

Nirvana on Fire: Mahayana Views on Violence Applied to Modern Philippine Politics

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Abstract

This paper argues that Mahayana Buddhist ethics, particularly the concept of “compassionate violence,” can be used to justify revolutionary violence against oppressive political and economic structures in the modern Philippines. The author analyzes Buddhist texts, Southeast Asian historical models of kingship, and pre-colonial Philippine history to build a framework for this argument. The paper concludes that under a Buddhist lens, overthrowing corrupt leaders is a justifiable and meritorious act necessary to end systemic harm and create a more just society.

Keywords

Violence, Buddhism, Southeast Asia, Buddhist Ethics, Mahayana

1. Introduction

The topic of violence has always been one deeply debated in philosophical circles. Is violence ever justified? At the core of Buddhist thought is that it is not (*Maggavibhaṅga Sutta*, 2023). You cannot justify forcibly taking the life of another person to advance your own means. But should that be the end of the discussion? Is pacification truly the way to advance?

In Buddhism, a religion that has existed in the Philippines for as long as Buddhism has reached the Southeast Asian region, all actions must be governed by the right intention. More importantly, compassion is the Mother of all Buddhas. That is to say, Compassionate action is the greatest form of action one can undertake. As we synthesize this with Walter Benjamin’s idea of Divine Violence—violence that neither makes laws nor keeps laws but rather breaks them—we come upon the idea of Compassionate Violence. This is violence that is liberatory insofar as its intent is based on compassion rather than hatred or the need to destroy.

It is based on revolutionary ideals rather than the idea of having to replace the now overthrown structure. This violence was something that even Buddhas would have undertaken as a representation of skillful means to bring about lasting systemic change.

Benjamin understands two kinds of forces, or violences: law-making violence (this is the foundational force through which all laws are instituted, such as wars creating new border demarcations, revolutions that create new constitutions, and the like) and law-preserving violence (this is the everyday policing of the laws that have been made through law-making violence). All instances of these forces are violence as a means. That is to say, it wields violence to control and dominate. Force used in this way cannot rightly be done as an act of moral justice, such as a country using drone strikes to protect itself, but killing civilians and not giving the proper transparency. Those instances of force are less about moral justice (as having killed civilians is another act of moral injustice) and more about domination.

Walter Benjamin's provocative idea, therefore, is Divine Violence. The third kind of violence. This violence is violence outside of the law—in the same way the Lacanian Real is outside the human Symbolic Order. Benjamin uses the example of the General Strike: the action of refusing to work not to change something within the system, but rather to suspend the system entirely. This is an instance of violence being used as an end, instead of as a means. It is real violence: Violence for Violence's sake, to end and destroy. For Benjamin, the Legal and Justice System is part of the problem, which is to be expected in a world where governments are influenced and controlled by market forces and capital.

In a sense, Walter Benjamin's Divine Violence is not just violence as we understand it. It is crude, pure violence. It is violence for the sake of destroying violence (that is to say, Law). This is the very violence under which we as modern humans live today—the hidden and esoteric violence created by the complex web of the law, like a mandala of sharp blades.

In Mahayana, there is the concept of two truths, known as the Two-Truths Doctrine. In the simplest terms, it is the fact that there is a conventional truth—that is, the reality that we experience and live within every day—and there is an ultimate truth. Ultimate reality is the reality that grounds and founds the rest of conventional reality. Ultimate reality in Buddhism is, ultimately, emptiness. Or, in the sense that Tsongkhapa uses it: ultimate reality is the negation of an ultimate reality. The Emptiness of an Ultimate Reality. This radical emptiness (which is sometimes even referred to as Buddha Nature) reveals the ultimate reality in all things—that it is empty, nothing inherently exists, nothing originates independently.

In a way, one can conceptualize Benjamin's two violences as being both of conventional truth.

These are two applications of violence-as-means. Benjamin's idea for Divine Violence—Pure Violence that shatters, destroys, and frees the mere man from the invisible shackles of law—is an ultimate truth. It is violence before law, and, more importantly, violence for violence's sake. This pure violence is immanent: it arises

when it is no longer needed, from the very people and structures that made it required in the first place. This is violence that is empty of an end.

In Buddhism, emptiness (in its text, the term *sunyata* is used) is closely correlated with compassion. Compassion is seen as the Mother of all Buddhas—there are Buddhas because Compassion exists. Compassion exists because Buddhas exist. Compassion, in the final analysis, is inextricable—and when brought to its ultimatum, is the same thing as emptiness. Understanding emptiness gives rise to the realization that all things are interconnected (because nothing has inherent essence and nothing arises independently). Realizing that all things are interconnected is the same as the realization of compassion.

Compassionate Violence, therefore, is a Buddhist deployment of the very concept of Pure Violence in Walter Benjamin's text. It adds the following realization to Walter Benjamin's Divine Violence: that violence done for violence's sake is an act of compassion. Another name, therefore, for Compassionate Violence is Empty Violence. To wield Compassionate Violence is to revel in the understanding of *Sunyata*, and in so doing, release the mere man from the shackles of the wheel of the law.

There are numerous instances of systemic violence: the educational structures built to create workers instead of learners, an economic system that encourages exploitation and near enslavement of other peoples, geographical barriers causing those in imperial centers (such as Manila or America) to have better opportunities than those who are born in more exploited areas, and even poor urban planning that has caused us to waste most of our lives away sitting in traffic...these things are put in place to exploit and oppress us and to keep those in power in power. Capitalism is a System of Violence. Many structures that are built into our lives—the artifacts of capitalism, neoliberal governance, and corruption—are extremely common in Global South communities and countries. These are countries that are commonly formerly colonized and are continually exploited for their resources and manual labor. One of the most important exports of the Philippines is migrant workers, or OFWs. Out-migration figures from the Philippines are some of the highest worldwide, comparable to other diasporas calculated in 2020. Remittances from these OFWs have been integral to keeping the Philippine economy afloat, reaching USD 33.8 billion in 2018. The amount constitutes 10.2% of the Philippines' GDP (Marasigan, 2022). What this means is that our main export is our manual labor, and Filipinos are commonly victims of abuse in other countries (Silverio, 2023). Families are forced to grow up without their parents, or families are torn apart because of affairs that might happen while the worker is overseas. This has caused damage and trauma, which is almost normalized now.

These structures are examples of systemic violence that continue to this day, and that keep life a capitalistic hell that is hard to even live in the first place. Many of our governors and leaders are not well-equipped, or are explicitly compliant in the exploitation of our people, so that they can benefit from remittances of Filipinos working overseas. While the national bourgeoisie continue to benefit and have

great lives, the masses live in squalor ([Philippine Statistics Authority, 2023](#)).

Despite attempts at peaceful reform, such as protests and attempts to install a leader who is more likely to help and support those who are suffering from systemic injustices, what is instead happening is that the cycle is being perpetuated. Those in power stay in power: the Marcoses, former dictators who have committed great injustices and violence upon the Philippines, have successfully been re-instated into power, thanks to the power of social media and historical revisionism ([The Nation, 2022](#)).

