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NEH Institute on Southeast Asia, Summer 2011
Course Module

The Philosophy of Nonviolence: Burma, Buddhism, and Aung San Suu Kyi

Introduction

This lesson introduces students to a Buddhist philosophy of nonviolence through an examination of the social ethics and strategies that have been employed by the people of Burma/Myanmar in their fight for freedom, legitimate political authority, and social justice during the reign of the country's military regime. Drawing on their knowledge from a previous session on the work of Gandhi and the Indian Independence Movement, students will analyze suttas from the Digha Nikaya (The Long Discourses of the Buddha) and the speeches and writing of Aung San Suu Kyi in order to become acquainted with key Buddhist ideas and their application in nonviolent action, particularly during the 8-8-88 demonstrations and the "Saffron Revolution." Students will also consider the potential of nonviolence in relation to projections for Burma's social, political and cultural future.

Guiding Questions

- What social, economic, political, and religious developments have taken place in Burma from the time of independence to the present?
- How are we to understand the structural violence that exists in the state of Burma/Myanmar?
- How has Buddhism influenced social-ethical values and conceptions of legitimate political authority in Burma? How has Buddhism been employed by the junta as a means of social control?
- What role does vipassina play in a revolution of spirit and a culture of reform?
- What happened during the 8-8-88 demonstrations and the 2007 Saffron Revolution? How were nonviolent actions and strategies employed by the participants of these movements?
- What is Aung San Suu Kyi's role in the movement for democracy/liberation? How has Suu Kyi formulated a philosophy of nonviolence that is Buddhist, Gandhian, and Burmese? How have Suu Kyi's Buddhist influences led her to develop a nonviolent approach that differs from Gandhi's?

Learning Objectives

Students will:

- Analyze the social, political, economic and religious situation in Burma/Myanmar and assess the relevance of nonviolence in responding to the structural violence that has accompanied the country's development during the past fifty years.
- Identify the Buddhist concepts and teachings that have been utilized both in articulating ideals for the common good in evaluating political authority. Identify the symbolic actions and practices that have informed a nonviolent response to the social injustice and the oppression experienced under the military regime, particularly during the country's most renowned public demonstrations.
- Compare and contrast Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolence to Aung San Suu Kyi's application and localization (Buddhicisation) of his theory and practice.

Preparation Instructions

Review:

- Gandhi's satyagraha campaign
- Key Buddhist theories and practices which are to be discussed in relation to the practice of nonviolence in Burma
- The history and social political situation of Burma since time of independence
- Suu Kyi's speeches and her application of Buddhist philosophy and Gandhian principles as a means of resistance to the military regime
- The 8-8-88 demonstrations and the Saffron Revolution

Read:

(Sources are listed in order of relevance for preparation)

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- Gustaff Houtman. *Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics: Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy*. The Institute of the Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, Tokyo. 1999.

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<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/11/02/AR2007110201783.html>
- Martin Kovan. "Violence and (Non-)resistance: Buddhist Ahimsā and its Existential Aporias" *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*. Volume 16, 2009.
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- "Inside Burma: Land of Fear." Reporter John Pilger. Director David Munro. Bullfrog Films. 1996. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V4-Tn6epRLk>
- "Portrait of Courage." Reporter John Pilger. Director David Munro. 1996.
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- "Burma Soldier Film Interview." Interview with Myo Myint Cho by APM's Dick Gordon (English Version). <http://youtube.com/watch?v=bsSiy72JHpQ>
- Michael A. Aung-Thwin. "Of Monarchs, Monks, and Men: Religion and the State in Myanmar." *Asia Research Institute Working Paper Series* No. 127. December 2009.
- Ingrid Jordt. *Burma's Mass Lay Meditation Movement: Buddhism and the Cultural Construction of Power*. Ohio University Press: 2007.
- Julianne Schober. *Modern Buddhist Conjunctures in Myanmar: Cultural Narratives, Colonial Legacies, and Civil Society*. Hawaii University Press: 2010
- Manuel Sarkisyanz. *Buddhist backgrounds of the Burmese Revolution*. The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1965.
- Sayadaw U. *In This Very Life: The Liberation Teachings of the Buddha*. Wisdom Publications, Somerville, MA. 1992.
- Kyaw Yin Hlaing. 2004. "Burma: Civil Society Skirting Regime Rules," in Muthiah Alagappa, ed., *Civil Society and Political Change in Asia*. Standord: Stanford University Press, pp. 389-418.
- —"Associational Life in Myanmar: Past and Present," in N. Ganesan and Kyaw Yin Hlaing, eds., *Mynamar: State, Society, and Ethnicity*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.2007

- South, Ashley. "Civil Society in Burma: the Development of Democracy Amidst Conflict," *Policy Studies* 51. Washington, D.C.: Wast-West Center in Washington. 2008.
- Robert Taylor. *The State in Myanmar*. University of Hawaii Press: 1987.
- Mary P. Callahan. *Making Enemies: War and State Building in Burma*. NUS Press: 2004.

