

TRANSCULTURAL ASPECTS OF WARRIORSHIP

Maja Milčinski♦

1. Introduction

Circa 1200 B.C. marks two famous events in the history of humankind of a very similar character. They were certainly not directly connected, since they occurred in two widely distant lands. One took place in the north-western part of Asia Minor, the other far away on the wide plains of Kuru Kshetra, close to Hastinapur, today's New Delhi.

Homer described the great military battle between the Greeks and the Trojans in his *Iliad*,¹ the great epic poem which had still not been plucked from mythology, so that the Greek gods and goddesses become involved in the fighting and quarrelling of the Greek warriors: the determined and hot-blooded Achilles, Agamemnon, Ajax, Diomedes, Nestor, Odysseus, and the Trojan heroes, Hector, Paris, Priam, and others. This was a huge battle, probably the largest in history to that date. The Greeks brought 100,000 soldiers against Troy (Ilium). After a ten-year siege, the Greeks succeeded in overcoming the Trojans with the famous trick with the Trojan horse. Troy was razed to the ground, its inhabitants massacred, only Aeneas and his father Anchises remaining alive, and the Greeks suffered equally large losses. This happened around 1200 B.C.,² or, according to other sources,³ between 1193 and 1104 B.C.

Similarly, around 1200 B.C., two great armies came in conflict in India. They were led by warriors of the same family, descendents of the legendary King Kuru, who had split into two hostile branches in conflict for territory: one of the branches, led by the ethically problematic Duryodhana, claimed the name of Kuru for itself and had complete

♦**Prof. Dr. Maja Milčinski**, the author of *Dictionary of Asian Philosophical Terms* (Slovenia 2003) and many other scientific books, has held teaching and research positions at Ljubljana University (Slovenia), Tokyo University, Toronto University, Marburg University (Germany), International Research Centre for Japanese Studies (Kyoto) and Rikkyo University (Tokyo), and Beijing University (Peoples Republic of China).

¹Homer, *Iliad*, trans. A. Sovre, Ljubljana: Državna založba Slovenije, 1950.

²Homer, *Iliad*, 11.

³*The Encyclopedia Americana*, International Edition (1985), vol. 27, 134.

authority over the entire land. The other, wrongly expropriated branch of Pandavas, was led by Arjuna, an honest hero for whom Krishna intervened, shown in the story first as a wise, neutral lord and experienced soldier, who initially tried to calm both sides, and later as a respected god, avatar – the representative of the supreme god Vishnu, sent to earth in order to help people resolve their difficulties. This story, too, together with the bloody battle itself, which lasted 18 days and left alive only the blind king Dhritarashtra of the Kurus, and on the honest side, only the Pandava brothers, is contained in the extensive epic *The Mahabharata*.⁴ The central place in this epic is held by the chapter entitled the *Bhagavad Gita*, the Song of the Lord, which is essentially a prologue to the battle itself.⁵

Do these two massive, probably the biggest organized military conflicts in history until that time, which occurred almost simultaneously, in two such distant places, allow the following speculation: is *Homo sapiens* perhaps programmed for occasional outbreaks of massive aggression against its own species, which lead to the slaughter of large numbers of individuals and the destruction of their possessions? Such speculation could perhaps be developed further, as though, thus, to maintain some ecological balance, etc. However, it is necessary to close the path to this speculation and return to the mentioned comparisons which, as two examples of mass slaughter – spatially distant but contemporary – are surprisingly similar in their internal dynamics, but nevertheless quite different.

2. Greek Pattern

The world of the heroes of the Trojan War and their very humanlike gods, as described by Homer, was inspired by cheerfulness, love of life, and vigorous activity. The notion that fighting was a vital need and joy for these heroes and gods cannot be avoided, and while the fighting was going on, there was no longer sufficient room for reflection and the weighing of conscience. The translator of the *Iliad* into Slovene, Sovre, felt this, even in their occasional declarations of existential pressures, raised as an inconvenience unworthy of any particular attention:

However, alongside the cheerful optimism, the epic is also not without pessimistic traits. In some parts of this epic there too sounds the string of anxiety at the notion of inexorable death, which sets a

⁴*The World Book Encyclopedia*, 1985 Edition, vol. 13, 58.

