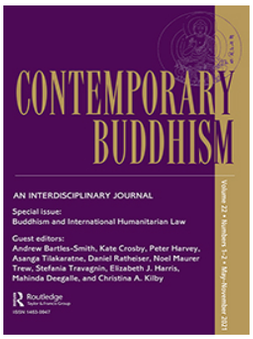

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THE PARADOX OF THE BUDDHIST SOLDIER

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ABSTRACT

At first glance, a military life and practising Buddhism may seem like two pursuits at odds. Buddhism sets the moral bar very high and nowhere in its teachings can one find any evidence in support of violence, whether in word, thought or deed. One could therefore argue that Buddhism and the military are two strange bedfellows, and some may find it difficult to conceive of serving in the military whilst adhering to the ethos, values and standards of Buddhism. This article challenges this popular myth and resolves this apparent paradox between Buddhism and the military. By drawing on canonical Buddhist teachings as well as voices from the Sangha and Buddhist military practitioners, we demystify the 'Buddhist soldier' and clear common misconceptions regarding: the fundamental teachings of *ahiṃsā*, karma and skilful (*kusala*) action; Buddhist teachings being equated to pacifism; the duty of soldiers and the State to protect; soldiering as a 'right livelihood'; and the karmic implications of military professions. Using international humanitarian law, the body of law regulating the conduct of war, as a natural reference point, we explore what guidance Buddhist teachings provide to soldiers and how they potentially can contribute towards reducing suffering in war, including through application in military training. Buddhism endorses the concept of maintaining disciplined, virtuous and skilled military forces to protect what is good. At all times one needs to aim at not causing suffering to others, but never at the expense of preventing even worse suffering.

KEYWORDS Ahimsa; Buddhism; ethics; intention; international humanitarian law; karma; military; pacifism; Pali Canon; soldiers; Vinaya; violence; war; warfare

Introduction

At first glance, a military life and practising Buddhism[1] may seem like two pursuits at odds. Buddhism sets the moral bar very high and nowhere in its teachings does one find any evidence in support of violence, whether in word, thought or deed. On the contrary, the entire Buddhist teachings and practices are geared towards the principle of *ahiṃsā* (non-harming), for the benefit of oneself and others.

In the line of duty, soldiers may be forced to take tough actions, including those that result in death. Although professional militaries are increasingly

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sensitive, disciplined and regulated by laws, instances of vicious military action have sometimes cast a bad light on the armed forces. Many therefore see the military as a 'no-go area' for practising Buddhists, and some even go so far as saying that military careers are a 'wrong livelihood'. Given that all Buddhist nations have militaries, how does one square these differences or reconcile this paradox?

War, religious belief and the meaning of death are connected at a very fundamental level. Warriors, faced with the imminence of death, sought purpose in their religious traditions. Buddhism itself evolved in this environment and became intimately tied to the topic of war. Buddhism recognises that in this worldly existence (*saṃsāra*) situations when war becomes unavoidable can arise,[2] which makes understanding the conduct of war in its context highly relevant.

Warfare has been subject to certain principles and customs since time immemorial. International humanitarian law (IHL), the law of armed conflict, is built on this legacy of religious and philosophical traditions. IHL focuses on conduct during war (*jus in bello*) irrespective of the question of whether wars are justifiable (*jus ad bellum*). Its objective is to reduce suffering during armed conflict by balancing military necessity with humanitarian concerns (Melzer 2019, 17–56). IHL provides us with a natural reference point and a particularly fruitful interpretive lens for seeking to understand Buddhism in the context of warfare. As all soldiers are legally required to act in accordance with IHL, it is relevant for Buddhist combatants to look at it from the perspective of their own traditions, identifying convergences as well as distinct traits.

By drawing on canonical Buddhist teachings as well as voices from the Sangha and Buddhist military practitioners, we try to demystify the enigma of the 'Buddhist soldier' and explore how Buddhist teachings potentially can contribute to reducing suffering in war, including through application in military training. Reflections from current and former members of the armed forces with their experience of the realities of warfare provide useful insights for bridging the gap between scriptural guidance and military practice.

This article argues that the deceptive incompatibility between Buddhism and the military mainly stems from a misunderstanding of the Buddhist concepts of *ahiṃsā*, karma and skilful (*kusala*) action, and from failing to recognise the soldier's duty to protect. Whilst Buddhism has no place for aggression or any other behaviour intended to cause harm, it does not rule out the use of military force for wholesome purposes. The canonical texts endorse the concept of maintaining disciplined, virtuous and skilled military forces to protect what is good. At all times one needs to aim at not causing suffering to others, but never at the expense of preventing even worse suffering.

Ahiṃsā

Although there is much diversity within Buddhism and Buddhist practices, all traditions are in agreement in their pursuit of moral, ethical conduct, *sīla* (Sanskrit: *śīla*). It is one of the three components constituting the Noble Eightfold Path, which provides a code of conduct committing to self-restraint with the principal motivation being to avoid harm. From a Buddhist perspective, ethics are causative, with karma (literally 'action') leaving imprints on the individual mind that by consequence influence the future – intention[3] constitutes the underlying force. Buddhist ethics are mainly governed by examining whether a certain action is likely to be harmful to oneself or others, with the morality of one's actions being appraised by evaluating one's intention. Because it is bad states of mind that result in harmful conduct, there is much emphasis on the cultivation of virtues.

The teaching on karma explains that one's future is shaped through one's intentional acts. Action (whether by body, speech or thought) is constituted by two components, the actual behaviour and the intention underlying that behaviour. Psychological impulses behind actions plant 'karmic seeds' and set in motion a chain of causes culminating in 'karmic fruits'.[4] To illustrate, deliberately harming a living being would plant seeds that will naturally mature into unpleasant results in the future, while accidentally causing harm does not generate a negative karmic effect in and of itself.[5] Seeing karma fatalistically, however, would be an incorrect understanding of the concept. The present experience of pain and pleasure is the consequence of actions taken both in the past and in the present, among other factors such as organic ones in the body (Sn.36.21). This creates the possibility to act with right intent by one's free will and to end suffering before the karmic seeds of past actions come to fruition.

> *Cetanāhaṃ, bhikkhave, kammaṃ vadāmi. Cetayitvā kammaṃ karoti: kāyena, vācāya, manasā*. – 'Intention, oh monks, I call karma. Intending, one does karma by way of body, speech, and mind.' (An.6.63)

The Buddha suggested that 'intention is karma', identifying mental intent, what one has in mind to make happen, as the principal factor of karmic accumulation and human suffering. *Cetanā*[6] (intention) is the mental factor that urges the mind in a particular direction, towards a specific goal. *Cetanā* obtains its ethical distinctiveness through mental factors known as *mūla*s (roots): 'Monks, there are these three roots of what is unskilful. Which three? Greed is a root of what is unskillful, hatred is a root of what is unskillful, delusion is a root of what is unskillful' (*Mūla Sutta*, An.3.69).

As one's actions result in consequences, one must show 'skilfulness'. A mind that is skilful avoids actions that are likely to cause suffering. The Buddhist terms used in the ethical evaluation of human conduct are *kusala*

(skilful, wholesome) and *akusala* (unskilful, unwholesome). Actions which are *akusala* are seen as being rooted in the *akusala mūla*s, the unskilful roots (also known as the Three Poisons), i.e. greed (*lobha*), hatred (*dosa*) and delusion (*moha*), thus resulting in unpleasant karmic results. Those which are *kusala* are seen as being rooted in their opposites, i.e. generosity/non-greed (*alobha*), loving-kindness/non-hatred (*adosa*) and wisdom/non-delusion (*amoha*), thus bringing about positive karmic results.

Analogous to breaches in law resulting in legal consequences, intentionally causing unnecessary suffering has bad karmic consequences, although these are seen as natural results, not punishments. Yet Buddhism takes an even more comprehensive outlook, the most unmistakable difference being that already all thought and speech bear karmic consequences. It thus aims at the stage where all atrocities ultimately take their origin and where suffering caused to others, whether by rhetoric or bodily action, can still be prevented.

Buddhism follows a non-dogmatic approach, empowering each individual, having carefully weighed the roots and karmic consequences of possible actions, to do what is right depending on each situation. There are no commandments, but precepts, principles intended to guide action, providing the means to avoid harm to oneself and others, but also leaving room for transgression under exceptional circumstances. The *pañcaśīla* (Pali: *pañcasīla*), five precepts, are commitments to abstain from killing living beings, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying and intoxication.

Underlying all of the five precepts is *ahiṃsā*, a foundational step on the Dharma path and a practical necessity to liberate oneself from the Three Poisons. While in English language '*ahiṃsā*' is often misleadingly translated as 'non-violence' (and '*hiṃsā*' as 'violence'), its actual meaning is refraining from intentional harm to any living being whether in thought, speech or physical action (Jenkins 2011). The term 'non-harming' captures better the intimate relationship to all living things, where any harmful conduct also results in self-harm. Harbouring harmful intentions fosters the very cognitive states that Buddhism tries to overcome, thereby also directly causing harm to oneself.

A cardinal problem arises when conflating the English word 'violence' with the Buddhist concepts of *hiṃsā*/*ahiṃsā*, which are fundamentally different from the English-language concepts of violence and the absence thereof.[7] According to the Oxford dictionary (Lexico 2021), 'violence' is defined as 'behaviour involving physical force intended to hurt, damage, or kill someone or something'.[8]

In colloquial use 'violence' is designated very loosely and subjectively, conveying a general sense of moral condemnation of what the observer deems to be unacceptable use of physical force, including towards objects (another foundational difference to *hiṃsā*/*ahiṃsā*, which instead extends to other living beings, also covering verbal and psychological harm). Some might call a vigorous defence resulting in brutal injury violence in this

sense – this depends on the eye of the beholder. When seeing the final result of injury caused, one cannot classify it as *hiṃsā* without understanding the underlying intent, which could have been entirely compassionate. Sometimes strong physical action resulting in injury might be the comparatively less harmful choice.

The difference between violence and *hiṃsā* is more than a nuance and decisively affects the understanding of Buddhist classifications of conflict situations.[9] Many have searched for and ostensibly found justifications for violence in the Buddhist scriptures, but it is important to understand that those are never justifications in the *hiṃsā–ahiṃsā* context or justifications of any conduct where the underlying intention is to cause harm. Trying to justify violence in Buddhist terms is an inherently futile endeavour.

Buddhist teachings are pragmatic at their very core and recognise the complexity of decision-making under difficult circumstances, such as when confronted with situations where one could be compelled to apply physical force. Virtually anybody honestly asking themselves under what circumstances they would use strong physical force that potentially could cause injury to others, even if that was not the intent, could envision a specific set of circumstances where that might occur – for example, when protecting themselves or their loved ones.

Not killing any living being is a precept that one always should follow and yet no one can ever completely adhere to, as every human being causes the destruction of tiny animals during their lifetime. In the Dharmic traditions one finds a realisation that duties can entail causing injury. Even when working the land already many small animals are harmed, but this is not the intention of farmers and occurs in line of their duty.[10] In Buddhism working in agriculture or other duties is not intrinsically considered to stand in contradiction of *ahiṃsā*.[11]

Buddhism considers *ahiṃsā* not as a rule, but as a principle. Rules and principles both are decision-guiding considerations. A principle can be understood as a fundamental belief influencing actions. Principles leave room for interpretation, providing a guiding beacon towards the right direction, internally motivating to act in a way that seems good and right. Stringent rules, while easy to understand, implement and enforce, lack flexibility to cope with unusual situations. For principles instead it is a continuous endeavour to adhere to them, while being fully aware that exceptions can be made, thus giving flexibility to exercise individual judgement. This allows for more nuanced, context-dependent action better reflecting complex ethical situations, such as those prevalent in war.

