

# The Buddha and the *Māgadha-Vajjī* War

Ven. Pandita (Burma)

✉: ashinpan@gmail.com ☎: 0094-77-6571856

Post Graduate Institute of Pali and Buddhist Studies,  
University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka

## Abstract

According to one account recorded in *Mahāparinibbānasutta*, the Buddha had to meet a royal minister named Vassakāra when the king Ajātasattu ordered the latter to visit the Buddha and inform him about the king's plan to subdue the country of *Vajjīs*. After hearing Vassakāra, the Buddha spoke on seven Conditions of Welfare (*satta aparihāniyā dhammā*), which would ensure the prosperity of *Vajjī* as long as its citizens observed them. Vassakāra shrewdly inferred from the Buddha's discourse how to defeat *Vajjī* people and later actually forced them into submission. Regarding that event, there are some perplexing questions: (1) Why did the king Ajātasattu choose to consult a wandering ascetic on a significant matter of state like fighting a war? (2) If the Buddha did not really accept any kind of violence, as the tradition would have it, why did he not openly speak against it? (3) Since it was from the Buddha's speech that Vassakāra got the clue how to defeat *Vajjīs*, did the Buddha intend to help Ajātasattu defeat *Vajjīs*? If not, what was his purpose in expounding the seven Conditions of Welfare to Vassakāra? This paper will attempt to answer these questions and will argue, in the conclusion, that this event shows the Buddha's disapproving attitude towards a political role of the Buddhist Order.

**Keywords:** History of religions, History of India, Buddhism, Theravada Buddhism, Monasticism, Politics, War, Violence

## 1 Introduction

Even though the Buddha was a wandering ascetic living outside the normal social and political atmospheres of his times, he did come into touch from time to time with contemporary political events. One such event, an intriguing one if I may say so, is recorded

in *Mahāparinibbānasutta* (DN II 72–76; Walshe 231–232). According to this account, the Buddha was made to give political advice when the king Ajātasattu ordered his minister Vassakāra to visit the Buddha, give him the king’s respects and inform him about the king’s plan to subdue the country of *Vajjīs*. After hearing Vassakāra, the Buddha spoke on seven Conditions of Welfare (*satta aparihāniyā dhammā*), which, according to the Buddha, would ensure the prosperity of *Vajjī* as long as its citizens observed them. Vassakāra shrewdly inferred from the Buddha’s discourse that the only solution would be friendly negotiations or a victory won through smashing the unity of *Vajjī* people. According to the commentary, he did divide *Vajjī* people later and forced them into submission (Sv II 522–524; An 17–20).

There are perplexing questions regarding the aforesaid event:

1. Why did the king Ajātasattu choose to consult a wandering ascetic on a significant matter of state like fighting a war?
2. If the Buddha did not really accept any kind of violence, as the tradition would have it, why did he not openly speak against it?
3. Since it was from the Buddha’s speech that Vassakāra got the clue how to defeat *Vajjīs*, did the Buddha intend to help Ajātasattu defeat *Vajjīs*? If not, what was his purpose in expounding the seven Conditions of Welfare to Vassakāra?

At present, there seem no satisfactory answers available yet for these questions, which has led some scholars to note:

... an *historically improbable* [Emphasis added] event is used here narratively to establish the Buddha’s superiority over his interlocutor. (Collins 443–444)

Remaining silent, he did not condemn war and did not say anything in favour of a policy of peace, of non-violence ... The silent way the Buddha took in this case contrasts with the active part he played in the dispute between the Sākyas and Koliyas (Ja V 412ff., Sv II 672ff., Dhpa III 254ff.). (An 17)

Although the historical evidence shows that the Buddha did not encourage kings to go to war, there are also indications that the Buddha was not always especially proactive in taking steps to prevent wars taking place. (Deegalle 5)

Moreover, this meeting is viewed by some scholars as part of the evidence for the view that “on certain occasions the Buddha seems tacitly to accept—or at least does not explicitly condemn—the use of force by kings” (Keown 72). This view, in turn, has led some scholars to “detect ‘two modes’ of Dharma in the Pāli canon with respect to violence” (72). (See the details of the two modes of Dhamma in Collins 419–423.)

