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BUDDHIST EMPIRICAL REALISM AND THE CONDUCT OF ARMED CONFLICT

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ABSTRACT

This article argues, through examples drawn mainly from the *Sutta Pitaka*, that the Pali texts are characterised by an empirical realism that avoids neither the grim realities of conflict nor the underlying forces that drive it. *Suttas* such as the *Cakkavatti-sihanāda Sutta* and the *Mahā-dukkha-kkhanda Sutta* are obvious examples of this realism. So also is the *Aṅgulimāla Sutta*, which deals with the phenomenon of a serial killer. Other texts examine causation, the *Mahā-nidāna Sutta*, for instance, which applies Buddhist causation theories to conflict and other forms of disruption in society. All focus on the almost intractable nature of conflict, when greed, hatred and delusion are embodied within human cultures and communities, producing diverse constructions of reality, fed by *papañca*, proliferating thought. I will argue that the empirical realism shown by texts such as the above can throw light on some of the bitter contexts of armed conflict that Buddhists are caught up in within the contemporary world, as combatants, humanitarian workers or members of civilian communities. They point to the difficulties that can arise, for instance, when humanitarian workers seek to enter zones of armed conflict to protect civilians and to encourage compliance with international humanitarian law (IHL) as set out in customary law and treaties such as the Geneva Conventions and its Additional Protocols. The strength of the diverse constructions of reality present can mean that IHL, and also the demands of compassion, are subordinated to other concerns. This article therefore argues that Buddhism offers not only tools for effective compliance with IHL within situations of armed conflict, but also an analytical model for understanding why some contexts of armed conflict are resistant to the principles embodied in this law. It also suggests a primary initial role for external authorities in guarding against IHL abuses, before armed services personnel can cultivate mindful inner discipline in line with Buddhist ideals.

KEYWORDS craving; constructed realities; mental corruptions; *papañca*; possessiveness; views; empathy; shame and concern for consequences; external and internal discipline; Punna; *Aṅgulimāla Sutta*; *Cakkavatti-sihanāda Sutta*; *Madhupinḍika Sutta*; *Mahā-dukkha-kkhanda Sutta*; *Mahā-nidāna Sutta*

Introduction

When I began to read the Pali texts well over 30 years ago, I was amazed at how realistic and down-to-earth the discourses attributed to the Buddha were. I was living in Sri Lanka at the time, doing postgraduate work in

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Buddhist studies, and was very concerned about the growing level of violence in both the north and the south of the country. The north was under the control of the Indian Peacekeeping Force (IPKF), who were fighting the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), and the south was experiencing the terrorism of the Janatha Vimukti Peramuna (JVP, People's Liberation Front), a militant Sinhala youth movement. As part of my master of arts in Buddhist studies, therefore, I wrote a dissertation on *Violence and Disruption in Society: A Study of the Early Buddhist Texts*, which was later published by the Buddhist Publication Society in Kandy (Harris 1994). This article draws on that early study but expands it considerably. The premises that undergird it are threefold:

- (1) That the conditioning contexts for the Buddha's teaching on the gaining of serenity and insight were the political and social realities of India at the Buddha's time, including the potential for war and conflict, and that these realities are represented in the Pali Canon with considerable empirical realism, namely with an emphasis on observation and experience rather than theory.¹
- (2) That Buddhism developed a radical and hard-hitting analysis not only of the causes of conflict but also of the dynamics at work within conflict.
- (3) That the empirical realism present in Early Buddhism has relevance for the study of the relationship between Buddhism and international humanitarian law (IHL) in that it can throw light on the bitter, seemingly intractable, contexts of armed conflict within which Buddhists (and others) are involved in the contemporary world as combatants, humanitarian workers or members of civilian communities. It can, for instance, illuminate the resistance that can arise when humanitarian workers seek to enter zones of conflict to protect and provide assistance to civilians and to encourage compliance with IHL as set out in customary law and treaties such as the Geneva Conventions and its Additional Protocols.

To develop these premises, therefore, I divide this article into four sections. First, I will give some indicative examples of what I have termed the 'empirical realism' found in the Pali texts on the topics of violence, war and conflict. Second, I will examine the doctrinal framework within which this realism is placed. Third, I will draw on a wider selection of texts to examine whether a Buddhist model can be developed for understanding why, within some contexts of armed conflict, humanitarian workers have experienced resistance, even from Buddhist stakeholders in the conflict, and why restraint in war can be lacking. Fourth, I reflect on what indicative texts in the Pali Canon say about the regulation of armed conflict, including the encouraging of

restraint in war and the managing of retaliation. Although my study is therefore predominantly textual, with an emphasis on the Pali Canon, my focus is the application of this data to contemporary situations of war and conflict.

The empirical realism in the Pali texts

One of the most graphic texts in the Pali Canon on the topic of conflict, war and torture is the *Mahā-dukkha-kkhandā Sutta* (The Greater Discourse on the Mass of Suffering) within the *Majjhima Nikāya* (M.I.83–90). The narrative trigger for the discourse is a question concerning the gratification and the dangers of sensual pleasures. In his answer, the Buddha examines the fear experienced by those attached to sensual pleasures for the security of their possessions, and the quarrels that arise between different groups of people for similar reasons – kings with kings, friends with friends. He then moves to this:

Again, with sensual pleasures as the cause . . . men take swords and shields and buckle on bows and quiver, and they charge into battle massed in double array with arrows and spears flying and swords flashing; and there they are wounded by arrows and spears, and their heads are cut off by swords, whereby they incur death or deadly suffering . . . (M.I.86)

Charges on the ‘bastions’ of a town are then described, with armies being ‘splashed with boiling liquids and crushed under heavy weights’, and then burglary, together with the tortures meted out by kings on thieves who are caught. The tortures are reminiscent of those used today by rogue governments and include the ‘fiery wreath’, ‘meat hooks’ and being ‘splashed with boiling oil’ or ‘impaled alive on stakes’ (M.I.87). I would argue that there is a graphic realism in this discourse that still speaks today, although contemporary methods of warfare are very different.