Buddhism, war and the State

Buddhism is frequently equated to pacifism, 'the belief that war and violence are unjustifiable and that all disputes should be settled by peaceful means'

(Oxford Reference 2021). Pacificism arguably covers a wide spectrum from absolute pacifism (the belief that no reason whatsoever can justify the taking of human life, even for military defence) to conditional and selective pacificism (which accepts that there are certain circumstances where military action could be considered to be the lesser evil). The Buddhist teachings found in the canonical texts certainly do not equate to absolute pacifism, which would not even allow for a country to defend itself by military means if necessary.

The understanding of 'true Buddhism' to be unconditionally pacifist is a modern, Western-inspired interpretation[12] that is challenged not only by its history, but also by scripture. This being said, out of this cultural encounter new directions in Buddhist thought and practice emerged, some aligning themselves more closely with various forms of pacifism. When taken as a general guiding principle, pacifism is not in conflict with Buddhist teachings. Buddhism condones seeking non-harmful solutions to situations of conflict at all times, even expanding the narrow focus on human life to the protection of other forms of life.

In conflict situations, the close proximity of the State and the Sangha sometimes creates the perception that Buddhism is implicitly supporting violence. It is easy for observers who conflate Buddhism with absolute pacifism to interpret voices from the Sangha in support of the military as hypocrisy and a reflection of their human failings. They see malign intent and corruption, for example, arguing that the Sangha is trying to ingratiate itself with the State to receive further patronage.[13]

Trying to reconcile the history of Buddhist participation in wars with an idealised Buddhism standing in opposition to any form of military action, some allege sheer realpolitik to explain why the Buddha in his many discourses to political leaders never counsels to abandon war. Actions taken by Buddhists that they may personally disapprove of, such as calls to defend the nation by military means, are denounced as inauthentic and/or corrupt expressions of Buddhism,[14] thereby venerating their own idealised notions while denigrating Buddhist communities. While the Sangha, like any other group of human beings, is not without human failings, one needs to be mindful when ascribing unwholesome intentions by mere judgement of external acts.

Strong physical force itself is neutral. It is the underlying intention that gives it its ethical quality. One may ask, if *people* are allowed to defend themselves, why should it be called violence when a *society* defends itself? Bhikkhu Bodhi brings this into historical perspective:

> I don't think in any way one could justify, on Buddha's principles, even by stretching them to a great extent, the idea of a just offensive war or war of aggression. There is an arguable case [which] can be made and has been made, and actually has been practiced throughout Buddhist history, that engaging in

> warfare defensively is justifiable and virtually all the Buddhist countries of South, Southeast Asia have engaged in those kinds of wars. (Bhikkhu Bodhi in Wright 2020)

In Buddhist historiography wars characteristically are explained as necessary reactions to others' improper conduct and by emphasising the compassionate intent on the side of righteous rulers. Wars of conquest would indeed be problematic in light of the precept against taking what is not freely given. The wider debate about what constitutes a defensive war is nevertheless more complex. One might imagine scenarios where initiating an attack becomes necessary for better defence and for preventing more suffering to arise. Nonetheless, in Buddhism (as in the other Dharmic traditions) warfare is considered to be a perilous course of action and it is very difficult to predict its consequences (Wu 2019).

Regardless of one's position on the various examples of Buddhist participation in historical wars, religion is only one among many factors in a conflict, often strongly overlapping with ethnic identity. When observers talk about 'Buddhist warfare', more often than not, it is because one of the groups in a conflict identifies themselves as being Buddhist. Even in societies where virtuous beliefs are widely held, one finds a similar range of human failings so evident throughout history. All the major religions contain scriptural interdictions on violence, yet all have followers who commit bad acts claiming religious justifications. Buddhist thinkers time and again have acknowledged that there is a profound difference between merely assenting to a belief and actually acting in accordance with that belief. Being Buddhist does not imply that one's acts are Buddhist or representative of Buddhism. In order to live according to Buddhist principles, one must perennially cultivate oneself through disciplined practice.

As the history of humankind continuously manifests itself in people's greed, hatred and delusion, i.e. the Three Poisons, the occurrence of war, a state of prolonged armed conflict, is an inseparable part of *saṃsāra*, our mundane world, where violence begets violence and one war ends for others to follow. *Saṃsāra* will always be filled with suffering (*duḥkha/dukkha*) – that is the first Noble Truth.

Warfare was also common in the Buddha's time, and war is a recurrent motif throughout the discourses. Kosuta (1997, para. 11) notes that 'if all the military sutta and passages were collected together in one text, they could form a separate volume of the Canon, as together they number over five hundred pages in length'. The sheer number of allegories related to warfare in the Pali Canon, where the military is generally referred to in favourable terms, is indeed striking. The language of combat and war is used myriad times for transmitting important spiritual messages.

One finds many accounts of human warfare, but wars are also fought at other levels, such as in the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* accounts of the *deva-asura* war[15] and the battle against the tempter-deity Māra (literally 'causing death', 'killing'), the personification of death and all forces antagonistic to attaining enlightenment. We also find Lokapāla, Dharma-protecting guardians that appear as generals, each endowed with their own special armour and weapons.

Śāriputra (Pali: Sāriputta), considered the first of the Buddha's two chief disciples, famed for his wisdom and teaching ability, earned the title *dhamma-senāpati* ('General of the Dharma'), just as a king has his army general. The image of the heroic warrior is a recurrent theme when illustrating commendable character traits. The numerous positive similes comparing certain qualities of monks to those of soldiers convey a message that the military was a respected institution in early Buddhism.

In fact, Buddhist teachings evolved and were mastered, disseminated and patronised by many people who in their formative stage were great warriors. The Buddha himself was born as the son of a ruler (and so came to be seen as belonging to the warrior class), was probably trained in the military skills, and in his previous existences as Bodhisattva is said to have held important military roles that did not hinder his path towards nirvana. He thus spoke from personal experience when using the language of warriors and conquest in order to provide Dharma guidance, but also when describing the horrors of war. In the *Mahādukkhakkhandha Sutta* (*The Greater Discourse on the Mass of Suffering*) the Buddha vividly narrates the conditions of war and points to the underlying reason for them to emerge:

> for the sake of sensual pleasures they don their sword and shield, fasten their bow and arrows, and charge wetly plastered bastions, with arrows and spears flying and swords flashing. There they are struck with arrows and spears, splashed with dung, crushed with spiked blocks, and their heads are chopped off, resulting in death and deadly pain. (Mn.13; PTS I.86–87)

The 'Buddhist social contract' is explained in much detail in the *Dīgha Nikāya*. In this concept of society, the responsibilities of citizens and their ruler are neatly intertwined: the ruler is bound to protect his subjects and maintain order in society, which in turn gives the ruler the legitimacy to rule. In the *Aggañña* ('Knowledge of the Highest') *Sutta*, the Buddha explains the emergence of the warrior class (*kṣatriya/khattiya*; 'lord of the fields') as a conscious choice by the people to select the most able among them to act as a protector. 'They originated among these very same beings, like ourselves, no different, and in accordance with Dhamma, not otherwise' (Dn.27; PTS Pali III.93).

The State has a duty to protect its citizens and maintains a monopoly on the legitimate administration of physical harm,[16] except in the case of

immediate self-defence. In a Buddhist equivalent to secularism, the State and the Sangha mutually support each other, but have their very specific respective responsibilities, with the Sangha giving its blessings to the State, which in turn offers protection to the Sangha. Concurrently the Sangha is offering moral guidance to society, thereby contributing to the State being held accountable by its citizens.

The *cakkavatti* (Sanskrit: *cakravartin*), who rules according to Dharma wherever his wheels carry him, is presented as an ideal leader, a secular counterpart to the Buddha, whose central role is to maintain order. Two of the *cakkavatti*'s seven *ratana* ('jewels', 'gems') are the two mounts of soldiers and quintessential battle stations of warfare in ancient India: the horse and the elephant.[17] One of the five qualities a king needs to 'abide where he himself has conquered' is 'his strength in the four divisions of his army, loyal and alert to commands' (An.5.134).

In prior births the Buddha himself numerous times was a *cakkavatti*, 'conquering the four ends of the earth, bringing stability to the country, possessing the seven gems' and having 'more than a thousand sons, valiant, vigorous, crushers of enemy-hosts' (An.7.62). For a king's eldest son to become a worthy successor he needs to be fully trained 'in matters of skill that belong to anointed warrior rajahs: elephant, horse, chariot, bow and sword skill' (An.5.135). Yet even a *cakkavatti*'s rule remains fragile and the exhibition of military potential remains warranted (Dn.17, 26; PTS Pali II.172–173, III.63–67). The historical *cakkavatti* exemplar, Ashoka, also did not disband his forces or stop applying them to keep his realm safe. In his edicts he warns the forest tribes of his military potential, retains physical punishment and asks his heirs when seeking further military conquest to employ 'forbearance and light punishment' (Eka.13).

The extreme of a State not having defensive forces to protect its citizens is never presented as a viable option in the scriptures.[18] On the contrary, the failure to fulfil one's duty to protect the citizens would have negative karmic repercussions for rulers. If there are no armed forces, people would live in fear of serious internal strife and invasion. Insecurity contributes to an environment where actions take root in fear, which directly ties to suffering and accruing negative karma, thus impeding one's progress on the path. A reflection of this is found, for example, in the concept of *abhayadāna* ('Gift of Fearlessness'), where the gift is considered to be an assurance of protection to those who require it.[19]

IHL and Buddhist law

IHL comprises a set of rules and underlying principles aimed at reducing suffering in times of armed conflict. Direct sources of IHL include treaties (particularly the Geneva Conventions and their Protocols), general principles

of law and customary international law, the latter being a fount to all others. Customary law indeed is a rich reservoir of the religious traditions and moral principles of the world.

The development of customary IHL depends upon State practice (*usus*) undertaken out of a sense of legal obligation (*opinio juris*) – understandings of which are influenced by different traditions, religious norms and principles. By engaging in comprehensive study of the vast body of learning on how different cultures understand armed conflict, including from Buddhist traditions and communities around the world, this repository of traditions and principles is increasingly being applied to gradually universalise IHL and to overcome perceptions of it being a Western-imposed system, thereby bolstering awareness and adherence.

Legal systems function well in an environment where people fear consequences, but in armed conflict that frequently is not the case. However, IHL also functions as a moral system, the term 'humanitarian' revealing this nature. To some extent, the reluctance of States to legislate and restrict conduct in armed conflict stems from the extraordinary nature of war and the existential threat that it poses. Given the extreme environment of war and the bendiness of some of the law's provisions, in order for IHL to function effectively (i.e. to actually reduce the suffering caused by armed conflict), it is of utmost importance to further strengthen its underlying ethical dimensions. By seeking common ground and engaging with the world's cultural and religious traditions, such as Buddhism, the law's ethical foundations can be solidified so that combatants make choices that lead to better humanitarian outcomes – even absent any potential legal consequences compelling them to do so.

Of particular reference value here is the *Vinaya* ('Discipline'), the body of rules governing the lives of monks and nuns. Both 'Buddhist law', such as in the *Vinaya*, and IHL are manmade constructs that can be adapted and improved upon depending on circumstances. The Buddha started this process, and different *Vinaya* traditions have continued it to varying extents. Upon Mahākaccāna's[20] request, the Buddha laid down special rules for the convenience of the monks of Avantidakkhināpatha (Central India) and other border countries (Vin.I.197–198) – for instance, allowing monks to wear clothing suitable to the different cultural and climatic conditions. While the *Vinaya* aims at monastics, it also provides a guide towards values held beyond the monastic context. Laypeople are not expected to follow the monastic rules, but their underlying principles are highly relevant to them. Laypeople and monastics follow the same path towards the one final goal, only at different speeds.[21]

Buddhism nowhere teaches that one is not allowed to protect oneself from physical harm. Even Buddhist monks are allowed to carry a stick to fend off attacks, but not with unwholesome intent.[22] *Vinaya* rule *Pācittiya* 74

(Thanissaro Bhikkhu 1995) says that if a monk engages in a violent act on another monk out of anger, it is a *pācittiya* offence (a minor violation requiring atonement). If this act occurred towards any other living being, it is considered a *dukkaṭa* (wrong doing), the lightest grade of offence for having engaged in an unskilful action that requires confession to another monk.

