Nonviolence, Political Authority, and the Ethics of Governance in Buddhist and Western Political Thought

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Abstract
This article explores how nonviolence may inform political authority without ignoring governance. Employing a qualitative, comparative analysis of selected Buddhist texts and Western political thought, it analyzes different approaches to the question of the relationship between intention (moral sincerity or motivation), forced compliance or coercion (legitimate or illegitimate authority), the general good (public welfare), and public scrutiny and responsibility. Buddhist discourses, edicts of Aśoka, and Mahāyāna works on ethics are contextualized between arguments for sovereignty, rights, and justice, and the moral responsibility of political systems. Buddhist non-harm, their implication of state violence in history, and the inherent limitations of either personal virtue or institutional legality are articulated. Buddhist perspectives on compassion and the social roots of suffering reveal the shortcomings of approaches focused solely on security. Constitutional and deliberative theories help explain how benevolent authority may be limited. Gandhi and Ambedkar offer differing Indian views on nonviolent action, social equality, and the reshaping of political relationships. The article outlines a model of compassionate constitutional governance based on harm prevention, equal status, material security, and responsible public authority. Nonviolence is presented as a demanding principle for institutions and political judgement, rather than just a personal rule or an absolute support for state inaction.

Keywords: nonviolence; Buddhist political thought; political authority; ethical governance; comparative political theory; social justice.

INTRODUCTION

Peace, order, and good government political authority is here to save the day. But its institutions can wound ostracise incarcerate and kill. This tension raises a question that cannot be decided by reference to good will nor to functional necessity: when can the use of force be morally justified? In Buddhist political thought, the question is of special urgency as the limiting of homicidal impulses is built into the conception of liberation. And contrasting evidence is also readily found in western political philosophy with its diverse theories of sovereignty, the civic good, individual rights and the legitimacy of state violence. By considering these intellectual traditions as all internally conflicting rather than antagonistic polities, the contrasts are more illuminating.

The article suggests that nonviolence should guide both the way authority operates and the social conditions it maintains. A government may avoid dramatic violence but still tolerate deprivation and humiliation. Like that, an administration may describe its coercion as compassionate while denying those affected any means to challenge its decisions. Because of this, a sound ethics of governance calls for connecting the reduction of suffering with public control of power. Compassion motivates attention to vulnerability, while constitutional accountability prevents this concern from becoming an unchecked claim to know what is best for others.

There are a number of routes into this issue from scholarship on Buddhist ethics. Harvey (2000) locates moral behavior within the wider religious and social context. Keown (1992) and Whitehill (1994) stress correspondences with virtue ethics, while Goodman (2009) offers a consequentialist account. These varying perspectives point to different aspects of Buddhist moral reasoning, but none should be allowed to dominate as the privileged representative of the tradition. Scholarship from history complicates any simple equation between Buddhism and peaceful government. Tambiah (1976) explores links between kingship and monastic institutions, and Jerryson and Juergensmeyer (2010) highlight Buddhist traditions in warfare.

This contribution is a bounded normative reconstruction. It explores how Buddhist limitations on harm can relate to institutional legitimacy structures without undertaking to prove that the ancient Buddhist textual corpus embodies modern constitutional democracy. I consider three questions: What upholds political authority? What restrains its power? And What are we responsible for when harm is made into social life? I include Gandh and Ambedkar as Indian interlocutors whose challenging of a strict divide

between Buddhist and Western ideas places the question of unmaking suffering when talking about colonial rule, caste hierarchy, the moral self and collective agency.

Method and interpretive scope

The way is that of textual qualitative interpretation and comparative normative analysis. The main Buddhist texts are selected discourses in Pāli, Aśokan edicts, and ethical works of Nāgārjuna and Śāntideva. Pāli passages are quoted from Walshe (1995) and Bodhi (2000 2005 2012). Discourse identification is indicated where it is more stable than page number among editions. The Western texts are select classics on virtue and order, early modern sovereignty and consent, and late modern rights, deliberation, and responsibility. The bibliography is: purposive, not comprehensive; this is not a systematic overview nor an empirical test of policy.

