenses of his empire (see Ananda W.P. Guruge's essay in Anuradha Seneviratne, ed., King Asoka and Buddhism, p. 220).

In his added observation (4), Ven. Thanissaro disputes my assertion that the Buddha did not recommend the precepts as a policy for governments. He implies by this that the Buddha held that a government should not wage even a defensive war. The text that he cites in support of this claim, however, says nothing of the sort. In the sutta (Samyutta Nikaya 3:5), the Buddha merely confirms King Pasenadi's observation that a king who misconducts himself by body, speech and mind is unprotected even when surrounded by his army, while one who acts righteously is protected even without an army. This discussion is clearly framed in terms of karmic consequences based on personal behavior. It says nothing about "the precepts as a policy for governments and society at large" nor does it address a king's responsibility for his subjects. The Buddha did not tell King Pasenadi—or any other king who sought his guidance—to disband his army and protect himself and his citizens solely by the power of his virtuous behavior. The reason, no doubt, was that he knew such advice would be irresponsible and could lead the realm to ruin.

Since government policy is outside our direct control, at the practical level my discussion with Ven. Thanissaro is only remotely about determining government policy. More directly, the discussion concerns two other matters: (1) the moral judgments that we make about a government that employs military force for defensive purposes and authorizes the police to use lethal action to disable a violent criminal; and (2) the course of action, based on these judgments, that we would consider appropriate for those following the Buddhist path.

In regard to the first point, the forming of moral judgments, the question is whether we should judge a government as acting contrary to the Dhamma if, within the scope of international law, it engages in defensive warfare to protect its citizens from external attack. Now since providing for the common defense and promoting the general welfare are duties of the state, I hold that in fulfilling these duties justly and with cautious restraint, the state is acting rightly and righteously even if it must resort to defensive military means to achieve that aim. By the same token, I believe the state is acting rightly— in accordance with the Dhamma—if, as a last resort, it permits lethal means to be used to protect its citizens from internal criminal elements that violate their right to life and physical security. I do not condone actions that deprive human beings of their life, least of all in warfare, which is an explosion of human irrationality. But when a nation faces the choice between submitting to the aggression of others and resisting them militarily, I believe they are justified both morally and pragmatically in choosing the latter.

As to the course of action to be taken by Buddhists, I hold that individuals must rely on their personal conscience to decide whether or not they wish to assist the state in fulfilling its mission by joining the military or the police force. For one who earnestly aspires to follow the path to

liberation, I would not recommend joining the military or the police. Joining these organizations may require a person to take human life, which would be a breach of the first precept and thus an obstruction to one's progress on the path to final liberation. But people following the Buddhist path are at different stages in their spiritual development, and not all Buddhists, even those who cherish the final goal as their ultimate ideal, are ready to undertake the full ethical training of a lay disciple, let alone a monastic.

Any action, moreover, can be viewed from multiple perspectives. Since the Buddha identifies karma with intention, when an agent is fighting in a genuinely defensive war or acting in an official capacity to stop a violent criminal, the karmic texture of his actions will be multifaceted, reflecting the complexity of his intentions. While the specific intention of taking life would have to be judged unwholesome and morally blameworthy, the overarching intention to safeguard others from harm and suffering would be wholesome and morally praiseworthy. Hence to condemn such actions out of hand as "premeditated murder," as is done in Ven. Thanissaro's LTE, is to make a rash and unfair judgment that is simply contrary to international jurisprudence. (See in this connection G.E.M. Anscombe, "War and Murder," and Thomas Nagel, "War and Massacre," both available online.)

(2) To say that "we are fortunate that the Nazis did not gain world domination" seems to me to trivialize the significance of the defeat of Nazism, almost putting the outcome of World War II on the same level as a football match. Ven. Thanissaro's statement also fails to address the question of how Nazism was to be defeated if not by war. In my rejoinder to his LTE I pointed out that once the Nazis launched their campaign to conquer all of Europe, it was clear there was no way other than war to thwart them. The choice facing the Allied nations was thus either to submit to the Nazis or to fight them militarily. Non-lethal methods of opposition had already been employed and had failed. The fact that the military option resulted in their defeat, and hence helped to avert the horrors that would have followed a Nazi victory, in my view provides moral justification for the decision to take up arms against them.