However, a monk who 'trapped in a difficult situation, gives a blow "desiring freedom"' (Thanissaro Bhikkhu 1995, on *Pācittiya* 74) does not engage in any offence. This blow is understood to include hitting out with one's own body (fist, elbow, kicking, etc.), with something attached to the body (stick, knife, etc.) or with something that can be 'thrown' (rock, shooting an arrow, etc.). If one harms another out of self-defence, it is a non-offence, even if anger arises in one's mind. If one's attacker dies, it is not considered to be a breach of the first precept if there was no intention to kill. As these rules are applicable to monastics, at the very minimum laymen are allowed to protect themselves, too, as long as they do not act unskilfully (*akusala*).

Monastic regulations treat intentionally bringing about the death of a human being, whether by killing the person, arranging for a person to be killed, inciting the person to die, or describing the advantages of death, as one of the four *pārājika* ('defeat') offences, which result in immediate expulsion from the Sangha for life; killing other sentient beings is a lesser offence. A monk's action leading to the demise of a human being only constitutes a *pārājika* offence if the monk intended his action to result in death. In all cases intention is a necessity for constituting the offence. This corresponds with IHL and the modern criminal legal system, where intent (*mens rea*), is one of two elements that must be proven in order to convict (the other being the actual act, *actus reus*). The taking of life is not considered murder when, for example, the accused acted out of self-defence, therefore negating the required intent because the killing was not done out of the desire to take the victim's life.

Although motive and intent are often treated as distinct concepts in law, no logical separation can be discerned between intentions and more ultimate intentions, i.e. motivations.[23] In legal practice there always has been an overlap, and also the legal sciences increasingly question this strict dichotomy, which emerged as a rhetorical construct in nineteenth-century criminal law in an effort to introduce scientific rather than moral norms, moving away from subjective desiderative standards towards standards of objective reasonableness (Binder 2002). The moral worth of underlying motives is difficult to codify as it has to be assessed case by case, thus undermining the predictability of laws and risking to punish the accused for their supposed character rather than their acts.

As in IHL and criminal law, the *Vinaya* does not deem the wider background motives to be central to judging culpability. What outside observers ascribe to motive is subject to conjecture as it demands a thorough

understanding of and insight into others' mental processes. Even the culprits themselves might very well not know, given the difficulty of successfully monitoring one's mental factors all the time. By focusing on that part of the culpability that can be shown by standards of reasonableness, i.e. the actual prohibited conduct plus the willingness to engage in it, regardless of presumed wider motivations, arbitrary punishment can be minimised. Man-made laws judged by fallible humans have to take utmost care in their assessment of culpability. This is very different from karmic law, which unfailingly provides justice for everybody, resonating well in a world where the perpetrators of crimes often face no legal consequences, including for violations of IHL.

The Sangha and the military have their own individual duties in society. From the perspective of the Sangha, the State is accepted as an institution, including its military powers. It is a symbiotic relationship where the secular and spiritual wheels of Dharma mutually benefit from each other's protection: monks benefit from the physical protection of the military, while the military benefits from the spiritual protection offered by the Sangha. Crucially, the Sangha also provides psychological support to combatants who are inescapably concerned about the karmic consequences of their actions. Naturally the two spheres frequently interact and at times even intersect, when soldiers turn monks and vice versa.

The *Vinaya* plays a central role in regulating monk–army relations. According to the *Bhikkhunī Pāṭimokkha* (rules 129–131) and *Pācittiya* (48–50), monks and nuns alike are allowed to see an army on active duty if they have a suitable reason. They may even stay with an army for two or three nights, but not see them in combat, roll calls or parades, or otherwise they engage in a *dukkaṭa*. When the border provinces of Magadha were in turmoil, king Seniya Bimbisāra solicited the Buddha to stop soldiers from escaping their duty by joining the Sangha. The Buddha duly decreed that the ordination of anybody currently serving in the army or other royal services (for instance, tax collectors) results in a *dukkaṭa* (*Mahāvagga* 40, Vin.I.74). By preventing soldiers from becoming monks, the Buddha intrinsically recognised their duty as well as the king's duty to protect the realm.

Wu (2019) explores the *Vinaya* accounts of Ajātaśatru's war with the Vṛjis. There, Buddhist jurists recount cases of war and conflict-related sexual violence, which shows that those were of real-life concern to them. In several *Vinaya* traditions nuns were prohibited to visit places affected by armed conflict due to prior instances of sexual abuse endured by nuns when wandering into battle zones. We also learn from these accounts about the complex and ever-changing nature of wars, which makes it extremely hard to predict their outcome. Notwithstanding, all *Vinaya*s agree that monks are allowed to make predictions on the outcome of a war.

Means of protection

For a State to be able to protect its citizens it must take preparations and offer means of protection, such as in the form of arms and fortifications. In one of the most popular Buddhist works, the *Milinda Pañha* (*Questions of Milinda*), one finds a reflection of this need to maintain an army to ward off ever-present danger:[24]

> 'Have rival kings ever risen up to oppose you, O king?'
> 'Yes they have.'
> 'Was it only then that you made preparations for battle?'
> 'Not at all. All that had been done beforehand in order to ward off future danger.' (Mp. PTS I.81)

Various scriptural foundations for military action to protect against harm are presented by Sangharaja Vajirañāṇa, the Supreme Patriarch of the Kingdom of Siam and his generation's leading intellectual, in his 'The Buddhist Attitude Towards National Defense and Administration', published in 1916. There he also illustrates the need to proactively prepare:

> The defence against external foes is one of the policies of governance, and is one that cannot be neglected. War generally occurs suddenly, and victory cannot be won solely by having a large number of men, arms, and munitions; it must also depend upon Presence of Mind (Sati), Knowledge (Paññā), Bravery, Experience, Readiness in Commands, and good fighting positions, and so forth, in order to make victory certain. Therefore, war must be prepared for, even in time of peace, otherwise one would not be in time and one would be in a disadvantageous position towards one's foe. (Vajiranana 1916, 19)

Moreover, in the *Nagarūpama Sutta* (Simile of the Frontier Fortress, An.7.67) the Buddha lists seven defences that make a frontier fortress unassailable: a deep and unshakeable foundation, an encircling moat wide and deep, an encircling road wide and high, ramparts thick, high and covered by plaster, a wise and competent gatekeeper, a great armoury of weapons (both missiles, shot as in arrows or hurled as in spears, and handheld, such as swords) and many different types of troops. Listed next to cavalry, chariots and the elephant corps, we learn here about the complex composition of foot soldiers, which included archers, standard-bearers, battle marshals organising the battle arrays, the supply corps, experienced noble princes, frontline commandos, veteran heroes and shield-bearing soldiers.

Frontier forts occupied a central position in warfare. They acted as a crucial deterrence encouraging peaceful existence, provided shelter to the armed forces and arrested the onslaught of invaders. Capture of these strategic strongholds was necessary for decisive victory and this could be achieved by elephants breaking open their gates. One such assault is recorded in the *Saṃgāmāvacara Jātaka*, where the Buddha in one of his prior Bodhisattva rebirths was the mahout of the king's elephant. When it turned in fear during

the attack on Benares, the Bodhisattva successfully restored the elephant's confidence and encouraged it:

> O Elephant, a hero you, whose home is in the battlefield:
> There stands the gate before you now: why do you turn and yield?
> Make haste! break through the iron bar, and beat the pillars down!
> Crash through the gates, made fast for war, and enter in the town! (Jat.182)

In ancient India elephants were a unique combination of a weapon (often characterised as early versions of battle tanks), the foundation of an army division, and a vital means of protection, yet also much-cherished fellow living beings renowned for their intelligence and majesty. The use of elephants in war was a military innovation that emerged in the centuries preceding the Buddha and that entirely changed the equilibrium in battles.[25] Elephants quickly became the dominant force in Indian warfare and continued so until well after the advent of firearms (Trautmann 2015, 108–119).

In early Vedic (c. 1500–1000 BCE) symbolism the elephant was only seen on the margins, but this rapidly changed in congruence with their taming for use in warfare (Trautmann 2015, 95–102). The army (*bala*) itself came to be conceived as a four-legged (*caturaṅga*) animal, the *caturaṅga-bala*, a fourfold army of foot soldiers, charioteers, cavalry and the elephant corps. The most powerful individual weapon in battle was the bow. Elephants provided an elevated platform for archers[26] and offered the king as well as other military commanders a better vantage point from which to steer their forces. War elephants were also used for trampling and intimidation, breaching of battle formations, inspiring awe and causing fear among enemy troops as well as their horses and, as we have seen in the *Nagarūpama Sutta*, for battering down enemy fortifications.[27]

Throughout the Pali Canon elephants are much revered and mentioned more often than any other animal. Among many other characteristics, we learn in detail about their behaviour and different classifications, how they are tracked in the jungle and captured for training, how they are tamed and trained for combat by endurance exercises as well as exposure to mock attacks with spears, and even their weak spots in battle (Dhammika 2015). The Buddha and monks are often compared with elephants, as for example in the *Sotar Sutta*, where the qualities of a worthy monk are matched to the qualities of a king's war elephant:

> Endowed with five qualities, a king's elephant is worthy of a king, is a king's asset, counts as a very limb of his king. Which five? There is the case where a king's elephant is a listener, a destroyer, a protector, an endurer, and a goer.
>
> And how is a king's elephant a listener? There is the case where, whenever the tamer of tameable elephants gives him a task, then – regardless of whether he has or hasn't done it before – he pays attention, applies his whole mind, and lends ear.

> . . . a destroyer? There is the case where a king's elephant, having gone into battle, destroys an elephant together with its rider, destroys a horse together with its rider, destroys a chariot together with its driver, destroys a foot soldier.
>
> . . . a protector? There is the case where a king's elephant, having gone into battle, protects his forequarters, protects his hindquarters, protects his forefeet, protects his hindfeet, protects his head, protects his ears, protects his tusks, protects his trunk, protects his tail, protects his rider.
>
> . . . an endurer? There is the case where a king's elephant, having gone into battle, endures blows from spears, swords, arrows, and axes; he endures the resounding din of drums, cymbals, conchs, and tom-toms.
>
> . . . a goer? There is the case where – in whichever direction the tamer of tameable elephants sends him, regardless of whether he has or hasn't gone there before – a king's elephant goes there right away. (An.5.140)

Wild elephants are seen as symbols of the uncontrolled mind, the most dangerous of weapons. They are contrasted to the king's elephant whose mind is tamed and disciplined, and can be directed to destroy any obstacle. As with the human mind, the destructive force of elephants demands restraint (Dhp.326).

The association of elephants with nobility and divinity, shared across the Dharmic traditions, emerged in congruence with their domestication for use in battle. War elephants are intimately linked to kingship and the display of power, impressive emblems of military might, to be displayed in ceremonies and royal processions (not unlike the display of war assets in modern military parades). The elephant was indeed one of the seven jewels of kingship.

