VIRTUE AND VIOLENCE IN THERAVĀDA AND SRI LANKAN BUDDHISM

Eric Sean Nelson

1. Introduction[1]

The English word ethics stems from the Greek word "ethos" that signifies a way of life or art of living. Ethics concerns human actions, behaviors, and practices, in particular how we *ought* to treat others and ourselves. In the western philosophical tradition, to speak schematically, there are two major forms of approaching ethics. On the one hand, one form of ethical theory consists of the rule based on ethics found in the deontological ethics of intention and duty, and the other the utilitarian ethics of evaluating actions in terms of their consequences. Virtue ethics and other varieties of context-based ethics, on the other hand, emphasize the individual and communal cultivation of virtues through role models and exemplars and their appropriate and flexible application to the situation. The ethical is not assessed by the intentions and consequences of actions but by how these and other elements fit into a concrete way of life as a whole.

Recent scholarship, in particular Damien Keown's pioneering works on Buddhist ethics, has seen the development of the claim that Buddhist ethics is a variety of "virtue ethics."[2] That is, according to Keown, "Buddhist ethics is aretetic: it rests upon the cultivation of personal virtue in the expectation that as spiritual capacity expands towards the goal of enlightenment ethical choices will become clear and unproblematic."[3] Virtue ethics is a contemporary approach to morality that resorts to the moral paradigm developed by Aristotle. Aristotelian ethics emphasizes the cultivation of individual virtues and the political community in order to promote human flourishing or happiness in the broadest sense. Keown argues for an interpretation of Buddhist ethics "based on the Aristotelian model, or at least one understanding of it." Keown continues, "The parallel between Buddhist and Aristotelian ethics is, I believe, quite close in many respects. Aristotle's ethical theory appears to be the closest Western analogue to Buddhist ethics, and is an illuminating guide to an understanding of the Buddhist moral system."[4]

In this paper, I will examine the role of virtue ethics and violence in traditional Theravāda and contemporary Sri Lankan Buddhism. Despite the limits and problems of applying the virtue ethics model – especially in its Aristotelian form advocated by Keown – to Buddhist ethics, I contend that the virtue ethical elements of Theravāda Buddhism help clarify issues of war and violence as well as compassion and peace in a country such as Sri Lanka (the former British colony of Ceylon). The Sri Lankan people, both Sinhalese and Tamil, have suffered from approximately three decades of civil war, ethnic strife, and terrorism. An end to this conflict between the mostly Buddhist Sinhalese and predominantly Hindu Tamils is still not in sight.

The issues revealed by the relation between Buddhism, politics, and violence in South Asia should serve as a caution to and a

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[2] Damien Keown, *Buddhist Ethics: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 25; and *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 2.

[3] Keown, *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics*, 2.

[4] *Ibid,* 21.

source of self-reflection for the contemporary project of socially engaged Buddhism. Given (1) the everyday logic of being absorbed in circumstances and making exceptions for one's own actions and inactions; (2) the possibility of acting from the condition of exception and emergency (as being the norm and the typical rather than the extraordinary and atypical); and (3) the customary division between friend and enemy, native and foreign, ethical and social norms and practices can be used to reproduce and intensify rather than dismantle and resolve social conflicts. This is true even of an ethics that is well-intentioned and altruistic, such as perhaps the canonical Theravāda ethics of loving kindness (*mettā*), generosity (*dāna*), and compassion (*karuṇā*), if it obeys instead of confronting this logic of conflict.

Consequently, despite the many merits of the recent revival of the ethical and religious in contemporary thought and culture, the related privatization of social-political issues into private ones of charity and compassion can result in an ideological blindness to and a perilous one-sidedness in addressing issues of social justice. That is, the ethical requires an understanding of and concern with society beyond individual attitudes, intentions, and virtues if it is not to become an unethical and abstract cult of virtue or misused in the name of various particular religious, moral, national, and ethnic identities. To this extent, ethics in general and in Buddhism needs to be more than the virtue ethics of individuals and communities, i.e., more than an ethics of individual and social virtues in order to be both open and responsive to encountering others as well as critical of its own self-distortion, if ethics is a response to rather than an excuse for the underlying logic of conflict, violence, and war that so often dominate human relations.

2. Buddhism and Virtue Ethics

Morality, meditation, and wisdom constitute the three-fold basis of Theravāda Buddhist practice. As the foundation and prerequisite of the path, the moral life (*sīla*) is the first part of Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa's great commentary *Visuddhimagga* and it is described by the Buddha as the foundation on which the path is built.[5] Theravāda Buddhist ethics is considered a variety of virtue ethics, which considers the effects actions have on one's general condition or way of life as a whole, because it emphasizes: (1) morality (*sīla*) as a way of life rather than a system of rules, (2) the cultivation of morality through precepts and as perfections and virtues, (3) moral psychology, which is richly developed in the Pāli *sutta*s and commentaries, and (4) the need for skillfulness, fittingness, and appropriateness in applying morality to the situation.[6] Although Theravāda ethics differs from the Aristotelian paradigm of virtue ethics, such as its focus on the actual and concrete suffering of the other and of all sentient beings, it remains comparable in some ways to Aristotelian and Confucian ethics in stressing the need for the cultivation of an apt ethical discernment that is responsive to the context through the appropriate enactment of morality.

There are aspects of the Pāli canon that clearly evoke Aristotelian virtue ethics, as when the Buddha described the moral life constitutive of the Buddhist path as a "noble aggregation of

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[5] Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification*, tr. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli (Seattle: Buddhist Publication Society Pariyatti Editions, 1999); and *Numerical Discourses of the Buddha*, tr. and ed. Nyanaponika Thera and Bhikkhu Bodhi (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2000) is a selective translation of the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* (hereafter cited as AN), AN XI.1, AN XI.2.

[6] The view that Mahāyāna involves a kind of virtue ethic has been more extensively developed, especially given the claim that the Bodhisattva's compassion can override rules. Arguments for Zen and Mahāyāna virtue ethics are found in Simon P. James, *Zen Buddhism and Environmental Ethics* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004) and David E. Cooper and Simon P. James, *Buddhism, Virtue and Environment* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005).

virtues" involving a "faultless happiness." [7] Here we see an emphasis on the cultivation of virtues, their complementary unity in producing a balanced way of life, and the happiness that this entails. For the Buddha, the self-interested concern for one's own welfare leads one to develop a goodness that involves its own kind of well-being. [8] Likewise, the Buddha's emphasis on moral appropriateness instead of ethical absolutes and skillfulness in relation to the situation and context is a characteristic of virtue ethics. Nevertheless, Keown's argument for the parallel between Buddhist and Aristotelian ethics is problematic given that Aristotle's *phronesis* (prudential judgment or sense of appropriateness) is primarily an aristocratic mastery, an accomplishment of the patriarchal householder and active citizen, whereas Buddhist moral skillfulness (Pāli: *kusala*) transcends the *ekos* and *polis* to a kind of freedom in relation to people and things.[9] This is not the freedom of indifference but of compassion (*karunā*, the core virtue) as a spontaneous responsiveness constituted by instead of transcending the ethical. Such freedom evokes one aspect of a different variety of ancient Greco-Roman virtue ethics – the cosmopolitanism of the Greco-Roman Cynics and Stoics. Rather than restricting the ethical to the polis, the political community, the Hellenistic and Roman Cynics and Stoics argued for the moral community of humanity, advocating a universal rather than particularistic "virtue ethics."[10] Likewise in Buddhism, the ethical is not limited to the national community or even the human, as ethical responsiveness extends to all sentient beings and to the world itself. This suggests a kind of Buddhist

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[7] MN I. 269; translation in John J. Holder, ed. and tr., *Early Buddhist Discourses* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2006), 70.

[8] SN III.4. Most passages cited from SN can be found in the following incomplete translation: *The Sutta-Nipata*, tr. H. Saddhatissa (Surrey: Curzon, 1994).

[9] Keown, *op. cit.*, ch.8.