Peaceful protests and rallies have swayed the minds of those who have compassion for it, but those in power are not so willing to give up their hold on power. Many who are born into power believe it is their birthright. Many who are born into power are blind to their privileges due to the environment of their birth and upbringing.

Is there any way that we can change this? Popular anti-violence activist Mahatma Gandhi—popular across the world as a paragon of anti-violence—has a nuanced take on violence. He realizes that some forms of violence are justifiable, while others are objectionable. A farmer having to kill a monkey to protect his crops is justifiable. British Royalists hunting for sport and pleasure is objectionable ([Rajmohan, 1996](#)).

Similarly, Asanga, a Mahayana Buddhist figure, spoke of compassionate violence. Here, he states that any person, even a bodhisattva, can perform violence and inflict violence on others, provided that the intent is compassion, or it is done in love. To do violence in compassion inherently entails that the result be a net good: a bodhisattva kills a bandit, for example, with the compassionate intent to protect those in the village ([Jenkins, 2010](#)).

2. On Violence

Let us explore the topic of necessary violence through an ontological foundation of Buddhist compassion: can there ever be a situation wherein real violence is required to enact real and radical change? To look for an answer, I refer back to the story of Sawrahan, the farmer who killed an unjust king and paved the way for one of the most powerful dynasties in Myanmar.

This story is inherently steeped in Buddhist ideals and society, and perhaps, very importantly, in Southeast Asian society as well.

This paper employs ideas and traditions from the Mahayana branch of Buddhism. Mahayana is the most common branch of Buddhism, and it is found most popularly in East Asia. The Philippines, once having a large esoteric Buddhist tradition, has since given way to Catholicism. It was the Chinese during the mid-1900s who re-established Mahayana beliefs and traditions in the Philippines—particularly in Manila and in the Binondo Chinatown—shortly after its liberation from the Americans.

The Philippines is not separate from the rest of Southeast Asia; for the most part, the Philippines' shared culture with the rest of Southeast Asia is underex-

plored. Not to mention, of course, the findings that could connect the Philippines to the rest of the Hindu-Buddhist world of Classical Southeast Asia. With this in mind, I explore conceptions of violence in Buddhism to find possible justifications for necessary violence to bring about change in Philippine society, which itself has cultures and traditions that were most likely influenced by Buddhism and Southeast Asia before the arrival of the Spanish (Miksic & Goh, 2017).

This paper aims to answer the following questions:

1) Can violence—are there instances where violence is justified? Violence is mostly looked down upon in modern contexts. As much as possible, we should not upend the usual social order. Many rallies and protests are still conducted within the confines of a system that is built within us. There is an inherent expectation that violence is dangerous and that it would lead to an endless cycle of violence should we resort to it. However, there are multiple kinds of violence. It would be a fool's errand to reduce violence to a single thing. How can we equate the violence of a slave freeing themselves from their master's chains to the violence of a master forcing a slave to work for nothing until they die? Should there not be different kinds of violence, then? Should many forms of violence not be objectionable, but some violence be justified?

2) Does Buddhism condemn violence in all forms?

3) What kinds of violence exist? The paper examines examples of violence that exist outside of the physical, such as social, systemic, and psychological violence.

Now we must do the following:

1) Study which acts of violence are permissible and necessary from the perspective of Buddhism. Consider which acts of violence are righteous (if any) or ethical.

2) Examine Buddhist ahimsa to see how violence can be used to prevent further harm.

3) Explore the idea of violence in a more nuanced view, along the lines of Buddhist ethics, to find if there is anything we can glean from them.

4) Examine situations in which Buddhism has explored violence, and then apply those situations to a Philippine context to see if we can use Buddhism in the Philippine context at all.

5) Examine situations in the Philippines and the possibilities of justified violence in the Philippines.

6) Use of Buddhist ideals—a religion so predisposed to peace—to find ways to justify violence showcases that even in the most peaceful and nonviolent of religions, there is room for justified violence, especially against an oppressor.

All of the arguments in this paper are grounded on the Sunyata Teaching or the View of Emptiness and Interdependence, which is crucial to Mahayana ideology and bodhisattvahood. It applies bodhisattvahood (masses-oriented buddhahood) to revolutionary causes that can lead one to the supreme realization of the truth of the world: that it can be changed, that it is not beneficial, and that it is ultimately compassionate to advocate for violence and revolution through the understanding of Sunyata, Compassion, and the Mahayana conception of Skillful Means (Upaya

Kaushalya).

Skillful Means is contextual action. It is one of the core teachings of the Mahayana Canon—particularly spoken about in the Lotus Sutra, one of the most popular sutras from Mahayana texts. In the Lotus Sutra, the Buddha speaks about how if he needs to present as a buddha to be able to save someone, he will do so. If he needs to present or manifest as a warrior, he will do so. If he needs to present as a slave, he will do so. The essence of skillful means is contextuality, the understanding that due to emptiness, or the fact that all things depend on each other, one must “tailor-fit” their approach to teaching the Dharma (or the Law or the Doctrine of the Buddha, or the Truth) to what the would-be student needs so that they may attain their enlightenment and be saved.

In Vajrayana, the most hyper-focused branch of Mahayana, one wherein they use Tantra or “salvation-practices” akin to esoteric magics, the most important aspect is bodhicitta. This term translates to “Enlightenment Thought” or “Awakening Mind.” It is a configuration of thought or a particular mindset that places a mindstream on the path to enlightenment. The path is compassion. Bodhicitta is compassion.

2.1. Is Violence Ever Necessary?

The necessary violence discussed in this paper operates from the conception that violence can be used to enact real and radical change needed in today’s society. Through this violence, we can institute important reforms that force oligarchs and government officials to renounce all their money-grabbing and monopoly on wealth, as the Philippines has one of the greatest wealth disparities: the top 1 percent captures 17% of the national income, with only 14 percent being shared by the bottom 50 percent. This is one of the largest income inequalities in the world (World Bank, 2023).

By finding ways to justify necessary violence, we can enact real change and ensure that we steer the direction toward a more mass-focused discussion. If any violence is going to be enacted, it must be enacted by the masses, who are the majority of the workforce and can seize the means of production. Too much philosophical discussion inherently tries to dismiss violence as “barbarous or savage,” but I believe that not being willing to commit violence in the face of oppression and marginalization only perpetuates such oppression.

The ability to use Buddhist ethics to justify violence can cause preconceived notions of Buddhist ethics to be upended. It is easy to misconstrue Buddhist ahimsa—nonviolence—as a pacifistic view, but it is a very complex take on violence, required violences, justifiable violences, and more. By presenting a nuanced take on violence, ethical discussions on violence can similarly become more nuanced, instead of a blanket condemnation of the usage or role of violence in the modern world. Very often, violence is the only resort for those who are being oppressed.

On the topic of Compassionate Violence, this topic is expounded upon by Asanga, a prominent Mahayana thinker. In the major ethics of Mahayana Bud-

dhism, it is assumed that the bodhisattva—important beings who are at the cusp of Enlightenment and Nirvana but choose to stay to help other people achieve enlightenment—are exempted from what is ordinarily forbidden, including killing, as long as they stay compassionate. There is nothing that states that this is bad to follow—in fact, bodhisattvas are commonly exemplars of Buddhist ethics. Bodhisattvas can generate great merit by killing with compassion (Jenkins, 2010).