However, I believe that this meeting, as recorded in Pali sources, shows the Buddha acting in perfect accord with the traditional view—that the Buddha opposes all kinds of violence without discrimination—and this paper is an attempt to prove it. To do so, I need to answer the relevant questions posed at the beginning, and I will attack them in the order of (1, 3, 2) in order to make the logic of my argument clearer.

## 2 Why did Ajātasattu choose to consult the Buddha on his war plan?

This question has become important because of Collins' following observation:

Readers can come to their own conclusions about the possibility that, historically, a king like the parricide Ajātasattu would have sent his Chief Minister to ask *a wandering holy man, publicly*, [Emphasis added] how to set about attacking and conquering a neighboring territory. I find it unlikely. (Collins 443–444)

Collins' doubts boil down to two questions: (1) why should the king have even bothered to consult the Buddha, "a wondering holy man", on a matter definitely mundane yet very important for the state? (2) Did he not care for his public image as a king when he ordered this (at that time at least) seemingly pointless public query? These questions, and obviously the lack of the reasonable answers, have led him to term this meeting "an historically improbable event" (443–444).

I argue, however, that it is possible to find reasonable answers to these questions without denying the historicity of this story if we consider the details of Ajātasattu's order issued to Vassakāra. The king's particular order can be found in the following summary of Collins:

First we hear Ajātasattu announce his intentions, or hopes, to his minister Vassakāra in strong, even violent, language ... He then tells Vassakāra to go to the Buddha, greet him politely and then simply announce his plans, in the very same violent words, without an explicit question, indeed without any explanation of why the statement is being made. He is just to note "what the Blessed One says." (444)

After duly considering the king's order, I can answer Collins as follows:

1. Ajātasattu chose to consult the Buddha because he probably believed that he could use to his advantage whatever the Buddha said; see his command for his minister:

*yathā ca Bhagavā vyākaroti taṃ sādhukaṃ uggahetvā mamaṃ āroceyyāsi, na hi Tathāgatā vitathaṃ bhaṇantīti.* (DN 73)

And bear carefully in mind whatever the Blessed One may predict, and repeat it to me. For the Buddhas speak nothing untrue!<sup>1</sup> (Rhys Davids and Rhys Davids 2: 2)

“Buddhas speak nothing untrue!” can mean either that they do not deliberately tell lies (but they may still speak false out of honest ignorance) or that whatever they state is factually true and accordingly reliable. Just telling no lies would not qualify the Buddha as the king’s consultant, so Ajātasattu must have meant the latter.

How could a king have such unreserved trust in an ascetic? My answer is, why not? Even nowadays, we can see some close disciples of famous religious masters having irrational trust in their gurus, such as “The master must have a reason for saying this or doing that, he cannot be wrong”, etc; so we cannot deny that Ajātasattu was not such a case. For him, the Buddha might have been more than a religious teacher, for it was the Buddha who had rescued him out of the personal hell of remorse for having killed his own father (DN I 85; Sv I 133–138, 238). Besides, being a religious teacher does not mean that the Buddha would have to face or answer strictly religious questions only. It is a well-known fact that the king Pasenadi Kosala consulted the Buddha on many subjects including even family matters (Malalasekara *Pasenadi Kosala* s. v.). If the king Ajātasattu happened to trust the Buddha’s wisdom in the matters of state, he would certainly attempt, somehow or other, to get the information out of the latter.

