

WHY GO TO WAR?

A charming illustration of how wars begin in the minds of men comes from a Buddhist fable called “The Buddha and the Two Kings”.

Once two powerful clans of northern India, the Sakyas (to which the Buddha himself belonged) and the Koliyas, who had lived peacefully for many years, suddenly started preparing for war against each other. Hate stories had circulated on either side till the people rose in arms, clamouring for revenge for imaginary offences. Their armies marched to the field of battle and prepared for action. Then the Buddha himself appeared in their midst. He went and sat down on a log of wood which was lying in the battlefield. The news spread and the kings of the rival clans hastened to pay homage to him.

The chief of the Koliyas knelt on one side and the chief of the Sakyas on the other. The Buddha addressed the King of the Koliyas: “Friend, what has brought you here? Why have you seen fit to declare war?”

“Sire,” answered the King of the Koliyas, “it is a sinister trick. The Sakyas have long taunted us with this and that, called us cowards and cattle-grazers and impious ones, for they said ‘You have not produced a Prince of Light, a god among men.....’ ”

“But what, friend,” interrupted the Buddha, “was the act, the word or deed that caused you to declare war?”

“Prince among men,” answered the King of the Koliyas, “I will tell you or rather, with your permission, I will command my prime minister to tell you, because he knows everything about it.”

So the prime minister was summoned and his master bade him tell the Buddha why it was necessary for the Koliyas to declare war.

“Prince among men,” the prime minister answered, “We declared war because the Sakyas have been taunting us in thought, word and deed.”

“And pray what may that be?” asked the Buddha.

The prime minister looked embarrassed: “Prince among men,” he said, “I will ask my secretary to explain it all. He understands every circumstance of the case.”

So the secretary was summoned: “You are to explain to the Exalted One the reasons for our declaring war on the Sakyas,” commanded the prime minister.

“Prince among men,” answered the secretary, “such taunts have been spat at us – they called us cowards and cattle-grazers – that we said we would fight when the occasion came. After all, we, too, are warriors.”

“But, my friend,” said the Buddha gently, “tell me about the taunts.”

“My memory fails me, Exalted One but my personal assistant knows all about it. May I call him?”

“By all means,” replied the Buddha. “If you are sure he can explain the matter.”
“Oh, I am sure he can explain. He has an excellent memory.”

But, alas, the personal assistant’s memory also failed him. “I am sorry,” he said, “I cannot recall. We were going to war, and therefore I am sure that it must have been a very grave matter

“Surely you can remember” prodded the secretary.

“Well, I do seem to recall,” said the poor assistant more and more nervously, “that it was about some water.”

This was considered so funny that even the crowd laughed. But the Buddha did not laugh. Patiently, He continued to enquire of them on what grounds the Koliyas had declared war on the Sakyas.

“Call the chief clerk!” commanded the prime minister. And the chief clerk was summoned and asked the reason for war.

“I am sorry,” he replied, “I cannot recall, but the deputy recorder is bound to know.” So the deputy recorder was summoned, and the sub-recorder, and his assistant, and the head of the district. Finally, in desperation, they called the headman of the village, Ananda Simhala, who happened to be serving with the troops ready to go into battle. He was brought before the Buddha who said to him:

“My friend, why did you say this and that against the Sakays and want to make war on them?”

“Prince, it was like this,” replied the village headman. “For one, two and three years there have been no rains, and the village has been silent with misery. The waters of the river have trickled away until there was no more left that could be sucked up by a thirsty bull. And we have many bulls, as you know.”

“Yes,” said the Buddha gently, “but continue, my friend.”

“Well, Prince among men,” said Ananda Simhala, “I heard that the Sakyas had been building a dam of stone and mud to bring water to their fields. And I cried vengeance on these sons of men, that they should have water while we have

famine. So the next day I went to the village office and I have a coconut and flowers to the clerk and he said 'yes' and he spoke to his chief, and his chief to his chief, and his chief to the biggest chief, until

"Until what?" asked the Buddha.

"Well, until I scarcely had time to go and don my sword and buckle on my armour and the council at the village hall had declared war. You see, Father of all men, we are poor. And I, as headman of the village, have seen much misery."

Suddenly the village headman stopped and looked shamefacedly at the ground. There was a long silence until the Buddha spoke: "You see, friends, you go to war about a bit of water that does not even exist. Go, ignorant men, and may you follow the noble, fateful path of deliverance. Enmity is not appeased through enmity but through faith and understanding. This is the eternal law." Thus was peace established between the Sakyas and the Koliyas.

(Courtesy: UNESCO)