The *Mahā-nidāna Sutta* (The Great Discourse on Origination) in the *Dīgha Nikāya* (D.II.55–71) uses similar language to the *Mahā-dukkha-kkhandā Sutta*. The discourse offers a detailed account of *paṭicca-samuppāda* (Dependent Origination), offering examples of the conditioning factors that nurture the arising of craving (*taṇhā*), and its destructive results, including this:

And so, Ānanda [the Buddha’s closest monastic companion], feeling conditions craving, craving conditions seeking, seeking conditions acquisition, acquisition conditions decision-making, decision-making conditions lustful desire, lustful desire conditions attachment, attachment conditions appropriation, appropriation conditions avarice, avarice conditions guarding of possessions, and because of the guarding of possessions there arise the taking up of the stick and sword, quarrels, disputes, arguments, strife, abuse, lying and other evil unskilled states. (D.II.58–59)²

Within the context of war, 'possessions' can also include land, identity, status and power. The most hard-hitting discourse for me, however, in terms of its realism is the *Cakkavatti-sihanāda Sutta* (The Lion's Roar on the Turning of the Wheel). It contains a mythical story told by the Buddha to illustrate what can happen within a society when a 'wheel-turning' monarch, namely one who governs righteously according to dhammic principles, fails to honour one of his responsibilities, as 'he did not give property to the needy' (D.III.64). The immediate result of this monarch failing to give 'property' to the needy is that poverty increases. One of those affected by poverty then commits theft. The monarch, discovering that this person was forced to steal because of poverty, gives him property but does not then tackle the wider issue of deprivation within the population. Inevitably, the rumour then spreads that the king is giving property to those who steal. So stealing becomes rife. The king then makes a U-turn and decapitates one of the offenders. People copy this and begin to commit murder in order to gain what they need to live. As the violence increases, the lifespan of the community decreases and morality in general degenerates. In effect, the discourse describes a once-orderly society falling into violent anarchy, until it comes to the point when there is what the discourse terms a 'sword-period' of seven days, when people mistake each other for wild beasts and kill indiscriminately. At this point, some within the community realise that there could be an alternative to violence and retreat into the forest, again for seven days. When they return, they choose a morally positive path and help to end the killing.

In this discourse, humanitarian concerns hardly feature in the slide to anarchy. The monarch is shown to make a bungling attempt at a humanitarian approach but fails. It is only at the end, when some society members choose a different path, that humanitarian values return. Although this discourse is placed within a mythical framework, I would argue that it holds a fundamental and timeless insight, namely that conflict, war and societal collapse is often driven by failures of the state to enable all to live in food and property security. There is a realism in the myth that deeply moved me when I first read it. I could see parallels to it in the contemporary world, for instance in the genocides and the bitter internal wars that marked the twentieth century.

In the *Cakkavatti-sihanāda Sutta*, the cause of violence is state-induced poverty and deprivation. In the *Aṅgulimāla Sutta* (On Aṅgulimāla; M.II.97–105), violence springs from an individual, a serial killer who terrorises 'villages, towns and districts' in the kingdom of Kosala. He is described as 'bloody-handed, given to blows and violence, merciless to living beings' and as wearing the fingers of those he has killed around his neck (M.II.98–99). Although the later Pali commentary provides a background story to explain his conduct, we are not told in the *sutta* how he became such a violent person. Had he himself suffered abuse or violence as a child? Had his mind

become unbalanced by the experience of war? We do not know. We are told that people normally went in large groups along the roads he frequented but that even this did not give them security. The Buddha then goes out to encounter him, against the advice of the villagers, and uses supernormal powers to stop *Āṅgulimāla* catching up with him. *Āṅgulimāla* demands that he stop, but the Buddha replies that he *has* stopped – stopped violence towards others – and that it is *Āṅgulimāla* who should now, likewise, *stop*. *Āṅgulimāla*, being very impressed that the Buddha has come, without fear, to teach him, becomes his disciple, resolves to stop his killing, and develops into an exemplary Buddhist monk, a *bhikkhu*.

Matching the *Āṅgulimāla Sutta* in the violence that is evoked to illustrate the Buddha's teachings is an image within the *Kakacūpama Sutta* (The Simile of the Saw; M.I.122–129). Its aim is to stress the kind of mind *bhikkhus* should develop through meditative practice, and this is its last simile:

Bhikkhus, even if bandits were to sever you savagely limb by limb with a two-handled saw, he who gave rise to a mind of hate towards them would not be carrying out my teaching. Herein, bhikkhus, you should train thus: 'Our minds will remain unaffected, and we shall utter no evil words; we shall abide compassionate for their welfare, with a mind of loving kindness, without inner hate'. (M.I.129)

A textual narrative about a *bhikkhu* named *Puṇṇa* can be taken as an example of this attitude of mind. *Puṇṇa*'s intention is to go to *Sunāparanta*, an area considered to be part of contemporary Myanmar (S.IV.60–63). The people there were known to be 'wild and rough'. The Buddha, therefore, asks him what he will do if he is attacked, presenting *Puṇṇa* with a progression of ever worsening attacks and ending with: 'But *Puṇṇa*, if the people of *Sunāparanta* do take your life with a sharp knife, what will you think about that?' Even faced with this possibility, *Puṇṇa* refuses to speak of retaliation, only of thanks, in this case that death, which some people seek, would have come to him without him having to go far to find it. According to the *sutta*, *Puṇṇa* then goes to *Sunāparanta* and creates 500 lay male followers and 500 lay female followers and he himself attains liberation (*nibbāna*). He dies there; we are not told whether this was through violence.

