

SPRING 2007: Buddhism and the Military

QUESTION: Since the age of eighteen I've been in the military, training for combat, engaged in combat, and training other soldiers to do the same. When I was young, I thought peace came through aggression and never letting your defense down. But now I'm in my mid-forties, still young enough to do what has to be done but old enough to realize that peace and happiness are what make a life good. It's that peaceful, happy feeling that I can't seem to find.

Do you believe a person can practice Buddhist ways and still maintain a job in the military, even though the military is by nature an aggressive organization? As a Buddhist, must you always believe in "turning the other cheek" when something bad happens to you?

NARAYAN LIEBENSON GRADY: I want to be careful with my comments because I feel strongly that veterans in this country, who have given so much of themselves, have often been treated badly, particularly in recent times. Although I am not questioning your intention over these last many years, I don't think that it's possible to put the Buddha's teachings into practice while engaging in combat or training others to engage in combat. This is because it is not possible to aspire to alleviate suffering in oneself and others while harming oneself and others. One factor of the noble eightfold path is wise livelihood, and one area that we are cautioned against is dealing in arms.

I do believe, however, that it is possible to bring peace in an arena of aggression, depending on one's particular role and responsibilities in the military. If one's values and understanding are different than the status quo, there may be a way to advise others and be of help. I know a practitioner who served in the marines and is now in an advisory position where she's able to educate and influence military personnel whose decisions impact many people. I respect her decision to have taken on this position.

The Buddha stressed the importance of not meeting aggression with aggression or hatred with hatred because it simply perpetuates suffering. And as others have said, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth means everyone ends up without eyes or teeth. Our task as practitioners is to bring as much creativity as possible to conflict, in the form of wisdom and compassion. It is true that there are rare instances where the path of least harm requires strong and decisive action. In these cases, it seems to me that clarity of intention, restraint, and limiting of physical harm are crucial.

Regarding your concern about a career change at this point in your life, I wonder if you are attached to doing what you have always done and are afraid to make a change. It can be easy to rely upon seemingly secure conditions even when we've worn out the original reason for our involvement. What do you really want to do? What is it that you love? Your present career seems in opposition to your growing understanding of what brings about peace and happiness. It can take a great deal of courage to do something different, but I encourage you to continue to ask yourself these questions. It might also be helpful to speak with former soldiers who are Buddhist practitioners. I imagine that there are many who have been through some of your

experiences and who would have much wisdom to offer.