2. Moreover, the king’s public image was perfectly safe. In accord with the king’s order, as seen above, Vassakāra did not *explicitly* admit that the king himself sought the Buddha’s advice; rather he merely announced the king’s intention to attack *Vajjīs* and waited for the Buddha’s response. Therefore the king would not need to admit that he was the one seeking the Buddha’s advice, nor that he actually made use of the information gained from the Buddha. Even if the Buddha had openly condemned his ambitions, he could have behaved as if he were unaware of the Buddha’s opposition, pretending that it had ended as part of Vassakāra’s personal discussion with the Buddha and consequently never come to his ears. In short, the king had nothing to lose and everything to gain.

On the other hand, it was only Vassakāra who would look bad in the public eyes; he would appear to the public as a politician who would do anything or stoop to

<sup>1</sup>Cf. Walshe’s version: “And whatever the Lord declares to you, report that faithfully back to me, for Tathāgatas never lie.” (231). The term *vitatham* literally means “1. Untrue, false ...2. Vain, futile” (Apte *vitatha* s. v); accordingly it is open to two interpretations as given above. Yet Walshe has chosen to render only one of them owing to reasons unclear to me.

anyone for the sake of achieving his ends. He was, I think, only a scapegoat to absorb any potential backlash of this meeting.

On the other hand, Harris suggests that Ajātasattu's decision to consult the Buddha on such a matter shows that "he did not consider the latter either ill-informed or dismissive of such political conflicts" (17). If it is the case, we should wonder why the king did not go to the Buddha himself or order Vassakāra to openly ask for advice rather than to make statements out of context in a spooky manner.

On the contrary, I believe that the king must have been certainly aware of the Buddha's disapproving attitude towards violence yet was not in a position to concede if the latter chose to speak against his plan. By using Vassakāra, not known as a follower of the Buddha, as a scapegoat, the king removed any need to worry about his relationship with the Buddha even if the latter had taken an ethical stand against his ambition to overcome the *Vajjīs*.

### 3 Did the Buddha really advise Vassakāra how to destroy *Vajjīs*?

This is in fact a very old question, since Buddhaghosa has tried to answer it in his commentary as follows:

*Kim pana bhagavā brāhmaṇassa imāya kathāya naya-lābhaṃ jānātīti? Āma, jānāti. Jānanto kasmā kathesīti? Anukampāya; evaṃ kir' assa ahosi: Mayā akathitepi katipāhena gantvā sabbe gaṇhissati. Kathite pana samagge bhindanto tīhi saṃvaccharehi gaṇhissati; ettakampi jīvitam eva varam, ettakañhi jīvantā attano patitthābhūtaṃ puññaṃ karissanti ti. (Dhp-a II 522)*

But does the Blessed One know that from this speech the brahmin is gaining access to the proper way? Yes, he knows. If he knows, why did he speak? Out of compassion. They say that he thought thus: "Even if I do not speak, he will go and capture them all within a few days. But if I speak, he will break up their harmony and capture them, spending three years. Even such a span of life is really important; for while living they will perform merit, which is their own refuge."

An is not convinced by Buddhaghosa's explanation so he observes:

We come to wonder about the position of the Buddha in the conflict between *Māgadha* and the *Vajjīs*. If the Buddha had compassion for the *Vajjīs*, why did he not warn the *Vajjīs* of the impending danger from their opponent? (17)

However An's criticism seems beside the point, for any warning would not have reduced the death and destruction resulting from the subsequent war. On the contrary,

such a warning might have made both countries sustain substantially greater damage, for a war between two well-prepared enemies could have become attrition warfare,<sup>2</sup> which might have resulted in no real gain for whoever the victor was since Māgadha and *Vajjīs* were probably not so different in strength.<sup>3</sup> (Why should Ajātasattu have sought the Buddha's advice or taken his time to destroy the unity of *Vajjīs* if defeating them militarily were a mere pushover for him?)

He also notes:

According to Buddhaghosa's interpretation, the Buddha just aimed to postpone the war by three years in order for the *Vajjis* to do merit for their own salvation. His commentary seems based on the result rather than on the situation in which the Buddha found himself. (An 17)

I agree with him in that Buddhaghosa's interpretation seems based on the result, but this fact still cannot convince us to abandon the commentator's explanation unless we are ready to reject all interpretations based on results.