For the purposes of this article, it is again the empirical realism behind these discourses that I would highlight. Our contemporary world is familiar with these genres of violence and terrorism, these pathologies of violence. They are no longer carried out with swords and arrows but with suicide bombs, knives or poison-laced substances. They demonstrate that the Buddha's teaching was honed and communicated to lay and ordained followers alike against a political, social and economic backdrop that was shot through with violence. Neither the Buddha nor his followers distanced themselves from the reality of conflict around them. As I wrote in 1994:

[The Buddha's] concern for the human predicament made him acutely aware of the potential for violence within the economic and political forces around him. The political milieu of rival republics and monarchies in northern India forms a backdrop to his teaching, whether the rivalries between the kingdoms of Kosala and Magadha or the struggles of the republics to maintain their traditions and their independence in the face of the rising monarchies. (Harris 1994, 6–7, drawing on Thapar 1966, chapter 3)

The doctrinal framework within which this realism is placed: a world enmeshed in craving

I have demonstrated in the first section that, according to the Pali texts, the Buddha did not communicate religious truth as an abstract philosophy, divorced from social and political contexts. He contextually embedded it within Indian society and illustrated it through the realities of that society, using principles honoured by effective teachers throughout history. This is very relevant to the theme of Buddhism and IHL. One task for those who follow the Buddha's teaching is to create new metaphors, new illustrations, which have the potential to speak to us now in the most violent of situations, including modern warfare, where IHL obliges belligerents to limit their methods and means of warfare and to protect civilians and combatants who are out of action (*hors de combat*).

These new metaphors and illustrations, however, must be consistent with Buddhism's overall assessment of human society, which is that it is enmeshed in egotistical craving, *taṇhā*. A passage from the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* captures this perfectly:

Bhikkhus, I will teach you about craving – the ensnarer, streaming, widespread, and sticky – by which this world has been smothered and enveloped, and by which it has become a tangled skein, a knotted ball of thread, a mass of reeds and rushes, so that it does not pass beyond the plane of misery, the bad destination, the lower world, *saṃsāra*. (A.II.211–212)

The currents of craving that this discourse then examines, 36 of them, are all connected with the sense of 'I am', the ego: *what* 'I am' or am not, aspirations for 'I' in the present and in the future, and putative external causes of all this. The *Attadaṇḍa Sutta* in the *Sutta-nipāta* offers another important illustration of this assessment of human society. The narrator sees people 'floundering, like fish in little water', 'opposed to one another', running 'in all directions' and is afraid, until he sees 'a barb ...nestling in the heart', the barb of craving and delusion, which causes societal disruption (Sn.935–939).

When these two discourses are taken together, they embrace both the individual and the community. The 'barb' of craving pierces the individual but it is also present collectively within the 'world'. Both individuals and

communities can possess an 'ego', from which comes a determination to create a particular future for 'I' or 'us', a future that is 'eternal', no matter what suffering is caused to others.

According to the Pali Canon, one antidote to attachment to the 'I', whether individual or collective, is meditation on old age, death and the decomposition of the body after death. It is this that can help individuals and communities see things as they are, namely as impermanent and subject to decay and death. Significant for the topic of this volume is that the description of these meditations evokes sights that are seen in conflict and its aftermath, particularly when mass graves, proof of the brutality of armed conflict, are discovered. This is one of the 'charnel ground contemplations' from the *Kāyagatā-sati Sutta* (M.III.88–98), aimed at developing awareness of the body's impermanence:

Again, bhikkhus, as though he were to see a corpse thrown aside in a charnel ground, one, two, three days dead, bloated, livid, and oozing matter, a bhikkhu compares this same body with it thus: 'This body too is of the same nature, it will be like that, it is not exempt from that fate'. As he abides thus diligent ... That too is how a bhikkhu develops mindfulness of the body.

More images are then added – of 'a corpse ... being devoured by crows, hawks, vultures, dogs, jackals, or various kinds of worms' and of a skeleton 'smeared with blood, held together with sinews ... a skeleton without flesh and blood, held together with sinews ... disconnected bones scattered in all directions ...'. (M.III.91–92). This perhaps represents the ultimate in empirical realism, in the context of Buddhism's doctrinal framework. Contemporary cremation practices hide these realities nowadays, but war and conflict resurrect them, and this 'resurrection' can be in the form of graphic, uncensored images of the aftermath of suicide bombings, including on social media. For the Buddhist who has meditated on these realities, compassion for all caught in the cycle of birth and death, including enemies, should result. The empirical realism in the texts, in general, should encourage people to see things as they are, namely as frequently shot through with the consequences of unchecked greed, hatred and delusion.

Constructions of reality and dis-ease of the mind

In this third section of my article, I examine whether a Buddhist model can be developed for understanding why, within some contexts of armed conflict, humanitarian workers have experienced resistance, even from Buddhist stakeholders in the conflict, and why restraint in war is often lacking. Buddhism emphasises loving kindness, *mettā*, and compassion, *karunā*, and promotes an ethic of empathy, namely that we should stand in the shoes of others, including those with whom we are in discord. These should lead, among

Buddhists, to immediate sympathy with the aims and principles of IHL. However, this has not always been the case. This part of my article argues that such a model can be developed through the Pali texts themselves.