⁵*The Bhagavad Gita*, trans. S. Radhakrishnan, London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1958.

limit to any kind of activity. Homeric man is inspired especially by the mystical threat of the eternal law of the Fates, which governs even the gods. So although they do not age, they are neither immortal nor all-powerful. They, too, are dependent on the original law which operates according to inescapable Destiny and finally draws also heaven into the whirlpool of general destruction. Homer's heroes expect nothing from the afterlife, so their spirit is reluctantly separated from the body and lamenting departs to Hades; he is sad to abandon the "flower of manhood" when he knows that waiting in the underworld is eternal darkness, endless vegetating in dull semi-consciousness. What does Achilles' shadow say to Odysseus? 'I wanted to be a labourer in the fields, to earn my daily bread with the animals, a landless man, shifting for his own food, rather than govern here (in the Hades) the crowd of deceased!'⁶

It was unnecessary for the Greeks, with their character and approach to life, to have some dramatic, motives for determining such a powerful punitive expedition: during a visit to Sparta, Paris had kidnapped King Menelaus' consort, who was more beautiful than chaste. No moral, ethical doubts or other philosophical reasons influence the progress of events. Essentially, constant action then follows, mainly by the Greek and Trojan heroes, and women also having an important role in this spectacle, either as the subject of disputes between famous warriors, or as goddesses who distort and upset the wise plans of their Olympian consorts through their manipulations and interventions.

A classical Hellenist philologist evaluated the role of Homer's creation in the development of European culture as follows: "With Homer begins the unique internal formation of the European man. There is no essential difference between Homer's thought and ours, though three millennia lie between us."⁷ To this optimistic thought of a Hellenist, we would add for our purpose only that this European spirit of genius also developed weapons, right up to the crown of this destructiveness – the atom bomb.

3. Indian Pattern

Let us now turn to the other, Indian example: the long and equally bloody battle in Kuru Kshetra. The motive here is weightier and appropriate,

⁶Homer, *Iliad*, 1.1.

⁷Homer, *Iliad*, 6.

generic bellicosity does not have such importance as in the Greek epic. The translator described the background to the events before the dramatic dialogue between Arjuna and Krishna in the *Bhagavad Gita* as follows:

Some decades prior to the beginning of the situation in the *Bhagavadgita*, Arjuna had been involved in a serious dispute between the two branches of his family. On the one side were he and his four brothers, descendents of Pandu, and on the other their cousins, the hundred sons of Dhritarashtra, who declared themselves to be descendents of the firstborn of Kuru, though actually both branches of the family were descendents of Kuru. The aggressive sons of Kuru had long persecuted the sons of Pandu. After some of their tricks have failed, they try to use the weakness of the eldest brother, Yudhishtira, who could not resist a passion for dice. They invited him to play, and cheated him until he wagered his share of the kingdom, all his brothers and their common wife, Draupadi. However, the just though weak old king Dhritarastra took pity on the sons of Pandu and returned their share of the kingdom. After a while, his sons again arranged a dice contest, with the same result. The sons of Pandu had to spend twelve years in exile in the wilderness, and spend thirteen years unknown among people. This period, when the main story, so to speak, starts, is filled with tales of the adventures of various other legendary personalities. The sons of Pandu fortunately survive the punishment, but this does not bring reconciliation for them: the sons of Kuru do not want to return an inch of ground, let alone share the kingdom with them. Conflict becomes inevitable and both sides seek allies.⁸

When two hostile armies confront each other, righteous Arjuna does not show the kind of fighting euphoria which has spurred on the Greeks towards their fight for Troy. On the contrary, Arjuna (Feuerstein ascribes to him Hamletian character) experiences a deep spiritual and moral, organismic shock, when he thinks about the fact that he was supposed to kill the people with whom he had familiar and friendly ties. He would give up the arms and surrender to the enemies, even at the price of his own life.

That is where the main story of *Bhagavad Gita* begins: Krishna offers himself to Arjuna as the coachman of his fighting carriage. He is also saving Arjuna from his defeatism, first by appealing to his initiation

⁸*Bhagavadgita: Gospodova pesem*, trans. and commentaries, Vlasta Pacheiner, Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga, 1970, 109.

into the warrior caste. When this has no effect, Krishna opens the contents of the deepest Indian Yoga and existential philosophy, which concludes with the insight that to be filled with the universal Spirit, Brahman, should be the aim of everyone. Then the feeling of guilt for one's actions vanishes.⁹

The man who is united with the Divine (Brahman) and knows the truth thinks 'I do nothing at all'.