In my opinion, Buddhaghosa's interpretation is unacceptable only because, according to him, the *Vajjī* people were doomed whatever they tried to do. This contradicts the Buddha's own statement which essentially means that they could not be defeated as long as they maintained their harmony properly, and it also implies that the Buddha was lying outright to Vassakāra.<sup>4</sup>

On the other hand, I argue that we can find the correct answer if we think over the following facts in the context:

1. The Buddha did his best to publicize the meeting between Vassakāra and himself:
  - a) Venerable Ānanda was present when the Buddha met Vassakāra. It means the information Vassakāra obtained was not privy only to him.
  - b) Immediately after their meeting, the Buddha asked Ānanda to have all monks residing at Rājagaha assemble. Such an order is not commonly found in the suttas; it would naturally arouse curiosity among monks. And Ānanda would be at hand to answer any question raised by the curious.
2. If that meeting became public knowledge in Māghadha, sooner or later *Vajjīs*

<sup>2</sup>"Attrition warfare is a military strategy in which a belligerent side attempts to win a war by wearing down its enemy to the point of collapse through continuous losses in personnel and matériel [sic.] // The war will usually be won by the side with greater such resources." (*Attrition warfare*)

<sup>3</sup>"If the sides are nearly evenly matched, the outcome of a war of attrition is likely to be a Pyrrhic victory." (*Attrition warfare*)

<sup>4</sup>To be fair to Buddhaghosa, he does say "They say" (*kira*), by which he seems to indicate that he is only giving the official interpretation of Mahāvihāra tradition and that he is not willing to take responsibility for it.

would certainly get the information since two countries at the brink of war would certainly have spies in each other's territory.<sup>5</sup>

3. Even if *Vajjīs* happened to be ignorant of the meeting between Vassakāra and the Buddha, the information Vassakāra got was not news to them, for the Buddha had already taught them the seven Conditions of Welfare before, as the Buddha himself told Vassakāra.
4. The Buddha was seemingly trying to declare his neutral position when he informed Vassakāra of *Vajjīs* having already learned these seven conditions, for what he seemed to mean is, "Do not think I am supporting your cause when I tell you about these conditions, for I have already taught these to your enemies too."

Therefore the Buddha was just like a football expert who gives a public assessment of a forthcoming match without giving unfair advantage to either side. What made the difference was that while Ajātasattu made use of the information gained from the Buddha, *Vajjīs* failed to do so and suffered for it.

On the other hand, suppose *Vajjīs* did take heed to the Buddha's advice and managed to maintain their unity despite Vassakāra's attempts. Then Ajātasattu would have waited as long as possible to attack while waiting for a chance to disrupt the unity of *Vajjīs*. Then an imminent war would have been postponed if not canceled altogether by later circumstances. This was, I believe, the Buddha's actual objective for expounding the seven Conditions of Welfare to Vassakāra, and *Vajjīs* did survive three more years before they lost their harmony and subsequently their freedom. (Of course we cannot be sure that Ajātasattu would have entirely called off the war even if *Vajjīs* remained in harmony.)

#### 4 Why did the Buddha not attempt to condemn the impending war?

I have already shown that Ajātasattu seemingly had no wish to give up his ambition even if the Buddha had chosen to speak against it. The Buddha was too smart, I believe, to waste his breath in such a case. Moreover, I argue that it was not only a matter of context but also that of principle. To understand the general principle that underlaid the Buddha's behavior, we should compare this event with two other occasions when the Buddha did try to prevent war:

<sup>5</sup>Espionage was in use even at that time. The king Pasenadi Kosala himself admitted to the Buddha of using spies to get information (SN I 79; Bodhi 1: 174).