The key to this model is the teaching given in the texts about the capacity for the unenlightened mind not to see things as they really are but to construct 'realities' based on premises conditioned by what Buddhism calls the *āsava* – corruptions, taints, cankers or intoxicating inclinations – and the defilements (*kilesa*), and the difficulty for such a mind to eradicate these corruptions and defilements. There are four *āsavas*: sense desire (*kāmāsava*); the desire for existence, usually interpreted as eternal existence for the self (*bhavāsava*); wrong views (*ditthāsava*); and ignorance (*avijjāsava*). There are 10 *kilesa*: greed (*lobha*); hate (*dosa*); delusion (*moha*); conceit (*māna*); fixed and speculative views (*ditthi*); doubt (*vicikicchā*); mental laziness (*thīna*); restlessness (*uddhacca*); shamelessness (*ahirika*); and lack of concern for consequences (*anottappa*). The first three of the latter are separately listed in the Pali texts as poisons or unwholesome roots (*mūla*). I have already touched on the dangers of the first *āsava*, as expressed by the *Mahā-dukkha-kkhandā Sutta*. Other discourses could also be cited, for instance the *Potaliya Sutta* (To Potaliya; M.I.359–368), when attachment to sensual pleasures and clinging to material possessions are to be undermined by comparing them to meatless bone, a blazing grass torch held against the wind and a charcoal pit full of blazing coals (M.I.364–365). The *Sabbāsava Sutta* (M.I.6–12) also gives an excellent account of the *āsavas*. Clinging to the idea of an eternal self and speculating about that self, for instance, is described in this way:

The speculative view, bhikkhus, is called the thicket of views, the wilderness of views, the contortion of views, the vacillation of views, the fetter of views. Fettered by the fetter of views, the untaught ordinary person is not freed from birth, ageing, and death, from sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair; he is not freed from suffering, I say. (M.I.8)

The corruptions and defilements are presented in texts such as these as leading to suffering for oneself and, by extension, to suffering in society. But it could be asked: 'If the dangers of these are so clear in Buddhist teaching, why can there be resistance, even among Buddhists, to the implementation of compassionate principles in warfare?' The answer given in the texts concerns their sheer tenacity. The Buddha is reported as saying:

Bhikkhus, there are these two kinds of illnesses. Which two? Bodily illness and mental illness. People are found who can claim to enjoy bodily health for one, two, three, four, and five years; for ten, twenty, thirty, forty, and fifty years; and even for a hundred years and more. But apart from those whose taints [*āsavas*] have been destroyed, it is hard to find people in the world who can claim to enjoy mental health even for a moment. (A.II.142–143)

To completely eradicate the *āsavas*, therefore, is not easy. An illustration of their tenacity is presented in the *Cūḷa-dukkha-kkhandā Sutta* (The Shorter Discourse on the Mass of Suffering; M.I.91–95), when a lay person comes to the Buddha and asks why greed, hatred and confusion or delusion (*moha*) persist in his mind, although he knows the dangers associated with them. The Buddha tells him that attachments connected with the householder life are the reason for his inability to practise what he knows will lead to the lessening of suffering. The implicit message is that he should become a monk, a *bhikkhu*, and give himself to meditative practice, if he really wants to progress along the Buddhist path. However, there are numerous discourses that imply even the monastic communities were not always models of harmony or intensive meditative practice, at the Buddha's time or subsequently, when the Pali texts were being compiled. For instance, in the *Kosambiya Sutta* (The Kosambians; M.I.320–325), a group of monastics who have 'taken to quarrelling and brawling and are deep in disputes, stabbing each other with verbal daggers' is described (M.I.321). In the *Anaṅgaṇa Sutta* (Without Blemishes; M.I.24–32), jealousy and competition within the monastic community, when *bhikkhus* hide their faults and unwholesome thoughts, and seek honours from lay people, lead to this simile:

Suppose a metal bowl were brought from a shop or a smithy clean and bright; and the owners put the carcass of a snake or a dog or a human being in it and, covering it with another bowl, went back to the market; then people seeing it said: 'What is that you are carrying about like a treasure?' Then, raising the lid and uncovering it, they looked in, and as soon as they saw they were inspired with such loathing, repugnance, and disgust that even those who were hungry would not want to eat, not to speak of those who were full. (M.I.30)

The moral of the illustration is that the Buddhist monk who may appear to have abandoned the *āsavas* may really still have them within, like the poison of a dead snake or dog.³ In the *Dvedhā-vitakka Sutta* (On Two Kinds of Thought; M.I.114–118), the Buddha gives advice to his monastic followers on what to do if unwholesome thoughts connected with the corruptions and the defilements persist even during meditative practice. After outlining a number of strategies for the restraint of unwholesome thoughts, the Buddha, as a last resort, advises, 'with his teeth clenched and his tongue pressed against the roof of his mouth, he [the *bhikkhu*] should beat down, constrain, and crush mind with mind' (M.I.120). The implication of the discourse is that this would not be an unusual point to reach. Thoughts connected with the corruptions and the defilements are strong and are not easily eradicated. And if this was so for the monastic community, how much more so for lay people! Bewilderment, *mohanasmim pagāḷho*, according to the Pali Canon, is something that most humans often feel. Moreover, since most humans usually associate only with those like-minded to themselves, those

attached to sensual pleasures and the accumulation of possessions will make friends only with those who have similar attachments. Their attitude to themselves and to life, and their 'constructed realities', will never, therefore, be challenged or questioned.⁴

In the context of conflict and war, the fact that our 'realities', under the influence of the *āsavas* and *kilesas*, are constructed and do not represent things as they really are is crucial to the discussion of IHL. John Paul Lederach (2001), a Mennonite peace activist, wrote after the attack on the Twin Towers on 9/11:

Always remember that realities are constructed. Conflict is, among other things, the process of building and sustaining very different perceptions and interpretations of reality. This means that we have at the same time multiple realities defined as such by those in conflict.⁵

This could have been taken out of a Buddhist peace manual. It admirably applies the theory I have outlined. Lederach went on to explain that communities can hold constructed realities that, in their eyes, might seem perfectly logical but which to those outside that community might appear bizarre, false or dangerous. Caroline Brazier, a Western *Buddhist* and trained psychologist, describes our constructed realities through the vocabulary of addiction and presents it as an imprisonment:

[B]ut it should be clear from what we have seen so far [Brazier's explanation of Buddhist philosophy] that what we are looking at in *Buddhist* psychology is a psychology of addiction. But to what are we addicted? For most of us, it is an addiction to self. The self we create is the source of security and comfort to which we turn when life gets difficult; and this habitual pattern of refuge is just as persistent and just as falsely based as any substance addiction. (Brazier 2003, 33)

The *Madhupiṇḍika Sutta* (M.I.108–114; the Honeyball Discourse) mentions a Pali term that is relevant here: *papañca*.⁶ Most often translated as proliferation, although I. B. Horner translated it as 'obsessions', *papañca* is the proliferation of thoughts, feelings and judgements in the unenlightened mind. The Honeyball Discourse declares that *papañca* is the cause of such things as taking up weapons, quarrelling, contending, disputing and slander, and that the defeat of *papañca* is the way to end such actions. So it declares:

Bhikkhus [monks], as to the source through which perceptions and notions tinged by mental proliferation [*papañca*] beset a man [person]; if nothing is found there to delight in, welcome and hold to, this is the end of the underlying tendency to lust, of the underlying tendency to aversion, of the underlying tendency to views, of the underlying tendency to doubt, of the underlying tendency to conceit, of the underlying tendency to desire for being, of the underlying tendency to ignorance; this is the end of resorting to rods and weapons, of quarrels, brawls, disputes, recrimination, malice, and false speech ... (M.I.109–110)

An early analysis of *papañca* was made by Bhikkhu Ñāṇānanda in 1971 (*Concept and Reality*). He described *papañca* as the spreading out of concepts that occurs in the last stages of our mental cognition processes, when our thoughts and feelings run riot. He then added a most interesting point based on the grammatical structure of the Pali. When this ‘spreading out’ happens, he pointed out, we become the victims of our own mental and linguistic constructions. So, drawing from the *Madhupiṇḍika Sutta*, he wrote:

Like the legendary resurrected tiger which devoured the magician who restored it to life out of its skeletal bones, the concepts and linguistic conventions overwhelm the worldling who evolved them. At the final and crucial stage of sense-perception, the concepts are, as it were, invested with an objective character. (Ñāṇananda 1971, 29; quoted in Harris 1994, 29)

His evidence is the *sutta*’s description of what arises in the mind when the senses engage with sense objects, for instance in connection with visual consciousness:

Dependent on the eye and forms [visible objects], eye-consciousness arises. The meeting of the three is contact. With contact as condition, there is feeling. What one feels, that one perceives. What one perceives, that one thinks about. What one thinks about, that one mentally proliferates [*papañca*]. With what one has mentally proliferated as the source, perceptions and notions tinged by mental proliferations beset a man with respect to past, future, and present forms cognizable to the eye. (M.I.111–112)

The Pali word (*samudācaranti*) translated as ‘beset’ in the above extract implies a reversal of the usual process of thought, according to Ñāṇānanda. The thoughts take on a life of their own and ‘beset’ the thinker; that is, they make the thinker the victim. The thinker can no longer control or restrain thought.

Ñāṇānanda emphasised that *papañca* happens in the unenlightened mind and that it works through craving (*taṇhā*), conceit (*māna* – the tendency to measure yourself up against others) and views that flow from egocentric consciousness. He also emphasised that language reinforces this, by creating a dualism between subject and object in the individual or collective mind: ‘I like this’, ‘I want to be rid of this’, ‘We like this’. In 2015, a further study of *papañca* was published by an organisational psychologist, Maya Shobrook. Shobrook, *Helpless to Selfless*). It took Ñāṇānanda’s thought further, by comparing *papañca* to ‘automatic thoughts’ in Cognitive Therapy, and offered a developed analysis of the dangers of thinking through the concepts of ‘I’ and ‘mine’. As Ñāṇānanda, she argued that we become ‘helpless’ under the influence of *papañca* and cannot hope to make a clear assessment of the problems that beset us, unless we interrogate our use and abuse of the concept of ‘Self’ (Shobrook, *Helpless to Selfless*).

In 1994, using Ñāṇananda, I imagined what a sequence of thoughts influenced by *papañca* could look like if it were to foster conflict or violence. I adapt it here:

I feel aversion to this group (or community or religion). I am right to feel aversion. This group is morally corrupt (or inferior or violent). Therefore, it is worthy of my aversion. Even more, this group threatens my identity and not only my identity but also that of my whole community. Therefore, to protect my community, this group must be eradicated. I cannot survive unless this happens. So it is my duty to work for the eradication of this group (or another object) for my sake and the sake of others.

In this sequence, 'I feel aversion' (*dosa*) comes first. *Dosa* is the second *kilesa*. It is a mental state that is contingent on experience, on conditioning, on personal likes and dislikes. The conditioned nature of this state, however, is lost sight of in the sequence of thoughts that follows, which universalises the state so that it becomes a conviction that is seen both as empirically verifiable and as an imperative for action (Harris 2017). This conviction and imperative to action are then clung to with a 'This alone is truth' mentality, an attitude that is criticised in many discourses in the Pali Canon, because, in the unenlightened mind, such statements are usually rooted in ignorance.⁷ In the context of violent conflict, other factions may have constructed a completely different argument, equally held as 'This alone is truth'. Such limited, fixed views (*diṭṭhi*) narrow people's focus and stop them seeing differing perspectives on the shared world of the human situation.

In my imagined example, 'aversion' or *dosa* could be replaced by fear, jealousy, anger⁸ or a feeling of being threatened. In 2017, when examining the dangers of *papañca* with reference to Ñāṇananda's thought, I wrote, 'If we use the image of the resurrected tiger seriously, this kind of proliferation can kill us in some way – can destroy us and our communities' (Harris 2017). It can also destroy and endanger proper compliance with IHL.