[10] Martha Nussbaum criticizes the reduction of virtue ethics to the communitarian model of Aristotelian ethics, contending that Stoicism offers a more humanistic and universalistic model in "Kant and Cosmopolitanism," in James Bohman and Matthias Lutz-Bachmann, eds., *Perpetual Peace: Essays on Kant's Cosmopolitan Ideal* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), 46.

world-community (*cosmo-polis*), which is further supported in the ideal of the *cakkavatti* as a universal and inclusive wheel-turning monarch. The wheel-turning monarch conquers through law rather than violence ("stick or sword"), instituting peace and fairness for all.[11]

Whereas appropriateness is secondary to principle in rule-based ethics and to command and law in the legalism of command theory, virtue and context-oriented ethics is defined by the recognition that appropriateness is not accidental but constitutive of the ethical. Ethical life calls for the development of moral sensibility or judgment, since the richness and complexity of life cannot be adequately articulated and addressed through an abstract system of mechanical rules or rigid commands. Some might object that Buddhism has no ethics but only calls for a non-moral meditative insight into the causality of karma. This view of karmic determinism is clearly false, as I have argued in more detail elsewhere.[12] For the Buddha, as he is said to state repeatedly throughout the *Sutta-nipāta*, the path is intrinsically ethical although morality alone is insufficient for liberation.[13] Buddhism is about deeds rather than rules and rites.[14] One should focus on moral conduct, virtue and responsibility instead of the fate or destiny of caste or birth;[15] since there is no shelter except the actual good we have done.[16]

Given that family resemblances and analogies do not entail identity, it is important to resist conflating Buddhist with other varieties of virtue ethics such as Aristotle's. This context-sensitive and flexible responsiveness articulated in Buddhism is not based in political prudence, interpreted as discriminatory judgment, and the

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[11] DN I.89, DN III.59. *Dīgha Nikāya*, translation available in *The Long Discourses of the Buddha*, tr. Maurice Walshe (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995).

[12] E. S. Nelson, "Questioning Karma: Buddhism and the Phenomenology of the Ethical," in Charles Prebish, Damien Keown, and Dale S. Wright, *Revisioning Karma* (*Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 14 (2007)): 353-373.

[13] SN IV.898.

[14] SN II. 249-250.

[15] SN I. 136-140, III. 462, III. 648-650.

[16] AN III. 51.

hierarchy of social relations legitimated by Aristotelian ethics. Buddhist social ethics is often interpreted as being more republican and egalitarian, due to the Buddha's historical origins and message. [17] Ideally, Theravāda Buddhist virtues are oriented towards a mindful loving-kindness that is developed and disclosed in practices of morality, mediation, and wisdom. The primary example of such mindfulness is the Buddha himself as the embodiment of a purely skillful and spontaneous ethical responsiveness towards all beings. This openness and situatedness also opens up possibilities for misunderstanding and misapplication when the person acts, speaks, and thinks without mindfulness. The lack of mindfulness might generate the conclusion that the first precept of non-harm (*ahiṃsā*) can be bracketed in the name of another good such as the protection of Buddhism. Such a perspective is found in utilitarian interpretations of Buddhist ethics, where the lives of the many might outweigh one life, and in the phenomenon that has been described as "Buddhist fundamentalism" by Tessa J. Bartholomeusz and Chandra Richard de Silva.[18] However, this phenomenon is more aptly described as the nationalistic and communalistic use (or cooption) of Buddhism, since it is not based in the authority of the Pāli Canon, and insofar as the word fundamentalism usually entails a return to and literal reading of a canonical or sacred text rather than a radical departure from it.

The majority of the Buddhist *sutta*s forbid violence and war, with some interesting exceptions, calling for non-attachment even ultimately to Buddhism itself. Such non-attachment is often conflated with indifference. Critics of Buddhism often confuse non-attachment and indifference, conflating a stereotypical view of Stoicism (with its supposed repression of the emotions for the sake

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[17] David J. Kalupahana, *Ethics in Early Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1995), 100-101; and Etienne Lamotte, *History of Indian Buddhism: From the Origins to the Saka Era* (Louvain-la-Neuve: Université catholique de Louvain, Institut orientaliste, 1988), 10.

[18] This expression is developed in Tessa J. Bartholomeusz and Chandra R de Silva, eds., *Buddhist Fundamentalism and Minority Identities in Sri Lanka* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998).

of virtue and the equanimity of *ataraxia*) and Buddhism (which calls for recognizing, working with, and transforming emotions).[19] Another critique would reduce Buddhism to the opposite of indifference – egotistical self-satisfaction and joy in oneself.[20] Yet it is clear from the Pāli canon that the Buddha is never portrayed as advocating moral indifference to the fate of others. On the contrary, the noble person is: "One who is devoted to one's own welfare and cultivates the virtues, while at the same time [being] devoted to the welfare of others by causing others to cultivate their virtues."[21] From a perspective that is critical of the popular or political uses of Buddhism, which seem to contradict Buddhist teachings, the treatment of Buddhism as a reified cultural identity and exclusive possession that excludes others and justifies hostility toward them is at odds with its moral content. This politicized Buddhism seems to contradict the explicit call for taking up others well-being, and in particular, its universalism and cosmopolitanism that extends to humanity and indeed the entirety of sentient life. The violent promotion of Buddhism as a particular way of life conflicts with the very practice and aim of that way of life. This problematic nexus between Buddhism and the political is as much an issue for contemporary Buddhism, including "engaged Buddhism," as it is for its traditional forms.[22]

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[19] For a more nuanced approach to the emotions in Stoicism, see Nussbaum, 44-45.

[20] See Elizabeth Harris, who has an interesting analysis of such claims in "Buddhism in the Media," in Karma Lekshe Tsomo, ed., *Innovative Buddhist Women: Swimming against the Stream* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2000). The implausible view that Buddhism aims at a stereotypical "Stoic indifference" excluding possibilities for transformation is also found in other figures, such as Gillian Rose's critique of what she calls Levinas' "Buddhist Judaism," in *Mourning Becomes the Law: Philosophy and Representation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 37-38.

[21] Kalupahana, *op. cit.*, 76.

[22] For a survey of the relations between Buddhism and political institutions and movements in recent Asian history, see the essays gathered in Ian Harris, ed., *Buddhism and Politics in Twentieth-Century Asia* (London: Continuum, 1999). On the many problems of engaged Buddhist interpretations of Buddhist ethics, see Christopher Ives, "Deploying the Dharma: Reflections on the

Utilitarian and contextualist readings imply that in some cases moral agents are justified in sacrificing their own virtues and the goods and lives of others for the sake of a greater good. For instance, in common dilemmas from moral philosophy, agents might be justified in killing one person who would otherwise kill hundreds or thousands. The argument that it is legitimate for the first precept demanding *ahiṃsā* to be suspended under limited exceptional circumstances, i.e., in order to assimilate some forms of self-defense, is itself conditional, since it is clear from the *sutta*s that karmic responsibility is unavoidable for killing. One is always culpable for killing, although one might be considered more or less culpable.[23] Violence only creates more violence and, no matter how necessary or legitimate it seems, always has its consequences such that the end cannot cleanse or sanctify the means. But even given this understanding, individuals and groups have felt compelled for various reasons to engage in violence, and with some justification in cases of compassion for the greater good, as in the *Jātaka* narratives when the Bodhisatta (Skt., Bodhisattva) saves the tiger by allowing it to eat him or the ship-captain kills one in order to save many, or for the sake of self-defense.[24] As Peter Harvey notes, despite any moral dilemma: "Most lay Buddhists have been prepared to break the precept against killing in self-defense, and many have joined in the defense of the community in times of need."[25]

Reflection on the history of South and South-East Asia illustrates that the Buddha's commitment to non-harm and non-violence has often been in tension with political institutions that have never abandoned the right to use force and established social

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Methodology of Constructive Buddhist Ethics," in *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 15 (2008): 23-44.

[23] Hammalawa Saddhatissa, *Buddhist Ethics* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2003), 60.

[24] On compassionate killing, see Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 135. H. Saddhatissa introduces the self-defense of the community through a comparison with Plato's *Republic* (*Ibid,* 114), although violence is simultaneously seen as a condition of decline (*Ibid,* 120, 124).