1. The first (Pj II I 357–358) was the dispute of Sakyans and Koliyans that arose while they were building a dam to use the water of the Rohini river, which divided their territories, during a drought. The Buddha successfully convinced both parties not to make war. It should be noted here that:
  - Both parties were relatives of the Buddha.
  - The Buddha appeared to act alone without involving the Saṅgha.
2. The second (Dhp-a I 356–358; Ja IV 152) was the attack of Viḍaḍūbha, the king of Kosala, on Sakyans. Again the Buddha attempted to intervene but he failed this time. Viḍaḍūbha managed to destroy Sakyans. Here also it should be noted that:
  - One party was the relatives of the Buddha.
  - The Buddha appeared to act alone without involving the Saṅgha.
3. The third was the *Māgadha-Vajjī* war which we have been discussing here. In this case:
  - None of the parties were the Buddha's relatives.
  - What little the Buddha did was in the presence of Venerable Ānanda.

If we look at all accounts carefully, we will at once notice that the Buddha seemingly declined to act when he did not have blood relation to the parties involved in violence, while he did act when his relatives were involved, which fact is emphasized by Pali records:

1. The Suttanipāta commentary recounts how the Buddha started to act, when Sakyans and Koliyas were at the brink of war, as follows:

*Atha Bhagavā 'ñātakā kalahaṃ karonti; handa ne vāremī' ti ākāsenāgantvā dvinnaṃ senāniam majjhe atthāsi* (Pj II I 357)

Then the Buddha (thought) thus: "The relatives are quarreling. Probably I should restrain them", went through the sky and stood between two armies.

2. When he tried to prevent Viḍaḍūbha from attacking Sakyans, he chose to stay under a leafless tree in the Sakyan territory rather than under a shady tree in the Kosala territory; when asked by Viḍaḍūbha why he did so, he answered: *hotu, mahārāja, ñātakānaṃ chāyā nāma sītalā* (Dhp-a I 356–357) ("Let it be, great king, the shade of the relatives is cool").

On the other hand, when we think of how the Buddha dealt with Ajātasattu, we can notice that not only the Buddha did not openly attempt to deter him from fighting wars [against *Vajjīs* or against the king Pasenadi Kosala (SN 82-84; Bodhi 1: 177-178)] but also



the former did not raise even a finger during the time Ajātasattu ascended to power by first putting his father Bimbisāra, a devout follower of the Buddha, into prison and later having him killed (Sv I 133–138).

Now the question is, why? Did the Buddha feel more compassionate towards his own relatives while not care enough for others?

I answer that the Buddha acted in this particular way, not because his compassion for his own relatives was greater than that for strangers, but because he wished to protect the Buddhist Order that he founded from the effects of political events and fortunes. By having his relatives as one or more parties involved, he managed to personalize his actions so that these deeds might be viewed by the public rather as personal efforts of an individual concerned with the well-being of his relatives than as deeds that represented the Buddhist Order as a whole. In other words, the Buddha used his blood relationship with Sakyans to protect his followers from being targeted by the people unhappy with his interventions. This argument is corroborated by the fact that the Buddha acted alone, unaccompanied by his followers, in such events.

On the other hand, Ajātasattu was not a relative of the Buddha nor were his enemies. If the Buddha had chosen to intervene, his act would have been without the excuse of blood relationship; then it would have got interpreted as representing the whole Buddhist Order given his status of leadership, and accordingly drawn his followers into a potential danger zone. And it is not possible to exaggerate the danger that monks dabbling in politics might have to face; we can find in Vinaya what can happen when monks cross the powers that be, even if unwittingly:

*atha kho rājā Māgadho Seniya Bimbisāro vohārike mahāmatte pucchi: yo bhaṇe rājabhaṭaṃ pabbājeti, kiṃ so pasavatīti. upajjhāyassa deva sī chedetabbaṃ, anussāvakassa jivhā ud-dhāritabbā, gaṇassa upaḍḍhaphāsukā bhañjittabbā 'ti. ... rājā Māgadho Seniya Bimbisāro bhagavantaṃ etad avoca: santi bhante rājāno assaddhā appasannā, te appamattakena pi bhikkhū vihettheyyumu. sādhu bhante ayyā rājabhaṭaṃ na pabbājeyyun ti. (Vin I 74)*

Then King Seniya Bimbisāra of Magadha asked the chief ministers of justice: “Good sirs, what does he who lets one go forth who is in a king’s service engender (for himself)?”