In several *Jātaka*s the Bodhisattva takes birth as an elephant, such as a white Chaddanta ('having six tusks') king (Jat.514). The white elephant also appears in the form of Airāvata (Pali: Erāvana), the mount of Indra,[28] king of the gods and their leader in war (Snp.379). In the canonical texts Indra is mostly referred to as Śakra (Pali: Sakka; 'mighty'), the ruler over Trāyastriṃśa (Pali: Tāvatiṃsa; 'belonging to the thirty-three gods'), a highly sought rebirth in *saṃsāra*, which one can only reach as consequence of accumulating very good karma. The precious rarity of white elephants, symbols of purity, is also present in the Buddha's birth story, where his mother Māyādevī dreams of him entering her side in the form of a white elephant.[29]

Soldiering and 'right livelihood'

Widely held assumptions that Buddhism demands absolute pacifism have made Buddhists vulnerable to unfounded criticism for neglecting legal and pragmatic concerns[30] in a global environment where armed conflict is prevalent. Due to these same assumptions, Buddhist soldiers also often find themselves the object of misunderstanding in their communities, which

puts them under additional stress. In fact, there are Buddhists serving in militaries across the world and, just like other countries, Buddhist nations maintain armed forces to protect their citizens and national interests. The majority of soldiers in the militaries of Bhutan, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Thailand are Buddhists, for example.

Whether soldiers can be good Buddhists is a controversial topic in some circles. In Buddhism the thought of taking somebody's life is so reprehensible that a small subsection of (often Western) Buddhists would answer that one should not serve in the armed forces. Much of where one stands in this debate depends on one's own perceptions of the ethical nature of militaries. It is easy to comprehend that for those who see the military as inherently malevolent, joining the service becomes morally unacceptable.

Being a member of the military or any other armed group is clearly not without difficult ethical conundrums for a Buddhist. While the role of a soldier involves many kinds of tasks, it can involve taking the lives of people or supporting others who do. Prima facie, one could therefore argue that Buddhism and the military are strange bedfellows, and some may find it difficult to conceive of serving in the military whilst adhering to the ethos, values and standards of Buddhism.

Nonetheless, soldiers also play a central role in helping to prevent suffering from arising – they can be a force for wholesome objectives. The military is not only meant for conducting warfare; it acts as a crucial deterrent and supports local communities in many other capacities, such as rescue operations, emergency relief and reconstruction. Serving members in the military forces generally profess their clear intention to serve society, keep their communities safe, support law and order, maintain peace and other worthy endeavours. Some, misunderstanding the purpose of militaries, might perceive soldiering to be a wrong livelihood and yet they benefit from the safety this profession provides to them. Abolishing the military would result in a lack of safety, implicitly allowing more suffering to arise.

Military careers in the light of Buddhist ethics were discussed in some detail during the first Armed Forces Buddhist Community Conference[31] in the UK. Ajahn Brahmavaṃso,[32] arguing that Buddhist philosophy should not be reduced to pacifism, explained that one needs to understand the pragmatics of a situation. When it comes to moral decision-making in one's career, what is most important is what one's intentions are, rather than what the career is itself. It is important to bear in mind that working in other professions also comes with discrete ethical conundrums that one needs to carefully navigate. According to the highly influential Thai ascetic-philosopher Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu, 'No matter what kind of activity we carry out – be it politics, economics, or, indeed, even war – if done morally will maintain the natural, harmonious balance of all things, and will be consistent with the original plan of nature' (Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu 1986, 119–120).

In the Pali Canon, the life, service or practice of soldiers is not judged more harshly than any other mundane profession. Countering notions of warfare being the unique domain of the *kṣatriya*, in the *Issatta* ('Archery') *Sutta* the Buddha talks about military recruitment being based on merit of fighting skill rather than social stratification:

> 'Great king, you have a battle to be fought, then warrior youths not trained and without experience in archery, who would be frightened and would run away from the battlefield, come. Would you recruit them, would they serve the purpose?'
>
> 'Venerable sir, I will not recruit them and they would not serve my purpose.' ...
>
> 'Then Brahmin youths, ... householder youths, ... outcaste youths, trained and experienced in archery, who would not be frightened and would not run away from the battlefield, come. Would you recruit them, would they serve the purpose?'
>
> 'Venerable sir, I will recruit them, they would serve my purpose.' ...
>
> Then the Blessed One further said, 'Any youth skilled in archery, powerful and energetic, would be employed by a king going to war – unskilled people are not employed just because of their high caste.' (Sn.3.24)

In the *Dīghajāṇu Sutta* (An.8.54), a key text for understanding Buddhist lay ethics, when listing conditions for people to reach wealth and happiness in this life, the Buddha explicitly included archery (the most emblematic of military services) and service under the king (which also included tax collectors, for example) among the suggested careers, and advocated for developing skilfulness in these professions.

Providing archers with bows and arrows consequently required the manufacture of weapons, which brings us to another relevant topic, the condemnation of the trade in weapons, included as the fifth factor in the Noble Eightfold Path that deals with 'right livelihood' (*sammā ājīva*). The *Vaṇijjā* ('trade', 'trading', 'trading as a means of livelihood') *Sutta* states 'a lay follower should not engage in five types of trading activities. Which five? Trading of weapons, human beings, meat, intoxicants and poison' (An.5.177).[33] It is not a condemnation of weapons or their manufacture, but arguably rather of the distribution of tools used for taking life.[34] Prohibiting the development and manufacturing of weapons would have stood in direct conflict with a ruler's duty to ensure the safety of the people and to maintain protective forces.[35]

The manufacture of weapons, such as swords, lances, knives, arrowheads and spearheads, to provide soldiers with the tools and implements of warfare, was mainly conducted by blacksmiths (*kammāra*). The *kammāra* were tightly organised into their own guild and their guild chiefs were closely coordinating their affairs with the royal court. The Buddha himself is said to have been a *kammāra* in one of his previous rebirths as a Bodhisattva (*Sūci Jātaka*,

Jat.387), where he pursues the daughter of another blacksmith who is characterised as 'dear to the king' (*rājavallabha*). In the *Setaketu Jātaka* (Jat.377) the Bodhisattva, in the form of the king's priest, arms laymen with shields and weapons and appoints them to the king's service.

From the *Dhammapada* Commentary (Dhp-a.II.24–28) we learn that a hunter's wife is not held karmically responsible for preparing his weapons as she is only fulfiling her husband's request. This is part of the commentary on 'Just as the hand that has no wound is not affected by poison, so also, there are no evil outcomes for those who do no evil' (Dhp.124), showing that disregarding external appearances, one needs to understand the underlying duties and state of mind for being able to gauge intentions.

The question of 'right livelihood' is also of direct relevance to the many soldiers who are involved in the development and manufacturing of weapons worldwide. In one of his Dharma discussions Master Chin Kung (Jing Kong 淨空), an eminent master of the Pure Land school, directly addresses this intersection:

> This is a question from a layman in China. He says, there is a layman who sincerely studies Buddhism. However, he is a soldier and engaged in combat plans and weapons manufacturing every day. He is puzzled by this issue, may Master mercifully expound.
>
> There is no fault to be engaged in this vocation. Why? Your vocation, your job is to protect the nation, protect life and property of people. This is called the 'Gift of Fearlessness'. There is no fault. In this world, every nation must have soldiers for defence. Singapore, though it is a small country, has its own military force. . . .
>
> To explain from a different perspective, we can never wage war and invade others without a reason. This is right. So for a defensive war, a war of resistance . . . , Buddha and Bodhisattvas all agree that this is not wrong. Then the taking of life takes place under special circumstances. This means lifting the precepts [kai jie 开戒], not breaking the precepts [po jie 破戒]. You as a soldier, having taken Bodhisattva Precept or Five Precepts, if you are protecting your nation, you confront the enemy, do you kill or not kill them? At this moment do you think 'Oh, I have taken the precept of not taking life, if I kill them I will break my precept'? Alright. When the enemy breaks through, then in our city, our country, how many people will die because of your failed responsibility to protect? Then you will have committed a most serious sin. So you must do your duty even though sacrificing yourself. Your job is to defend against the enemy. The teachings of the Buddha are reasonable and logical. Your vocation is to protect nation and territory. This is the duty you have to fulfil. Without doubt, you are not sinful at all. (Chin 2017)

Accordingly, under close watch of the government Buddhists can be soldiers or be involved with weapon manufacturing. If it is their duty, they will not be regarded as karmically liable as long as they are skilful, meaning their intentions are not rooted in the Three Poisons. This, however, is by no means a blanket endorsement of weapons. From both a Buddhist and an IHL

perspective, the unnecessary, indiscriminate and prolonged suffering caused by some forms of arms, such as biological, chemical and nuclear weapons, is immensely problematic.[36]

IHL's principle of humanity forbids the infliction of all suffering unnecessary for achieving one's side's legitimate purpose of a conflict and it requires that those who have fallen into enemy hands are to be treated humanely at all times (Melzer 2019). Moreover, the famed 'Martens Clause', which appears in numerous IHL treaties, states:

> In cases not covered by this Protocol or by other international agreements, civilians and combatants remain under the protection and authority of the principles of international law derived from established custom, from the principles of humanity and from the dictates of public conscience.[37]

Therefore, even during situations of armed conflict which are not covered by more specific laws, the principles of humanity and the dictates of public conscience should continue to guide belligerents' behaviour and provide a minimum level of protection for both civilians and combatants against the ravages of war.

Buddhist principles apply evenly at all times regardless of whether there is war or not, and certainly also contradict views that 'in war everything that is not legally forbidden is permitted'. Instead, everything is geared towards reducing suffering by practising *ahiṃsā*.[38] While both IHL and Buddhism acknowledge the realities of war and share their concerns about the suffering caused by weapons, Buddhism takes aim at the pinnacle of disarmament, which is the disarmament of the mind.

Karmic implications of soldiering

For Buddhist military practitioners the most common and important discussions are those related to ethical issues soldiers face before, during and after combat, particularly pertaining the karmic consequences of military service and the morality of taking life.[39] A unique perspective here is provided by Buddhist military chaplains, who work at the very intersection of Buddhism and the military, and fulfil important roles in imparting military ethics. Formal and informal Buddhist military chaplaincies exist in several Asian countries, including India, Indonesia, Myanmar and Thailand. In recent years Western militaries also started to enrol Buddhist chaplains. An interesting example from the field is provided to us here by Captain Thomas Dyer, the first Buddhist chaplain in the US Army, deployed to Iraq in 2009:

> During a battle in Iraq, an American Buddhist soldier fired at an armed insurgent crouching on the balcony of a house. The shots killed not only the insurgent, but went through to the house, killing the insurgent's pregnant wife and six-year-old son. The soldier went to Thomas Dyer for help. Dyer recalls, 'The soldier

> recounted a sutra from the Saṃyutta Nikāya. In short, the sutra says that if a warrior kills someone while exerting himself in battle, he will be reborn in hell. As a Buddhist chaplain, how could I help this Buddhist soldier? What could I say?' Dyer told the soldier 'although bad things happen in combat, this world cannot sustain itself without protecting forces. We talked about the good military has done … then I affirmed him as a soldier, reminding him that his service is valuable and needed and that he … did the right action at the right time. As a Buddhist soldier, if his motives are good, his karma is good.' (Bosco 2014, 837)

Often referenced (and also misrepresented as in the quote above), the *Gāmaṇi-saṃyutta* contains accounts of the Buddha's sermons to various *Gāmaṇi* (village headmen, community leaders) regarding the karmic implications of the professions that their communities engage in. In three similar discourses there, the *Yodhājīva Sutta* (Sn.42.3), the *Hatthāroha Sutta* (Sn.42.4), and the *Assāroha Sutta* (Sn.42.5), the Buddha talks to the headmen of the *yodhājīva* (literally 'one making a living through fighting', thus referring to professionalised warriors), elephant mahouts and cavalrymen. As the *yodhājīva* community is contrasted to mahouts and cavalrymen, who bound by their profession were staying in settlements close to their animals (Singh 1989), *yodhājīva* appears to be a broad term potentially encompassing the foot soldiers in the king's army.[40]

> If he, as a [*yodhājīva*], strives and exerts himself in battle; if his mind is already inferior, depraved, and misdirected [with the thought] 'Let these sentient beings be killed, bound, annihilated, perished, or never exist'; and then if others kill him and finish [him] off [while he is] striving and exerting himself [in battle], then, after death with the break-up of the body he is reborn in the hell named Sarājita.' (Sugiki 2020, 8, n. 28)

Some understand this to imply that all soldiers who die in battle end up in battle-hell (Sarājita),[41] basing this on their assumption that the intention of soldiers in battle necessarily is to kill and annihilate. Rather, what all three discourses state is that it is those soldiers who die in a misdirected mind having base thoughts intending to kill and annihilate, that do – it is evil intention that determines the unfavourable rebirth.

