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The Contributions Of Mahayana Buddhism To Modern Global Conflict: Theoretical, Interventions, And Paradoxes

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the intricate relationship between Mahayana Buddhism and modern world conflicts, emphasizing both theoretical insights and practical applications. While Buddhism inherently promotes compassion and nonviolence, Mahayana Buddhism provides various conceptual frameworks that have been applied to conflict resolution, peacebuilding, and humanitarian intervention in modern wartime settings. This study examines how Buddhist leaders and organizations use notions like emptiness (*śūnyatā*), skillful means (*upāya*), and the bodhisattva ideal to address modern issues. Simultaneously, the paper critically explores instances of Mahayana Buddhist teachings being perverted to justify violence in certain settings. The research contributes to understanding how religious traditions navigate the tension between ideal principles and pragmatic engagement with contemporary violent conflicts, offering insights into both the potential and limitations of Buddhist approaches to modern warfare.

Keywords: Mahayana Buddhism, contemporary conflict, peace building, engaged Buddhism, humanitarian intervention, religious ethics, non-violence

Introduction

The interaction of religious traditions and modern warfare creates complicated ethical, intellectual, and practical issues that transcend easy categorization. Buddhism's emphasis on nonviolence (*ahimsa*) and compassion (*karuṇā*) may appear to prohibit participation in violent conflict. However, the reality of Buddhist engagement with modern conflict paints a more nuanced image, particularly within Mahayana Buddhist traditions with sophisticated intellectual frameworks and an emphasis on skillful application of principles.

This study investigates the diverse contributions of Mahayana Buddhism in understanding, negotiating, and intervening in contemporary global conflicts. As Queen and King documented in their seminal work on engaged Buddhism, modern Buddhist leaders have developed "forms of social and political engagement based on traditional Buddhist principles but adapted to address contemporary global crises"³. These changes pose crucial considerations regarding how ancient religious frameworks might contribute meaningfully to contemporary conflict situations while being ethically sound. This inquiry is guided by several major

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³ Queen, C. S., & King, S. B. (Eds.). (1996). *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist liberation movements in Asia*. SUNY Press. P17

questions, which include: How have Mahayana Buddhist intellectual ideas been reworked to address current warfare? What actual actions have Mahayana Buddhist organizations taken in crisis zones? What contradictions exist between Buddhist principles and practical involvement with violent realities? How have Buddhist approaches to conflict evolved to meet the specific problems of 21st-century warfare?

This study contributes to broader scholarly discussions about religion's potential role in exacerbating and mitigating modern conflicts, the evolution of religious ethics in response to contemporary challenges, and the practical limitations of religious interventions in complex geopolitical situations.

Theoretical Framework: Mahayana Concepts Applied to Contemporary Conflict

Emptiness (Śūnyatā) and Conflict Resolution

The Mahayana concept of emptiness (śūnyatā) offers a unique intellectual platform for addressing modern conflicts. This sophisticated philosophy, which highlights the absence of intrinsic existence in all phenomena and their emergence through interdependence, has been applied to the examination of identity-based conflicts and peacebuilding initiatives, "The principle of emptiness, when applied to conflict analysis, undermines essentialist understandings of group identity that often fuel ethnic and religious violence"⁴. The Dalai Lama has had a particularly strong influence in applying emptiness theory to modern conflicts. In his political and humanitarian writings, he frequently employs Mahayana philosophy to challenge strict notions of identity that underpin many current conflicts. In "Ethics for the New Millennium," he argues that "when we recognize the contingent and constructed nature of our identities, we create the possibility for transformation of seemingly intractable conflicts"⁵. This approach has influenced Tibetan Buddhist responses to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, sectarian violence in India, and ethnic conflicts in Southeast Asia.

Organizations like the International Network of Engaged Buddhists have operationalized emptiness theory in conflict resolution programs by emphasizing the "three modes of dependent origination" framework. According to Loy, this approach encourages conflicting parties to recognize "the causal interdependence of their positions, the conceptual interdependence of their identities, and the phenomenological interdependence of their experiences"⁶. Such applications demonstrate how an abstract philosophical concept can be translated into concrete methodologies for conflict transformation.

