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Commentary:

Blowing-up of the Buddhas by the Taliban

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Much ink has been spilled of late concerning the Afghan-ruling Taliban's decision to destroy all "heathen" images in their nation, including two massive stone Buddhas carved in the side of a mountain in Bamiyan. Without exception, the reaction has been critical. Even Pakistan and Iran, two nations not generally unsupportive of "Quranically-inspired" acts which anger Western nations, wagged their diplomatic fingers and whispered, "tsk tsk." Reportedly, Egypt's top Muslim cleric, Grand Mufti Nasr Farid Wasel, was set to travel to Kabul to make a personal plea on behalf of these ancient treasures (until the Taliban said, in characteristically blunt fashion: "Too late").

Majority Buddhist countries were also by and large outspoken in condemnation. But one Thai Buddhist spokesperson seemed tempered by the coda that "as Buddhists, we're not really allowed to criticize anybody." A ridiculous notion; it was belied by that person's succeeding words of derision at the Taliban's flagrant disrespect for the symbols of another world religion! One Western commentator has described the Taliban destruction of the Buddhas as a symbolic attack not simply on works of art or religious icons, but upon the very bedrock of civilization itself. The Taliban's response of adamant rigidity, was—our country, our religion, our statues, butt out! One high-ranking Taliban official summarily dismissed the vehemence of the uproar about this "brutal act of wanton violence," by saying—"But we are only breaking stones."

Since the Taliban, as brutal and unrelenting a crew as ever ruled a modern nation-state, came to power in this war-ravaged nation a few years back, human rights, not to speak more specifically of women's rights, have been in abominably short-supply. But the world, with occasional exceptions, has remained fairly mute. Then, as soon as these same men undertake to break some stones, the conscience of the world is pricked, and "civilization" is threatened by these "barbarians." This leads me to ask: where do our priorities lie?

As a student of religion, I cannot help but focus on several other aspects of this incident, particularly the symbolic resonances involved

in this affair and its aftermath. Here we have, in one corner, the world's most misunderstood and oft-reviled religion, Islam, making a full frontal assault (with rockets and bullets no less!) on what can surely be described as the faith most brimming with sympathetic cache, Buddhism. The evil terrorists versus the peaceful monks; the scowling and weathered Ayatollah Khomeini versus the winsome and rotund Dalai Lama. A perfect Hollywood set-up no doubt, but bad news for the way the rest of the world views Islam. Will anyone recall the near-unanimous Muslim outrage to the destruction? Unlikely. Will they instead have in their minds the graven image of heavily armed soldier-types blasting away with rockets at a peaceful-looking 53-meter mountain statue, while shouting "Allahu Akbar"? The Taliban does not realize the disservice they do to the other billion Muslims in the world, not to mention the millions of their own countrymen. But then, as with so many other things which exist beyond their borders, they probably don't give a damn.

Let me get back to the Buddhist element in this affair. After my initial shock was replaced by a feeling of sad resignation at the fate of the Afghan Buddhas, I tried to think about what this seemingly cruel and wasteful act might mean from a larger Buddhist (that is to say, non-Western Enlightenment-biased "civilization") perspective. I believe that the Taliban are, presumably unbeknownst to themselves, acting as closet bodhisattvas, dramatically fulfilling the dharma and helping us poor unenlightened souls to move ever so much closer to the brink of awakening.

Sounds strange? Maybe not. After all, recall the single-most important set of teachings in Buddhism: all is suffering; suffering is caused by grasping at things; once we realize the truth that there really are no things at all, and that all is impermanent and illusory, we will be free from suffering, and consequently will be able to help others free themselves from this vicious cycle. The stone Buddhas in Afghanistan, as valuable as they may have been at one time as *upaya* or "skillful means" by which to help lay Buddhists realize the dharma, have long since lost all use as objects of veneration or meditation. Unworshipped for centuries, the Buddhas weren't doing much good (in religious terms) either. Add to this the simple fact that very few, outside of a small number of specialists, knew of their existence; and we can see that even their aesthetic value was minimal. Their demise, on the other hand, has not only brought these beautiful creations into a world-wide spotlight on a scale their faithful carvers could never have dreamed, but more significantly, in Buddhist terms, serves to remind us that we should never place the continued existence of a "bunch of stones" over and above the health and welfare of living human beings.

If out of the settling dust left by the Bamiyan Buddhas the world can begin to see more clearly the abuses against humanity perpetrated by the Taliban, and if even a modicum of the outrage generated by this case can be shifted away from the now-eliminated stones towards the still suffering people of this nation, then their creation 1,500 years ago will have finally fulfilled its greatest promise.