The three Suttas are preceded by the *Tālapuṭa Sutta* (Sn.42.2), where in analogy when talking to the headman of a community of performers, Tālapuṭa, rather than making a blanket statement that all people in his community will take rebirth in the laughter hell, the Buddha says it is those performers who are intoxicated with greed, hatred and delusion, who are heedless and who make others heedless, who will do so. Once again, it is the state of mind and intentions that are central – Tālapuṭa, even though having been their leader and thus karmically implicated in their performances, became an *arhat* (Thag.19.1).

In the *Mahā Kammavibhanga Sutta*[42] (*The Great Exposition of Kamma*), the Buddha expounds that somebody who kills a living being does not necessarily in their next life take rebirth in a hell realm and can even take rebirth in a heaven realm instead. This is explained by the complexity of the human mind and accumulating many different kinds of karma in lifetimes. Also, one's last state of mind at the time of death (*maraṇa-citta*) can have great impact on one's rebirth.

These discourses show that professions do not define us; rather, we can define how we go about our work. Buddhist combatants need to reflect carefully on what their mental state is when fighting in war and be aware that if their intention is to kill and destroy, then this invariably involves bad states of mind that lead to adverse karmic effects.

Buddhist scriptures also talk about the obligation of the State towards safeguarding and respecting its troops. In the *Cakkavatti-sīhanāda Sutta* kings are advised to 'establish guard, ward and protection according to Dhamma for your own household, your troops in the Army, . . . ' (Dn.26; PTS Pali III.61). In the *Saṃvara Jātaka* the king is praised for paying all divisions of the armed forces their appropriate wages[43] and the *Sāma Jātaka* lists among the ten duties for kings to be able to reach heavens their duty towards their own soldiers.[44]

A recognition of the duty towards one's own troops is also found in IHL. War crimes occur when unnecessary suffering is inflicted. Following law and logic, it can be argued that this includes crimes committed against one's own forces, as belonging to the same side should not be a legitimate reason to deny victims protection under IHL.[45] While IHL only comments on crimes committed against one's own forces in certain circumstances, related bodies of law such as military law and human rights law also reflect this duty to ensure the welfare of one's soldiers.

According to common interpretations of Buddhism's moral code, the laws of a country need to be respected. If the law requires one to be conscripted to the army without any possibility to object and one is fundamentally opposed to joining any war, one can try to influence the security landscape or the legal environment – one can also take the vows and join the Sangha. During a conference on the topic of 'Reducing Suffering During Armed Conflict: The Interface Between Buddhism and IHL'[46] held in Sri Lanka in 2019, a former army general highlighted the need to pay more attention to the decision-making politicians:

> People fail to make a distinction between the hand that strikes and the head that takes the decision. It is the duty of soldiers to fight. Everybody is always talking about the soldier. You have to think about the policymakers. . . . It is the failures of some that ultimately necessitate the bravery of others. The soldiers' intention is to save people. (ICRC 2019)

Soldiers are duty-bound to serve the State. They need to make choices about how to manage their karma according to their duties and circumstances in order to minimise suffering as far as possible. As under IHL, this duty does not entail blindly following orders, though. From a Buddhist perspective, when one person orders another person to act, both the orderer and the ordered are responsible for resulting actions.[47] The orderer is not free of responsibility solely because of not having done the final act, and the ordered is not free of responsibility because they were 'only obeying orders'. While the orderer has the greater responsibility, the ordered has a responsibility to not obey immoral orders and to speak up.[48] This well aligns with IHL's emphasis on the individual soldier's responsibility to disobey illegal orders – orders to kill civilians, for example (Henckaerts and Doswald-Beck 2005, 563, Rule 154). This also extends to commanders being held responsible if they are aware of war crimes being committed by their subordinates and do not attempt to prevent them, or, after the fact, do not punish the persons responsible (Henckaerts and Doswald-Beck 2005, 558, Rule 153).

The *Rājaparikathā-ratnamālā (The Precious Garland of Advice for the King)* attributed to Nāgārjuna (second/third century CE), considered among the most important Buddhist philosophers, offers advice on what constitutes good government, including: 'Appoint these as leaders of the armed forces who are magnanimous, free of attachment, brave, gentle, steadfast, ever-heedful and follow the Dharma' (Rpr.3.24).

Relevant in this context are the cases of the Generals Ajita ('Invincible') and Sīha ('Lion') of the Licchavi clan, both followers of the Buddha. As the commanders behind lethal conflict that frequently occurred in their time in service[49] they hold high karmic responsibility, yet still had a chance to reach heaven[50] and even achieve full awakening. General Ajita immediately after his death was reborn in the company of the 'thirty-three gods' (Dn.24; PTS Pali III.14–15). From the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* we learn that the Buddha, instead of advising General Sīha to leave the army, asked him to properly discharge his duties. Sīha achieved becoming a *sotāpanna* (An.8.12), which literally means 'one who entered (*āpanna*) the stream (*sota*)', using the metaphor of the Noble Eightfold Path being a stream leading to the vast ocean of nirvana (Sn.55.5). For *sotāpanna* enlightenment becomes inevitable within at most seven rebirths and, if diligent, they may fully awaken within their present life.

The influential *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya* (*Commentary on the Treasury of Abhidharma*), an auto-commentary to the *Abhidharmakośa-kārikā* (*Verses on the Treasury of Abhidharma*), authored by the Gandhāran monk Vasubandhu around the fifth century CE, does not karmically condemn the military profession either. When one joins any group that is united in its intention to kill, whether it is a group of hunters, intent on killing an animal, or a fighting force whose intention is to annihilate human life, even if only one amongst them actually kills, all of them are equally karmically responsible, as they were

united in their intention to kill. Even when forced to join such a group, one is karmically responsible unless one rejects the group's murderous intention by vowing not to take life, even in protection of one's own.[51] It is again intention that is the defining element. The interpretation that anybody joining a military force will be held equally karmically responsible for any death that occurs in the military's line of duty hinges on the misconception of militaries being killing machines united by an intention to kill. When professional soldiers are on assignment, their intention will generally be more wholesome.

The following is a thoughtful set of reflections by a Buddhist Lt. Colonel in the British Army:

> I think that there is a serious military side which we simply cannot ignore. It is a difficult one. What we cannot have in the military is a situation where our soldiers/officers hesitate on the battlefield. . . . I am not suggesting that we blindly follow orders if those orders are illegal, but then all soldiers are taught this in any case. If an order is illegal then it is a different thing. So, in my opinion, this is why I personally frequently contemplate my position:
>
> Do I trust that my Government are correctly motivated in their considerations over the use of their Armed Forces? Does our Army still function in as humanitarian manner as possible? Do I think that we are still acting as a force for good in what we are doing? If I can truthfully answer 'yes' to all these then I am content that I can remain in this profession, but it is a personal decision. It is my karma. If I have doubts over any of these questions then I would have to leave.
>
> But one thing is for sure: if I have remained in the Army and the time comes for me to carry out or give an order that involved taking life, then I must do so, but in full mindfulness about that decision, and with full cognisance as to the karmic consequences. But I must not hesitate. The decision about my profession must be made before I am in that situation. On the battlefield is not the time to make such considerations.
>
> But at the same time, my religious beliefs will make me conscious of others suffering. I will do all I can to reduce suffering. I will show kindness and compassion whenever I can. I will always try to be a force for good. (cited in Kariyakarawana and Gilbert 2011, 7)

Conduct in war

Buddhist teachings provide rich source material relevant to conduct in war. Nonetheless, already from a pragmatic standpoint it would not have made sense for the Buddha to give advice concerning when and how to conduct war. What conceivably can be permitted in a particular set of circumstances cannot be generalised and if the Buddha had laid out clear rules under what preconditions one can go to war, this could have incited people to engage in

warfare. Giving specific guidance on how to conduct war would have distracted from the ultimate objective to avoid war altogether. What he advocated for instead was a different kind of 'war', that against the evil roots in oneself.

The teachings focus on wider ethical principles, but not without offering guidance also directly applicable to restrain the conduct of hostilities, for instance when condemning siege warfare[52] and prohibiting attacks against the weaponless. From the *Vasala Sutta* we learn that the Buddha said 'Whosoever destroys or lays siege to villages and towns, … let one know him as an outcast' (Snp.118). The *Dhammapada* emphasises that 'All tremble at the rod, all are fearful of death. Drawing the parallel to yourself, neither kill nor get others to kill' (Dhp.129), which is a version of the Golden Rule, an ethic of reciprocity to treat others as one wants to be treated, which naturally flows from *ahiṃsā*, as nobody would want others to act in ill-intent towards them. It also lists severe karmic results for 'those who do harm with weapons to those who are unarmed and harmless' (Dhp.137–140).

As a commander in conflict, the aim should not be to cause harm, but to quickly end the hostilities, and if this can be achieved with minimum suffering caused, it is beneficial for all parties. This is reflected in the *Milinda Pañha*:

> Just, Nâgasena, as the strong man who, when he enters into a terrible battle, is able the most quickly to get hold of his enemies' heads under his armpit, and dragging them along to bring them prisoners to his lord, that is the champion who is regarded, in the world, as the ablest hero – just as that surgeon who is able the most quickly to extract the dart, and allay the disease, is considered the most clever. (Mp. PTS 293)

Skilfulness in battle means to quickly get over the disease without causing superfluous harm.[53]

In the worst-case scenario of being burdened with the duty to take others' lives under someone else's command, the soldier's intention cannot merely be determined by seeing an act and its outcome. An observation of two people engaging in a fight with weapons cannot gauge their underlying intentions. In one of the major Mahāyāna sutras, the *Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*, the Buddha elaborates:

> Furthermore, good man, it is like two people fighting with a sword or lance. Suppose one using a blade to defend himself wounds the other, causing him to bleed and death results. But if he had no intention to kill, the karmic consequences will be light, not heavy. For one who comes to the Buddha with no intention of killing, even if that person were to cause the Buddha to bleed, the karmic effect would also be light, not heavy. (Mm.9.6)

The renowned Sri Lankan Buddhist monk and scholar Venerable K. Sri Dhammananda relates this to the wider military:

> Buddhists should not be the aggressors even in protecting their religion or anything else. They must try their best to avoid any kind of violent act. Sometimes they may be forced to go to war by others who do not respect the concept of the brotherhood of humans as taught by the Buddha. They may be called upon to defend their country from external aggression, and as long as they have not renounced the worldly life, they are duty-bound to join in the struggle for peace and freedom. Under these circumstances, they cannot be blamed for becoming soldiers or being involved in defence. . . .
>
> It is natural and every living being struggles and attacks others for self-protection but the karmic effect of the aggression depends on their mental attitude. During the struggle to protect himself, if a man happens to kill his opponent although he had no intention to kill, then he does not create bad karma resulting from that death. On the other hand, if he kills another person under any circumstances with the intention to kill, then he is not free from the karmic reaction; he has to face the consequences. (Dhammananda 2002, 383–390)

The ethics of the use of lethal force is highly complex. In the Mahāyāna tradition one finds the concept of *upāya-kauśalya* ('skilful in means') being applied to situations involving the intentional use of lethal force. *Upāya-kauśalya* expresses the notion of using expedient methods that fit different people and situations in order to minimise suffering and ideally prevent bad karma.