'Constructed realities' as a threat to compliance with IHL

In war and conflict, I would suggest, whole communities can be affected by the proliferation of thoughts that are based on premises rooted in the *āsavas* and *kilesas*. This proliferation can result in attachment to land and religious sites, to convictions of communal or racial moral superiority, to memories of past greatness and the wish to restore this greatness, or to anger conditioned by perceived slights and betrayals. The Buddha's teaching would condemn all such attachments as the fruit of craving, as forms of clinging to individual or communal 'selves'.

When attachments rooted in one of the corruptions or the defilements become, through the dynamics of *papañca*, supposedly empirically verifiable truths for a whole community, a constructed reality arises, which can become all but impermeable to other arguments or 'realities', often now spread and reinforced by algorithm-driven 'bubbles' in social media. Such constructed 'realities' can be present within radicalised religious groups, state forces, ethnic majorities and minorities, and a variety of other communities. They can be present within the four categories of armed group organisations studied by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC): integrated state armed forces, centralised non-state armed groups, decentralised non-state armed groups; community-embedded armed groups (ICRC 2018). When they are present in contexts of war, considerations connected with IHL, such as the protection and humane treatment of civilians and captured combatants on the other side, can be forgotten because of the strength of these constructed realities, which can deny humanity to the perceived enemy and make violence a virtue to gain the desired end. A 2004 ICRC study points out that 'It is perfectly possible for people to know that an act is illegal but to consider it to be legitimate', for instance when 'the enemy is demonised and considered as vermin' (ICRC 2004, 9–10). Buddhism might attribute this to *papañca* and the 'constructed realities' it nurtures. The very conduct of hostilities, therefore, can be conditioned by the dynamics of *papañca*, resulting in cycles of violations of IHL and resistance or opposition to the presence of those who seek to ensure compliance with the law.

I have not named particular conflicts in this article. However, I have had personal experience of conflicts in Bosnia, Ireland, Israel/Palestine, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, and have supervised research students working on conflict in various parts of Africa. In all these contexts, I have witnessed the devastation that constructed realities can create. Of course, these 'realities' usually have some grounding in fact, for instance in experiences of violence and terrorism from a perceived enemy. A Buddhist lens, however, can reveal points where *papañca* has prevented communities from seeing things as they really are and empathising with religious and ethnic others. Recognising how people construct their 'realities', their world, can help people lessen the degree to which they are captured by these, and help them to engage with the lived experience of others.

The existence of 'constructed realities' on all sides of armed conflict can also hinder the work of humanitarian organisations when they seek to provide practical support to victims of armed conflict. The ICRC report *The Roots of Restraint in War* speaks of the importance of trust between humanitarian organisations and armed forces and armed groups.⁹ State armed forces and non-state armed groups need to have trust that humanitarian organisations such as the ICRC will live up to their ethic of neutrality and not act through partisan motives. The existence of 'constructed realities' among

belligerents, however, can influence the judgements that lead to trust. Humanitarian organisations have been barred from some conflict zones because their actions have been perceived to be partisan by one of the parties to the conflict, even though empirical evidence might prove otherwise. 'Constructed realities' can also trigger armed conflict in the first place and then influence how hostilities are conducted and whether violations of IHL occur.

The regulation of armed conflict

Other articles¹⁰ in this volume examine forms of Buddhist mental culture that aim to help combatants control and/or purify their minds in conflict situations so that self-regulation occurs. They appeal to what can be called 'internal authority' whereby combatants accept the benefit of mental culture, see its truth and attempt to act accordingly so that excessive use of force is mitigated. Combatants and indeed humanitarian workers should be trained in these forms of self-regulation so that they become autonomous moral agents, guided by cultural or religious values.¹¹ I will not, however, concentrate on Buddhist mental culture here. For, in the heat of battle, self-regulation is rarely enough on its own. Therefore, I investigate in this section a strand within the Pali texts that refers to external authority, namely to leadership by those imbued with authority, in religious, state and military fields.

A foundational text within this strand is the *Aggañña Sutta* (Knowledge of Beginnings, D.III.80–98), which, within another myth, describes the development of craving, possessiveness, theft, false speech and interpersonal violence within a newly formed society without an executive or judicial procedures. The arising of these 'evils' eventually prompts some members of the society to recognise that a force of authority is needed – a being 'who would show anger where anger was due, censure those who deserved it, and banish those who deserved banishment!' They go to the person whom they believe is best qualified for this, with both personal charisma and capability, and a social contract ensues, within which this chosen authority figure is provided with livelihood by the people in return for enforcing order (D.III.92).

It is significant that the showing of 'anger' (*kodha*) in the face of evil, by a person imbued with authority to punish, is justified in this discourse. Banishment of evil-doers to protect the health of the wider community is also endorsed. Although the expression of anger is unwholesome (*akusala*) within Buddhist ethics,¹² this strand within the Pali texts sees it as a necessary part of the proper exercise of power in societies that are riven with conflict. A controversial further example of this is when Pasenadi, ruler of Kosala, is shown in conflict with Ajātasattu, ruler of Magadha. Ajātasattu is the aggressor at first and Pasenadi defends his kingdom, only to be defeated. At this point, the Buddha, when he hears what has happened, is recorded as saying:

Bhikkhus, King Ajātasattu of Magadha has evil friends, evil companions, evil comrades. King Pasenadi of Kosala has good friends, good companions, good comrades. Yet for this day, bhikkhus, King Pasenadi, having been defeated, will sleep badly tonight. (S.I.82; see Harris 1994, 18–19)

Although Pasenadi has used defensive force, there is no condemnation at this point of his decision to do so, implying that such force, however regrettable, is part of exercising the authority of kingship or the state. In the next battle, however, it is Pasenadi who is the victor. He allows Ajātasattu his life but, in a retaliatory overreaction, confiscates all his troops and elephants. When news of this reaches the Buddha, his response is different. The verse he is recorded as uttering judges both sides through appeal to the principle of karma in war: ‘The killer begets a killer, one who conquers, a conqueror. The abuser begets abuse, the reviler, one who reviles’ (S.I.85). Both Pasenadi and Ajātasattu, in this second battle, fall short of proper conduct between states.