Lesson Activities

Class 1

Have Students Read:

- "Sakkapanha Sutta: Sakka's Questions"
- "Cakkavatti-Sihanada Sutta: The Lion's Roar on the Turning of the Wheel"

1) Discuss with Students:

The gap between intentions (peace) and actions (war), panchanga (obsessive thinking=proliferation of relational blockages), and wholesome actions/commitment to the whole (kusala).

- Intentional origins of government, problems in society as structural, breakdown of mutual contribution and breakdown of community, ideal of community in accordance with the dhamma.

2) Discuss with Students:

- Buddhist ethical principles; their relevance for the assessment of authority and for the implementation of nonviolent action in Burma
 - Dhamma- cosmological law, natural law, the eternal law of the universe, what the Buddha realized and taught (can be realized through vipassana). Can be used to secure but also to assess/criticize the legitimacy of the State. To apply oneself to the Dhamma is to practice mental culture; necessary for the transformation of society. Primary aim is to strive for everyone's enjoyment of freedom/liberation from samsara (not national independence). Liberation- a mental disposition attained after release from the Five Hindrances, sensual desire, ill will sloth and torpor, restlessness and remorse and skeptical doubt. Release ensures non-indebtedness, good health, release from prison/freedom, a place of security.
 - Dhammathat- collection of customary rules and precedents; places universal laws within the boundaries secular realm while retaining universal appeal. Undergoes alterations.
 - Karma- Action concerned with intention.
 - Vipassana- Technology of liberation, a form of spiritual cultivation. Insight meditation/contemplation on the arising and passing away of materiality (rupa) and mentality (nama). How this practice leads to the realization of impermanence (annica), suffering (dukkha) and no soul/separate self (anatta). Enables one to see pattern of interdependent arising/relational dynamics. Fosters the development of loving kindness (metta) and compassion (karuna). Employed by political prisoners (transcends dichotomy between jailer and jailed), Aung San Suu Kyi under house arrest. In conjunction with moral precepts (sila) and one-pointed mind (samadhi), vipassana promises liberation from the prison within, the wheel of samsara (mental freedom over physical prison)

- Maggam-Precepts (sila)= Right speech, right action, right livelihood. Concentration (samadhi)= right awareness, right concentration, right effort. Wisdom (Panna)= right view, right wisdom. Avoid- Abuse of Speech: untruth, but also belittling, gossip, condescending, even edifying. Abuse of Possessions: stealing, but also hoarding, exploitation, slavery, wasting, allowing others to be poor. Abuse of Violence: do not kill, but also not allow others to die violently, not working for peace, professions that promote or allow murder, pollution, physical abuse, devaluing others' lives, as well as not caring and comforting. Abuse of intoxicants: also not being "responsible." Abuse of sex: not just rape, but also abusing others through sexuality.
- Brahma-vihara (The Four Divine States/The Four Immeasurables): compassion (metta) loving kindness/warmth (karuna), equanimity/indifference (Upekkha), sympathetic joy/good fortune of others (Mudita).

3) Give Lecture on History of Burma/Myanmar Since Independence Using the Following Outline:

- Aug 1944
 - Aung San. The Anti-Fascist Organization (AFO)
- Aug 1945
 - AFO becomes Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL)
- 19 July 1947
 - Aung San and six members of interim government are assassinated
- 4 January 1948
 - Burma becomes independent state. 12 Jun 1956 U Nu becomes prime minister of AFPFL
- 12 June 1956- 3 May 1958
 - Ba Swe is Prime Minister (AFPFL)
- 3 May 1958- 28 Oct 1958
 - U Nu is Prime Minister of The Clean Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (Clean AFPFL)
- 28 Oct 1958- 1 Mar 1960
 - General Ne Win is Prime Minister of "Caretaker Government"
- 1 Mar 1960- 2Mar 1962
 - U Nu is Prime Minister, Head of The Union Party
- 2 March 1962-4Jan 1974
 - Military Coup led by General U Ne Win, "The Revolutionary Council"
- 4 Jan 1974- 8 1981
 - U Ne Win becomes President, Chairman of the Burma Socialist Party (BSPP; informal reference= "Mortar"-joke about the mixture of disparate ideas in party philosophy)