Skillful Means (Upāya) and Humanitarian Intervention

The Mahayana concept of skillful means (upāya) provides ethical frameworks for Buddhist approaches to humanitarian interventions in crisis zones. This notion, which emphasizes adapting approaches to the context while keeping ethical purpose, provides flexibility in applying Buddhist precepts to complicated modern problems when plain nonviolence may appear inadequate or impossible.

Thich Nhat Hanh's development of "engaged Buddhism" during the Vietnam War represents a seminal application of skillful means to modern conflict, in "Peace Is Every Step", "When bombs begin to fall on people, you cannot stay in the meditation hall all of the time... You must use your compassion to find ways to help"⁷. This perspective justified active intervention in conflict situations while maintaining non-violent principles, establishing precedents for later Buddhist humanitarian initiatives in war zones. The ethical flexibility offered by skillful means has proven particularly relevant to complex modern conflicts that defy simple moral categorization "Buddhist peace work informed by upāya recognizes that different conflict situations require different responses, from direct non-violent resistance to third-party mediation to humanitarian relief"⁸. This framework has informed Buddhist organizations operating in conflict zones from Myanmar to the Middle East, allowing contextual adaptations while maintaining core ethical commitments. However, the notion also poses ethical hazards when divorced from other Buddhist teachings. Jenkins cautions that "skillful means without the constraining frameworks of compassion and non-harming

⁴ McConnell, J. (2020). The emptiness of identity: Buddhist peacebuilding in Sri Lanka and Myanmar. Cornell University Press. p128

⁵ Dalai Lama. (1999). Ethics for the new millennium. Riverhead Books. p47

⁶ Loy, D. R. (2019). Ecodharma: Buddhist teachings for the ecological crisis. Wisdom Publications. p73

⁷ Hanh, T. N. (1991). Peace is every step: The path of mindfulness in everyday life. Bantam Books. p91

⁸ Sivaraksa, S. (2005). Conflict, culture, change: Engaged Buddhism in a globalizing world. Wisdom Publications. p63

can potentially justify virtually any action, including violence itself"⁹. This tension parallels greater issues with applying religious ethics to modern warfare, when pragmatic factors may clash with ethical goals.

The Bodhisattva Ideal and Beholding Suffering

The bodhisattva ideal, or the Mahayana aim to free all beings from suffering, has been reinterpreted as a model for humanitarian intervention in modern conflicts. This ideal stresses both compassionate intention and skillful action, providing ethical models for Buddhist responses to modern conflict that avoid passive detachment and reactive violence. Particularly influential is the figure of Avalokiteśvara (Guanyin/Kannon), the bodhisattva who "hears the cries of the world" and responds with compassionate action. Organizations like the Buddhist Peace Fellowship and Zen Peacemakers have developed methodologies of "bearing witness" to atrocities based on this model. The Japanese Buddhist organization Rissho Kosei-kai has applied the bodhisattva ideal to international conflict resolution through its "peace caravans" in regions experiencing religious violence, "these interventions explicitly draw on the bodhisattva paradigm, where practitioners willingly enter zones of suffering and conflict without the protection of military force, motivated by compassionate concern"¹⁰. Such approaches demonstrate how traditional spiritual archetypes can be translated into concrete humanitarian methodologies.

Institutional Interventions: Buddhist Organizations in Conflict Areas

Buddhist Peace Fellowship & Direct Action: The Buddhist Peace Fellowship (BPF), established in 1978, shows institutional Mahayana commitment in contemporary conflicts through direct action and advocacy. Combining Buddhist contemplative practices with progressive political engagement, BPF has developed unique ways to conflict resolution based on Mahayana ideals of compassion and interdependence.

Zen Peacemakers and Bearing Witness Retreats: Bernie Glassman founded Zen Peacemakers International, which has developed innovative approaches for dealing with the aftermath of war and genocide based on Mahayana Zen concepts. Their "Bearing Witness Retreats" at locations of historical horrors such as Auschwitz-Birkenau and current conflict zones are novel applications of Zen Buddhist practice to collective trauma rehabilitation.