Ven. Thanissaro criticizes my position here by pointing out that the Buddha did not consider "rewards in this world" to justify breaking the precepts. This claim, however, conflates "this-worldly benefits" of the type we might call "self-interested goods" with the achievement of a moral good, which in the case I am describing was preventing the conquest, torture and execution of millions of innocent people by a monstrous death machine. Thus his reference again fails to acknowledge the moral tensions in the case under consideration and thereby becomes irrelevant to the argument.

Perhaps it was because he saw deeply into the moral complexities involved in establishing a peaceful social order—and not because he considered the precept against killing to be inviolable under all circumstances—that the Buddha did not make pronouncements about such convoluted matters as defensive wars or protective police action, where moral cross-currents are at work. His method was always to uphold the primacy of non-harming, non-hatred and non-enmity, to insist on peaceful resolution of conflicts and to advance a vision of a peaceful world order guided by ethical principles. In this respect he was uncompromising. But he must

have been too much of a realist to have expected such ideals to be realizable in a world ravaged by greed for power and wealth, by prejudice and hatred, and by desire for revenge. Thus, while expounding non-harming as the ideal, he nowhere insisted that governments adopt strict non-harming as a policy of state. Since no such instance is recorded in the texts, I have to conclude that the issue is a gray area not addressed one way or another in the Pali Canon. And that throws us back upon our powers of moral reasoning.

(3) If I rightly understand Ven. Thanissaro's position in regard to the hypothetical case of the German couple who are sheltering the Jewish family, he is saying that from the standpoint of the Dhamma, the couple, when questioned by the SS agents, should either truthfully admit that they are sheltering Jews or remain silent—even though the SS agents would be sure to interpret silence as an admission of guilt and would search their home for the Jewish fugitives. To be faithful to the Buddhist moral code, Ven. Thanissaro seems to hold, the German couple must not lie to the SS agents. He thus quotes the Buddha as describing a person whose speech is skillful as one who "doesn't consciously tell a lie for his own sake, for the sake of another, or for the sake of any reward." Again, for me this example illustrates the uncomfortable corner into which one paints oneself when one absolutizes a principle laid down as a general rule and refuses to recognize extraordinary circumstances that may overrule its presumptive validity.

This is not to say that a simple weighing of consequences justifies telling a lie. Truth-telling, I believe, has a powerful intrinsic value that should normally prevail over concern for the concrete benefits a lie might bring to oneself or those one favors. But the situation I described is of a very different sort. It presents us not with a clash between a moral rule and personal advantage, but with a case where two moral mandates pull in opposite directions: one, the obligation not to speak falsehood; the other, the obligation to protect the endangered lives of innocent people. The former is covered by a precept made explicit in the Pali Canon; the latter, to my knowledge, is not expressly covered by a precept.

Ven. Thanissaro gives precedence to the precept, writing in regard to this example: "There is no basis in the Dhamma for saying that other, outside 'obligations' can take precedence over the precepts." Thus I assume that if he were present on this occasion, Ven. Thanissaro would advise the German couple not to speak falsely, to tell the truth or to keep silent, even though the SS agents would interpret silence as a sign that there are Jews in the house. By following this advice, the German couple would have acted in accordance with the precept, but the Jewish family they were sheltering would have faced arrest, torture and murder, betrayed by those whom they trusted. Such is the conclusion that would follow from the prescription to adhere unflinchingly to the precepts. I myself find such a conclusion so repellent to my own moral sense that I'm forced to conclude that the fault lies in turning a precept laid down as a general rule, obligatory when conditions are normal, into a moral absolute obligatory under all conditions.