Comparison advances by articulating three common points of contention: authority justified; coercion as moral; and responsibility for preventable suffering. We take similarities to be opportunities for dialogue and not emblems of influence. Genre matters as well: a cosmological narrative, an imperial inscription, a philosophical treatise and a contemporary theory of justice cannot be read as policy exemplars. Collins (1998) in particular demonstrates how to read narrative visions of moral order as rooted in a larger Buddhist textual universe.

Nonviolence is invoked here as a value-based concept to bind us to an attitude of opposition to violence; it is not that means assumed to be coextensive with any use of ahiṃsā or avihiṃsā always. Political power signifies a claim to the management of collective behavior that calls for justification, not simply the fact of control. Governance embraces, among other things, public mandates, administrative regulations, and the allocation of opportunities and burdens. It is always significant that the distinction is still made between violence and coercion: legal taxation or a judicial decree may be coercive without being physically violent, although coercive institutions still may cause grave mischief in their application and distribution. And the course being proposed is precisely the argument of the article: this is not put forward as an explicit doctrine held in common by the authors whose work we have considered.

BUDDHIST NONHARMING AND THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF RULE

Moral agency and the restraint of injury

Buddhist ethics link the damages of negative actions to greed, hatred, and delusion, and the development of conduct to their weakening. Gethin (1998) finds these to be points of focus within the whole Buddhist way. Tied to the Buddhist path is the focus on intention as the defining factor of bodily action (Bodhi 2012 AN 6.63) (Bodhi, 2012, AN 6.63). While this focus raises the question of how our political actions might be motivated by hate, fear, or clinging to power it does not show the power of a good will to nullify the pain of a wrong.

The first precept's prohibition against taking life also has implications for political membership. In the Veḷudvāreyya Sutta, considering one's own wish to live supports both refraining from harming others and encouraging others to do the same (Bodhi 2000 SN 55.7) (Bodhi, 2000, SN 55.7). This line of thought brings a foundation for extending moral concern beyond self-interest. Bodhi's (2005) thematic anthology also highlights the link between personal behavior and care for others' well-being. Still, moving from individual precepts to institutional obligations calls for further justification: a state is not merely a larger version of an individual practitioner, and its officials must address the needs of people with differing commitments.

The interpretation of nonharming remains disputed. Gethin (2004) describes how, in the Theravāda Abhidhamma and the commentarial analysis he reviews, intentional killing cannot be simply regarded as an act driven by compassion. Goodman (2009) offers a broader approach, allowing more consideration of the welfare of those affected. This disagreement has political importance. An official cannot justify killing solely by citing a compassionate aim. The relevant question involves the nature of the act, the reliability of its expected benefits, and the potential for misuse of exceptional permissions.

Authority as a response to social disorder

The Aggañña Sutta relates an elected ruler coming into power as a consequence of disputes and misbehavior – he is tasked with carrying out certain duties and he takes a percentage of the yield in exchange (Walshe 1995 DN 27). Political rule is so presented as having emerged to fulfill a social role rather than simply being based on divine royal and divine male superiority; but it is also not presented as 'democracy' – it is not a system of popular election, equal voting rights, and judicially enforceable rights (Walshe, 1995, DN 27). It is only meaningful as authority if it serves a function and adheres to standards.

This functional reading also places a limit. No consent to a given ruler's election can justify every subsequent deed. If the sovereign's agency is exercised to remedy disorder, his conduct needs to be brought to task for whether it makes better or makes worse the disorder. For instance, the Cakkavatti-Sīhanāda Sutta associates failure to ensure the well-being of the poor with the spread of theft, which leads to violence. Its story same here reveals problems with informal acts of reward and punishment (Walshe 1995 DN 26) (Walshe, 1995, DN 26). The justified inference is not that economic hardship can work as an explanation of all crimes, but rather that coercion is inadequate as a solution to material insecurity.