- 8 Aug 1981- 23 Jul 1988
 - Ex-General U San Yu is President; Ex-General Ne Win is Chairman of BSPP
- 26 July-12 Aug 1988
 - U Sein Lwin is President, Chairman BSPP
- 8 Aug 1988
 - Mass Demonstrations for five days; government crackdown.
- 19 Aug-18 Sep 1988
 - Dr Maung Maung is President, Chairman BSPP
- 26 August 1988
 - Aung San Suu Kyi's speech at the Shwedagon Pagoda ('the soul of the nation').
- 18 Sep 1988-23 Apr 1992
 - Bloodless 'fake' military coup. General Saw Maung is President of State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC)
- 30 May 1990 Election (for Parliament or Constituent Assembly...)
 - NLD victory, won 392 out of 485 seats (81%); military sponsored National Unity Party won only 2 %. Aung San Suu Kyi, U Kyi Maung, U Tin U (leaders of the elected NLD party) not permitted to assume government
- 27 Aug 1990-Nov 1990
 - First collective monastic boycott. In Mandalay seven thousand monks, led by U Yewata, boycott against the military with “pattan nikkujjana kamma” (overturning the bowl). Military cracks down in November, raiding monasteries and arresting more than 3,000 monks and nuns.
- 18 December 1990
 - NLD set up the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma in exile (NCGUB)
- 1991
 - Suu Kyi wins Nobel Peace Prize
- 12 April 1992-15 Nov 1997
 - General Than Shwe is President, SLORC
- 15 November 1997-March 2011
 - General Than Shwe is President; Thein Sein is Prime Minister beginning 2007; State Peace and Development Council SPDC
- March 2011 Elections
 - Ex-Prime Minister Thein Sein, Head of Union Solidarity and Development Party, becomes President of Myanmar's “Civilian Government”. National Democratic Force, an NLD splinter group, wins 12 seats in the two federal houses. Constitution guarantees one-quarter

of seats in the lower house of parliament and one-quarter in the upper house to serving military officers.

Class 2

Have Students Read:

- Aung San Suu Kyi “Freedom from Fear,” and “In Quest of Democracy” in *Freedom from Fear*.
- “Metta Sutta”

1) Discuss With Students:

- Aung San Suu Kyi's treatment of the Buddhist teachings regarding the four causes of decline and decay, authority (mahasammata, khattiya, raja) the Buddhist social contract, the ten duties of kings, the eight virtues of kings, seven safe guards against decline, the four assistances to the people, the four ways to overcome peril. U Pandita (Suu Kyi's teacher)- one cannot overdo mindfulness; concentrate on saying things that will bring about reconciliation.
- Democracy as a "revolution of the spirit" that is rooted in Buddhist principles. The relation between democracy (self-rule) and Bodhisattva value of human beings achieving Buddhahood.
- Buddhicisation of Gandhi's *Satyagraha* campaign. Active Metta (visiting families of political prisoners). Freedom from fear; cultivating the habit of refusing to let fear dictate one's actions. Four ingredients of success or victory: chanda—desire or will/"wish to do" or intention (chaneda); the right attitude (citta); perseverance viriya, and wisdom (panna). Truth- a sense the struggle to overcome subjectivity, tied to sincerity and goodwill. Linkage of awareness and objectivity. U Ottama and U Wisara (monks who protested against the British)

Class 3

1) Give Lecture on 8/8/88

- The spark- in cafe, squabble over music, police kill student. Thousands of students demonstrate, met by force, 41 suffocate in a police van- spark greater demonstrations. Ne wine resigns, General Sein Lwin (“the butcher”) appointed. More demonstrations (farmers, urban workers, students, monks, civil servants); greater crackdown; Opposition politicians emerge. Aung San Suu Kyi visits; Shewdegon Speech. Key issue= which is the legitimate authority/institution? SLORC of NLD?
- 1989-1990- SLORC bans assemblies, silences writers, forcefully relocates half a million people. International pressure. May 27, 1990- Election. NLD wins more than 80 % of the seats. Suu Kyi and opposition leaders under house arrest or imprisoned.

2) Watch and Discuss: Scenes from *Burma: Land of Fear*.

Class 4

1) Give Lecture on the 2007 Saffron Revolution

- Review notions of political authority and relationship between state and sangha
- 2003 Depayin Massacre- clash between NLD and State Peace and Development Council (previously the SLORC)
- 2006- Relocation of capital to Naypyitaw (isolated officials)
- August 2007- 500 % hike in fuel prices lead to protests
- Government reacts violently- protesters and monks beaten- international media attention
- September 28, 2007 All Burma Monks Alliance

2) Watch and Discuss: Scenes from *Burma VJ*

- Discuss symbolism in film and the role of media and international pressure in success of social movements (US/ASEAN, March 30th elections).
- How successful were the nonviolent demonstrations in Burma? Consider optimistic, realist, and pessimistic projections for the future of Burma under the civilian government.

Assessment

5-page paper due by the end of the last session. Students will be asked to articulate the formulation of a Buddhist-nonviolent philosophy and its lived expression by Aung San Suu Kyi, the Sangha, and the people of Burma since the late 1980's.