(4) Ven. Thanissaro writes that the prohibition against killing "doesn't leave you totally defenseless against evil aggressors [since] even monks are allowed to strike others in self-defense—as long as their intention is not to kill." This ties up with the first point he makes in his LTE, where he proposes that governments "[find] non-lethal ways to protect people's lives and properties," so

that “our police and military… could serve proudly with a genuine code of honor.” I fully endorse this proposal as an ideal. As a nation, we should be diligently seeking more benign methods of social control, and there is a certain truth in the maxim that too many guns in the hands of the law provoke lawlessness rather than respect for the law. However, for such a proposal to be at all feasible, we would have to carry out an almost total transformation of society as we know it. In national affairs, we would need to adopt ways of dealing with people who have homicidal dispositions so that they do not turn into violent criminals. We would have to ensure that those intent on taking the lives and property of others have no access to lethal weapons and no opportunities to use them. And we would need reliable guarantees that conflicts between people and social groups can always be resolved by peaceful means. In international relations, we would have to be confident that negotiations and pressures from the international community will invariably succeed in preventing rogue nations from maliciously attacking their neighbors or foes.

While I would fully support such a program of social transformation, in moral reflection we have to take account of the world as we actually find it, not a world that we posit as an ideal. In the world that we actually find—this messy world in which we live and act—deadly violence against innocent people is far too common, and too often antagonism between rival groups and hostile nations can erupt in unprovoked violence that endangers the lives of the innocent. It is the responsibility of state authorities—whether at the local or national level—to safeguard the lives and safety of people in their charge, and to fulfill this obligation those in the appropriate forms of government service are sometimes compelled to use lethal force. Within a legal system committed to ethical constraints, lethal force would always be the final resort, to be used with the utmost hesitancy and only when no other method is feasible. However, when there is no choice but that between the use of lethal force to protect the innocent and permitting the wanton destruction of life by those bent on conquest or murder, the state incurs an obligation to protect the innocent.

In making this claim, I must stress that I am not seeking to condone the present-day drift toward excessive militarization in our nation’s policies, the proclivity of police to use lethal force in response to slight provocations, and the racial biases seen in police action. I am well aware that in recent years these trends have resulted in heartbreaking tragedies that could have been easily avoided. But there are situations in which the use of lethal force may be the only effective way to prevent the death of innocents and therefore becomes, in my view, obligatory for those charged with the duty of preserving life and liberty for the general public.

To illustrate this, consider the following scenario—one that, painfully, we hear about all too often in America today. A mentally deranged man enters a schoolyard during recess armed with a high-capacity assault rifle. He starts shooting randomly at students and teachers, who begin dropping dead. A police officer arrives on the scene and quickly assesses the situation. He knows that if he attempts to approach the gunman to disable him without shooting (like the monks in Ven. Thanissaro’s example), he would likely lose his own life, and in any case he would give the gunman time to kill more hapless students. If he were close enough, the officer could shoot to wound rather than to kill, but at a distance of fifty or sixty yards he might not have that option;

by aiming at the arms or legs he risks missing his target and thus allowing the gunman to murder more students or even to turn the rifle on him. Such devices as Tasers are effective only up to a distance of twelve or fifteen yards, and we are presupposing a much greater distance, where a shot is as likely to cause death as to wound. So what should the policeman do?

On Ven. Thanissaro's interpretation of the Buddha's injunction not to kill, the policeman should not shoot but seek to employ some non-lethal way of protecting the students' lives. However, given the specific layout of the situation I have described, it's hard to see what non-lethal method he could use to achieve this aim. Given, too, conditions in today's world, I also wonder whether we would want to live in a society where police are not permitted to use lethal methods under conditions when lethal force seems the only realistic method of preventing the wanton destruction of innocent life. Ironically, in the real world (as contrasted with idealistic depictions of a fantasy world), the maintenance of social order, the curbing of destructive violence, and the establishment of a reasonable degree of safety and security requires that some people take on the responsibility for using forceful, even lethal, methods of curbing miscreants. We can sustain the hope that the world will one day adopt a true "culture of life" rather than our present "culture of death." But this, as I said above, requires fundamental changes in many dimensions of our communal life, more than can reasonably be expected in the near future.