The Kūṭadanta Sutta further elaborates this insight into politics. "Agricultural resources, capital for traders, and fees for agents" are among the ways to care for disorder (Walshe 1995 DN 5) (Walshe, 1995, DN 5). These snippets would seem to endorse a preventative model of governance: mere security, in their view, partly depends on the chances of a decent life. They do not translate into a modernist welfare

state, but they do repudiate a view of wrong-doing that only increases the sanctions. The ethical virtue of power has to do with what people are open to, not just to what they are forbidden.

Aśoka and the limits of benevolent sovereignty

Aśoka's edicts offer a significant and fine-grained historical articulation of the conflict between nonharming and government. Major Rock Edict XIII apologizes for the conquest of Kaliṅga while glorifying conquest through dhamma; Major Rock Edict XII exhorts restraint and respect in governance in between religious groups; and Pillar Edict IV discusses the administration of justice and the commutation of death sentences (Dhammika, 1993). Although they reflect efforts to temper the power of the state, they do not seem to eliminate authoritarian institutions.

Thapar (1997), of these policies in the political conditions of Mauryan empire. Such conditions make it difficult to reduce Aśoka to a naive pacifist or a secular modern democrat. The means and also the ends of remorse, welfare, and restraint matter, but their importance must be calibrated with unremitting sovereign power. An ethic based on the conscience of the king seems most vulnerable if the subjects do not have autonomous means of challenging official acts. Aśoka is because of this best understood here as a historical concern of normative government rather than an institutional precedent.

Compassion beyond benevolent intention

Nāgārjuna's guidance to a ruler links ethical self-development with public duties, including attention to individuals facing punishment (Nāgārjuna, 2007). Śāntideva's discussion of patience and care for others questions the view that an opponent's suffering lacks moral relevance (Śāntideva, 1995). These works offer grounds for challenging practices of vengeance and humiliation. Their normative value does not rely on the assumption that all political conflicts can be resolved through personal goodwill.

Nor does the Buddhist account of the person itself entail the elimination of conventional accountability. Siderits (2007) gives a philosophical account of the questions of personal identity and the relation of conventional and ultimate truth. For political reasons, repudiating the independently existing individual would not, even if it were correct, warrant the destruction of individual concrete persons' claims and responsibilities. The suggested political implementation is more limited in scope: officials should refrain from seeing enemies as concretely incarnate evil, while maintaining mechanisms for determining conduct, fault, and protection.

Contemporary engaged Buddhism further extends ethical focus to institutions, and suffering as a collective occurrence. King (2009) discusses the influence of Buddhist concepts on social activism; Sivaraksa (1992) links ethical engagement with critique of current social institutions; and Loy (2003) explores the role of Buddhist understandings of suffering in society. Together, these efforts offer reasons to believe in institutional nonharming; and in addition, to protect it: a religiously grounded public-security account must be accountable to persons who deny its tenets.

WESTERN ACCOUNTS OF AUTHORITY AND ITS MORAL LIMITS

Virtue and the problem of superior judgement

Plato's analysis of political order emphasizes knowledge and rule by the educated, and Aristotle distinguishes constitutions that act in the general interest from those that serve the interests of the rulers (Aristotle 1998 Book III; Plato 1992 Books IV–VII) (Aristotle, 1998, Book III; Plato, 1992, Books IV–VII). These rival analyses are a useful point of comparison with the Buddhist preoccupation with virtues of those in charge. Public office is another task with capabilities that are not mere winning or effective administration.

Yet the justifying appeal to persons who have a better moral or philosophical standpoint has a familiar danger. If the governed cannot even challenge the claim, then moral expertise is a premise for domination. Both classical accounts share provisos that would exclude them from being identified simply with the contemporary political equalization of persons; as a result, their usefulness here will be incomplete: they emphasize the effects of rule and reveal the reasons for guarding against the political monopoly of persons who are supposed to be superior.