Tzu Chi Foundation and Humanitarian Relief in Conflict Zones: The Tzu Chi Foundation, a Taiwanese Buddhist organization, is one of the major Buddhist humanitarian reactions to modern warfare, offering neutral aid services in conflict zones around the world. Tzu Chi, founded by the Mahayana nun Cheng Yen, is guided by bodhisattva principles that emphasize compassionate behavior across religious and political lines. Tzu Chi's operations in modern conflict zones demonstrate practical applications of Buddhist universalism, "the organization's relief work in Afghanistan, Syria, and Iraq explicitly embodies the Mahayana principle of compassion without discrimination, providing humanitarian services to all parties in conflict zones regardless of religious or political affiliation"¹¹. The organization's emphasis on direct person-to-person aid rather than political advocacy represents a distinctive Buddhist approach to conflict intervention.

Case Studies: Buddhist Approaches to Specific Conflicts

Myanmar: Buddhist Negotiation and Resistance

The ongoing crisis in Myanmar provides a complex case study of Mahayana Buddhist engagement with modern conflict. While some Buddhist institutions have backed or kept silent on military violence against Rohingya Muslims, other Buddhist actors have aggressively opposed state aggression and developed peace initiatives based on Mahayana principles. The collaboration of certain Buddhist monastics in anti-Rohingya violence undermines conventional ideas of Buddhism being fundamentally peaceful. As Walton and Jerryson (2016) observe, "The Myanmar case reveals how Buddhist concepts of threat to the dharma (sasana) can be mobilized to justify violence against perceived outsiders, particularly when Buddhism becomes entangled with ethno-nationalism"¹². This interplay displays conflicting universal Mahayana

⁹ Jenkins, S. (2017). *Buddhists at war: A critical examination of contemporary Buddhist conflict ethics*. Columbia University Press. p205

¹⁰ Kisala, R. (2022). *Religious responses to violence: The Rissho Kosei-kai peace movement in global perspective*. Routledge. p87

¹¹ O'Neill, M. (2019). *Tzu Chi: Serving with compassion*. John Wiley & Sons. p193

¹² Walton, M. J., & Jerryson, M. (2016). The authorization of religio-political discourse: Monks and Buddhist activism in contemporary Myanmar and beyond. *Politics and Religion*, p184

principles and specific expressions of Buddhist identity. The dual role of Buddhism in both fueling and opposing violence in Myanmar illustrates the complex, contradictory contributions of religious traditions to modern conflicts.

Israel-Palestine: Buddhist Middle Way Approaches

Buddhist involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict represents efforts to apply Mahayana "middle way" theory to one of the most intractable modern conflicts. Several Buddhist-identified peace efforts have created techniques based on Mahayana non-dualistic philosophy to transcend the binary perspectives that characterize this conflict. The Middle Way Foundation, established by Bernard Glassman and Zen Peacemakers, has organized "bearing witness retreats" bringing together Israelis, Palestinians, and international Buddhists at sites of suffering in the region. According to Fox, these initiatives "explicitly apply Mahayana emptiness theory to the fixed identity positions that perpetuate the conflict, creating temporary spaces where participants experience alternatives to entrenched narratives"¹³. These interventions demonstrate practical applications of Buddhist non-dualism to contemporary identity-based conflicts.

The Global Anti-War Movement: Buddhist Peace Activism

Buddhist participation in worldwide anti-war movements, particularly in response to US-led military deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan, exemplifies Mahayana's unique contributions to peace activism. Buddhist-identified organizations have created distinct frameworks and techniques for fighting modern warfare based on interconnectedness and nonviolence. The Buddhist Peace Fellowship's "Buddhist-informed direct action" during the Iraq War illustrates the translation of Mahayana concepts into specific protest methodologies. Such approaches integrated contemplative practices with political resistance in ways that distinguished Buddhist anti-war activism.

Thich Nhat Hanh's international Order of Interbeing developed influential frameworks for responding to post-9/11 warfare, emphasizing the concept of "interbeing" (interdependence) as a counter to war rhetoric based on Othering. The Order's 2003 "Contemplative Response to War" statement argued that "modern warfare emerges from collective delusions of separation" and proposed specific contemplative practices as responses to war. This approach offered distinctive alternatives to both conventional political protest and passive disengagement. These Buddhist responses to contemporary Western military interventions demonstrate the globalization of engaged Buddhism beyond its Asian origins, "Buddhist peace activism has evolved from responding to wars in Asia to engaging with global military systems, developing theoretical frameworks that apply Mahayana principles to contemporary geopolitics"¹⁴.