(5) It is a misrepresentation of my position to assert, without qualification, that I am holding, "It's morally laudable to kill." As should be clear already, when proper qualifications are made, what I am saying is that people in certain positions in society have an obligation to protect the lives of those in their charge, and to fulfill this duty it may sometimes be necessary for them, under conditions when no other feasible alternative is at hand, to take human life. Even with respect to war, what I said is that a nation that resorts to war is morally justified in doing so to stop a vicious aggressor when all other avenues have been exhausted, when not resisting the aggressor would expose its own people to death or subjugation, and when it meets the criterion laid out in the UN Charter. It must also respect the laws of just conduct in war. There is thus a vast difference between my actual position and the interpretation that Ven. Thanissaro imposes on it, namely, that I hold, "It's morally laudable to kill."

(6) Ven. Thanissaro insinuates that I propose the view that "killing in defensive war, instead of being an obstruction, would be part of a path to awakening." If I held such a view, I would indeed be guilty of describing an obstruction on the path (namely, killing) as an aid on the path. But I never made such an assertion. In my original article, the one that sparked this debate, I explicitly wrote:

[For] those who seek to advance undeterred along the path to the final goal of the Dharma, the extinction of suffering… refraining from intentionally inflicting harm on living beings (especially human beings) is a strict obligation not to be transgressed through any "door of action," body, speech or mind. Under this commitment one must adopt a strict regimen of non-harming. In a private struggle to the death, one must opt to die rather than kill. If subject to conscription, one must opt to become a conscientious objector or go to prison if necessary. (Emphasis added.)

Thus I stated without "muddying" any waters that one earnestly committed to the training is obliged to strictly uphold the first precept, the training rule not to take life. I did, however, recognize that there are Buddhists of sincere faith and commitment who, because of their life situations in this imperfect world, feel themselves compelled "to make occasional concessions as matters of practical necessity." I said that they have chosen to adopt a gradual and compromised path to liberation, which still remains the guiding aspiration of their hearts. Among these compromises with the perfection of the training would be taking on positions of political authority, enlisting in the military and joining the police force. People in Buddhist countries who adopt such ways of life can still maintain high standards of moral integrity. During my years in Sri Lanka I knew a chief of police and several generals who were men of upright character, deeply devoted to the Dhamma. They chose their professions, not because they were nonchalant about killing, but because they wanted to serve their country and society by protecting innocent people who might be endangered by predatory attacks or violent crime. I don't think it would be fitting to condemn them out of hand or to advocate proscribing lethal action when it is necessary to protect the public. In a country in which the population is mostly Buddhist, this would mean that virtually all who serve as heads of state, soldiers and police would have to be non-Buddhists, or, if Buddhists, judged as morally corrupt.

Ven. Thanissaro wraps up his discussion under (6) by stating that his purpose in raising the point about the Buddha's stricture against evil views was to show that any Buddhist who wants to claim conscientious objector status may do so without any doubt about the Buddha's absolute position against killing. I've never doubted the entitlement of a Buddhist to claim conscientious objector status, but Ven. Thanissaro's premises imply that to remain true to the Dhamma, a Buddhist faced with serving in the military is obliged to claim conscientious objector status. At the least, such a person may not serve in a combat role, but must either refuse to serve or apply for non-combat duty. They must also be prepared to face the consequences, including imprisonment, if such status is denied. By the same token, such a person should not serve in the police, at least not in a role that might necessitate the taking of life.

While I would recommend that a Buddhist who earnestly seeks to attain the highest goal of the Dhamma undeterred should not join the police or military—or else, if obliged to enlist, should apply for non-combat service—I would not hold that all Buddhists facing conscription must of necessity apply for conscientious objector status. Nor do I hold that those who join the police or military are thereby turning their back on the Dhamma. As I said above, people may be sincere in their Buddhist convictions yet make varying degrees of commitment to Buddhist moral practice, which indeed consists of training rules personally adopted rather than commandments imposed by supernatural authority. Participating in the military, particularly in a combat role, may require that one transgress the precepts, and this will be a danger to one's purity of virtue and an impediment to one's progress on the path. But among the demands that mundane life makes upon us, we must each choose between those we are willing to submit to and those we are prepared to resist. Not all are capable of strict standards of observance, and I think it would be both presumptuous and uncharitable to say that those who choose the more compromised approach have necessarily "marched off in the opposite direction" from liberation. All

predominantly Buddhist nations have maintained police forces and armies. While not all Buddhist police officers and soldiers truly take the Dhamma to heart, many do and seek to gradually advance along the path in accordance with their family circumstances, personal aptitudes and karmic conditions. Let us not disparage them from high moral ground but instead recognize their limits and respect their aspirations.