He who works, having given up his attachment, resigning his actions to God (Brahman), is not touched by sin, even as a lotus leaf (is untouched) by water.

Arjuna is finally detached from his doubts, his ego, saved from the illusion that it is he who will set right some fault, or is burdened with some indelible sin. The salvation of his ego is henceforth only a tiny cog in the mighty mechanism of the Highest, the Absolute.

What Krishna communicates to Arjuna cannot be characterized only as a lesson that conveyed to Arjuna an important logical "insight." It was an unusually speedily implemented counselling that occurred on a meditative-mystical level. While the action is only accessible to us through the textual medium, the story cannot communicate to us the elementary shock which embraces the mental-spiritual side of the subject, on a level which is closely connected with his vegetativum. So we cannot resent philosophers who are personally unconvinced by Krishna's argument, as though with such a logical base it could no longer be imagined that Arjuna could start the battle. Pacheiner states:

Many literary historians have discovered with surprise that (the *Bhagavad Gita*) is written in support of war. Some of them, e.g., Edgerton and Winternitz, angrily note that its ideology justifies any crime. The East-German Marxist, the well-known ideologue Walter Ruben, even says that the *Bhagavad Gita* was written only in defence of the feudal nobility as the governing class.¹⁰

Feuerstein¹¹ sets against such critics first some general standpoints in the sense that, over the years, moral standards also follow their own development.

⁹⁹*The Bhagavad Gita*, 177-178/8,9,10/V.

¹⁰¹⁰*Bhagavadgita: Gospodova pesem*, 110.

¹¹Georg Feuerstein, *Introduction to the Bhagavad Gita: Its philosophy and Cultural Setting*, London: Rider and Co., 1974, 147-158.

The exclusive reliance on reason for answering ethical questions has proven a pitfall to Western philosophers. Reason works with abstraction, not the ‘concretes’ of life. It represents a static picture or ‘cross-section’ of reality. The pioneers of the intellect are beginning to realize this. More and more, scientists call for a complete overhaul of scientific methodology. The criteria of validity are shifting perceptibly from ‘abstract’ and ‘consistent’ to ‘practical workability’... The diversified processes of life cannot be abstracted by reason and retain at the same time their ‘life’ quality. An ethics grounded in pure generalizations cannot possibly be expected to answer any practical purposes. Therefore, Krishna founds his ethics on a deeper and wider understanding of life. He does not discard reason, but he also does not rely on it. His attitude is refreshingly experiential: Life itself must be the ultimate criterion of the applicability of ethical ideals. *Svadharmā* is the channel through which man can reach his essential nature, that is, realize his ‘innate idea’. It has far more in common with Socrates’ inner voice, ‘the daimonion’.¹²

An ethical judgement is as dependent on internal principles as it is on objective factors. The indologist, S. N. Dasgupta, is talking in essence about ‘internal principles’ when he presents the concept ‘*svadharmā*’ as an “individual norm which means only an obligation reinforced in the tradition of the four castes.” Feuerstein here corrects him, that *svadharmā* is only “the channel through which man can achieve his being, that is to say, comprehend his own ‘innate idea’.”

So, war became a legitimate form of human behaviour, either by being understood as a matter of course (Greek) or through elaborate philosophical argument (Indian).

4. Ethics of War in Old China

In discussing the birth of philosophy in China, place of honour is given to Confucius (Kong Zi 551-479 B.C.), perhaps not so much on the basis of date of birth as on the basis of his work which, as a first level of self-formation, suitably introduces us to a specific Asian model of perception of the basic questions of human existence.¹³ The times in which Confucius

¹²Feuerstein, *Introduction to the Bhagavad Gita, Its philosophy and Cultural Setting*, 152-153.

¹³*The Analects of Confucius*, trans. Arthur Waley, New York: Vintage Books 1938.

lived and worked were troubled. The mass of small feudal states were in constant conflict. Confucius was one of the voices of the spiritual golden age that embraced both West and East in the 5th century B.C. Socrates (470-399) and Buddha (557-476) both lived and worked at that time, and the 5th century was also the period when the *Old Testament* of the Bible was put together. Confucius, who thus wanted to serve a prince in building a state, did not suit most of his employers, who wanted more military strategic advice than the counsel of wise statesmanship. What, for example, can a warlord do with the advice that is inscribed in Confucius' *Analects*?