[25] Peter Harvey, *op. cit.*, 255.

practices involving the mistreatment of other humans and animals. The idea that *ahiṃsā* is a primary virtue has coexisted with its repeated violation. Since the canonical virtue of *ahiṃsā* can be overridden by the weight of circumstances in societies that have claimed to promote the *Dhamma*, it is worthwhile to consider the logic at work in the justification of internal coercion and external war. This raises the question of whether violence is inherently incompatible with the *Dhamma*, as the Buddha is generally portrayed as advocating, or whether there is a "Buddhist just war theory" based on other canonical sources and non-canonical popular "lived" practices and ways of reasoning? Although Ananda Abeysekara denies this apparent paradox by arguing that Buddhism cannot be separated into an authentic philosophical discourse stemming from the Buddha and popular violence, since they are contingent and constructed categories, this paradox cannot be evaded if Buddhism does not only consist of practices but normative claims that can potentially problematize those very practices.[26]

3. Virtue and Engagement

In many senses, Buddhism is inherently ethically engaged. Buddhism is about practices and a way of life, and the Buddha called for the appropriate practice of the virtues.[27] Compassion, generosity, and loving-kindness are primary Theravāda virtues. These are genuinely altruistic and other-oriented since they are ultimately not done out of any "need" but out of freedom.[28] Although Richard Gombrich is correct when he asserts that the Buddha's primary goal was not social reform but spiritual liberation,[29] the historical Buddha remains an ethical model and exemplar who confronted social injustices, such as caste hierarchy

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[26] See his *Colors of the Robe: Religion, Identity, and Difference* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2002), 204.

[27] SN I. 73.

[28] SN I. 25.

[29] Richard Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism* (London: Routledge, 1988), 30, 68.

and the exclusion of "untouchables," and the social pathologies of violence and war. He did not do so because he was commanded to do so to avoid punishment by a divine being, but because of an insight into the moral nexus of *kamma* (karma), which as moral is never simply a predetermined fate or destiny.[30] He is described as responding immanently from out of his own condition to the concrete suffering of others. Although the Buddha's initial encounter with the suffering of others can be interpreted as reflecting his concern about suffering the same afflictions, as being self-interested, it is still his being affected by the other's suffering – the disquiet, sickness, old age, and death of others – that set him on the path of awakening.[31] This encounter with and uncalculated response to suffering provided the basis for *kamma* becoming ethical and the universe a basically moral arena in early Buddhism.[32]

It is sometimes argued that "socially engaged Buddhism" is a relatively new and western inspired phenomenon. First, this claim presupposes that something else is meant by "engagement" than traditional forms of Buddhist ethical engagement for sentient life. Second, this claim is inaccurate insofar as engaged Buddhism is not merely a contemporary western construct insofar as there are qualities in traditional Buddhism allowing contemporary western redeployments. Third, whereas "Western" interpretations often focus on the individualism of Buddhism, and there are elements emphasizing working for one's own salvation, Asian Buddhists have interpreted *kamma* as inherently social. *Kamma* inherently binds one to others, forming a network of freedom and fate, and responsibility extends beyond the immediacy of the moment into the past and future of this and other lives.[33] Further, a number of

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[30] I develop this argument concerning the moral character of karma in "Questioning Karma," 353-373.

[31] On the general importance of feeling, affective response and moral sentiment in Buddhist thought and practice, see Keown, *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics*, 68-78.

[32] Gombrich, 69.

[33] On the social character of karma and responsibility, see Jonathan S. Walters, "Communal Karma and Karmic Community in Theravāda Buddhist

contemporary ethical issues such as the moral status of animals and the environment are arguably more fully articulated in Buddhist than in traditional western discourses.[34] The modern focus on social activism and engagement is motivated by enlightenment ideas of liberty, equality, and fraternity and the social movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As varied responses of historical agents, who can interpret and engage their contexts and are not the mere passive product of colonial hegemony, anti-colonial liberation struggles involve a multiplicity of traditions and inspirations that are more than their Western and Christian sources.

Socially engaged Buddhism, inconceivable without its Asian sources, brings traditions of Buddhist ethical reflection to bear on contemporary moral and social issues. If ethical insights of the *Dhamma* are needed in a world that all too readily resorts to intolerance, persecution, and violence, then vigilance concerning the possible dangers (whether to non-Buddhists or to Buddhists themselves) of inappropriately and unskillfully engaging Buddhist ethics remains vital to such engagement for peace, social justice, and the common welfare. These dangers are apparent in the history of Asian Buddhism and should serve to stimulate Western

History," in J. C. Holt, J. N. Kinnard, and Jonathan S. Walters, *Constituting Communities* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003), 9-39, see especially 10, 18, 28. According to Walters, the notion of rebirth in Sri Lankan popular Buddhism only deepens one's sense of responsibility for others and the social character of karma. My relations with others are unavoidable, given that I am bound to them not only in this life but in others as well. The suffering that I ignore today, because I believe the other person deserves that suffering because of past deeds, will become part of my own suffering.

[34] The notion of social engagement said to be lacking in traditional Buddhism is not so much a traditional Christian idea, which is not necessarily altruistic or purely ethical in the Kantian sense since charity is done for the reward of salvation rather than purely for its own sake, as it is a modern one emerging from the moral and political thought of the enlightenment. Compare Rita Gross's discussion of the claim that Christianity is the source of socially engaged Buddhism in *Soaring and Settling: Buddhist Perspectives on Contemporary Social and Religious Issues* (New York: Continuum, 1998), 13-18. No doubt, the encounter between East and West has promoted contemporary engaged Buddhism, yet this would have remained unlikely if it did not have a basis within Buddhism itself.

reflection on the character and potential consequences of moral and political engagement.

The first danger is the possibility of the *Dhamma* being appropriated by and limited to a political program such that it becomes part of the ideological legitimation of problematic political practices and institutions. One is unlikely to critically engage a political order with which one is complicit. In engaging politics, Buddhism – like any other philosophy, religion, or way of life – risks becoming an instrument of the state or a party. Providing an ethical basis for action, and morality is the basis of practice[35], entails establishing a foundation for the justification and legitimation of action, although living morally is distinguished from being attached to and anxious about right and wrong as viewpoints. [36] On the one hand, this makes ethics and moral judgment possible. On the other hand, it opens up the danger of losing the ethical in its very institutionalization. There are numerous historical examples that show how moral values and ideals are used to excuse horror such that peace becomes war, justice turns into injustice, humanitarian compassion justifies violence, and freedom is turned into tyranny. Connections with the state, the military, political parties and economic powers have at times morally compromised Buddhism and can do so again in the future. This is not without its rationale within Buddhism, which often – analogously to the Christian two kingdom doctrine of the earthly and divine kingdoms – either accommodated itself to the state or left it to its own devices.[37]

Social engagement or activism, which counters tendencies toward the privatization of moral questions, is by itself an insufficient condition or criterion for addressing structural and institutional social-political issues that concern issues of power, justice, and equality that involve more than the intentions and good will of individual agents.[38] Buddhism should not be reduced to

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[35] DN I. 206.

[36] DN I. 26.

[37] See Gombrich, 70 and 116.

[38] Ives makes the important point that Buddhist ethics addresses individual suffering and the individual's response to suffering more than it does the social-

engagement because it is "other-worldly" but insofar as engagement blinds one to the need for mindfulness and comprehension (*saṃpajāno*) in general and comprehension of suitability (*sappaya saṃpajāno*) or the "art of practicality" in particular. This art involves skillfulness and appropriateness in the choice of the right means (Pāli, *upaya-kusala*; Skt., *upāya-kauśalya*) for the right situation at the right moment, which Mark Siderits translates as "pedagogical skill" and Jan Nattier more broadly as "tactical skill."[39] This virtue is one that the Buddha preeminently exemplified.