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Dear Inquiring Mind

Candidly speaking, I can't help but doubt whether critics of Bhikkhu Bodhi's essay, "War and Peace: A Buddhist Perspective" (Spring 2014), would cling to their moral high ground if their family were viciously assaulted by a sociopath, of if their homeland were attacked by malevolent terrorists.

In the context of bodhisattva practice, there is actually a bodhisattva precept to the effect that one dedicated to this path must not refrain from a physical or verbal non-virtue if committing such a deed would bring about a greater good. For example, if an armed murderer asks you if you have seen the innocent person he intends to kill, you may justifiably tell him "no" (even if you have seen that person) or otherwise mislead him in order to protect the life of the person he would kill. In so doing, you also protect the potential murderer from committing that evil.

Thus I am in sympathy with the UN Charter, which, as Ven. Bodhi says, "sees physical force as the last choice, but condones its use when the alternative, allowing the transgressor to proceed unchecked, would have more disastrous consequences." I also fully agree with his statement: "In time of war… the karmic framework can justify enlisting in the military and serving as a combatant, providing one sincerely believes the reason for fighting is to disable an aggressor and protect one's country and its citizens.… The Buddha's psychological understanding of karma as intention, colored by the moral quality of the motive, can be brought forth as a mitigating factor." The moral defensibility of violence is rooted in motivation (to commit a lesser act of violence to prevent greater harm both to one's own side and to the others' side), and in wisdom, clearly anticipating the consequences of one's act of violence.

Right view and right intention are essential if one is not to violate the letter of the Buddha's law regarding physical and verbal non-virtues. This presents each individual with an ongoing, daily challenge to assess the level of one's own wisdom and purity of motivation whenever presented with a moral dilemma of the kinds Ven. Bodhi's essay points to. It is much easier to be obedient to rules taken as moral absolutes than to be wise and compassionate in understanding how to apply them. Once again, I find that the Mahayana scriptures tackle tough issues that are glossed over in the Pali suttas.

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A last response from Ven. Thanissaro Bhikkhu

The version of Ven. Bodhi's first response that the editors sent to me contained this passage:

> *But in my view it makes better sense to see the rules as having presumptive validity, applying to situations that do not involve contending obligations. Everyday life, however, often confronts us with moral dilemmas, for example, where telling a lie (a violation of a precept) might help prevent terrible harm. On this basis I believe we must navigate such dilemmas by using our own powers of reflection guided by the intent of the precepts, which is the reduction of harm and suffering.*

I was taken aback by the idea that the precepts aren't even good guides for everyday life, so—in my comment #3—I responded simply by citing the Buddha's observation on people who feel no shame at telling a deliberate lie.

However, in the final version of Ven. Bodhi's first response printed online, he replaced the above passage with the example of the moral dilemma faced by a German couple hiding Jewish fugitives in their home. Then, in his second response, he devoted a long discussion to how repellent my "response" to that example was. Because this issue is one that should be treated clearly and carefully—after all, it's a question of whether the precepts that the Buddha stated in such absolute terms really can be taken absolutely—I'd like the chance actually to respond to Ven. Bodhi's altered example.

The response is this: Even in this extreme case, the couple would still be wise to hold by the precept against misrepresenting the truth. However, it's a mistake to assume that the precept would limit their options to just two: divulging the whole truth or remaining silent. An important part of training under the precepts lies in seeing how you can hold to them skillfully. That often requires imagining a wider range of options for action that you might not have bothered to explore otherwise. In the case of this precept, this means learning how to withhold damaging information without stating anything contrary to what you perceive to be the truth. In other words—unlike an oath in a court of law—the precept doesn't require that you state the whole truth. You're free to keep certain facts to yourself—for example, by asking diversionary questions or pulling the conversation off on a different tack. Learning to master these skills forces you to develop quick discernment and a well-developed imagination, but that's an important part of what training in the precepts is for.