Tzu-gung asked about government. The Master said, sufficient food, sufficient weapons, and the confidence of the common people. Tzu-gung said, Suppose you had no choice but to dispense with one of these three, which would you forgo? The Master said weapons. Tzu-kung said, Suppose that you were forced to dispense with one of the two that is left, which would you forgo? The Master said, Food. For from old death has been the lot of all men; but a people that no longer trusts its rulers are lost indeed.¹⁴

The *Yijing*,¹⁵ an ancient oracle and collection of existential wisdom from the end of the second and beginning of the first millennium B.C., also dealt with disputes and wars between people and states, and Confucius is supposed to have added his commentary to the book. It mentions this theme in several places, particularly in hexagram 6, entitled "Conflict." It recommends careful consideration at the beginning and also "a cautious halt halfway," if possible also to overlook the causes of conflict since victory in a conflict does not bring long-term happiness. In hexagram 7, "The army," it advises against war, which is "at best a dangerous matter which leaves damage and destruction in its wake." But if war is inevitable, it should not be conducted savagely, since if the mob kills everything that gets in its way, this cannot be victory but only defeat and misfortune.

Daoists¹⁶ had equally to be reconciled with war as legitimate. In the basic Daoist work, the *Dao de jing* by Lao Zi (cca. 604-517), there are thoughts and understandings which can be seen as one of the most important milestones from the point of view of the question of man's

¹⁴*The Analects of Confucius*, 158-XII-7.

¹⁵*Yijing: Knjiga premen*, trans. and commentaries, Maja Milčinski, Ljubljana: Domus, 1992.

¹⁶Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1963.

being. Besides these general characteristic of the work, there are also some parts seemingly untypical for the book, since they could more easily be imagined in the memoirs of some military strategist than in a work with the dignity of the *Dao de jing*.

Aims are instruments of ill omen, not the instruments of a gentleman. When one is compelled to use them, it is best to do so without relish. There is no glory in victory, and to glorify it despite this is to exult in the killing of men. One who exults in the killing of men will never have his way in the empire.

On occasions of rejoicing, precedence is given to the left; on occasions of mourning, precedence is given to the right. A lieutenant's place is on the left; the general's place is on the right. This means that it is mourning rites that are observed.

When great numbers of people are killed, one should weep over them with sorrow. When victorious in war, one should observe the rites of mourning.¹⁷

5. Conclusion

It is precisely in our time, when there is never a moment at which some bloody conflict is not taking place somewhere in the world, that discussing war as an unimaginable absurdity cannot be considered as idle talk.

The story of Mohandas Karamchanda Gandhi (1869-1948), the Indian political and spiritual leader, Mahatma – the Great Spirit as he was known – who achieved the independence of India in 1947 after many long years of a peculiar pattern of political activity, is well known. In contrast to revolutionary struggle, he established his tactic of non-violent activity, which he called “*satyagraha*” – i.e., “to remain aware of the truth.” Another of his principles, adopted by his adherents, was “*Swaraj*,” literally meaning “self-control” has the depth of a double meaning: psychologically this is self-mastery and overcoming fear, but politically this expression meant national independence and economic self-sufficiency. Further, it meant starting social and political changes with the spiritual transformation of individuals. His *satyagraha* was more than passive resistance, since it also embraced attempts to constructively cooperate with opponents of Gandhi's movement. One has to be acquainted with the history of stubborn British colonialism properly and adequately to appreciate Gandhi's contribution to methods of non-aggressive resistance

¹⁷Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, 89-90/XXXI.

in the context of human civilization and spirituality. Let me just add that Gandhi greatly appreciated the *Bhagavad Gita* and its philosophical lessons.¹⁸

From the Tibetan philosophical and religious culture came the idea of *Shambhala*.¹⁹ The old legend tells of a hidden Buddhist kingdom in some Himalayan valley which is governed by wise and compassionate rulers. This is supposed to be a land of pure prosperity and peace. A famous 19th century Buddhist teacher, Mipham, described this land in more detail in his *Great Commentary to the Kalachakra*. Other teachers, however, believe that there is no real “Kingdom of *Shambhala*,” but that it is only an idea of non-religious enlightenment and the self-development of human existence in the spirit of militarism. Not, however, as training in aggressiveness, but in the sense of the Tibetan *pawo*, which means simply someone who is courageous. This is an image that is also recognized by some other cultures.