There are numerous problems when considering how violence should be conceptualized and addressed. One way of examining this is revealed in the systematization of Gandhi's thoughts on violence, and how he viewed violence as having different categories. This systematization recognizes that there are many objectionable violences and justifiable violences. We argue that there are also invisible violences (such as those inflicted by the systems and structures that we are forced to live in), and finally, necessary violences.

Can we kill, then? According to Buddhist precepts, absolutely not. However, Mahayana ontology perpetuates the following important concepts: non-permanence (*anicca*) and emptiness (*sunyata*). These realizations about reality create a world that is intensely interdependent, where the severing of a link is often thought to be the greatest sin one can perform...unless it is intensely required.

Bokar Rinpoche (a Vajrayana Lama), from the Vajrayana branch of Buddhism, states the following when speaking of Releasing—a tantric ritual:

Releasing (grol ba) refers to the ritual of liberating beings who are leading extremely evil lives. According to the tantras, an evil person who throughout his life harbors intense hatred for others and constantly harms them, when he cannot be tamed by any other means, should be released from the present life and his consciousness transferred to a pure buddha realm. This release serves the double purpose of saving the evil person from rebirth in hell and relieving others and the world of his harmful presence. The ritual to perform this release can only be performed by a yogin of the highest attainment who meets the following requirements with regard to motivation, action and result: Regarding the motivation, the yogin must have no self-interest whatsoever and desire only the other person's ultimate good. For the action, the yogin must effect the release through meditative absorption, hand mudras, and mantras, and never resort to the use of poison or weapons of any kind. In addition, the yogin must be able to resurrect the individual. For the result, the adept, using the power of meditation, must be able to project the consciousness of the person into a pure buddha realm.

This still follows the belief that slaying a person ends the current continuum of a Mindstream, but it is done with compassionate intent, brought about as an ultimate recourse. It should be noted that Vajrayana (lit. "The Diamond Vehicle") is a subset of Mahayana that employs the use of Tantras (lit. "Salvation Devices") to construct a foolproof and lightning-fast path to Buddhahood in a single lifetime through the use of symbolic rituals and actions.

In Asanga's conception of violence and selfhood, they take it a step further. As

all beings are just aggregates—there is no real “person” that exists, just a combination of many things creating a person—then the “person” does not actually exist. If the person does not exist, then murder cannot exist either (as murder requires you to end a person). If murder does not exist, then it is not forbidden (Jerryson, Juergensmeyer, and Demieville, 2010). While complicated, this is potentially one way of justifying extreme violences, lest violence be not enough to end another.

Is there a cause for resorting to violence? Of course. Nonviolence inherently protects the state. This is problematic insofar as the state is the tool through which invisible violences are perpetrated: in the Philippines, those with state power can continuously buy votes to stay in power, hire hitmen, and even the police to kill their enemies or to intimidate the less privileged. Those who run the state benefit from importation and the income from remittances of OFWs. Another aspect might be that those parts of the machinery of the state are viewed as “better” than the common “masa,” most probably a holdover from pre-colonial ideals on the state—it is usually the nobility and royalty (the *maginoo* and *datu* classes) that function in administration. However, nonviolence against the state is not just ineffective (they get to stay in power, after all), but might even be patriarchal and racist. Nonviolence is a privilege: pacifism is an ideology that comes from a privileged context. Only those who have the privilege to thrive can be nonviolent. Those who are forced to live in worse conditions are forced into crimes and desperate actions just to live and exist. Those outside imperial centers, those who do not conform to beauty standards, and those who are not of the male gender are commonly victims of the invisible violences of the state (Gelderloos, 2018).

However, to whom should the necessary violence be directed? We should argue against structures. The famous folk tale of the Pagan Dynasty, which was established by the farmer Sawrahan, who killed the king who took off his crops, is an example of violence against such structures. In almost every part of Southeast Asian government systems, there is no inherent assumption that the king or the chief’s eldest son would succeed his father. Aspirants to the throne could use their mother’s line to justify their claim for the throne, and this is the mechanism that “men of prowess” used to be able to rise to a throne (Miksic & Goh, 2017). This means Southeast Asian government systems are a lot more fluid than once realized, and very often, a lot of rulership is dependent upon a claimant’s capability to rally others under his cause. Very often, this is done through merit-making, feasting, trading ties, and sheer martial prowess. To commit violence, one must be strong enough to be violent.

The violence committed by the world is indiscriminate against the oppressed. In the same way, one’s violence must also be indiscriminate against the very system that perpetuates and establishes oppression.

Compassionate Violence is both an ethical conundrum and a call to arms. Compassionate Violence mandates that indiscriminate violence for violence’s sake be directed against those structures that cause the most harm first, while keeping those

structures that provide some modicum of relief and comfort to the oppressed for last.

Structures that uphold, perpetuate, and cause the most harm are most blatantly those that have become direct arms of state violence: the police and other law enforcement institutions. These institutions are the most obvious examples of law-keeping violence that must be dismantled if one wants a chance to dismantle the very cycle of violence. However, it must be realized that these lawkeeping forces are going to be supremely difficult to completely destroy and will remain until the very end of the institutions and systems that we seek to obliterate.

Another example that must be rejected and opposed is the institution of the Armed Forces, or the Army. Just like the police, the armed forces are both institutions of law-keeping and, more importantly, law-making violences. It is through armies that borders are challenged, international relations are modified, and nations are created. It is imperative that the Armed Forces be opposed as a starting point for Compassionate Violence.

As Compassionate Violence is grounded upon Mahayana principles, it is central in the teaching of the Buddhadharmā that there is ultimately no self, or no singular person. Rather, every person is a conflux and a nexus of multiple interdependent conditions and situations that come together to create the appearance of a single person. Violence upon an individual under Compassionate Violence will be inevitable, but Compassionate Violence remembers and operates completely under the principle of No-Self, and so all violence is rendered first and foremost to institutions and structures that ground, perpetuate, and facilitate oppression: the police, the army, the banking institutions, the megachurches, capitalist science, ICE, neoliberal academia, and more.

However, it must be stated: even the structures that provide relief and comfort are still part of the selfsame system and thus work to perpetuate an oppressive system. To work within the system is to ultimately keep it going. Therefore, despite the right intentions of such structures, they must ultimately be overthrown as well. This realization follows after *sūnyatā* realization.

How would this apply to Philippine societies? The current image of the Philippine government—with the President having numerous other Governors and Mayors who administer their Local Government Units—is actually very reminiscent of the old pre-Hispanic *barangay* systems, where a *primus inter pares* would serve as the Head *Datu* and several other *datu* would answer to them (Scott, 2010). This can be one reason why dynasties and loyalty are so prominent: the idea of political families has never been removed from us, and has been with our people since pre-Hispanic times, the political families being the aristocracy and royalty (the *datu* class).