“Sire, a preceptor’s head should be cut off, the tongue should be torn from the announcer of a proclamation, half the ribs of a (member of a) group should be broken.” ...

King Seniya Bimbisāra spoke thus to the Lord: “There are, Lord, kings who are of no faith, not believing; these might harm monks even for a trifling matter. It were well, Lord, if the masters did not let one in a king’s service go forth.” (Horner 4: 92)

In the account cited above, the monks who granted going forth to royal servants did so only on account of the latter's request, not because they wished to dabble in politics. If even such monks could have faced such terrible punishments, we can only imagine which kinds of terrors would have awaited the monks who dared to lobby against a king's ambitions. The Buddha might have been safe because he was what he was, but his followers could not have been as fortunate. The need to protect his followers should be the exact reason why the Buddha declined to condemn the king Ajātasattu's war plan.

And one instance in the history of Burma further testifies the danger of politics to monks; it was the record of a tribal non-Buddhist king murdering Buddhist monks because he saw them as a danger to his throne:

*Sohanbhvā:*, the king of *Añ:va*, was ruthless, without compassion for other living beings and disrespectful towards the Triple Gem ... (Thinking thus,) "These monks have no families but they build up communities by recruiting disciples. They have a potential to revolt. I should capture and kill them." ... (he) invited the monks living in the neighbourhood of *Cackouñ:*, *Pañ:ya*, *Añ:va* together with their disciples ... surrounded them with elephants, horses and soldiers and killed them ... It was in the year (901) [1538 A. D] that the noble monks were killed. (Trans. from *MhanNan*: 2: 142)

It is an extreme case yet an ample proof of how a political image can be dangerous to the Buddhist Order.

## 5 Conclusion

To sum up my argument as regards the Buddha's role in the *Māgadha-Vajjī* war:

1. The king Ajātasattu chose to consult the Buddha probably because: (1) he believed whatever the Buddha said might be useful for his own ends (2) he had nothing to lose by such an attempt.
2. What the Buddha told Vassakāra was meant to deter the war, not to give any advantage to Ajātasattu or to *Vajjīs*.
3. He declined to condemn the war because he did not wish to have the Buddhist Order come in the harm's way owing to political events.

The meeting of the Buddha and Vassakāra is important for understanding two things: (1) the Buddhist attitude towards violence and (2) the ideal role that ancient Buddhists have envisioned for the Buddhist Order in the general picture of politics and society. Of them:

1. It would have been premature to use a single piece of record for deriving a theory of Buddhist attitude towards violence. However, I can at least state that the meeting of the Buddha and Vassakāra can be explained in terms of the traditional point of view therefore it cannot be conclusive evidence for the theory that Buddhism accepts violence in certain contexts.
2. If my interpretation is correct, the Buddha's behavior when he met Vassakāra shows the Buddha acting as an example to discourage his followers from getting involved in politics if and when their political activities have a potential of bringing negative consequences to the Order.

However I do not mean that he explicitly prohibited monks and nuns from doing politics, for he would have prescribed Vinaya rules against such activities if he intended to bar all politics from the Order. And his own involvement in the political conflicts of his own relatives seems to suggest that his followers can also do likewise if they can manage like him to find a plausible excuse for doing politics while keeping the Order safe from the backfire of their actions. However, keeping the Order safe may require that such monks cannot leverage their religious status to achieve political objectives or that they will have to do without the sanction and prestige of the Order or both.

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