One of the most elaborate discourses related to warfare is found in the (early Mahāyāna) *Ārya-Satyakaparivarta* (*Noble Discourse of the Truth-teller*), which teaches that, for kings, compassion requires them to implement appropriate measures to protect their people. As Jenkins (2010) and Sugiki (2020) lay out, the text includes discourses on policies to avoid war and on how to confront opposing forces without resorting to killing. However, if all attempts to prevent armed confrontation fail, then the king should engage in warfare with three thoughts in his mind: that he protects his people, defeats the enemy and captures the enemy forces alive.

> Even if the king, [who] is skillful in means and [who] has a thorough knowledge of warfare, kills or wounds the [warriors of the] foreign army, by that, for the king, there is little fault, there is little vice, and receiving the [karmic] consequence [of it] also becomes uncertain. Why is this? [It is] because in this way he has performed that task with compassion and never abandoning in mind. As he has performed that task by completely abandoning himself and [his] wealth for the sake of thorough protection of the people and [for the sake of his] son, wife, and clan, immeasurable merit will also grow. (Sugiki 2020, 14)

Thus, kings do not acquire the same karmic repercussions as a killer, when they engage in war out of compassion towards their subjects and after all other avenues have been exhausted. The *Ārya-Satyakaparivarta* limits permissible forms of warfare and sets strict conditions for taking life in battle. It also talks about the need for humane treatment of prisoners of war as well as

protection of infrastructure and the natural environment. And even at times of war there are opportunities to accumulate merit. However, there is no indication that warfare itself brings merit here, but rather the compassionate intention to limit harm in the course of war, both to one's own people and to one's opponents.

Another well-known example for the taking of life as 'skilful in means' is found in the *Upāya-kauśalya Sūtra*,[54] where in the absence of any other karmically less adverse options, the captain of a ship (the Buddha's past rebirth as a Bodhisattva) decides to kill a robber to prevent him from accruing the negative karmic effects of killing a group of merchants. If the captain had warned the traders, they instead would have killed the robber and accrued the negative karma. The captain willingly took on the karmic implications of taking human life, possibly resulting in many rebirths in hell, in order to prevent others from incurring even worse karma, thereby saving both the robber and the merchants – and, through self-sacrifice and compassionate intention, ultimately himself.

This willingness to take on bad karma to prevent others from doing so is also demonstrated by the first Buddhist Chaplain in the US Air Force, Brett Campbell:

> I won't deny support to anybody, even if that person's actions are causing suffering. . . . I support the Air Force mission by helping Airmen stay spiritually resilient. If that means that I am bringing negative karma my way, so be it, I will gladly accept that karmic debt for the opportunity to help these Airmen stay spiritually and psychologically healthy. (cited in Thieme 2017)

Buddhist teachings illustrate difficult moral choices, where one has to weigh the serious karmic consequences of non-action, against actions in violation of the five precepts. Candrakīrti, a famous seventh-century scholar of the Madhyamaka school, cites the example of a hunter's two sons arguing at the edge of a precipice. When one of the two grabs the other, intent to thrust both of them over the cliff, the father is left with the only option to shoot one son with an arrow to be able to save at least one of the two (Jenkins 2011, 314). In this example non-action would lead to comparatively more harm than taking action resulting in injury, a case where proportionality and the sum total of harm are at the centre, showing once more that one can intentionally cause physical injury to prevent even greater harm to arise without engaging in *hiṃsā*. Another comparison that is frequently made is life-saving, but conceivably lethal, surgery.

Because *ahiṃsā* is based on intention, it leaves space for the skilful use of strong physical force. Crucially, acting in accordance with *ahiṃsā* can sometimes require using strong force, while restraint from applying force can sometimes be harmful. One does not find a licence to kill here; quite the contrary, taking any life with any hint of unwholesome intent is inherently

bad. It requires utmost skilfulness to use potentially lethal force without generating harmful mental attitudes. Being aware of potentially bad karmic consequences whenever transgressing the precepts is important, particularly the cardinal one not to take life. This awareness is a means by itself, causing one to be heedful and act cautiously. Self-sacrifice, willingly taking on bad karma for protecting others, is a wholesome mitigating factor. Yet the karmic implications of using lethal force are difficult to predict, so it is only ever warranted after all other alternatives are exhausted.

Similarly, during armed conflict IHL strikes a balance between military necessity and humanitarian exigencies. Its principle of military necessity permits 'only that degree and kind of force required to achieve the legitimate purpose of a conflict, i.e. the complete or partial submission of the enemy at the earliest possible moment with the minimum expenditure of life and resources' (ICRC 2014, 6). From this balance directly flows the prohibition of superfluous injury and unnecessary suffering.

IHL's principle of distinction requires that the parties to an armed conflict distinguish at all times between civilian and military targets and that attacks may only be directed at military objectives. Furthermore, IHL requires that all feasible precautions must be taken to avoid civilian casualties and damage to civilian objects (ICRC 2014, 48). Causing deliberate or indiscriminate harm to civilians and the natural environment would certainly be in violation of *ahiṃsā* as well.

IHL's principle of proportionality, a corollary to the principle of distinction, dictates that incidental harm caused by military action must not be excessive in relation to the concrete military advantage anticipated (ICRC 2014, 47). The proportionality principle is about weighing competing considerations and taking a difficult choice based on a moral judgement, where the law does not provide clear and direct guidance. Under the extraordinary conditions in war the legitimacy of killing is often taken for granted, which makes it of utmost importance to have a moral compass. Buddhism has much to say about taking difficult moral decisions, and through its rich principles it provides many guiding beacons to combatants.

The *Makasa* ('Mosquito') *Jātaka* offers good examples for the need to use force wisely and proportionally. There the Bodhisattva comes across a village of wounded men and on enquiry learns that bugged by mosquitos, the villagers had decided to go to war with them using bows and arrows, only to end up shooting each other. He then recounts a similar story where a carpenter's son, in order to help his father drive away a mosquito, employs an axe with the intention to hit it, but splits his father's head instead. 'Better than such a friend is an enemy with sense, whom fear of men's vengeance will deter from killing a man' (Jat.44). Both are examples of senselessly using weapons disproportional to the intended outcome. Disregarding intentions,

the treacherous nature of strong physical force also requires restraint by wisdom and skill.

Buddhism and military training

Training lies at the heart of both Buddhism and IHL. Both consider continuous training to be a necessity for practical implementation. From a Buddhist perspective, an accumulation of karmic imprints ends up forming behaviours and reactions. Continuous training strengthens one's own capacity to work in even the most chaotic situations, which refers to chaotic external environments as well as the chaos in one's own head. Monastic training itself can be seen as an example of taking forceful action for a wholesome purpose: '*Chinda sotaṃ parakkamma, kāme panuda* – Exert yourself and cut off the stream of craving, drive away sense desires' (Dhp.383).

In a message of gratitude for having been invited to the 2009 Armed Forces Buddhist Community Conference in the UK, His Holiness the Dalai Lama outlines parallels between soldiers and monks:

> I have always admired those who are prepared to act in the defence of others for their courage and determination. In fact, it may surprise you to know that I think that monks and soldiers, sailors and airmen have more in common than at first meets the eye. Strict discipline is important to us all, we all wear a uniform and we rely on the companionship and support of our comrades.
>
> Although the public may think that physical strength is what is most important, I believe that what makes a good soldier, sailor or airman, just as what makes a good monk, is inner strength. And inner strength depends on having a firm positive motivation. The difference lies in whether ultimately you want to ensure others' wellbeing or whether you wantonly wish to do them harm.
>
> Naturally, there are some times when we need to take what on the surface appears to be harsh or tough action, but if our motivation is good our action is actually non-violent in nature. On the other hand if we use sweet words and gestures to deceive, exploit and take advantage of others, our conduct may appear agreeable, while we are actually engaged in quite unacceptable violence. (Dalai Lama 2010)

Monks, like soldiers, need continuous training and strict discipline. Both emphasise patiently enduring difficult situations and not giving way to surges of emotion. A simile in the *Milinda Pañha* illustrates:

> How do they show the manifold restraints of the holy life? Just, O king, as a coward, when he has gone to a battle and is surrounded by the forces of the enemy on all sides, will turn back and take flight for fear of his life; so too, whoever are unrestrained, shameless, impatient and fickle, when they renounce the world they are unable to carry out the manifold precepts and revert to the lower state. (Mp. PTS 251)

Monks need self-discipline[55] for overcoming greed, hatred and delusion, and cultivating their opposites. In the *Dhammapada* one finds this simile: 'As an elephant in the battlefield withstands the arrows shot from a bow, even so will I endure abuse; truly, most people are undisciplined' (Dhp.320). In the military, discipline is often regarded to be the most important attribute. Considered to be foundational, it improves self-control, helps conquer fear and promotes integrity, which all ultimately enhance the protection of those not directly participating in the hostilities.

Military training regimes find many resources in Buddhism, such as in its diverse range of meditation techniques. Capt. Somya Malasri, Buddhist chaplain in the US Army, elucidates: 'I think the Soldiers have stress in their minds, so I can help them with meditation. I can teach them how to meditate and how to get rid of stress, anger or anxiety' (cited in Bosco 2014, 834). Research indeed shows that meditative training is highly effective in lowering aggression levels and reducing the number of disciplinary violations in the military.[56]

In Buddhism meditation is an instrument for achieving positive change. Different Buddhist schools of teaching focus on different meditation techniques. For example, some of the earliest texts focus on *ānāpānasati* (mindfulness of breathing), which is still a core meditation practice in Theravāda, Tiāntāi and Chán (Zen/Seon/Thiền) traditions. Different forms of meditation techniques aim at developing different characteristics, such as *sati* (mindfulness), *samādhi* (concentration), *samatha* (calming the mind) and *vipassanā* (gaining insight). Importantly, all forms are preceded by and combined with practices such as moral restraint and right effort, which aid in developing wholesome states of mind.[57]

Mindfulness constitutes an essential part of Buddhist practice. It is the first factor of the Seven Factors of Awakening, and 'right mindfulness' is the seventh element of the Noble Eightfold Path. Broadly speaking, mindfulness practice involves the process of developing the skill of bringing one's attention to whatever is happening in the present moment. In Buddhism there is a direct connection between the practice of mindfulness and the cultivation of morality. Conscious attention is essential for combatting the natural tendency to act mindlessly, thus enabling one to take compassionate action instead.

Certainly, mental insight into oneself and the world are essential for soldiers who must minimise the infliction of harm and prevent IHL violations, while attaining their military objectives in high-stress combat situations. Mindfulness practice also builds up mental resilience in combatants, offering a preventive strategy against mental health problems. Just as physical exercise produces changes in the physique, mental exercises allow the mind to become 'fitter' and better cope with complex challenges.

Kaji Sherpa, a former Gurkha officer with the British Armed Forces, cites his participation in the delicate United Nations peacekeeping mission in East Timor in 1999, where his training in Buddhist mindfulness allowed him a better understanding and calmer mind in face of a very volatile situation on the ground. He explains, 'In Tibetan Buddhism during times of conflict it is not losing our country what we fear most. What we fear even more is losing our compassion' (ICRC 2019). This need for compassion is also attested by a Buddhist US Air Force Cadet:

> we realize that war is certainly a thing that we don't want to have to do, but sometimes it is absolutely necessary, and it requires compassion for your country, your family, the people that you are protecting. I think Buddhism definitely has a place there … (Bosco 2014, 843)

When Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh was asked whether there are 'times when it is right to use violence in order to protect yourself, or your family, or nation', he explained: 'If you see someone who is trying to shoot, to destroy, you have to do your best in order to prevent him or her to do so. You must. But you must do it out of your compassion, of your willingness to protect, and not out of anger. That is the key.' The interviewer, following up: 'Some see a conflict between what is necessary for a police officer to do, which is violent sometimes – to enforce the law, on the one hand – and your teachings on the other'. In reply: 'Well, you carry a gun, but it's perfectly possible to carry a gun with a lot of compassion inside. You carry a gun to say, "You should not do that. If you do that, you may get into trouble." But that is a message that can go together with compassion' (PBS 2003).