During this, I was able to uncover that many of the problems of modern Philippines arise from the structures begun and built upon by American imperialism and global capitalism. The Global South is locked in perpetual debt by mechanisms such as the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and more. World

corporations such as Nestle get to exploit local workers for greater profit (Bradley, 2017), making it so that those in the Global North directly benefit from the exploitation of the Global South. These structures are perpetuated by those in the government and the state, who benefit directly by allowing such exploitation through permitting these corporations to operate within the islands and taxing them or requesting extra payments from them accordingly (Ramnath & MacPhee, 2012).

This then leads to the very familiar idea as espoused by Frantz Fanon:

The colonial world is a compartmentalized world...as soon as they [the colonized] are born, it is obvious to them that their cramped world, riddled with taboos, can only be challenged by out-and-out violence. (Fanon, 2022)

If the structures are put forth from the pre-colonial era, but perpetuated, intensified, and made worse by colonialism, then this compartmentalized world we live in must be challenged. It can only be challenged by violence. We can justify this violence by understanding compassionate violence and violence to help others. This violence is justified as necessary violence.

A major problem with Buddhist violence—and truly, all sorts of religious violence—is the slow path to using religion to justify bigotry, such as the genocide of the Rohingya Muslim minority in Myanmar (Chavez-Segura, 2014). The only violence needed is for achieving what we need to achieve, without sliding into the slippery slope of outright religious bigotry against minorities. This requires an understanding of how Southeast Asian religions work, why violence against minorities happens, and how we can avoid it even within the Buddhist framework.

It should be noted that compassionate violence includes not only an external change but also an internal one, inextricably and unavoidably. The oppressed actor—or the Colonized as Fanon constructs the post-Native—is one who continuously suffers under a “mandala” of oppressive institutions and structures. The Colonized is one who suffers the invisible hand of Colonization, which masks and parades as “Law” and “Civilization.”

Compassionate Violence is a deeply psychological phenomenon: through the realization of radical interdependence (or Sunyata), one awakens to Compassion. Not every member of the Masses will awaken to this realization, but what is important is that those who will organize and lead do, in a “prime” violence against the colonial education imposed by the Philippine Government. By awakening to Compassion, organizing becomes easier and, more importantly, spreading Sunyata Realization becomes easier. Filipinos are predisposed to privilege familial and/or community ties due to sociocultural norms. By leveraging community, we can help the Mere Filipino realize that we are not just our community, but we are everyone else. And by helping another, we ultimately help ourselves, as that is the promise of radical interdependence: all things depend on each other, meaning you depend on me and I depend on you.

For Fanon, violence is cathartic and, more importantly, inevitable and required.

It is in the cleansing fires of violence that the Colonized is seared away. In the same way that “destruction” in multiple Mahayana Buddhist texts actually implies “transformation,” so is Compassionate Violence in actuality the selfsame transformation that forcibly transmogrifies the Colonized from an object to a historical object. As Fanon puts it: with the destruction of the Colonizer must also come the destruction of the Colonized. Only when the Colonized is no longer the Colonized—done only through pure, indiscriminate violence against the Colonizer—can the new entity forge a new psychological identity. And upon the grounds of Empty Violence, the new psychological identity arises with compassion.

Beyond the karmic implications of Compassionate Violence, which will be illustrated later on, this Empty Violence carries with it a restorative function. It destroys and frees the Mere Man (in Benjamin’s words) or the Colonized (in Fanon’s words) and creates, finally, a new sovereign being in its wake. However, for this Violence to be cleansing in such a way, it must be situated upon a proper mental realization of sunyata—that is to say, of radical interdependence.

Does this mean that for Compassionate Violence to take place, all who might participate in such a sacral brutality must be educated in one of the most esoteric concepts in Mahayana? Of course not. In fact, a grand violence orchestrated and led by those who do have sunyata realization will inevitably cause the selfsame realization within those who join their ranks. Those who might lead or organize the revolution must do so with the proper mindset and spiritual configuration in mind, lest the Empty Violence—the purest of the purest violences—be tainted by symbolic order and law-reification, leading the violence to turn into another form of Law-Making Violence (this can be seen as one of the reasons why some revolutions have led to new forms of government and thus domination, as with modern Post-Enlightenment societies such as in Germany, France, and the United Kingdom).

A man freed from its oppressive constraints is free to scope out a new psychophysical realm. This psychophysical realm can be another realm of domination. Hence, Empty Violence is needed for pure violence to arise that does not ultimately perpetuate the wheel of law.

2.2. What about Nonviolence?

There is a misconception that Buddhism is a purely pacifistic faith or dogma. This is, of course, false, as will be apparent later on in the paper. To tackle this, let us first talk about ahimsa. Ahimsa is commonly translated as nonviolence, while its literal translation would be “not-harm.” Himsa is literally translated as “harm.” This means that ahimsa does not inherently condemn violence by dint of its meaning. True ahimsa would be to try to stop harm from happening, a negation of himsa. This passive nonviolence is counter to the teachings of ahimsa, which suggest that we have an obligation to help those in need. Sometimes, being harmless may actually require violent action (Jerryson, 2018).

As the mainstream commonly misinterprets Buddhism as a completely pacifist

“philosophy” or “way of life,” it is important to go against this blanket generalization to avoid both dumbing down the intricacies of Buddhist doctrines and allowing it to be wielded for reactionary purposes under the guise of “nonviolence” or “pacifism.”

Buddhism is commonly seen as a pacifist ideology owing to its idea of *ahimsa* or “non-harm.” As I will discuss later, *ahimsa* does not entirely mean nonviolence or complete abstinence from violence. There are some instances where violence is ethically justifiable under Buddhist metaphysics, as well as materially inevitable under materialist dialectics. In many situations, nonviolence is not the same as non-harm. Under the virtue-consequentialist ethics of someone like Tsongkhapa, one will find that committing to nonviolence will only perpetuate harm, which is supremely antithetical to the doctrine of skillful means and, ultimately, to the perfect wisdom of *bodhicitta* or the compassionate Enlightenment Thought.

In fact, *ahimsa* taken to an extreme can become a source of violence. In situations of systemic oppression, not taking a stand is not an example of skillful means or compassion. Instead, it is an example of non-wisdom. Compassionate violence—violence guided by *sunyata* realization—becomes inevitable in situations of sheer systemic oppression on the scale of modern Capitalism. Though the Buddha might say that it is never right to fight “fire with fire,” this ignores his other, more important teachings of non-extremism, right action, and right conduct.

In some instances, it is the right action to step in and perform violence so that others might be saved, as will be shown later in one of the Jataka Tales where Sakyamuni Buddha himself—or, to be more precise, a previous *bodhisattva* incarnation of him—steps in to kill a murderer that would have caused greater damage and killed more people, all the while accepting the eons in hell he would have had to receive (and in so showcasing such strong compassion, was able to forfeit and transcend the need for karmic purification through the hells completely). This application of skillful means mandates a materialist perspective of interdependence and material relations—the understanding that people will act according to the conditions that have been placed by them and not because they are essentially evil. Only in this understanding can Compassionate Violence, as shown by the Buddha’s previous incarnation, arise.