In the case of the Nazis at the door, the first point that needs to be clarified is that Nazis searching for fugitives don't expect anyone to admit up front that, "Yes, I'm hiding fugitives in my home." They're expecting you to deny it. Instead of listening carefully to what you say, they'll be looking for clues in your face or body language to decide whether it's worth their while to give the house a cursory or a thorough search.

The second point is that there are Nazis and there are Nazis. Some Nazi soldiers aren't all that enthusiastic in their work, and they won't want to search the house it they don't have to. Other Nazi soldiers are more fanatical, and will be determined to search the house no matter what you say.

So, in hopes that you're dealing with soldiers from the first group, you might answer their question about Jews in your home by opening the door wide, spreading your arm, and saying, "You're welcome to look for yourselves." If it's appropriate to the situation, you might add, "I can assure you that we are hiding nothing shameful in this house." The invitation will disarm them, and because the follow-up remark is the truth—there really is nothing shameful about trying to protect Jewish friends—you can say this while looking the soldiers straight in the eye. Your body language is telling them that you're innocent. If they do search the house, they won't bother to ransack the attic.

This may sound like hair-splitting, but consider what would happen if you're actually dealing with Nazis of the second sort. Regardless of what you say, they give your house a thorough search and find the Jewish people in hiding. If you had originally told the soldiers that there were no Jews in the house, then if they then imprison and torture you, they could use your lie to break you down. This is how torturers demolish their victims psychologically: by catching them in behavior that the victim knows to be shameful and then using that to convince the victim, in their twisted way, that he or she deserves the torture they're meting out.

If, however, you had originally said that you were hiding nothing shameful in the house, then if the soldiers accuse you of lying as they take the Jewish people out the door, you can look them straight in the eye and maintain, with your full sense of honor, that, no, you had told the truth: There is nothing shameful about protecting Jewish lives. This at least gives you your sense of self-worth to hold on to when everything else, beyond your control, is falling apart. If the Nazis then imprison and torture you, you'll have an inner reserve of self-worth to help you survive the ordeal with your morale intact.

If this example sounds forced, remember that the usual way of posing moral dilemmas is even more forced. Questions of this sort are usually phrased in the form, "What if you know that by telling a lie—or by killing Hitler—you'd save countless lives?" In other words, it's always assumed that you know your breach of a precept will have a good long-term effect. But how often in real life are we presented with situations in which we can really know something like that? How can you be sure that your lie won't be found out, and that the long-term consequences will be made worse by the lie? If you had had a chance to kill Hitler, who knows? The Nazis might have replaced him with a leader who was not so stupid as to attack the Soviet Union and fight a war on two fronts, in which case the Allies would have most likely lost the war.

So holding to the precepts in all circumstances is not just a matter of adhering blindly to petty, selfish rules. They give wise guidance on how to live honorably, with your morale intact, in a world where, to paraphrase Kierkegaard, we act forward but know backwards. When you can't be absolutely sure of how your actions are going to ripple out in the world at large, you have to base your choices on the one thing you can be sure of—your intentions—and to take responsibility for the one thing you are responsible for: what you yourself do and what you intentionally try to get others to do. That's all that can be asked of a human being, but unfortunately many people—thinking that that's not enough—don't even manage that much.

This applies to all human beings, whether they're in positions of power or not. The Buddha's description of a wise king is one who has an army but conducts his foreign policy with enough wisdom so that he never has to use the army to kill. The best way to deal with Nazis is not to create the conditions—as the Allied powers did in 1918—that would give rise to them in the first place. That's the Dhamma lesson we

should take from the example of WWII, not the idea that precepts are expendable in the face of other commitments.

If you encounter a case where holding to the precepts conflicts with other values you hold to, you need to reconsider your understanding of the case. Either you haven't stretched your imagination enough to realize how you might maintain the precepts and hold to your other values at the same time, or you're holding to a value you can't take as an absolute. Any value that can be used to justify lying or killing in one instance sets a bad example and can, in the hands of a clever propagandist, be used to justify those actions in any instance. For the sake of long-term well-being—your own and that of those who take you as an example—you'd be wise to let it go.

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