From a Buddhist perspective, compassion is something that can be cultivated and one finds various practices aimed at developing one's virtues. For example, there are the *brahmavihāra*s, four Buddhist virtues and the meditation practices that cultivate them: loving-kindness, compassion, empathetic joy and equanimity. When preaching to soldiers, monks often emphasise teachings of compassion to help them minimise the negative karma resulting from their military service. As negative states of mind are harmful to oneself, compassion offers combatants a strong form of protection from the surge of bad emotions amidst the horrors of war. And even in the course of war, compassionate intentions present soldiers the opportunity to generate merit.

Finding increasing application in the military as well, traditional forms of martial arts[58] are another area where there is a confluence between Buddhism and fighting. There is a notable tendency to either amplify and embellish the connection between Buddhism and martial arts, or, conversely, to see their many congruences as merely incidental or anecdotal, when indeed it is a natural relationship that connects them at the most fundamental level. Warriors who practised martial arts took an acute interest in the relevance of their religion and how to apply it to their work. They required

a sense of purpose, a moral code and, prepared to die in battle in service of their lord, a way to face death. Inevitably, the realms of Buddhism, martial arts and combat became intimately intertwined.

Martial arts essentially are the art of learning to control and restrain strong physical force. Through continuous training one develops the ability to use sophisticated techniques to avoid harm, using only the amount of physical force needed to refuse the aggression that one is being offered. Research studies[59] consistently show that, like meditation, martial arts help practitioners to better gain a sense of control over both the situational environment and themselves, leading to fewer negative emotional responses and an overall reduction in violent behaviour.

There is also a further dimension to this confluence of Buddhism and martial arts. When meditating, simultaneously maintaining an ideal physical posture, controlling one's thoughts and breath for extended periods of time, not being distracted by bodily discomfort, requires both physical and mental fortitude.[60] Martial arts training establishes a solid foundation for meditation practice and furthers practice discipline. Both Buddhism's Eightfold Path and traditional martial arts are conduct- and discipline-oriented. Daily practice and perennial repetition aim to retrain the mind. Battling the enemy within, soaking the intense training into one's bones, also leads to a direct experiential realisation of the interconnectedness of all life and in that fosters compassion for others.

A natural response to attack is fear, with aggression often following in its wake, clouding one's ability to effectively respond. When one's thoughts attach to fear, one oftentimes responds with unnecessary force, inflicting greater harm to the attacker than is ethically or legally justifiable. By overcoming attachment and by developing confidence in the ability to defend oneself, one learns to better control one's fear and other mental dispositions. A stable, calm mind present in the moment, overcoming all distractions, is of paramount importance in the heat of battle. Being able not to act upon negative impulses gives one the possibility to act with wholesome intent.

Martial arts practices, when combined with their traditional emphasis on character-building principles such as discipline, humility and respect, can indeed also benefit the military. IHL's principle of honour demands a degree of fairness and mutual respect between adversaries as fellow warriors, members of a common profession that fights not out of personal enmity but out of a sense of duty. Honour has been vital to the development of IHL, drawing from the warrior codes of many cultures and time periods (US Department of Defense 2016, 65–66). Beyond the confines of the law, the realm of ethics and religion taps into people's identities and underlying motivations in a way that IHL often cannot. There is an important place for religious traditions, such as Buddhism, to further the ethical values that underpin IHL.

By highlighting as well as strengthening the underlying ethics, combatants can connect with IHL in a more meaningful way than only considering them as abstract legal demands externally imposed on them. This is also in line with the findings of the ICRC study 'Roots of Restraint in War'.[61] Ethical values play a strong complementary role to the law, discouraging unwanted behaviour not only because it is 'against the rules' but also because it is 'against who we are'.

During the earlier mentioned conference on the 'Interface Between Buddhism and IHL' (ICRC 2019), serving and retired military personnel recounted how they applied IHL principles and Buddhist teachings in their profession. Buddhist ethics and military values were not perceived as being in conflict by them, but rather seen as being complementary. Buddhism emphasises training and the cultivation of virtues, from which wholesome acts then take shape. Arguably, Buddhist soldiers have karmic incentives to become trained in both IHL and in the ethical teachings of their religion. In a profession entrusted with taking decisions over life and death, it is immensely important to maintain forces that are disciplined, virtuous and skilled – skilful both in the arts of their vocation and in the wholesomeness of their intentions.

Conclusion

Buddhism never wavers in upholding its high ethical principles, such as *ahiṃsā*, but it recognises the need to continuously adapt to the conditions of the real world. Contrary to what is often assumed from the outside, in canonical scriptures the concept of *ahiṃsā* was never understood to stand in contradiction to maintaining armed forces and protecting what is good – if necessary, by military means. The use of lethal force for wholesome purposes was at no time completely ruled out. War is assumed to be unavoidable, arising out of human failings in our imperfection-marred *saṃsāra*. A disciplined, virtuous and skilled army is seen as necessary for protection, their very existence often being the reason that conflict is avoided and without which the people would live in fear, resulting in more suffering to arise.

What stands out in the highly pragmatic perspective of Buddhism, where the ethical quality of conduct is determined by its contribution towards reducing suffering, is the supreme importance of intention, which lies at the very root of karma. Because it focuses on volition, *ahiṃsā* leaves room for military action based on wholesome objectives. To minimise suffering, one must restrain evil. In the rare instances where it cannot be avoided, this can even result in armed conflict. Because the use of military force (like the outcome of wars) is so unpredictable, however, it must only be applied absent other less harmful options and in a protective posture.

This is no Buddhist justification for violence, but to the contrary: while violence implies intention to cause harm, Buddhism demands that force is restrained by purely wholesome intentions aimed at minimising overall harm, an utmost high ethical requirement. This restraint is even extended to thought and speech, the precursors before aggressive physical actions can ensue. Due to the cyclical nature of karma where violence begets violence and where one's misconduct in war would create conditions for future conflict to arise, this ultimately appeals to everyone's self-interest.

There is no fundamental contradiction between adhering to *ahiṃsā* and working in the military. As in other professions, what is most important is how one goes about one's work and what intentions one has. In the teachings one finds a recognition of the extraordinary circumstances prevalent in war and of the State's as well as the soldier's duty to protect. As a soldier in combat, one may have to transgress the cardinal precept not to take life, potentially impeding one's progress on the path. It takes much heedfulness to ensure that one's intentions are in no way tainted by greed, hatred or delusion.

Buddhist soldiers not only need to guard themselves against harmful thought, word and deed, they also need to practise the antidotes, i.e. generosity, loving-kindness and wisdom, and thus take meritorious actions. Just like monks, they need to be well trained. Discipline, self-control, patience, endurance, mental insight, skilfulness – all these factors contribute to reducing suffering in armed conflict situations. Imperatively, this applies to all levels of the military and extends to political decision makers.

Buddhism indeed provides us an invaluable resource for contemplating warfare in the present age. Its scripture supplies a fount of stratagems on how to avoid war, but military deployment remains as a last resort. By resorting to narrative, Buddhist ethical teachings are capable of maintaining tensions and ambiguities, challenging the listeners to immerse themselves in various scenarios and experience the complex choices one must confront.

Although Buddhism is already widely applied in the contexts of conflict prevention and resolution, it also offers many teachings relevant to conduct in war. It offers profound inspiration to the 'law of armed conflict', IHL, for advancing its humanitarian aspirations. Its teachings engage with many IHL-relevant topics and show many commonalities in spirit. Both Buddhism and IHL accept the reality of conflict and try to find a path aimed at reducing suffering.

Whilst there is arguably wide common ground, their differences also prove to be insightful. Buddhist principles apply at all times evenly and it is another type of 'war' that takes centre stage here, the war against the evil roots in oneself, directed at the disarmament of the mind. From a Buddhist viewpoint the legal rules need to be complemented by strong ethical restraint. While the intention behind an act is of relevance in IHL, unwholesome mental states, such as vengeance, do not play a direct role in its compliance. For

IHL to work effectively in this environment, it needs continuous cultivation of its underlying ethics.

Those who ignore the reality of conflicts, denounce the military and deny Buddhists their legitimate right to protect themselves disengage themselves from the important dialogue on how Buddhist teachings can contribute to reducing suffering in armed conflict. Ostracising or spiritually condemning soldiers is also not conducive to developing virtuous as well as skilled soldiers, thus negatively impacting conduct. As we have shown, a 'Buddhist soldier' is a paradox, not a contradiction, difficult to understand because on their surface Buddhism and the military appear to reflect conflicting characteristics – yet this paradox reveals to us a hidden truth.

Notes

1. Buddhism encompasses a variety of traditions, beliefs and spiritual practices. This diversity is partly reflected by the different use of scriptures as well as the divergent interpretations of Buddhist traditions according to different lineages or persuasions. While this article focuses on common principles and canonical texts, it also appreciates this complex cultural, historical and philosophical diversity.
2. See Asanga Tilakaratne in this volume.
3. 'Intention' widely overlaps with the concept of 'motivation'. Both terms refer to mental forces behind goal-directed behaviour and are often used interchangeably. This differs from their very narrow legal definitions, which creates a false dichotomy (as is shown in the section on 'IHL and Buddhist law'). Motivation, however, is a broader concept that is applied in relation to wider background and underlying reasons. Greed and hatred, for example, are often cited as motivations, but would not be used when referring to intentions.
4. See Peter Harvey in this volume.
5. Although there can be cases of culpable carelessness.
6. Cetanā (Sanskrit, Pali) is commonly translated as 'intention', 'motivation', 'volition', 'purpose', 'directionality of mind' or 'that which drives one to act', which all are interrelated concepts. The translation used throughout this article is 'intention', which is a suitable term reflecting that the cognitive and purposive aspects of the mind are intertwined and closely interact.
7. For more detailed discussions on this subject, see the work of Prof. Stephen Jenkins – for example, Jenkins (2011).
8. This definition is also consistent with other major dictionaries, such as Merriam-Webster: 'the use of physical force so as to injure, abuse, damage, or destroy' (Merriam-Webster 2021).
9. In a valiant effort to stay in the English language HH the Dalai Lama delineates the Buddhist use of the English word 'violence': 'Violence–Nonviolence demarcation [is] much related to motivation. Any action, even some wrathful action, verbal as well as physical action, motivated by compassion, sense of concern of others' well-being, essentially that is non-violence. … So, physical level, violence, but that sort of violence is permissible' (Dalai Lama 2009).
10. See, for example, the *Manu-smṛti*: 'People think that agriculture is something wholesome. Yet it is an occupation condemned by good people; the plough

with an iron tip lacerates the ground as well as creatures living in it' (Olivelle 2004, 212).