According to this strand of the Pali texts, therefore, the exercise of authority at the level of kingship or the state might involve the use of defensive force. I would argue that this is also part of Buddhism’s ‘empirical realism’ in a craving-filled world, although the theoretical ideal within Buddhism is always that violence only breeds violence. Yet such force is always subject to the principle of karma, under which it stands condemned. As the Pasenadi/Ajātasattu example suggests, however, if war is entered into, humanitarian standards are expected, which invites the question: how should conflict and war be regulated once it has broken out, according to this textual strand, particularly retaliatory violence, which frequently is prey to excessive force?

Self-regulation within individual combatants is one option. Yet, as I have suggested above, fear of death and mental constructions of the ‘enemy’ may prove stronger in the heat of battle than any mental training undertaken. External authority, therefore, has to enter. The Pali texts of Theravāda Buddhism speak of four specifically religious external sources of authority (here, for the authenticity of a teaching), the *mahāpadesa*: the Buddha, an Order of monks that contains an elder monk, a group of learned elder monks and a sole elder monk.¹³ But what would be the recognised external sources in war and conflict? I suggest that these would be the state and military commanders (*senānāyakas*), who, ideally, should see themselves as subject to dhammic principles.

I would suggest there are three Buddhist principles or teachings that could be used by such sources of external authority for the regulation of conflict and excessive retaliation. The first principle is that of karma,¹⁴ which can be used to instil in combatants that there can be no impunity for violations of IHL or the excessive use of force, at both legal and religious levels. In other words, combatants must be convinced that those who are guilty of violations will be held accountable before the law as well as under the principle of karma. In

doing this, appeal can be made to a second teaching of the Buddha, namely that moral shame (*hiri*) and fear of blame and other consequences (*ottappa*) are the forces that enable human society to function. The Buddha is recorded as saying this:

Bhikkhus, these two bright qualities protect the world. What two? Moral shame and moral dread. If these two bright qualities did not protect the world, there would not be seen here [any restraint regarding] one's mother, aunts or wives of one's teachers and [other] respected people. The world would become promiscuous, like goats and sheep, chickens and pigs, dogs and jackals (A.I.52).

Again, the empirical realism of Buddhism can be seen. Transferred to the fields of war and conflict, this is directly relevant to rape and sexual abuse, but also, by extension, to any violation of IHL. External authority, through creating a military culture where violations of IHL are not tolerated, can utilise as a regulatory strategy the inherent capacity of all humans to fear shame, blame and punishment, because 'army values' have been broken.¹⁵

The third principle within the Pali canon is simply its stress on discipline and gradual training. Discipline in spiritual practice is a *sine qua non* for progress in the Buddhist path towards liberation. In the textual strand that I am highlighting, however, it is also a *sine qua non* of governance and the exercise of authority. In the Pali texts, the metaphor of a trained and disciplined animal in war is often used to illustrate the necessity for a trained mind.¹⁶ For instance, the need for a ruler to employ trained, brave and experienced people for his army is used by the Buddha as an illustration of the value of giving gifts to those who have trained their minds, namely the monastic community (A.I.99). The texts see a direct correlation between disciplined spiritual lives and discipline at every level in society, led by those in authority, and expressed both in war and in peace.

This has implications for the training of combatants in war. The ICRC stresses, in *The Roots of Restraint in War*, 'Empirical studies have shown that training increases restraint in the battlefield' (ICRC 2018, 28). Training is not the focus of this article and is covered by other contributors. However, the Pali Canon promotes gradual training as the most efficacious. An illustration that I used in 1994 is worth citing again. The *Dantabhūmi Sutta* in the *Majjhima Nikāya* shows a confused novice monk coming to the Buddha and lamenting that a prince had not responded to his teaching of the Dhamma. The Buddha takes the novice by the hand, as it were, and kindly points out that a prince, steeped in his possessions and his love of the sensual, would not be able to absorb the kind of teaching that the Buddha was giving to his monastic pupils. Significantly, he uses an illustration from warfare. Just as a king's elephant has to be trained gradually to go into battle and withstand the noise and weapons of war, so it is with human beings. They have to be

trained gradually in the teaching of the Buddha. So, it would have been far better if the novice had started at a different place (M.III.128–137; Harris 1994, 35–38).

Applying this to the training of combatants, starting with meditation training and the complete eradication of anger, hatred or fear may not be wise or even possible if results are expected. Starting with the rule of law, including IHL, and the very real possibility of sanctions and punishment for those who violate this could be more efficacious. This point was made strongly by the ICRC in their early publication, *The Roots of Behaviour in War*, which stressed not only that ‘any failure to obey an order must be sanctioned’ but also that it was essential to reach those who had influence over combatants so that orders were in compliance with IHL.¹⁷ Yet gradual training can also be used in the development of values such as the capacity to feel empathy. For Buddhists, the following verse from the *Dhammapada* is often used to support absolute non-violence – ‘All beings tremble at the rod; Life is dear to all. Seeing their likeness to yourself, You should neither kill nor cause to kill’ (v. 130). Even though combatants can rarely avoid killing, the principle of empathy present in this verse can nevertheless be utilised in training, particularly in the context of IHL, offering a ‘value-based motivation’ that can be ‘as powerful a motivator of combatant behaviour as the threat of punishment’ (ICRC 2018, 32) Training in mindfulness can then come later.