Although the *Dhamma* is oriented towards peace, moral responsibility and compassion, a second danger can be seen in attempts to use Buddhism to justify violence and war. The various forms of Japanese Buddhism, subordinated to the interests of the Imperial state and state-Shinto after the persecutions of the Meiji era, became part of a militaristic system of justifying expansion, colonization, and war.[40] It was the reduction of the *Dhamma* to socio-political interests that legitimated acting contrary to the *Dhamma*. Distinguishing "reactionary" and "progressive" engagement by itself does not resolve this issue. Imperial Japan's political and militaristic use of Buddhism and the support of aggressive war by the majority of Japanese Buddhists are one powerful example employed by critics of the social role of Buddhism such as Brian Victoria.[41] Yet this question can be raised in contemporary contexts. There are Buddhists who actively work for the non-violent resolution of the Sinhalese-Tamil conflict, for example the Buddhists involved in *Sarvodaya Shramadana,* while

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political diagnosis of suffering in Ives, "Deploying the Dharma: Reflections on the Methodology of Constructive Buddhist Ethics," 35.

[39] Mark Siderits, *Buddhism as Philosophy: An Introduction* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2007), 58; and Jan Nattier usefully explores the different senses of "tactical skill," involving more than teaching or pedagogy, in *A Few Good Men: The Bodhisattva Path according to The Inquiry of Ugra* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003), 154-156.

[40] The extent of this complicity and active engagement has become apparent from the work of Brian Daizen Victoria, *Zen at War* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005) and *Zen War Stories* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003).

[41] *Ibid*.

other Buddhists have played a significant role in intensifying and participating in the conflict.[42] We can thus find at least two conflicting models of socially engaged Buddhism in contemporary Sri Lanka, one "for peace" and the other "for war."

What lessons should be drawn from uses of Buddhism that seem morally problematic or unvirtuous by Buddhist ethical criteria? Are there sources within Buddhist teaching, as Brian Victoria has argued of Zen and Tessa Bartholomeusz of Sri Lankan Theravāda, which potentially legitimate violence and war?[43] The first precept, or first moral rule, of Buddhism seems clear: I undertake the precept to refrain from destroying living creatures (*Panatipata veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami*). The first precept of *ahiṃsā*, a vow taken to dedicate oneself to non-harm and non-violence, does not seem a promising start for justifying violence and yet it is not the case that individuals and groups claiming to be Buddhist have never engaged in violence. One can blame this on the imperfection of human character, and accordingly people often distinguish the pleasant ideal from the unpleasant reality. This separation of norms and practices, besides being dualistic, precludes critical discussion and leaves unanswered the question of whether there are possible sources within Buddhist teaching for departing from the moral demand of *ahiṃsā* to not harm sentient beings.

4. Virtue, Violence, and War

Through hatred, hatred is never overcome; through non-hatred, hatred is always overcome – this is the eternal law.[44]

The obligation to cultivate compassion, loving-kindness, respect, and reverence for all human and sentient life does not

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[42] For a brief account of the *Sarvodaya Shramadana* movement in relation to Buddhist ethics, see Harvey, 225-234.

[43] Brian Daizen Victoria, *Zen War Stories* and Tessa J. Bartholomeusz, *In Defense of Dharma: Just-War Ideology in Buddhist Sri Lanka* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002).

[44] *Dhammapada*, verse 5.

seem a hopeful beginning for the justification of war. The argument that it is better to suffer harm than to do harm appears less auspicious for legitimating violence of any kind. Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike often take for granted that there is no legitimate Buddhist justification of war much less a Buddhist tradition of just-war theory. To use violence is to betray the Buddha's teachings: "There is a person who abstains from the destruction of life; with the rod and the weapon laid aside, he is conscientious and kindly and dwells compassionately towards all living beings."[45]

There are noticeable historical exceptions to the obvious interpretation of the Buddha's first precept demanding non-harm. Traditional Buddhist kings have raised and used armies. Buddhist monks have developed and used martial arts. In Medieval China and Japan, monks have justified killing, carried weapons, formed armies, and been involved in rebellions.[46] Tibetan Buddhism tells of a future king who will militarily liberate them from external oppression in the stories associated with Shambhala and the *Kalachakra Tantra*. Japanese Buddhists supported the expansion of imperial Japan. There are questionable relations between Buddhists and the military in countries such as Burma and Thailand. Currently in Sri Lanka, Theravāda monks and laity have been implicated in persecution and violence in the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict and civil war.

Because of (1) the Buddha's rejection of violence and war as a legitimate means of achieving one's ends and (2) the long history and dedication to peace and non-violent social change in the Buddhist tradition, it is important to reflect on these historical exceptions. The powerful ethical character of Buddhism can be seen from the Buddha's critique of war, violence and social injustice to more contemporary movements as diverse as the Vietnamese peace movement of the 1960's, the Tibetan struggle

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[45] AN, X, 206, also compare AN, IX, 7.

[46] A classic article on such issues in East Asia is Paul Demiéville, "Le bouddhisme et la guerre. Post-scriptum a l'«Histoire des moines guerriers du Japon» de Gaston Renondeau," *Mélanges publiés par l'Institut des Hautes Etudes chinoises*, Tome I, Paris, 1957, 347-385.

for religious freedom, the Burmese pro-democracy movement, and in Sir Lanka the lay *Sarvodaya Shramadana* movement for peace, communal self-help, and popular empowerment.

Counterexamples to what is often considered normative Buddhism, which was a plural and contested Asian "construct" before it was a western one, implicitly reveal the moral character of Buddhism in limiting and countering the drive to hatred, violence and war by the very fact that violence is deeply problematic in Buddhism. Those claiming to be Buddhists who engage in war are forced to appeal to the limited and contested (in Buddhist thought) idea of self-defense or to a questionable antinomian non-attachment to the ethical core of Buddhism itself – loving-kindness and compassion. Although one cannot and should not expect to exclude all possibilities for self-defense and especially non-violent resistance, practices contradicting this minimalist idea reveal that other motives and self-deception can be at work. Rather than there being a general "antinomianism" or "nihilism" inherently at work in Buddhism, as Brian Victoria contends, the problem lies in the ambiguity about moral appropriateness, including skillful means and skillfulness in Buddhism. Buddhist ethics does not advocate the application of one single rule or principle that is eternally and universally valid in all cases but involves ethics understood as (1) appropriateness, (2) a way of life, and (3) part of the way.[47] Although it is not the end or entirety of the Buddhist path, morality is its necessary prerequisite.[48]

Because of the virtue-ethical and context-sensitive character of Buddhism, a number of Buddhists and non-Buddhists suggest that there is a condition that transcends ethics, even understood as ethical virtues and appropriateness. One abandons morality, just as one abandons the raft that gets one to the other side of the river. Yet going beyond good and evil as unconditional absolutes and as

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[47] For a recent argument in favor of principles in Buddhist ethics, see Ives, "Deploying the Dharma: Reflections on the Methodology of Constructive Buddhist Ethics," 30-34.

[48] AN, XI, 1-2. This point is developed in Gombrich, 74, 89; and Keown, *op. cit.*, 50-53.

discriminatory attachments does not entail transcending ethics as one's way of existing or dwelling. The art of suitability and skillfulness is not unethical in being anti-essentialist, as it directs the mind to considering the context and the level of understanding of oneself and others. This prudential context-sensitivity has and can be misunderstood as an excuse for unethical behavior among some Buddhist individuals and groups. Buddhist ethics at its simplest levels appeals to prudential self-interest, especially through the popular logic of merit and merit transfer that is the dominant form of popular Buddhist practice in Sri Lanka;[49] yet continuing to act out of self-interested motives is canonically considered only the lowest level of moral action.[50] Egotistical self-interest and attachment to one's own individual or group superiority undermines the basic equality of sentient beings that is asserted in the Buddhist tradition as well as the fundamental practices and virtues of loving kindness (*mettā*), generosity (*dāna*), and compassion (*karuṇā*).