Security and the justification of coercion

Machiavelli studies the incentives that motivate rulers to maintain political stability, such as the use of violence, prevention, and necessity (Machiavelli, 1532/1998, Chapters XV–XVIII). Hobbes bases sovereign power on the imperative of escaping from an insecure state of nature with its violence, war, and peace (Hobbes, 1651/1996, Chapters XIII–XVIII). Neither account can be simply rejected because violence is evil; the problem is that in the absence of disciplined authority people can be highly vulnerable. A nonviolence theory must be able to articulate the protection of vulnerable individuals in the face of moral indifference.

But necessity is an even more fragile justification if you do not allow its conditions for review. The state, for example, can recast opposition as an existential threat, a scare-mongering that makes the provisional powers of emergency the irrevocable powers of rule. Per Weber's account of politics, we are responsible for the consequences of our acts, plus our beliefs, and the modern state is distinguished by its claim to a distinctive relation with physical force that can be called legitimate (Weber, 1919/1946). It is the ethical error that is no error: when we put force to work, the resulting public power is burdened by a set of judgments that cannot be disentangled by a rhetorically evacuated plea of pure motives.

Arendt (1970) makes another distinction between force or power supported by togetherness and violence as technique. Her distinction refutes a common presumption that an administration owns political strength because of its ability to enforce conformity. An important comparative inference: widespread dominion depends on bonds of encouragement

and esteem that violence, in itself, cannot establish. A non-harmer administration will, at the minimum, nurture those bonds while maintaining the ability to shield citizens from immediate cause.

Rights and public justification

Locke to argue that political power is accountable to aims related to the protection of persons and their rights, and Rousseau to propose a model of collective sovereignty in harmony with freedom (Locke, 1689/1988; Rousseau, 1762/1997). Neither approach eliminates the problems of exclusion, disagreement, or coercion. Still, both depart from the question of the kind of man rulers should be, and turn to the kind of terms on which people can be governed. Mill's defence of liberty further renders unthinkable a form of coercion motivated solely by the claim that authorities are better equipped than individual persons to know their good (Mill, 1859/1978).

This reveals a point of failure for a paternalist approach to compassion. A government may genuinely desire welfare but limit the ability of its citizens to choose, complain, or organise. Kant's practical philosophy introduces further the requirement to treat persons as ends in themselves rather than as means to some good (Kant, 1996). When it comes to government this requirement prevents an entire group being sacrificed to the alleged peace of the majority. Buddhism's compassion for suffering and respect for persons serve to support each other here, but their philosophical routes are separate.

Rawls (1999) finds justice in the institutional design of the basic structure, while Rawls (2005) emphasizes the legitimacy of political relations in an era of reasonable pluralism. Habermas (1992/1996) bases law and legitimacy in the democratic process of public justification. These are accounts that offer that compassionate leadership does not, in itself, offer: the why of responsibility for decisions to those governed by them. I am not arguing that existing deliberative institutions guarantee equality. I argue that the right to challenge leadership is to be found in the concept of ethical government.

NONVIOLENCE AND THE PROBLEM OF STRUCTURAL INJUSTICE

Focus on force to which you can directly respond can miss subtler, everyday patterns of suffering created by institutional practices. Galtung's (1969) distinction between personal and structural violence expands the concept to situations where preventable harms are built into social institutions. The idea is valuable, provided it is used carefully. Labeling all suffering as violence can obscure distinctions between well-planned violence, disparity of opportunity, and bureaucratic inertia.

Despite this, Buddhist accounts of poverty and moral failure still enable a productive link. Poverty is able to erode the social conditions for ethical agency, without being an appraiser of each person's behavior. Young's (2011) model of responsibility for justice can clarify why involvement in harmful structures can generate political obligations, despite the challenges in names and shames. Responsibility so is more than locating a single villain. Responsibility also involves altering systems that sustain avoidable hardship.

Sen (2009) points to preventable injustice and comparative evaluations of how people are living. Nussbaum (2011) brings capabilities to the heart of evaluating human development. Both make clear what institutional compassion may entail: what conditions should be available in order that people have the potential for meaningful lives. Food security, access to education, physical security and opportunities for action are because of this relevant to nonviolence because without them people are vulnerable to oppression and harm a normative rather than derivational connection of capability theory to Buddhism.