The key to “militarism” as well as the first principle of *Shambhala* is that you accept yourself, such as you are. Free of all selfishness, benevolent to all who need help, heroic but at the same time gentle, without any aggression. In this kind of non-aggressiveness one is not even afraid of sacrificing one’s own life. Such a character of a “warrior,” though, should not become an obsession and the subject of proselytizing. In order to avoid such fanaticism, a sense of humour is needed, as a guarantor of proper proportion. For a man to maintain such an adaptable approach to life and discover also its funny side, he must first recognize and overcome his basic fear, his fear of death in the first place, which can completely paralyze a person. Less aggressive, but also widespread, is the fear that we will be unequal to the demands the world imposes on us. When we successfully recognize these fears and come to terms with them, we gradually become calmer and more pliable, but a little more melancholic and, at the same time, ever more fearless warriors or soldiers without the aggressive arrogance (brutality) with which such a title is normally linked, more sensitive, and, let’s say, in the face of an understanding of one’s own transitoriness sometimes more melancholic. W. Walther said of fear:

¹⁸*The Encyclopedia Americana*, International Edition (1985), vol. G, 278-284.

¹⁹Chögyam Trungpa, *Shambhala: The Sacred Path of the Warrior*, Boston-London: Shambhala, 1988.

Fear is a basic characteristic of human existence, which we cannot and should not deny or efface. Since right there and then, when we want at all costs to avoid it, it raises itself most forcefully: it thus teaches us our triviality. On no account flee from fear or try to avoid it, but honestly recognize the tone that it generally gives to our existence, and only then declare war on it. Even Kierkegaard recognized the positive side of fear when he declared: ‘Whoever gets used to bear the fear as much as is his/her fate, has learned the highest wisdom’.²⁰

The author of the work on *Shambhala* explicitly stresses that this comprehension does not translate that man has found “some philosophy” but that he has succeeded in harmonizing spirit and body. Such an aim is also concealed in the method of achieving this internal harmony and tranquillity that Gautama Buddha presented and taught 2500 years ago. This is meditation in a sitting position. A person sits on the ground with legs crossed, back and neck straight, and ensures only that his/her breathing is relaxed and rhythmic. Nothing more! Such meditation cannot be understood as contemplation on specific themes. It is not important what sort of thoughts come to mind, since thoughts, in essence, are neither sinful nor virtuous. Let them run as they will, thus is the spirit pure and empty until a benevolent tranquillity is created which leaves the Ego aside and which is at least prepared to do something for others.

Anyone patient enough to follow such a theory and its resolutions and imbued with the traditional concept of war as an unavoidable, occasional outburst of conflict between major social groups, will in all probability see in the idea which is built on Buddhism, of cultivating benevolence and love without any trace of egoism and a willingness always to offer help to those nearby, and recommends meditation in the sitting position as the principal method of achieving such a naturalness, a doctrine which serves anything but “militarism.” It is, then, difficult to believe that the author of the *Shambhala*, the Tibetan master Chögyam Trungpa, also had in his program a military organization based on the Buddhist principles of non-aggression and one of the guiding mottos “victory over war.”²¹

²⁰Werner Walther, *Die Angst im menschlichen Dasein*, München: Reinhardt, 1967.

²¹Kidder Smith, “The Sun Tzu ‘Art of War’ and My Experiences in the Buddhist Military (Manuscript), June 1992, 2.

The report on the Buddhist organization, “victory over war,” often reminded me of the well-known work of the Czech writer, Jaroslav Hasek, *The Good Soldier Schweik*, which gave laughter to millions of people throughout the world, while only a few people grasped the deeper meaning of the work; that it is possible even when in the clutches of the human whirling of war, with all its absurdities and cruelties, to live non-aggressively, retaining a naïve benevolence to the people around you, even those who identify with the traditional, so to speak, glorified image of war. It is not so important that the “Schweik” attitude relaxes the aggressive tension of the opponent, since there is nothing provocative about him. It is important that the root of such an attitude is to be sought in an insight into human transitoriness, not that this insight could be worked into some sophisticated philosophy. Schweik has some inner understanding that one day he will die, and he leaves to fate when this will happen, and delights in the humble “here and now.” The symbol of Schweik and his attitude probably also helped the Czechs and the Slovaks when the Soviet Union destroyed the vision of the Czech spring and poisoned Czechoslovakia with their ideology, right up to the end of the Soviet Empire.

We should now overview the possibility or even probability that in such cruel times often the ways of “non-aggressive combativeness” appear which might broach the widespread prejudice about the legitimacy and inevitability of war.