Concluding thoughts

In the first part of this article, I sought to demonstrate that the Buddha taught against the backdrop of the political and social realities of his time, with their potential for violence and conflict, and used these realities in metaphors, similes and illustrations. In the second part, I demonstrated that the use of these metaphors and illustrations supported the Buddha’s teaching that the world is enmeshed in craving and that the only escape from the consequences of this is to work towards the eradication of selfish craving and the gaining of insight, namely the ability to see things as they really are. In the third part of the article, I set myself the challenge of creating a Buddhist analytical model for understanding why, within some contexts of armed conflict, even when there are Buddhist combatants, IHL has been violated in the conduct of hostilities and humanitarian workers have experienced resistance to their work. I argued that the Pali texts themselves can provide such a model through its teaching about the sheer tenacity of the corruptions (*āsava*s) and the defilements (*kilesa*) within the mind. I focussed particularly on what happens in the mind when thoughts, based on premises rooted in the corruptions or defilements, result in *papañca*, a proliferation of thoughts that victimise the thinker and result in constructed ‘realities’ that lead individuals and communities away from seeing things as they really are. Most

people, including Buddhists, remain susceptible to what this article terms 'constructed realities'. It is in war and conflict, I would suggest, that these constructed realities become most dangerous. They are one of the most pernicious obstacles to ensuring compliance with IHL. In the last section of the article I reflected on whether the Pali textual tradition endorses the initiation of defensive violence and whether principles and teachings from the tradition can be utilised to better regulate the conduct of hostilities and excessive retaliation to prevent violations of IHL, even in the presence of constructed realities. I pointed to sources of internal and external authority and argued that external authority that is subject to dhammic principles has a role in enforcing the rule of law in conflict, through the proper exercise of sanctions and punishment, and the utilisation of the human fear of blame and shame. Although this article recognises that Buddhism ideally condemns all forms of violence and war, it nevertheless argues that it also offers realistic and pragmatic tools for the understanding of conflict and its regulation so that excessive force is not used, and an 'enemy' population is not harmed by obstructing the work of humanitarian workers.

Notes

1. Empirical work and empirical judgements are based on direct observation and experience rather than theory. I use the phrase 'empirical realism' in this article to denote the ability of the Pali texts to represent violence and conflict, through the empirical, namely through what can be observed through the senses, resulting in a graphic and sometimes disturbing realism.
2. See also S.II.118, which describes the consequences of ignorance, one of the causes of craving, in terms of a swelling or surging: 'Bhikkhus, the ocean surging causes the rivers to surge; the rivers surging cause the streams to surge; the streams surging causes the lakes to surge; the lakes surging cause the pools to surge. So too, ignorance surging causes volitional formations to surge; volitional formations surging causes consciousness to surge; consciousness surging causes name-and-form to surge; name-and-form surging causes the six sense bases to surge [etc.]...'.¹
3. Many more discourses could be mentioned that describe dissension and quarrelling within the monastic Sangha, e.g. the *Sāmagāma Sutta* (At Sāmagāma; M.II.243–251) and the *Upakkilesa Sutta* (On Imperfections or Corruptions; M.III.153–162).
4. For instance, see *Sunakkhatta Sutta* (To Sunakkhatta) M.II.252–261.
5. Lederach (2001).
6. I have written on *papañca* before and draw from these sources: see Harris (1994, 27–30) and Harris (2017).
7. See for example the *Aggivacchagotta Sutta* (To Vacchagotta on Fire; M.I.483–489) and the *Dighanaka Sutta* (To Dighanaka; M.I.497–501) for a critique of the view that 'This alone is truth'.
8. One text illustrates anger with reference to snakes, a figure that is a familiar one in this article. A person who is quick to anger, for instance, but whose anger does not last long is like a snake that is possessed of poison but is not fiercely

poisonous, and a person who is neither quick to anger nor has anger that lasts long is like a snake that is neither fierce nor venomous (A.II.110–111). Anger is thus also seen as a negative quality that poisons any situation or body politic.

9. ICRC (2018, 67).
10. For example, see the Harvey and Trew articles in this volume.
11. The importance both of moral values rooted in culture or religion and law/authority is stressed in ICRC (2018, e.g. 35 and 65).
12. See for example the *Kodha Vagga* (Chapter on Anger) in the *Dhammapada* (vv. 221–234).
13. See for instance the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, D.II.123–24.
14. See e.g. the Harvey article in this volume.
15. See ICRC (2018, 9 and 32).
16. See for instance *Dhammapada* v. 321: ‘Folk take the tamed one into battle; The king mounts the tamed one. The tamed one, who endures abusive speech, is the best among human beings’ (Dhp. 321).
17. ICRC (2004, 16).

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Abbreviations

A. *Aṅguttara-nikāya*; as translated by Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Aṅguttara Nikāya*, Bristol: Pali Text Society, 2012.

D. *Dīgha-nikāya*; as translated by M. Walshe, *The Long Discourses of the Buddha*, Boston: Wisdom, 1995.

Dhp. *Dhammapada*; as translated by V. J. Roebuck, *The Dhammapada*, London: Penguin, 2010.

M. *Majjhima-nikāya*; as translated by Ñāṇamoli Bhikkhu and Bodhi Bhikkhu, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*. Boston: Wisdom, 1995.

S. *Saṃyutta-nikāya*; as translated by Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya*. Boston: Wisdom, 2000.

Sn. *Suttanipāṭa*, translated by K. R. Norman, *The Group of Discourses (Sutta Nipāṭa)*, 2nd ed. Oxford: Pali Text Society, 2001.

Translations in this article are those of the above. Reference to A., D., M. and S. are to volume and page number of the Pali Text Society editions of the Pali text, as indicated in the translations (Pali page numbers are shown in square brackets within the translation). For Dhp. and Sn. reference is to verse number.

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