Buddhist monks are seen as paragons of peace, always “turning the other cheek.” However, one of the greatest refutations of this construction is the fact that one of the most popular depictions of Buddhist monks—the Shaolin—is a sect of martial artists who are warriors who fought in the long history of the East. This is also true for the warrior-monks of Japan, the *sohei*. Some of these fought for the *Buddhadharma*; others fought for political means. It matters not the reason: what is important is that Buddhists engage in violence as much as any other religion.

One example of such a Buddhist monk committing an act of “*ahimsa*” is the act of self-immolation by Thich Quang Duc, in protest of the Vietnam War. Some say that this is, in truth, an act of *ahimsa*, but in true reality, it is an act of pure violence, though the violence was directed at the self. It falls short of being an instance

of pure violence due to it being a protest and not an act for the sheer destruction of the current order, just the protestation of one of the violences. But this act of violence is seen as a skillful means application of the teachings of the Buddha, and is sometimes seen as the highest act of violence. Today, Thich Quang Duc, who committed such an extravagant and brutal act of violence, is revered as a saint and a holy person in Vietnam, showcasing that violence truly has a place within Buddhist doctrine.

In Mahayana Buddhism, the branch of Buddhism that is most widely wielded, taught, and practiced by the masses, is rife with violent imagery. One such example is the battle between Vajrapani—the bodhisattva Samantabhadra given a vajra by Vairocana, the Cosmic Buddha—and Mahesvara, the Buddhist conception of the Vedic God Shiva. In this battle, illustrated in the *Sarvatathāgatattvasaṅgraha*, Vajrapani is sent to “kill” Mahesvara due to his evil deeds. Vajrapani defeats Mahesvara in a magical battle, and Mahesvara is reincarnated in another realm where he eventually becomes a Buddha.

In the above example, perhaps one of the most striking and vicious examples in Mahayana texts, arises one very foundational idea of our conception of Compassionate Empty Violence: that destruction and brutality within the Buddhist framework are more about transformation and salvation rather than annihilation. Vajrapani kills Mahesvara to stop him from continuing his evil deeds, and in doing so allows him a new lease on life. One in which he eventually achieves Buddhahood in another realm.

3. Limitations

The paper will only examine justified violence within the modern-day Philippine context through a Buddhist lens and rhetoric. It will not attempt to justify it within the context of other Southeast Asian countries.

Additionally, this paper will not devote a great amount of time to justifying an anti-capitalist and Marxist response to modern-day problems. It will begin its arguments from the position of the materialist (insofar as its analysis of modern-day violence is concerned) dialectic and uses Buddhist rhetoric to create a sacred kind of violence that can potentially work to acquire a larger number of people. Buddhist rhetoric can easily be translated into specifically Philippine Catholic ideas: Filipinos have syncretized indigenous views on karma, merit, and ancestral worship with Catholic ideals.

Finally, this paper is not within the scope of justifying why Buddhism is used instead of Roman Catholicism. It recognizes Buddhism as a primary religion in Ancient Southeast Asia and still a powerful force today, and realizes that there is merit in learning from a religion that is outside of a Filipino-majority context to help both force others to think outside of the box as well as to connect us to the rest of our Southeast Asian roots.

We start from the point of view that violence can be justified, especially with a more nuanced view of violence. Violence is the unity of the oppressed; it is the

reply against the invisible. This nuanced view of violence presupposes that there are many kinds of violence, and some are better than others. Some acts of violence are justified, others are necessary, others are objectionable, and some are invisible (so ingrained in daily life, otherwise systemic violence).

In Buddhist ideals, ahimsa is the nonviolability of life. If life is being violated, then it is a duty to stop that violation. If stopping that violation requires violence, then that is necessary violence. This violence is necessary because some violence is invisible, and to show them to the light is violence in and of itself (violating the status quo is violence).

The concept of Southeast Asian Royalty also applies here: royalty is the ruling class. If we ever have a ruling class, they must be the ones with the greatest amount of merit. Low amounts of merit in Buddhist ethics mean misfortune will befall the masses and the royal kingdom. Thus, when applied in contemporary times, the ruling class that reigns over us and holds capital must also be meritorious. If they are not, then misfortune will befall the state, and those below them will continue to be wicked because those they follow are wicked and do not have merit. If this is the case, is it ever justified to overthrow these ruling classes and replace them with someone more meritorious, for the benefit of the people?

Southeast Asia is home to multiple revolutions, and that is for good reason: a common story in Southeast Asian Buddhism is the tale of a farmer killing a king and becoming the king by proxy. This is a common allegory for a righteous king versus an amoral king. In modern contexts, corrupt governments and oligarchs have the same roles as kings, while normal citizens would have the role of the farmer. King also can mean the structures currently set in place that continually oppress us, such as out-of-control laissez-faire and oligarchies.

In essence, it is important that we focus on necessary compassionate violence, and nothing more than that. The violence we inflict is necessary to overthrow kings, like farmer Sawrahan, who killed and took over the king and began the much more meritorious Pagan dynasty in ancient Myanmar. It should not be directed at those who are suffering or the minorities within the state itself. Necessary violence is violence used to stop systemic violence. In Buddhism, the concept of “Right Action” should guide how we move and act, so that our actions create good consequences for others and ourselves.

4. On the Strictures of Buddhist Royalty

Let us look at multiple examples of Buddhist violence that can be found across Southeast Asia, as well as the various ways Buddhist thought justifies violence. From folk tales, one can find the story of the Cucumber King from Myanmar; from history, the story of the guileful Raden Wijaya, founder of the Majapahit Empire, who defeated the Mongols; and in modern politics, the violence of the Thai Buddhists against Thai Muslims.

Violence in general is defined as “behavior involving physical force intended to hurt, damage, or kill someone or something.” This is, of course, a very simplistic

view of violence. If we are to understand the Buddhist concept of violence, we must henceforth view violence as Himsa.

Himsa (हिंसा) is the Sanskrit term for “violence,” “hurting,” or “harm.” It is a common idea in most dharmic religions, which include Hinduism and Buddhism. Ahimsa (अहिंसा) is the conception of nonviolence, non-hurting, or non-harm. Does this mean that violence is outright unwanted in Buddhist ethics? As always, there is a more nuanced view of this. While Himsa is commonly translated as violence, it is also harm or injury in general. Ahimsa, therefore, can also be interpreted as “not-harm” or “not-injury.” There are certain situations wherein doing nothing can cause greater harm and injury, and partaking in violence can lead to you causing harm, but stopping greater harm. This will eventually lead to one of the many justifications for Buddhists to engage in war, to create a more peaceful society. It is unavoidable, especially in the past, after all. Even the greatest Buddhist kings were flanked on all sides by an army. How do we reconcile this?

Using the conceptions of merit-making or compassion through violence according to the AryaBodhisattva-gocara-upayavisaya-vikurvana-nirdesa Sutra, we will examine the violent means of making merit, accruing good karma, the importance of compassionate intent, the exceptions to the rule, the conceptions of kingship, and how ahimsa might be a reason for necessary violence.