It is fair to say that Buddhism does not endorse the use of violence. Still it is untrue that Buddhists – or at least individuals and groups claiming to be Buddhists and engaging in at least some of the practices associated with Buddhism – never engage in acts of war, hatred, and conflict. This is no doubt caused by human imperfection. Nevertheless, it should not just be accepted as human imperfection, since such actions always involve accruing *kamma* (karma) and Buddhism insists that beings strive for and realize universal wisdom and compassion. The Buddhist emphasis on non-attachment, including to itself, and developing universal compassion and self-criticism, especially of inadequate understandings of Buddhism, demands a greater emphasis on and means to critique one's own behavior towards others. The aggressive and brutal colonialism justified by Japanese Buddhists, the right-wing rhetoric and practices of some Sri Lankan monks and laity, and the connections between Buddhism and the military

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[49] Gombrich, 78; and H. L. Seneviratne, *The Work of Kings: The New Buddhism in Sri Lanka* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 348.
    [50] Kalupahana, 76.

in Burma, serve as important examples of the dangers of treating Buddhism as a cultural possession or ideology of political legitimation, of taking it as an end rather than a means and a way.[51]

5. Skilful Means and Moral Appropriateness

Nor to do any evil, but cultivate the good, to purify one's mind, this the Buddhas teach.[52]

Tessa Bartholomeusz, whose detailed critical account of just war thinking in Sri Lanka I will partly rely on and partly critically modify in section five, has located the issue of violence in the pragmatic and prudential character of Buddhist ethics.[53] She is correct to the extent that Buddhist ethics is not based in rigidly following one principle or rule but is a way of life grounded in the cultivation of multiple precepts or virtues. Even authors such as David Kalupahana, for whom Buddhist ethics is principally an ethics of principle, acknowledge that the principle can be modified according to new circumstances. [54] When there are new circumstances or a conflict between two different virtues or moral rules, this question becomes pressing: one must decide the moral dilemma through a sense of what is appropriate. When a principle becomes uncertain, it can only be interpreted rather than mechanically applied. A system of rules does not provide an infinite number of further rules explaining how to apply them. That is, there cannot be, on pain of infinite regress, another principle stating how to apply the first principle. This means that there is no further precept to explain the first precept of *ahiṃsā*. In cases of moral conflict, one has to adjudicate the sense of *ahiṃsā* through the context of Buddhist ethics as a whole and the pressing features of the situation itself. This raises the question of whether the first

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[51] Compare Stanley Tambiah, *Buddhism Betrayed? Religion, Politics, and Violence in Sri Lanka* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 59.

[52] DN II.49.

[53] See Bartholomeusz's book.

[54] Kalupahana, 95. See chapter 10 (pp. 90-95) for his account of moral principle.

precept can be outweighed at times by other considerations such as utilitarian considerations of sacrificing one life in order to save multiple lives. Can one then in exceptional circumstances destroy or allow one life to be destroyed in order to save the lives of a community or multitude of individuals?

This reasoning about exceptions and the force of necessity is not only an abstract and speculative question. It has occurred within Buddhist historical traditions and has given birth to a Buddhist tradition that has been likened by some scholars to western "just-war theory." Just war theory seeks to explain the circumstances under which it might be legitimate or at least necessary to take life in armed conflict. Whereas scholars of Theravāda such as Damien Keown have argued that killing can sometimes be a legitimate response to suffering, other scholars such as Rupert Gethin have rejected this argument since it does not address *dukkha* as a reality that must be understood and worked through rather than suppressed.[55] The issue is not that people claiming to be Buddhists at times engage in violence and war in the name of self-defense. It is difficult if not impossible to demand the saintliness according to which it is illegitimate to defend one's parents, family, friends or community under any circumstances. The problem is the "slippery slope," i.e., when and how this reasoning can go wrong and become an ideological excuse for morally illegitimate violence and war.

The expression "skill in means" or "skillful means" (Skt., *upāyakauśalya*; Pāli, *upayakusala*) is a basic Mahāyāna concept, developed in the context of the compassion and wisdom of the Bodhisattva, and rarely found in the Pāli canon. The roots of this expression, both *upaya* ("way, means, or resource") and in particular *kusala* ("skillful, profitable or expedient," often used as equivalent for "good, moral, or wholesome"), are present in the

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[55] Gethin develops this claim against Keown's position in "Can Killing a Living Being Ever Be an Act of Compassion? The Analysis of the Act of Killing in the Abhidhamma and Pāli Commentaries," in *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 11 (2004): 168-202.

Pāli Canon.[56] *Upaya*, the ability of the Buddha to teach at different levels according to the understanding of the recipients, is restricted to the Buddha. *Kusala* – skillfulness and wholesomeness as opposed to unskillfulness and unwholesomeness – in action, thought, and word is advocated for all following the path in Theravāda Buddhism.[57] The use of a number of expressions indicating different abilities and capacities requiring appropriateness and skillfulness – such as *kusala*, *sappaya*, *upaya*, and *yoniso manasikārā* (wise or appropriate attention), *ugghatitaññu* (swiftness of understanding), *patisambhida* (the knowledge to appropriately discriminate things) – can be seen in the Pāli Canon.

For the Buddha, in the *Sangiti Sutta* of the *Dīgha Nikāya*, there are "three kinds of skill: skill in progress, skill in regress, and skill in means" (*tini kosallani*: *aya kosallam, apaya kosallam, upaya kosallam*).[58] The use of *upaya kosallam* in this context shows that skillful means is not foreign to the sense of skillfulness in the Pāli Canon and that it is not limited to the Buddha, at the same time as the Buddha perfectly embodies such skillfulness.[59] Skill in the Buddha's discourses does not seem to mean casuistry, cleverness or a merely calculative pragmatic prudence that is more political than ethical. It is an art that cultivates a moral ability and insight consisting of appropriately applying the *Dhamma* to the situation.

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[56] For instance, DN I. 163-165. Two excellent accounts of the history and concept of skillful means in Mahāyāna Buddhism are those of Thomas Kasulis, who traces *upāya* back to the Abbhidharma, *Skillful Means: The Heart of Buddhist Compassion* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001) and Michael Pye, *Skilful Means: A Concept in Mahāyāna Buddhism* (London: Routledge, 2004). Also see Keown, *op. cit.*, 157-162.

[57] On skillfulness (*kusala*) as an equivalent term for morality in Theravāda Buddhism, see Gombrich, 62. On the basic role of *kusala* in the Pāli canon, see Harvey, 42-49.

[58] *DN* III.220. *The Long Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Dīgha Nikāya*, trans. Maurice Walshe (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), 486, translation modified.

[59] Michael Pye stresses the continuity between pre- Mahāyāna and Mahāyāna Buddhism and the importance of skillful means for Buddhism in general in Pye, ch. 7.

This is confirmed by another reference to the aptness of skillfulness in the *Nava Sutta* of the *Sutta-nipāta*, where it is said that the one who knows *Dhamma* is like the skillful boatman who is able to ferry others across a dangerous river.[60] Here again appropriateness is explained as being like an art or craft such that it is not simply the mechanical application of an abstract principle.

In another passage, understanding what is fitting and skillfully attending is the basis of wisdom.[61] In the *Avijjā Sutta*, skillfulness is associated with knowing and ignorance, when the Buddha is said to discuss how ignorance leads to unskillful qualities and knowing to skillful ones.[62] In *The Group of Ones*, appropriateness and skillfulness are interconnected such that both are essential to the path: "A *bhikkhu* who attends appropriately abandons what is unskillful and develops what is skillful."[63] This use of "skillful," which points to the cultivation of spontaneous activity as in learning a craft to the point where it becomes second nature, is not accidental to the Buddha's discourses.

Not only morality but also meditation is often compared to a skill that requires development. For example, in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, the Buddha said: "Just as monks, an archer, or his apprentice might practice on a straw man or a pile of clay, and thereby later become a long-distance shot, an impeccable marksman who can fell a large body, just so it is with a monk who reaches the destruction of the taints in dependence on the first *jhana*."[64] This sense of skill provides a partial basis for the later Mahāyāna reinterpretation and extension of skillfulness (*kusala*) as skillful means or skill in means (*upāya-kauśalya*). In early Mahāyāna texts such as the *Skill in Means Sūtra* (*Upāyakauśalya Sūtra*), and canonical texts such as the *Lotus Sūtra*, morality is

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[60] SN II.8.

