

Special Contribution

“ To Pray for Peace ”

Do not commit vulgar acts for which the wise may criticize you. All living things are happy, peaceful, carefree.

(from “ Kindness ” in The Words of the Buddha, Nakamura Hajime, trans.)

This verse, from the Discourse on Loving Kindness [Pali. Metta Sutta, Jpn.Jikyo], was chanted by the Burmese monks during the demonstrations in Myanmar (Burma) in 2007. Toppling the military government and restoring political power was not the main goal of the monks ’ demonstrations. Rather, theirs was an earnest and peaceful protest that called for relief for the common people living in the throes of poverty, and for an apology for the continuous violence suffered by monks at the hands of the military.

Who were the ones carrying weapons in their hands? True, what began as a demonstration to ease the suffering of the masses became one in which people hung banners that said “ Overthrow Military Rule! ” . Still, not a single monk carried a weapon; to the very end, they protested using only prayers and sutra.

And then, monks all across Myanmar performed what is known as “ turning over the bowls ” (Jpn. fuhatsu). “ Turning over the bowls ” is a form of religious protest that is permitted to monks in situations in which the Buddha, the Dharma, or the Sangha is slandered or when monks ’ homes are destroyed by the laity. “ Turning over the bowls ” is a declaration that the monks will refuse all donations?a serious situation for laypeople, who can no longer earn merit for their charity. While the significance of this act may be lost on the Japanese, for the Burmese, not being permitted to earn merit is a grate punishment that threatens a person ’ s happiness in both this world and the next.

Since the majority of Burmese are Buddhist?and the majority of the soldiers are also Buddhist?the action of “ turning over the bowls ” is, in actuality, that the monks want to permit donations. However, the military government has shot at and arrested many monks. On top of that, thinking that they could strip monks of their KESA and return them to lay life, the government has tortured and even murdered monks. Yet, no one can rip the KESA off of a monk ’ s heart.

The flames of war are burning not just in Myanmar, but throughout the world ?

Iraq, Afghanistan, Israel, Pakistan, the Iraqi-Turkish border, and Chechnya, to name only a few. This planet?this heavenly body, so small in the universe?has conflict spreading all over it. The regrettable thing about humans is that we are satisfied just as long as we have power and wealth for ourselves, without realizing that this is a form of self-torture. It is up to religious leaders to teach that “ it is difficult thing to receive a human body ” , and that, having been granted this rare chance to live life as a human being, it is a shame that we should hurt ourselves in such a way.

Though we cannot interfere politically in the affairs of foreign governments, as Buddhist clergy we are obliged to show that it is a mistake for the life of any living thing to be taken away by force. As Shakyamuni Buddha said in the Discourse of Loving Kindness:

Just as a mother protects the life of her only child, one should cultivate a boundless (and loving) heart that cares for all living things.

(Nakamura Hajime, trans.)

A friend told me the story of one Burmese monk who, after having been rrested, tortured, and stripped of his status as a monk, said, “ While I was being tortured, I fervently prayed that peace would enter the heart of the soldier who was torturing me. ”

Further, one should cultivate a boundless and loving mind that cares for the entire world. Above, below, and all around us, without obstacle, without hatred and without hostility (we should act with kindness).

(Nakamura Hajime, trans.)

As Buddhist clergy living peacefully in a country that does not now spread the sparks of war, each of us needs to ask ourselves, “ Is there something we can do? ”

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