This standard is exacting. An institution cannot escape responsibility by merely demonstrating that its employees acted without an intent to harm. It must address foreseen consequences, exclusionary trends, and the means of redress. The impulse to boost the well-being of a group cannot be used as a shield when doing so constrains the voices of those people. Material conditions and political power must be considered in tandem, since reliance on capricious grace can impose its own form of domination.

GANDHI AND AMBEDKAR AS INDIAN INTERLOCUTORS

Gandhi's narrative of self-rule ties political independence to ethical self-governance and critique of domination. In Hind Swaraj, protest is intertwined with the relationship between means and ends (Gandhi, 1909/1997). Because of this, nonviolence is not a stand-off from conflict but instead an operational form of resistance. Parekh (1989) highlights the philosophical idealism and internal contradictions of Gandhi's political philosophy. It includes Gandhi in this contrast as an interlocutor between numerous religious and rationalist intellectual influences rather than a plaintiff of Buddhist philosophy.

This perspective challenges the idea that effective political action must involve causing harm. Sharp (1973) examines how rulers rely on cooperation and outlines nonviolent ways to withdraw that cooperation. Chenoweth and Stephan (2011) provide comparative evidence on the effectiveness of civil resistance campaigns. Their research supports considering nonviolent action as a serious political tool, but it does not show that every campaign will succeed or that these methods resolve all issues of public security. Strategic analysis and moral arguments remain separate types of reasoning.

Another concern that Ambedkar foregrounds is that social-interpersonal gradation cannot be equalized through good-will. In rewriting the Buddha's teaching, Ambedkar emphasizes the role of dhamma in social life and the primacy of person-to-person relations (Ambedkar, 1957). When seen alongside Gandhi, this concern raises the problem that moral appeals often leave unacknowledged: who actually possess the agency to renounce oppressive social-interpersonal

relations? Responsibility for reconciliation should not be heaped on those who are first in line for exclusion.

The comparison still does not settle the serious differences between Gandhi and Ambedkar. It highlights instead a productive tension between a disciplined ethic of resistance and the alterity of unequal social power. A modern Indian take should so evaluate nonviolence from the stand of those who confront caste exclusion, religious chauvinism, or dependence. There is no grounds for celebration in public silence when that silence is rooted in fear. The institutional consequence I develop is so that nonviolence must be a safeguard for the capacity to challenge historical and present forces of dominance.

TOWARDS COMPASSIONATE CONSTITUTIONAL GOVERNANCE

Prevention as a public obligation

The earlier argument lends support for compassionate constitutionalism as a form of reconstructive governance. Compassion locates suffering in public concern; constitutionalism emphasizes Public Control - power lives within publicly defensible limits and procedures of challenge. Neither element will sustain the other. Compassion without controls risks paternalism; formal constraint without attention to social circumstances sustains risk of ongoing preventable suffering.

Prevention is the first obligation. Should the state look to see if deprivation, discriminatory management or refusal of service play a role in the issues that enforcement is meant to solve? This is not an attack on those who fail under this matter. It introduces an institutional dimension of responsibility to the question. An anti-theft policy that applies to small, repeated thefts must consider both immediate protection and factors impacting people's lives. The reasoning in DN 5 and DN 26 give moral justification for this questioning, but current policy evidence must say what is effective.

Equal standing and protection against humiliation

The second commitment is on equal footing. Someone should not have to adopt the ruler's religion or idea of virtue to be protected by the rules. Religious reasons can be used to justify public policy, but constraining rules need to be defendable across sources of disagreement, as the article argues in its deliberative analysis, not presuppose that ancient kingship already functioned this way.

Equal standing is also relevant to how the suspected offender is treated. Beccaria's rejection of over-penalising is an additional source of Western tools to restrict penal authority (Beccaria, 1764/1995). Concerns for anger and revenge connected to Buddhists' injustice arguments against humiliation serve to justify disapproval of humiliation as a public goal. Reintegration, impartial procedures, and avenues to challenge mistakes are institutional embodiments of this restraint, which must also be devised in ways that safeguard against harm to the victims and recognise their claims; compassion for the offender cannot be bought at the price of subjecting someone else to harm.