According to legend, Nyaung-u Sawrahan was once a farmer (Aung-Thwin, 1985). The previous king, King Theinko, was a wicked king. After being separated from his hunting retinue and hungry, Theinko stole a cucumber from Nyaung-u’s field. Nyaung-u caught him and killed him. Despite this, to prevent unrest in the kingdom, the queen married Nyaung-u and made him the king. Thus, his name arose: Taungthugyi Min, or Cucumber King. Nyaung-u is considered a being of good karma and thus attained kingship because of this. So strong was Nyaung-u’s karma that when one of the ministers objected to his installation, the stone statue of a guardian deity came alive and killed the minister.

Nyaung-u became a king because, in his past life, he was an ogre-guardian who had shielded the Buddha from the sun. The Buddha thus gave him the prophecy that he was to be the king of Burma thrice. And so he did. Thus, prophecy plays an important role in the spiritual merit of a king. The fact that he performed a great deed that gave him large amounts of good karma meant that killing the king did not diminish his merit and chances of becoming king. This points to a conception of violence as not being the gravest of sins in Buddhism.

On the island of Java, in Maritime Southeast Asia, another Buddhist king arose from violence. Raden Wijaya, who became Krtarajasa, is venerated as Harihara, a compound of Visnu and Siva. His predecessor, Krtanagara, was considered an incarnation of Siwa Buddha, a Javanese syncretism of Shaivism and Buddhism, binding them together. This inherently colors the Buddhist view on the establishment of Majapahit (Miksic & Goh, 2017), one of the largest maritime empires of Southeast Asia that encompassed most of Java, Sumatra, and parts of Borneo, which lasted from the 1300s to the early 1500s.

After managing to trick the Mongols into defeating his predecessor king—the son of Krtanagara—he led the Mongols to their deaths and eventual rout during their celebrations after sacking the main city of Singhasari. Through a combination of massacre and beguilement, Raden Wijaya was able to repel the Mongol invasion (and they never returned), and he accrued enough merit, charisma, and goodwill to establish one of the most powerful empires in Southeast Asia: Majapahit.

Here, violence is necessary: this happened during a turbulent time of war and changing nation-states. However, the fact that Raden Wijaya was completely accepted into the Siwa Buddha religion gives us leeway and a bit of insight into how Buddhists view their kings. Raden Wijaya was not an upright king of burgeoning divine charisma—he was an underhanded beguiler who used underhanded means and violence to get what he wanted. Is this something Buddhists would espouse? It is hard to think so. This raises another argument for great merit accruing from defeating wicked kings or those in authority and gaining the appeal and approval of your subjects.

However, religious violence can have a detrimental impact. The state, after all, is an inherently violent apparatus. Weber defines the state as “a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory (Weber, 2023).” The current state of political affairs in Thailand—in relation to its Muslim population—mirrors the Philippines. Thailand’s three southernmost provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat have been placed under martial law. They just so happen to have a primarily Muslim population. This happens not strictly because of Buddhist prejudices against Muslims but rather because Buddhism has become a state apparatus for enforcing its laws and beliefs through violence. Siamese State Buddhism arose during the reign of King Chulalongkorn, a kind of Buddhism with tenets and goals aligned with the wants of the state. This was symbiotic: political regimes garnered symbolic capital from state Buddhism to ensure legitimacy.

This is another avenue for Buddhist Violence: when Buddhism is used as a state apparatus. The state is an institution that monopolizes violence. Thus, it is not surprising to see monks armed with firearms, fighting in military service, because they are performing the duty that State Buddhism has imposed upon them. This violence of the state is currently outside the scope of this paper, but is still an important aspect to remember and consider when ruminating upon violence.

Due to this, Buddhism has become militarized. Yet another example of the way Buddhism grapples with violence: the fact that it is used as a state apparatus or as a way to “combat terrorists” shows that there are leeways for justifications of violence. There is a dissonance between Buddhist doctrine and lived Thai experiences. What has happened here? Especially with the idea of ahimsa being so important in Buddhist doctrine? Perhaps there is a reason. The Arya-bodhisattva-gocaraupayavisaya-vikurvana-nirdesa Sutra grants us proper insights into looking at violence alongside the all-important doctrine of ahimsa.

The sutra is translated as: “The Noble Teaching through Manifestations on the

Subject of Skillful Means in the Bodhisattva's Field of Activity.” This sutra engages in the topics of violence, warfare, and sometimes even torture. It is how Buddhists reconciled violence with the topic and philosophy of ahimsa.

How can it be that a brutal bodyguard can accrue merit while committing violent, savage acts in the name of Buddha? Why is it that Celestial Bodhisattvas—embodiments of compassion and the highest spiritual power—supported and backed efforts to spread the Buddhist faith?

One of the most powerful warriors in the service of the Buddha was the great Vajrapani, his menacing bodyguard. This bodyguard held a vajra, which was a flaming club. Once just a weapon, it has now become a symbol of the power of compassion. How is it that violence can be viewed as compassion, or even be found anywhere near the term? Are we not taught that violence is antithetical to compassion, peace, and love?

The world of Indian ascetics was commonly imagined to be hugely violent and dangerous. Defeat in debates often leads to death or conversion. Sometimes it ends with the forfeiture of the losing community's right to assemble or being forced to fund the opponent's monasteries.

The being known as Satyavaca was once depicted as an ascetic who challenged the Buddha himself with highly insulting language. He asked the Buddha the question: “...whether an anointed king may exercise the power in his own realm to execute those who should be executed.” The Buddha argues that this is so, and Satyavaca concedes this point. In a later Mahayana sutra, Satyavaca is said to be a manifestation of the Buddha, teaching military tactics and the right of kings to exercise their right to power.

However, should there be disputes between kingdoms, it is the utmost responsibility of the king to keep his citizens safe. All activities of kings are regarded as protection and not hostility.

They should attempt to defuse situations. However, if this fails, the sutra states:

Should attempts to succeed without armed conflict fail, the king is then instructed in how to assemble and deploy the various divisions of an army. He is to go to war with three intentions: to care for life, to win, and to capture the enemy alive.

To win is important here, as it does not necessitate or allow wanton destruction and genocide. Additionally, despite the violent means, the Buddhist sutra still teaches that the enemy should be kept alive. The sutra forbids burning homes or cities, destroying reservoirs or orchards, or confiscating the harvest, an extension of the sutra's innate concern for the well-being of all innocents.

With karma being a major aspect of Buddhist thought—karma being a universal force that affects your reincarnation in the next life—how does it deal with or reconcile violence?

Warfare with compassionate intentions, therefore, becomes a way of merit-making. Thus, it becomes *auspicious*.

In all branches of Buddhism, it must be understood that intent is one of the

most important aspects of action. Karma is intentional action: it is based on the intent of one's action rather than its effects upon the world. This is the reason why violence can be so easily reconciled with karma. From this, we can infer that ahimsa, or nonviolence, can more specifically be applied to violence without good intention. However, especially for kings, violence with compassionate intention becomes a valid thought that becomes an important and auspicious aspect of merit-making, and might even cause one to have a greater reincarnation in the next life.