[61] MN 9. *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya*, tr. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), 93.

[62] SN XLV.1, also compare SN XLIX.1.

[63] *Itivuttaka*, 16.

[64] AN IX.35, also see AN IX.36 not included in this translation: *Numerical Discourses of the Buddha*, 235.

fully absorbed into or subordinated to compassion such that the compassion of the Bodhisattva transcends the cultivation of the precepts considered as rules or virtues.[65]

Insofar as Theravāda ethics, like most Buddhist and many forms of non-Buddhist ethics such as Aristotelian and Confucian, is a form of virtue ethics, it faces the issue of appropriate action. If this is the case, then acting *from* the precepts, and the *Vinaya* in general, cannot be reduced to legalistic external conformity with them. Codes, precepts, and rules demand the ability to distinguish between the hypocrisy of breaking them for one's own advantage and the moral insight to adopt them to circumstances. For example, a Sri Lankan *bhikkhu* should not possess money, yet it might not be inappropriate for him to carry money for purposes that are difficult to avoid such as for bus fare to get across town.[66] Rules cannot be mechanically applied but require the skillful application of the *Dhamma* in acting in the proverbial right way at the right time in the right place.[67] A third source of the use of skillfulness in contemporary Theravāda Buddhism would be from the growing knowledge of Mahāyāna traditions of interpretation.

Is the Buddhist notion of skillfulness too open or ambiguous such that it can possibly justify unethical behavior in the name of a greater good? Can it potentially be used to justify behavior contrary to the basic ethical principles of Buddhism such as the Buddha's critique of violence and war? This question of skillfulness seems a more basic issue than that of ethical antinomianism and nihilism developed in some western critiques of Buddhism, since context-sensitive appropriateness would provide the justification for going "beyond good and evil" and other such expressions.[68] This is not only a potential problem in

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[65] *The Skill in Means Sūtra* (*Upāyakauśalya Sūtra*), tr. Mark Tatz (New Dehli: Motilal Banarsidass, 2001).

[66] On the strict canonical prohibition of money and ways of lessening it, see Gombrich, 103. Also note Harvey, 203-205.

[67] Keown, *op. cit.*, 47-48.

[68] On the Western philosophical reception of Buddhism focusing on issues of nihilism, see Roger Pol Droit, *The Cult of Nothingness: The Philosophers and the Buddha* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

Zen or Mahāyāna but in all Buddhism, given that the issue of appropriateness is already significant in the Pāli Canon and in contemporary Theravāda Buddhism.

6. Buddhism and Conflict in Contemporary Sri Lanka

To turn now to a "case study" of the relation between Buddhist ethics and violence, I will consider the long-running civil war in Sri Lanka. The Sri Lankan conflict has its origins in the development of Sinhalese nationalism in response to British colonialism and during the post-war independence movement. The British played off Sinhalese and Tamil interests and sentiments in order to retain power during the colonial period, much as they did in their other colonies. The postcolonial period saw the deepening of various narratives of ethic self-identity among both the Sinhalese and the Tamil populations. Successive democratically elected Sri Lankan governments have reflected the interests and aspirations of the Sinhalese, contributing to Tamil sentiments of disentitlement. The resulting episodic civil war has killed over 65,000 people since the 1980's.

The ethnic conflict has occurred between a series of elected governments, led by various parities from the right to the left who have been supported by the mostly Buddhist Sinhalese majority, and the terrorist – insofar as suicide bombings, assassinations, eliminating all Tamil rivals, etc., are terrorist – and or self-described "liberation" organization Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) organization based in the mostly non-Buddhist Tamil minority.[69] The best option for both sides would be a

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[69] Recent accounts of the LTTE's uses of terrorism include: Ami Pedahzur, *Suicide Terrorism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 70-88; Kingsley de Silva, "Terrorism and political agitation in post-colonial South Asia: Jammu-Kashmir and Sri Lanka," in Ramesh Thakur and Oddny Wiggen, eds., *South Asia in the World: Problem-Solving Perspectives on Security, Sustainable Development, and Good Governance* (Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 2004), ch. 7; and Shri D.R. Kaarthikeyan, "Root Causes of Terrorism? A Case Study of the Tamil Insurgency and the LTTE," in Tore Bjørgo, ed., *Root Causes of Terrorism: Myths, Reality and Ways Forward* (London: Routledge, 2005), ch. 10.

peaceful resolution and mutual cooperation, which seems presently unlikely. On the one hand, there is much to criticize in the Sri Lankan government and Sinhalese nationalists, from people who claim to be conserving and defending Buddhism and its role in Sri Lankan life to socialist populists, who have flamed the passions of war. On the other hand, the legitimate grievances of the Tamil population are used to support an authoritarian, nationalistic, and violent organization.[70]

Representatives of "engaged Buddhism" and "critical Buddhism" want to free Buddhism from what they describe as its traditional complicity with unjust social and political institutions and practices. They frequently point to Imperial Japan and the current conflict in Sri Lanka as primary examples that prove traditional Buddhism's complicity with violence, exploitation, and domination.[71] This argument appeals, in the case of Sri Lanka, to the fact that some Theravāda Buddhist monks and laity have been implicated in violence and calls for violence against the LTTE and / or the Tamil population. Any adequate consideration of this conflict begins to reveal the need for a more nuanced and differentiating approach to the question of what role Buddhism plays in the current conflict. This conflict raises two significant questions: (1) What is the role of Buddhism in promoting the conflict? (2) What are the arguments for and against the justice of war in the Buddhist traditions of Sri Lanka? The second question can be made more exact in the following terms: What possible

[70] Although some justify the violence of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam as a legitimate response to Sinhalese nationalism, it should be kept in mind that the LTTE, according to some observers, is "just as fanatically committed to a particular authoritarian agenda as the JVP and just as strongly nationalist. The Tamil Tigers' compulsive resort to terror has earned them, too, a justifiable comparison to the Khmer Rouge." (p. 97). See K. M. de Silva, "Sri Lanka: Surviving Ethnic Strife," *Journal of Democracy* 8.1 (1997): 97-111.

[71] For example, see Brian Victoria, "The Reactionary Use of Karma in Twentieth-Century Japan," in *Revisioning Karma*, 404, 427. This position is part of the "critical Buddhism" movement especially active in relation to Japanese Buddhism; see Christopher Ives, "What's Compassion Got to Do with It? Determinants of Zen Social Ethics in Japan," in *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 12 (2005): 39-43.

justifications of violence are there in (i) the Pāli Canon, (ii) tales about Aśoka – who has both righteous and violent traits[72] – and the universal wheel-turning monarch (*cakkavatti*), (iii) postcanonical Sinhalese narratives of kingship and nation such as the *Mahāvamsa*,[73] and, finally, (iv) contemporary postcolonial Sri Lankan Buddhism?

In the remainder of this paper, I will sketch out a possible answer addressing a few aspects of these questions. One strategy is to analyze Buddhist ideas in the context of western just-war and ethical theory and conclude that Buddhism as it informs the "popular" actions and practices of living Buddhist communities is more complex than its normative or "elite" ideal. Buddhist lands do not only involve traditions of nonviolence and loving kindness. They also have had a long history of thinking about and engaging in internal and external physical conflict. That is, wars from which reasoned as well as opportunistic assertions of the possible justice or unfortunate necessity of war can emerge. Buddhism privileges non-violence *while at the same time* self-described Buddhists have justified and engaged in war under certain conditions.

Buddhism is a diverse set of norms and practices; and this diversity is also true of Sri Lankan Buddhism where one can see three approaches to the question of war. First, there is a position that Tessa J. Bartholomeusz and Chandra Richard de Silva call Buddhist fundamentalism.[74] Yet fundamentalism suggests a return to the fundamentals of Buddhism, which in this case would mean to renounce violence as a means. As Mahinda Deegalle argues this position is not so much Buddhist as it is Sinhalese nationalist, which appropriates Buddhism as a symbol of Sinhalese heritage

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[72] John S. Strong, *The Legend of King Aśoka* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 40-41.