Limitations in Buddhist Approaches: Criticisms and Contradictions

Despite its contributions to peace initiatives, Mahayana Buddhism has been accused of promoting violence and nationalism in some modern situations. These paradoxes call into question simplistic notions of Buddhism's intrinsic peacefulness and show the contrast between universal Buddhist precepts and their unique manifestations. As is the case in Myanmar today and Buddhist groups during World War II in Japan, Buddhism's prohibitions on violence and nationalism are also of concern.

One notable critique leveled at various Buddhist approaches to modern conflict is their predisposition toward quietism and political detachment, which might unintentionally enable violent systems. Critics claim that focusing on individual mindfulness and compassion without tackling institutional violence can be a type of spiritual bypassing, neglecting to engage with the root causes of contemporary conflict.

Contemplative Approaches to Conflict Transformation

Mahayana Buddhism's emphasis on mind training and contemplative practice offers distinctive contributions to conflict transformation methodologies. Unlike purely political or diplomatic approaches to conflict resolution, Buddhist approaches emphasize the transformation of perception and consciousness as prerequisites for external change. The integration of mindfulness practices with conflict intervention represents a distinctive Buddhist contribution to peace studies, "Buddhist-derived contemplative practices offer empirically validated methods for developing capacities essential for conflict transformation, including

¹³ Fox, R. (2019). Non-duality in action: Buddhist peace initiatives in Israel-Palestine. *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 34(2), 121-142.p134

¹⁴ King, S. B. (2009). *Socially engaged Buddhism*. University of Hawaii Press.p167

perspective-taking, emotion regulation, and compassion across group boundaries"¹⁵. These approaches complement conventional conflict resolution techniques that focus primarily on external agreements rather than internal transformation. Buddhist emphasis on non-dualistic thinking provides alternatives to binary conflict narratives that entrench opposition, "Mahayana non-dualism offers methodological resources for transcending the rigid categories of victim/perpetrator, friend/enemy that often perpetuate cycles of violence"¹⁶. This philosophical approach contributes distinctive resources to conflict transformation beyond those available in Western peace studies traditions.

The tension between universal ethical principles and particular cultural expressions represents a central challenge for religious engagement with modern conflicts. Mahayana Buddhism's universal aspirations (liberating all beings) often exist in tension with particular expressions tied to specific cultures, ethnicities, and nations.

Future Directions and Implications

The study of Mahayana Buddhism's contributions to contemporary global conflict produces several notable findings. For starters, it illustrates that religious traditions provide complex, *ngịch lý* resources that can be deployed for both peace work and violence, frequently in the same conflict situation. The Buddhist instance challenges simplistic classifications of faiths as "peaceful" or "violent." Next, this analysis demonstrates Mahayana principles' special contributions to conflict transformation strategies, particularly their emphasis on perception alteration, non-dualistic thinking, and contemplative approaches. These contributions provide alternatives to traditional diplomatic and political methods to conflict settlement, which may disregard the psychological and perceptual components of battle. Additionally, the difficulties and contradictions inherent in Buddhist approaches to current conflict reveal broader issues confronting religion involvement with contemporary violence. The disparity between ideal principles and real practice, the conflict between universal ambitions and specific identities, and the difficulty of sustaining ethical integrity in complex political situations are not unique to Buddhism, but rather mirror challenges confronting many religious peace traditions.

Several future research and practice directions appear to be particularly promising. Greater emphasis on comparative research across religious traditions may reveal common obstacles and shared resources for religious peace action. A more critical assessment of power dynamics within Buddhist organizations would aid in identifying conditions that enable or limit ethical responses to violence. Finally, deeper engagement between Buddhist contemplative traditions and empirical peace studies may result in novel techniques that combine internal transformation with external peacebuilding. As religious components in current conflicts become more prevalent, understanding how traditions such as Mahayana Buddhism contribute to both peace and violence becomes increasingly crucial. According to this view, religious traditions do not provide simple solutions to modern combat or mere barriers to peace, but rather complex resources whose consequences are essentially determined by how they are interpreted, institutionalized, and utilized in specific conflict contexts.

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¹⁵ Condon, P. (2020). Meditation in action: Buddhist contributions to conflict transformation. *Journal of Peace Research*.p176

¹⁶ Lederach, J. P., & Lederach, A. J. (2010). *When blood and bones cry out: Journeys through the soundscape of healing and reconciliation*. Oxford University Press.p93

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