Who is allowed to be violent? Mahayana Buddhist ethics point out that bodhisattvas may do what is ordinarily forbidden or inauspicious, including killing, and still make merit as long as they remain compassionate. The sutra then goes on to state:

A king, who is well prepared for battle, having used skillful means in this way, even if he kills or wounds opposing troops, has little moral fault or demerit and there will certainly be no bad karmic result. Why is that? It is because that action was conjoined with intentions of compassion and not abandoning. On the basis of having sacrificed himself and his wealth to protect living things and for the sake of his family, wife, and children, there is immeasurable merit; it even strongly increases.

In this conception, those who are deemed royalty or spiritually powerful become exceptions to the rule of ahimsa. With the ardent nonviolent rhetoric of the modern world, does this not seem to align with how states work (as institutions with monopolies on violence)? And, if so, if we are to inflict violence upon these institutions, why can we not be like Nyaung-u and kill the wicked kings, and become kings ourselves?

According to Jenkins, the sutra states the following:

A king must recognize that his own policies are a substantial cause of hostile relations and that his own virtue is his first defense, reasoning that has currently been used in regard to the rise of terrorism. In an argument reminiscent of the Aggañña Sutta's claim that crime arises from poverty, it is stated here that enemy attacks and insurrections arise from unhappiness and dissatisfaction. A king is therefore indirectly protected by his benevolent cultivation of the well-being of his subjects, vassals, and neighbors. It is emphasized that, if they are happy and secure, then, instead of becoming enemies, they will be allies when enemies do arise. In the same way, a benevolent king will successfully enrich his treasury through gifts and the general prosperity of his realm, while a rapacious and exploitive king will fail. (Jenkins, 2010)

Asanga, one of the great philosophers of Buddhism's Mahayana Buddhist sect, argues for and validates compassionate violence. He is the one who states that Bodhisattvas can become killers, as in doing so they are helping others to be free of the karmic outcomes of great crimes. They must act in compassion. Not only does this validate the prevention of terrible crimes, but also the aggressive removal of cruel rulers from power. He says:

Likewise, the [karmic] outcome for a bodhisattva established in compassionate intentions for benefit and happiness, who removes from power kings or ministers who are excessively fierce, merciless, and solely set out to afflict others, is that they generate great merit.

One such story, in addition to that of Sawrahan above and of Raden Wijaya, is the Chinese pilgrim Hsuan-tsang's depiction of King Harsa. Harsa is depicted as oppressed by a vicious anti-Buddhist enemy who killed his father. He prayed to the bodhisattva of compassion, Avalokitesvara, for help, and the bodhisattva granted him power in return for the promise of overthrowing the vicious king, restoring Buddhism's influence, and ruling compassionately (Tsongkhapa & Asanga, 1987).

The Buddhist conception of compassionate violence holds the key to our understanding of righteous violence. Witness the seemingly pacifistic religion somehow reconciling compassion and violence, and in fact, making violence a powerful tool for compassion. With these ideals in mind, we will examine how the conception of right intent, compassionate intent, and the right to overthrow vicious rulers can somewhat justify violence against oppressors. It is, of course, problematic that sometimes utilitarian ethics can be used to justify and perpetuate oppression. Through Buddhist ethics—and, in particular, its similarities with the Southeast Asian ethics, which include the Philippines—we showcase the potential of righteous violence from compassion and genuine care.

5. On a Materialist Justification

With the framework for spiritual concepts laid out, we move on to its ultimate purpose: how do we reconcile this under a materialist dialectic? So far, the justification for violence has been ultimately under the purely ethical Buddhist framework: that killing is sometimes karmically justified and can lead to an onslaught of better outcomes for more people. While this might seem utilitarian, it is nothing but a means to an eventual look into virtue theory: that even in death, all conventional reality is empty. I will proceed to outline why and how dialectical materialism is applicable and not at all paradoxical or incompatible with Mahayana metaphysics.

First, let us lay down a metaphysical foundation. We shall draw from one of the greatest minds of the Prasangika tradition in Buddhism: Je Tsongkhapa (Tsongkhapa & Jinpa, 2021). The Prasangika tradition is most well known for using consequentialist arguments to reveal the ultimate and unavoidable fallacies of essentialist views. In the same way, dialectical materialism rejects the essentialism of Hegelian Idealism, opting instead for the fluid and relational conditions of material reality, where everything is influenced by real, concrete material conditions.

In Mahayana Buddhism, particularly in the Vajrayana branch, that is, the philosophical system of Master Tsongkhapa, there is the doctrine of Two Truths. I mentioned earlier in the paper that there is the conventional truth and the ultimate truth. The conventional truth is conventional reality—these things that we experience as phenomena. Crucially, conventional reality under Je Tsongkhapa's

philosophy is real. It exists outside of human consciousness, and multiple conventional valid cognitions (persons) can experience the same thing in more or less the same way. Even more crucially, Je Tsongkhapa maintains the assertion that existence is illusion-like and not an illusion.

With this ground established, conventional truth can be considered the realm of our existence. More importantly, it is the realm of the material, upon which one can apply materialist dialectics.

It is important to note that within the Two Truths (Conventional and Ultimate), Tsongkhapa argues that it is wrong to perform discourse in one Truth while using the logic of the other Truth. To him, these are two different spheres of discourse that can be connected, but do not always have to be. Hence, conventional truth is separated from the Ultimate Truth, while still ultimately arising from Ultimate Truth—that being the fact that all things are empty of intrinsic existence, and with that realization must come Compassion, as the Ultimate Truth is Emptiness.

Compassionate Violence, therefore, is Violence that arises from Emptiness. This means this Violence is immanent from the true nature of all things, emptiness. And as it is immanent from emptiness, it is ultimately compassionate. This is the kind of Violence that both arises from and brings to the surface the internal contradictions through its immanence. Compassionate Violence is the irresistible and unavoidable development and sublimation of all oppressive structures.

Compassionate Violence is the negation of the negation of Dialectical Materialism—as Colonialism and Capitalism negate the Warrior Culture and Freedom of the Philippine peoples, so does Compassionate Violence ultimately negate that negation. Compassionate Violence can only arise from such oppressive structures formed by colonialism and capitalism.

Under the Two Truths, therefore, one needs a dialectical materialist view of reality to be able to ascertain the relations and contradictions within. It is only through a materialist view, congruent with the Conventional Truth, that we can accept the following realizations: that we live in a world that is conventionally existent, and thus, materially existent and beholden to the scientific method of dialectical materialism, and also that this world is illusion-like because of its ultimate nature as being intrinsically empty and without some other essence that gives it its properties. All things are completely interdependent and originate from each other. Thus, Compassionate Violence—or more accurately, Empty Violence—becomes a potent tool for enacting change in conventional reality through a metaphysical justification through ultimate reality. And, as has already been stated before: with the realization of sunyata or emptiness comes the realization of compassion—that we are all ultimately each other.

6. Compassionate Violence and the Philippines

What, then, is the next course of action?