[73] *The Mahāvamsa: The Great Chronicle of Sri Lanka* (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1999). For a detailed account of the legacy of the *Mahāvamsa*, see Steven Kemper, *The Presence of the Past* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).

[74] See the book edited by Bartholomeusz and de Silva.

and identity.[75] This raises the interesting question whether there is actually such a thing as religious fundamentalism. Many movements labeled as fundamentalist seem to be more about the use of the religious for nationalistic economic and political interests. The nationalist and "just war" positions can both appeal to the *Mahāvamsa*, which describes the Buddha's legendary visits to Sri Lanka and the military victories of ancient Sinhalese Buddhist kings against invading Hindu Tamils.[76]

The nationalists explicitly demands that the Sinhala-Tamil conflict must conclude not only with the defeat of the LTTE but also with the restoration of a unified and fully Sinhalese and Buddhist Sri Lanka. Their argument for war generally follows a three step legitimation of anti-Tamil sentiment: (1) Sinhala and Buddhist identity constitute a unity that is radically distinct from the Dravidian Hindu Tamil interlopers from South India; (2) Sri Lanka is the island of *Dhamma* (*dhammadvipa*) ordained by the Buddha himself (during his three apocryphal visits) for Buddhism such that the whole island is a sacred relic of the Buddha's and the loss of its integrity would destroy this legacy; and (3) the justice of a defensive war for the *Dhamma* justifies the preservation of Sri Lanka in its unity as a majority Sinhalese Buddhist nation through military action against the Tamils, identified with the invading *damila* of the medieval epics, thus associating the present dispute with past threats as well as the fear of tiny Sri Lanka being submerged in the vastness of India. Bartholomeusz contends that it is paradoxically Buddhist beliefs about pacifism – i.e., that Buddhists are more fair, tolerant, and peaceful – that leads Buddhists to differentiate themselves from others and turn to

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[75] Mahinda Deegalle, "Theravāda Attitudes towards Violence," in *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 10 (2003). Also compare Gombrich, 141-142; and Harvey, 255-260.

[76] On the question of *The Mahāvamsa*, nationalism and mythic violence, see John Clifford Holt, *The Buddhist Viṣṇu* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 63-65, 93-94, 266-267. Also note the descriptions in Gombrich, 141-142; and Harvey, 255-258. Steven Kemper also emphasizes the role of colonial and other westernizing forces in the creation of modern Sinhalese nationalism in Kemper, 196-214.

violence to protect that very ideal. The perceived need to preserve endangered Buddhist peacefulness creates the conditions for violence.[77] Yet Buddhism is not so much the cause of such attitudes as it – or rather its surface historical facticity as uniquely Sinhalese – is instrumentally incorporated into conservative Sinhalese discourses and, more generally, the Sinhalese side of the "ethnic outbidding" that Neil DeVotta characterizes as a cancer eating away at Sri Lankan political life.[78]

The second range of views might be characterized as the moderate justification of the use of force, and maintains the justice of undertaking "defensive military action" against insurgencies even if the insurgents draw on some legitimate grievances. The war is interpreted as the defense of the territorial integrity and peace of the nation, as a proper function of the modern secular state, and/or the defense of the nation's endangered Buddhist identity. This model appeals to the conventional model of international law and its account of the justice and limits of war as well as to Buddhist principles such as maximizing well-being. Assuming one is attacked, and if common well-being outweighs the well-being of the attacker, it is then justifiable to defend oneself, one's parents and family, one's fellow citizens, including if it involves violence and killing. This argument is of course reasonable, and self-defense is not without its pragmatic justification and traditional authority. The problem is that such arguments often move imperceptibly from the exceptional justification of minimal violence under "conditions of necessity" to the ideological normalization of the state of war. Violence, once it is justified as an exception, becomes the norm from which there seems no escape. The ethical loses its normative and critical force and becomes part of the social reproduction and intensification of conflict rather than a medium of its resolution.

There are multiple strategies used by Sri Lankans to answer the question of how Buddhists can justify engaging in conflict and war.

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[77] Bartholomeusz, 16.
[78] Neil DeVotta, "Liberalism and Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka," *Journal of Democracy* 13.1 (2002): 83.

Some stress the unfortunate necessity of military action despite its negative karmic consequences. Others, perhaps motivated by the need for a more inspirational message, suggest that righteous war (i.e., one with a morally legitimate goal and fought in an honorable fashion with morally acceptable means) has meritorious karmic consequences. Both strategies presuppose that the precept of nonviolence is a prima facie rather than an absolute duty such that nonviolence is a first duty that can be overridden under certain circumstances as a last resort.[79]

Theravāda ethics, especially when it is interpreted textually through the Pāli Canon, places absolute value on acting out of compassion and avoiding harm. In practice, Sri Lankan Buddhists reason with a plurality of context-sensitive prima facie duties. The precept against violence is not absolute and can be overridden by more pressing obligations such as defense of one's parents, country, or the *Dhamma*. The Buddha's account of moral skillfulness suggests, according to this reading, the use of practical judgment or a sense of appropriateness to apply moral principles to the situation. The Buddha's precepts are primary and conflicts between precepts require contextual reasoning that employs considerations that some have compared with utilitarian (maximizing compassion and minimizing suffering) and others to virtue ethical (the effects actions have on one's condition) reasoning. In this way, Buddhist ethical reasoning is used to justify violence for the sake of nonviolence and the Sri Lankan government's claim to wage "war for peace." The justification of war requires the fulfillment of certain conditions comparable to Christian and western just war criteria. A number of Sri Lankan Buddhists, in line with traditional justifications of war in the Buddhist kingdoms of South-East Asia,[80] appeal to the Hindu *Bhagavad-Gītā* and the Pan-Indic idea that the ruler (*rāja*) and warriors (*kṣatriya*) fulfilling their military duties are exempt from *ahiṃsā*.

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[79] Bartholomeusz, 26-29.
[80] See Trevor Oswald Ling, *Buddhism, Imperialism and War: Burma and Thailand in Modern History* (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1979).

Historically numerous leaders and societies claiming to be Buddhist have had armies, police forces, prisons, etc., with actual weapons and the possibility of using them. This is based in Pan-Indian ideas about kingship and in several Buddhist traditions. In the Pāli canon, the Buddha abandoned becoming a universal wheel-turning monarch in order to become liberated. This prioritized liberation, and the renunciation of violence and harm that is essential to its realization, yet at the same time was interpreted as giving a derivative or secondary legitimacy to political leadership. Such monarchs are portrayed as universally wise and generous but do not abandon the state's monopoly on force. This model of righteous kingship is the basis for the Buddhist warrior-kings of the *Mahāvamsa* that continue to have national appeal.

Popular Sri Lankan Buddhism incorporates a tacit "just war theory" according to which war is justifiable when fought with the appropriate intent and means. The Sinhalese supporters of war appeal to such ideas of the legitimacy of defensive war, which is defined by the compassionate intention to protect rather than the negative motivations of anger, greed or hatred. It is interesting that "militant Sinhalese nationalists," insofar as they still claim to operate within the framework of Buddhism, frequently appeal to a widener or more extensive notion of defensive war (such as the unity of "Buddhist Sri Lanka" as a whole) since canonical Buddhism provides no basis for offensive or aggressive war.[81] Buddhism does not have the tradition of offensive "holy war" and, since motivation and intention are more important than external ritual and obedience, there is no basis for war to convert others by force even for their own good – which leaves open the question of the tacit violence or implicit coercive power of education, socialization, and the socio-economic reproduction of society.

The first militant nationalistic and second moderate pro-war Sinhalese positions described above are differentiated by the portrayal of what is being defended and what means are justifiable. This remains an active question given the fragility of peace, the

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[81] Bartholomeusz, 121-123.

continuation of death and destruction, the conflicting assertions about the "righteousness" of each side, and the competing claims about the justice and injustice of military action.