A demanding burden of justification for force

The third requirement is a heavy burden of justification to be imposed on force. The state's duty of protection generates some hard cases where an attack on defenceless persons may seem imminent. To refrain absolutely from intervening may allow great evil. But an open-ended permission to attack for a positive aim opens the door to misuse. Walzer (1977) on morally limited war demonstrates the logic of separating justification for the resort to force from the justification of how force is used. It offers an analogy, not a blue print, for moral evaluation in domestic contexts.

Current accounts also require a designated protective goal, weighing alternatives that are less damaging, restrictions on how, when, and the extent to which such intervention occurs, and scrutiny in the aftermath. These are normative criteria, not descriptive accounts. Harm that is predictable from the use of force should be taken into account, even that which occurs to witnesses; those making decisions must be held responsible for flawed assessments; the potential for a justified intervention should not lead to a presumption that authorities have identified the appropriate threat and no other option.

The position does still stand in tension with any hard reading of the prohibition on intentionally taking life. That tension too should be recognised without being papered over through descriptions of killing as an act of charity. Compassionate use of violence can involve grief moderation indemnification, and reform even when using violence to protect seems politically justified.

Accountability and the capacity to dissent

The fourth commitment concerns accountability. Mechanisms for review, providing reasons, and access to remedies enable evaluation of whether institutions fulfill their stated purposes. Ethical training for officials may support these processes, but meditation or moral instruction cannot replace independent oversight. A ruler's reputation for virtue is most of all insufficient when accusations relate to the ruler's own actions.

Finally, non-violent dissent must be recognized as part of governance, not just as disorder to be endured. Protest reveals damage not visible to state responses. Collective non-violent contestation offers a means of opposition that rejects the reasoning of retaliatory injury. Ethical authority must that means clarify the difference between disagreement and intimidation, and maintain the space for criticism. These obligations link personal moderation to institutions making correction feasible.

LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The comparison is partial. It does not encompass the total mix of the Theravāda, Mahāyāna, Vajrayāna, or Western political heritages. The categories themselves encompass histories that overlap and that cannot be wholly geographically determined. And while excluding incomplete dictionaries, using only English translations constrains an analysis of the semantic differences among dhamma, ahiṃsā, authority, and rights. Further work should involve more detailed philological work and treating of the explanations precluded by the canon selected, mainly about gendered and subaltern as well as in-group political power relations.

The system remains a hypothesis. Though it brings useful questions for assessing institutions, it does not demonstrate that an administrative arrangement will lead to less violence. Cross-national comparisons of the impact of policing welfare prison reform, and nonviolent mobilisation could consider its implications. More historical work might find cases where Buddhist institutions validated violent coercion, since such failures serve to examine how far the moral language of institutions deviates from action on the ground. The structure's validity is in addressing these failures, rather than sidestepping them as exceptions to the rule.

CONCLUSION

Beyond violence- another challenge for nonviolence is the nature of political authority and the social ties undergirded by it. Certain Buddhist texts bind non-infliction of injury with a compassion that includes moral motivation, material support and care for persons subject to painful conditions. Western theories of politics involve a range of debates about civic virtue, security, rights, and public justification. These various discourses also involve risks of their own: a kind and generous ruler might not be held accountable, security might justify oppression, legitimacy might mask injustice.

Their comparison backs a conception of governance that makes harm reduction compatible with equal political dignity and effective limits on power. Gandhi attunes us to the moral powers of nonviolent resistance, while Ambedkar presses us to see if social relations allow for real equality. Neither individual virtue nor bureaucratic process can do the job alone; only their twin capacity ogethercan. This is where the power of non-violence resides, in forcing governments to safeguard life and limb, to explain their methods, to heed conditions of safety, and to remain vulnerable enough to criticism. Compassionate constitutional governance speaks of this ongoing project but does not divest us of difficult judgments.

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