11. In Jainism one finds a more critical perspective on agriculture.
12. See, for example, Frydenlund (2017).
13. See, for example, Gethin (2007, 73–74).
14. For example, Schmithausen (1999, 53) describes this as an almost schizophrenic 'compartmentalisation of values', where Buddhists say one thing and do another.
15. See P. D. Premasiri in this volume.
16. For example: 'Those who administer torture and maiming are called kings' (Vin. III.46–47).
17. See, for example: Dn.17, 26; An.7.62; and Sn.55.1.
18. We find much evidence, though, that the use of one's armed forces is not always the best way to defend the country against invaders and that when one can lead by virtue and prevent bloodshed one should always do so – such as in the *Seyya Jātaka* (Jat.282) and *Mahāsīlava Jātaka* (Jat.51).
19. See Christina Kilby in this volume.
20. Mahākaccāna (Sanskrit: Mahākātyāyana) is one of the Buddha's ten principal disciples.
21. See Asanga Tilakaratne in this volume.
22. Even the much-quoted *Kakacūpama Sutta (The Simile of the Saw)* does not preclude monks from skilful self-defence: 'Monks, even if bandits were to carve you up savagely, limb by limb, with a two-handled saw, he among you who let his heart get angered even at that would not be doing my bidding. Even then you should train yourselves: "Our minds will be unaffected and we will say no evil words. We will remain sympathetic, with a mind of goodwill, and with no inner hate. We will keep pervading these people with an awareness imbued with goodwill and, beginning with them, we will keep pervading the all-encompassing world with an awareness imbued with goodwill – abundant, enlarged, immeasurable, free from hostility, free from ill will." That's how you should train yourselves' (Mn.21; PTS Pali I.129).
23. '[M]otive is ulterior intention – the intention with which an intentional act is done. Intention, when distinguished from motive, relates to the means, motive to the end; yet the end may be the means to another end, and the word "intention" is appropriate to such medial end. Much of what men do involves a chain of intention' (Williams 1961, 48).
24. The *Milinda Pañha*, according to the Burmese Pali Canon the eighteenth book of the *Khuddaka Nikāya*, provides many examples for the use of military imagery when conveying important spiritual messages.
25. Kautilya in his *Arthaśāstra*, ancient India's seminal treatise on statecraft, economics and military affairs, repeatedly affirms the supreme military importance of elephants. For instance, 'A king's victory is principally dependent on elephants. For elephants, with their huge-sized bodies and being capable of life-destroying acts, can annihilate an enemy's soldiers, battle formations, forts, and camps' (As.2.2.13–14).
26. For example, in the Ajanta frescoes (Cave 17) one can see three archers on top of the elephants.
27. The elephant's power to clear anything in its path is also reflected in the Hindu traditions where one finds the elephant-headed Ganeśa as the remover of obstacles (Vighneśvara).

28. In early Vedic times, Indra is described as riding a chariot, but in the later Vedic period he acquires Airāvata as his *vahana* ('that which carries, that which pulls'). Notably, the decline of the chariot in warfare, rapidly being replaced by the elephant corps as the elite unit of the armed forces, and also the increased prestige of riding one's mount (as a king on his elephant), is mirrored in Dharmic symbolism by deities acquiring their individual *vahana* (Trautmann 2015, 100).
29. To the present day, Southeast Asian Theravāda States still maintain the tradition to identify white elephants, either albino or particularly fair-skinned, as symbols of power and good fortune for the State.
30. Such as safeguarding the integrity of one's country's territory and population.
31. In 2007, the First Armed Forces Buddhist Conference was organised in the UK at Amport House, the Tri-service Armed Forces Chaplaincy Centre.
32. A well-known UK-born monk trained in the Thai Forest Tradition and the abbot of Bodhinyana Monastery in Australia.
33. Incidentally, these five are also covered in two Jain canonical texts, where Mahāvīra lays out 15 types of prohibited trading commodities (Jaini 1979, 172).
34. According to the *Milinda Pañha* weapons are not allowed to be gifted either: 'There are ten sorts of gifts, Nâgasena, in the world that are commonly disapproved of as gifts. And what are the ten? Strong drink, Nâgasena, and festivals in high places, and women, and buffaloes, and suggestive painting, and weapons, and poison, and chains, and fowls, and swine, and false weights and measures' (Mp. PTS 278–279).
35. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries brought the emergence of entirely new forms of highly destructive weapons. In a series of texts analysed by Venturi (2014), the 13th Dalai Lama uses a range of Buddhist tenets to express his conviction that the development of modern weapons and military forces are essential in the protection of the State.
36. See, for example, Soka Gakkai's longstanding work promoting nuclear disarmament (more on this in Daiki Kinoshita's article in this volume). The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement started its call for a ban on nuclear weapons in 1945.
37. This is the formulation of the Martens Clause used in Article 1(2) of Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions of 1949.
38. One might hope that minimising harm would also be the central objective in arms development.
39. See, for example, Bosco (2014) and Kent (2008).
40. In four discourses from the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, which are each called *Yodhājīva Sutta* (An.3.133, 4.181, 5.75, 5.76), the Buddha lays out desirable traits found in soldiers that also monks should emulate: 'Bhikkus(Monks), possessing four factors, a warrior is worthy of a king, an accessory of a king, and reckoned a factor of kingship. What four? Here, a soldier is skilled in places, a long-distance shooter, a sharp-shooter, and one who splits a great body. Possessing these four factors, a soldier is worthy of a king, an accessory of a king, and reckoned a factor of kingship' (An.5.75). He compares the victorious monk to a victorious soldier, 'who can handle the cloud of dust, the top of the enemy's banner, the tumult, and hand-to-hand combat' (An.5.75) and 'who taking his sword and shield, strapping on his bow and quiver – goes down into the thick of battle' (An.5.76).
41. Cf. Peter Harvey in this volume.

42. 'Now there is the person who has killed living beings here … has had wrong view. And on the dissolution of the body, after death, he reappears in a happy destination, in the heavenly world. But (perhaps) the good kamma producing his happiness was done by him earlier, or the good kamma producing his happiness was done by him later, or right view was undertaken and completed by him at the time of his death' (Mn.136; PTS.III.214).
43. 'Elephant troops and chariotmen, guard royal, infantry – I took no toll of daily dole, but paid them all their fee' (Jat.462).
44. 'Then the Great Being said, "O king, if you wish to reach the world of the gods (angels) and enjoy divine happiness there, you must practise these ten duties: … fulfill your duty, warrior king, … to your soldiers with their different arms"' (Jat.540).
45. For examples of how certain provisions could apply equally to one's own troops as to the enemy, see Nicholson (2015) and Vishakha Wijenayake in this volume.
46. From 4 to 6 September 2019, approximately 120 participants from around the world gathered in Dambulla, Sri Lanka, for a conference on 'Reducing Suffering During Armed Conflict: The Interface Between Buddhism and International Humanitarian Law (IHL)'. The conference was organised by the ICRC in collaboration with a number of universities and organisations, including Buddhist scholars, monks, legal experts and military personnel from the Theravāda, Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna traditions.
47. A recognition of this is reflected by the fact that both Buddhist leaders and soldiers who have been involved in wars often attempt to counteract negative karmic effects by engaging in compensatory acts of merit, such as alms giving or the building of pagodas.
48. See Vin.III.53 and 75, and Harvey (1999, 280).
49. See, for example, the account of General Sīha crushing Ajātaśatru's forces in Wu (2019).
50. Also in the rigorous *ahiṃsā* tradition of the Jains one finds examples of warriors who had taken enemy lives in battle and attained heaven afterwards, in one case partly due to the 'resolve not to be the first to strike but to fight only in self-defence' (Wu 2015, 106).
51. See *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya* IV.72c–d: La Vallée Poussin (1923–1931 and Zhang (2009).
52. For an exploration of siege warfare as found in the *Jātaka*s see Nishara Mendis in this volume.
53. The comparison to surgeons is also made in the modern military term 'surgical strike', which denotes military attacks intended to damage legitimate military targets with no or minimal collateral damage.
54. See, for example, Tatz (1994, 73–76).
55. This is also reflected by the name of the monastic regulations, the *Vinaya* ('Discipline').
56. For more on research regarding the use of meditation in military training see Charya Samarakoon in this volume.
57. For more on the role of Buddhist ethics in meditation and on the use of Koan practice in military environments see Noel Trew in this volume.
58. 'Martial arts' is a broad term covering a variety of codified traditions that originated as methods of combat and incorporate certain mental or spiritual qualities. For more on the historical congruences between Buddhism and martial arts see Bartles-Smith et al. (2021).

59. See, for example, Harwood, Lavidor and Rassovsky (2017).
60. See, for example, Mann (2012).
61. 'An exclusive focus on the law is not as effective at influencing behaviour as a combination of the law and the values underpinning it' (Terry and McQuinn 2018, 9).

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Abbreviations

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As *Arthaśāstra*. *The Kauṭilīya Arthaśāstra*. 3 parts. R. P. Kangle, Bombay: University of Bombay, 1965–1972.

Dhp *Dhammapada*. *The Dhammapada: A Translation*. Tr. Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 1997. Also: *The Dhammapada: The Buddha's Path of Wisdom*. Translated from the Pali by Acharya Buddharakkhita with an introduction by Bhikkhu Bodhi, 1996. https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/dhp/index.html

Dhp-a *Dhammapada-aṭṭhakathā*. *Buddhist Legends*. 3 vols. Tr. E. W. Burlingame, Harvard Oriental Series, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1921.

Dn *Dīgha Nikāya*. *Long Discourses of the Buddha*. Tr. M. Walshe, 2nd revised edition, Boston: Wisdom, 1996.

Eka Edicts of King Ashoka. *The Edicts of King Asoka*. An English rendering by Ven. S. Dhammika. https://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/dhammika/wheel386.html

Jat *Jātaka*. *The Jātaka or Stories of the Buddha's Former Births*. 6 vols. Translated by various hands under E. B. Cowell, London: Pali Text Society, 1895–1907.

Mn *Majjhima Nikāya*. *The Middle Discourses*. Tr. Bhikkhu Sujato, SuttaCentral, 2018: https://suttacentral.net/mn. Also: *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Majjhima Nikaya*. Ñāṇamoli Bhikkhu and Bhikkhu Bodhi, Somerville: Wisdom, 1995.

Mm *Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*. *The Mahayana Mahaparinirvana Sutra*. Translated into English by K. Yamamoto, Taisho Tripitaka Vol. 12: 374, 1973. Also: Yamamoto, K., and T. Page. 2007. *The Mahayana Mahaparinirvana Sutra*. Tr. K. Yamamoto. Edited and revised by T. Page. http://lirs.ru/do/Mahaparinirvana_Sutra,Yamamoto,Page,2007.pdf

Mp *Milinda Pañha*. *The Debate of King Milinda*. Edited by Bhikkhu Pesala, published by Motilal Banarsidass in 1991, revised 1998, Inward Path: Penang, 2001. Online PDF edition updated in August 2021. http://www.aimwell.org/milinda.html. Also: tr. I. B. Horner, *Milinda's Questions*, 2 vols, London, Pali Text Society, 1969. Also: tr. T. W. Rhys Davids, The Questions of King Milinda, 2 vols. Sacred Books of the East, 1890 and 1894. https://www.sacred-texts.com/bud/milinda.htm

PTS Pali Text Society.

Thag *Theragāthā* (eighth book of the *Khuddaka Nikāya*). *The Verses of the Arahant Talaputa Thera*. Translated from the Pali with some reflections by Bhikkhu Khantipalo, Kandy, BPS, 1996.

Rpr *Rājaparikathā-ratnamālā*. *Nagarjuna: Ratnavali*. G. Tucci, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, 1934, pp. 307–325; 1936, pp. 237–252, 423–435.

Sn *Saṃyutta Nikāya*. *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya*. Bhikkhu Bodhi, Boston: Wisdom, 2000.

Snp *Sutta Nipāta* (sutta collection in the *Khuddaka Nikāya*). *Sutta-Nipata (Sacred Books of the East)*. V. Fausböll, Oxford: Clarendon, 1881. Tr. K. R. Norman, *The Group of Discourses*, London, PTS, 1984. Also: tr. K. R. Norman, *The Group of Discourses* Vol.II, London, PTS, 1992, revised translation with introduction and notes.

Vin *Vinaya Piṭaka*. *The Book of the Discipline*. 6 vols. Tr. I. B. Horner, London: Pali Text Society, 1938–1966. Reference by volume and page number of Pali Text Society edition of the Pali text.

The authors take full responsibility for their use of translations based on the resources listed above. To find additional source material and translations for comparison, also see: *Wikipitaka – The Completing Tipitaka* (https://tipitaka.fandom.com/).

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