Finally, in a third type of position, there are Sri Lankan Buddhists who reject all and any violence as an impediment to *nibbāna* (*nirvāṇa*) and who have been prominently engaged in promoting the peace process and reconciliation. Bartholomeusz contends that this must be a consequence of giving the first precept of *ahiṃsā* a deontological status. That is, it is a universally valid principle and duty that is applicable regardless of circumstances and has no exceptions. The Buddha does not claim that violence is only sometimes wrong but that violence, no matter how righteous, always produces more violence; and warriors, no matter how virtuous, always suffer the consequences of war. However, the Buddhist precepts do not have to be interpreted according to the model of rule based ethics, or applying a conceptual principle to all cases, in order for Buddhists to unconditionally reject war. The most appropriate skillfulness may well generally result in the rejection of violence and war given its personal costs and karmic consequences. This position is adopted by the majority of Sri Lankan intellectuals, such as Walpola Rahula, who wrote in 1959 that "Violence in any form, under any pretext whatsoever, is absolutely against the teaching of the Buddha."[82]

According to the Buddha, "Conquest begets enmity; the conquered live in misery; and the peaceful live happily having renounced both conquest and defeat."[83] This position is in fact the only consistent one with the Pāli Canon, if not later non-canonical Sinhalese texts such as the *Mahāvamsa* that are also historically significant in shaping Sinhalese self-interpretations of their own identity and the possibility – albeit limited and tenuous – of a Buddhist theory of "just war." This difference shows the value of not reducing the normative dimension of Buddhism to its popular manifestations, and of not minimizing canonical texts and the

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[82] Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, revised edition (New York: Grove Press, 1974), 5.

[83] *Dhammapada*, verse 201.

"philosophical" dimension of Buddhism in the face of its "violent" lived reality.[84] Since norms and exemplars are richly embodied in images and narratives, the distinction between normative claims and actual practices does not entail the reduction of Buddhism's symbolic dimension to an impoverished rationalized shadow. Exemplars and norms often serve a critical, regulative, and self-reforming function, providing a textured fabric and context to which individuals can appeal so as to engage their circumstances and practices differently. If it is illegitimate to isolate and reify supposedly "elite" normative or canonical Buddhism on the authority of "anti-essentialism," it seems similarly problematic to eliminate all normative and regulative claims in the name of "popular practices."

7. Conclusion: Virtue and Violence

The Sri Lankan conflict is not exclusively a question of one individual's insight and virtue in my estimation. If it was, it would not be at such an impasse. It is a structural crisis that requires a political solution that has to rely on a plurality of ethical, religious, and social possibilities and voices. My claim here contradicts current tendencies that (1) seek to privatize social problems into issues of personal virtue or (2) reduce the plurality of public life to one vision of the good life and/or religious redemption. To the degree that Buddhism shares these features, which are appropriate given its primary goal of spiritual liberation, it is insufficient by itself to resolve structural social-political crises to the degree that these require critical and empirically-oriented social research and transformation. Like other ethical and religious ideals, Buddhism can become a constituent part of social ills, if the Buddhist does not recognize the independent and plural structural qualities of social-political life. Nonetheless, despite these limits, it still offers a valuable response to the question. Because of its responsiveness to the suffering of others as well as its self-critical, non-coercive and egalitarian character, Buddhism provides a powerful and

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[84] Compare Bartholomeusz, 110.

cogent individual way of life. And, as such, it can contribute to the resolution of conflict and suffering.

The conclusion that Buddhism is not the primary cause of the Sri Lankan conflict and can be part of its peaceful resolution is not a new thesis. P. D. Premasiri reasonably concludes that there is no place for righteous war within Pāli Buddhism: "the idea of a just or righteous war (*dharma yuddha*) involving the use of weapons of war and violence is conspicuously absent in the Buddhist canon. The Buddha countered the prevailing belief that soldiers of war who fight for a cause could, as a consequence of their rightful performance of duty, aspire to attain a heavenly rebirth if they succumb to their injuries while in combat. The Buddha states in the Pāli canon that one who fights a war does not generate wholesome thoughts but thoughts of malice and hatred, which are absolutely unwholesome. Therefore, their future destiny will be a woeful one, which is in accordance with their unwholesome *kamma*."[85]

According to my argument, Buddhism shares some of the potential problems of other varieties of virtue ethics. In particular, (1) moral appropriateness and skillfulness can become a potentially dangerous doctrine legitimating unethical behavior and (2) the ethics of individual self-cultivation of character can become ideologically complicit with systems of exploitation and domination. First, skillfulness can be reduced to an instrumental manipulation of means without regard for the quality of the ends, such that it is removed from its ethical context of loving-kindness, generosity, compassion, and *ahiṃsā*. Second, the privatization of the ethical separates questions of character from the reproduction of social-political systems, such that the moralist as well as the ideologue appeals to the good intentions of individuals without regard for underlying relations of power. Socially engaged Buddhists ought to be mindful of both issues if they are to counter the potential betrayal of the moral core of the *Dhamma* through individual practices and social-political institutions. These possibilities cannot be excluded *a priori* and indicate the need to

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[85] P. D. Premasiri, "The Place for a Righteous War in Buddhism," in *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 10 (2003).

be vigilant in cultivating and practicing the art of ethical appropriateness and skillfulness.

Like other forms of context-sensitive ethics, Buddhist ethics cannot be reduced to the mechanical application of one principle or universal rule, such as John Stuart Mill's principle of utility or Kant's categorical imperative. Whereas rule-based ethics requires the appeal to and application of a general principle to particulars, context-based ethics appeals to a concrete and existential way of living as a whole. This whole involves the interdependence of self and others as well as self and world.[86] In this context, even the first and most basic precepts of non-harm and non-violence (*ahiṃsā*) cannot be taken as unconditional or absolute if they cause more harm than not. This is why the taking of life in conflict or war is discouraged, especially because of their negative motivations and consequences, yet not absolutely forbidden in Pāli and Sri Lankan Buddhism. Likewise, vegetarianism is not taken as an absolute in the Pāli canon or in Theravāda countries. The Buddha rejected making it an unconditional duty or obligation, as one is more or less culpable for eating meat or even killing an animal given (1) the sentience/insentience of the being killed, (2) the motivation or intention involved in killing the animal (e.g., hunting for food as opposed to killing for employment or sport), (3) the amount of suffering produced by the action, and (4) the directness and indirectness of one's involvement in the killing of the animal.[87]

Instead of being an absolute independently existing command or obligation, morality is seen as a conditional and dependently arisen ethical mode of comportment. It is a situational and responsive disposition from which one can ethically respond to the diversity of concrete circumstances. Without this ethical orientation and context, a decontextualized notion of skillfulness – and appropriate judgment in general – can and has been used to justify violence and war in ways that run contrary to the Buddha's

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[86] Note that interdependence by itself is not an ethical claim and Buddhist ethics entails some forms of ethical independence, as argued in Ives, "Deploying the Dharma: Reflections on the Methodology of Constructive Buddhist Ethics," 24-25.

[87] Compare Harvey, 159-162.

teachings. If my argument is valid, then moral skillfulness and appropriateness can legitimately be used to justify less morally problematic and culpable forms of violence such as self-defense and perhaps humanitarian intervention to prevent genocide. As a consequence, it provides a limited and conditional Buddhist just-war-theory such that Theravāda countries can legitimately have armies and police forces and still be considered Buddhist. Yet, these uses are circumscribed, and such reasoning cannot consistently be used to justify aggressive violence or war motivated by anger, craving, hatred, or attachment. From this perspective, there is much to criticize in these lands and their history. Nonetheless, if the realization of *Dhamma* right here in this life is not to be completely betrayed by worldly calculations, then even such a pragmatically reasonable position goes too far or risks too much. Despite actual and potential problems with Buddhists, who would like but have not yet realized the *Dhamma*, it remains a commendable virtue of Buddhism that it provides the means to rigorously question violence and war as well as demanding the proper cultivation of the skillfulness and insight to do so. Such insight means that one is not only attentive to what others do but more importantly to one's own activities and disposition, even more when one has the self-satisfaction of it seeming most sensible and decent.