Can violence ever be justified? In learning about Buddhist conceptions of violence, we can find places where violence can be justified when radical changes and

revolution are required, guided by the principles of merit and fortune. Violence can be a necessary tool to enact much-needed change against forces that are unwilling to relinquish their power and monopoly on violence. Compassionate Violence, therefore, is Enlightened Violence. The Violence of the Buddhas. One that can bring about true and real change, as those in power will not want to let go of their power.

More importantly, how can this potentially be applied to our modern Philippine context or situation?

Earlier, I have shown multiple examples of violence both in Buddhist societies as well as within the confines of Buddhist thought. We have illustrated that Buddhism is far from the purely pacifist religion that we have been conditioned to see it as. If anything, this is a fabrication of orientalism (Said, 2021), as it creates a facsimile of Buddhism that much of the non-Buddhist world has begun to adopt and see as true, despite it not actually being what Buddhism is at all.

This heightened, fabricated version of Buddhism is the one most known by those in the West. However, Buddhism is just as susceptible to examples of religious violence as other religions are. It is, after all, as much a social act and ritual as it is a religious one.

To reiterate what has been said:

1) There are examples of Buddhists being violent, either out of necessity, compassion, or to build merit (by spreading Buddhism).

2) Even the greatest figures of Buddhism—Bodhisattvas and even past incarnations of Shakyamuni Buddha—have been able to justify their violence as being done from a point of compassion. Karma is known to care only about the intention of a person rather than the effects of their action: if one kills a bug with malicious intent, that generates negative karma. However, killing a bug accidentally will not generate negative karma.

3) Using violence to prevent greater violence is a necessity that has been shown in many stories. The Buddha himself, in one of his previous incarnations as a great captain of a ship, was forced to kill a homicidal thief, both to protect those on his ship and to protect the thief from the repercussions of his misdeeds. The bodhisattva had to live through eternities in Buddhist hells, while the thief was born in a heavenly realm—the bodhisattva (who would become Gautama Buddha) killed in great compassion to enact the greatest of goods at the expense of his own. For the bodhisattva's virtues, this is the greatest compassion: to throw oneself into hell for the others' heaven.

Now, let us turn to the situation in the Philippines. First, I will show *why* Buddhism has a hidden epistemological reason for being a good foundation for a nuanced, compassionate view on violence. Buddhism and Buddhist ideas had penetrated and proliferated in the Philippine Archipelago far before the arrival of Catholics. A certain level of ancestral memory comes, then, from this archaeological truth.

For the most part, the Philippines is not a Buddhist-majority country. Even if

Buddhist concepts have been brought here in the past—the Kapampangan word “kalma” comes from Sanskrit karma, for example, they have been relegated to communal memory or thoroughly localized into our contexts. However, it is only through these localized ideas that we can find common ground. More importantly, it is important to note the huge Buddhist influence in the Southeast Asian region: Palembang was considered a major center of the Buddhist world. Not to mention constant trade with the East Asian region. There is no doubt that much of Buddhist ideology and spirituality has reached us and has been localized. There is various evidence—though scant on the archaeological side—of Buddhist influence. Many have been uncovered in Agusan, the site of what was once the Kingdom of Butuan in the 10th century. Other than the Agusan Image, which has been decided to be the Buddhist deity Vajralasya (bodhisattva of amorous dance) ([Google Arts & Culture, 2023](#)), there has been epigraphical evidence of the cult of Mahapratishara from an amulet uncovered from Agusan as well ([Orlina, 2013](#)), upon which was written, in Sanskrit:

Om. O Excellent Nectar vara vara O Purest One hūm hūm phat phat, protect protect the one named Anai, protect (his) body, provide peace (for him), svaha. Om. O One with Nectar-eyes, O Protector of the Foetus, O One who Attracts, the Giver of Long Life, hūm hūm phat phat, protect protect the one named (si) Anai!

It should be noted that Anai here is pronounced “Angai,” as it is written with the Sanskrit diacritic that makes the n sound as “ng.” Additionally, the repetition of Om (and truly the prayer itself) is of Buddhist origin. Mahapratishara is a protector and an emanation of the meditation Buddha and a great fulfiller of wishes in Buddhist Mahayana traditions.

With this established, we determine that much of the Philippines’ culture has been influenced in some way or another by much of the Buddhist religion and culture. Perhaps it is filtered through the lens of those much farther west than us—such as in Indonesia, where Palembang is—and thus arrived in the Philippines with a decidedly Southeast Asian bent. A common way of accruing merit in Buddhism is performing actions that are appeasing and good to the gods.

This is all in service to creating a cultural link between Buddhism and the Philippines. Now that there is some historical precedent, we can craft our views on the matter in such a way that Buddhism not as an alien religion from the Philippines but as another religion that has influenced the various cultures of the Philippines and can be used as a cultural basis for potential popular action.

We have seen that one of the major justifications of violence in Buddhism is its use for protection, not just for those you must protect, but even for your enemy. The story of the Buddha having to kill the thief so that he may not suffer a worse fate is perhaps an example of great compassion that goes beyond what we might consider just. Not only that, but protecting one’s own family is an example of skillful means, especially for the king.

In the modern Philippines, we have no kings in name. However, it has similarly been stated above that it would be righteous and meritorious to overthrow cruel

rulers to instate better rulers. With this in mind, any violence against those cruel rulers—whether they be kings or politicians who exert their power as if they were kings—is justified in three dimensions. In the dimension of compassion, it is to save them from any further cruelty they might perform so that their next life will be a better one than the one they have right now. In the dimension of the king, this is to protect the people who are being harmed by the actions of the unjust ruler, as his actions make them susceptible to violence from outside forces. In the dimension of the folk, the people get to exercise the strength of the many to choose a ruler, as is their right.

In the Philippines, nonviolence is construed as a virtue. Of course, it must be; even the Filipino National Hero is stated as a paragon of peaceful revolution. Gandhi is taught as an example of a peaceful revolution. What are all these but means of pacification? When the Katipunan liberated the Philippines from the Spanish, we were simply sold into the hands of the Americans. To this day, we stand on American institutions and structures. What has that led us to? Further oppression, wealth disparity, and decadence are powered by the labor workforce who believe they must follow the upper classes. Is this all we can do? Surely not: violence, now more than ever, is necessary. Violence is not only to murder those in power—to save them from themselves—but to tear down structures that continue to oppress us so that we can create a future wherein those violences do not exist to harm.

In the Philippines, the question then becomes, how can we apply this concept of justified violence? There have been many such obvious examples of actual physical violence being inflicted upon the masses and the people bursting into their fullest during well-known protests. Many of the most well-known have been named massacres. The Hacienda Luisita Massacre is an infamous example, with the dispersal of the protestors leading to 7 dead and 121 injured.

Another is the Mendiola Massacre, where, under Corazon Aquino, farmers who were fighting for equal land distribution and equal wages were violently dispersed, with shots being fired, leading to the deaths of 13 farmers and 39 injuries (Francisco, 2016). A case even more recent is the US Embassy protest of 2016, where indigenous people protested the presence of the US in their ancestral lands, no doubt something also enabled by local governments and the national government. At least 50 were injured. These are just some examples of the grosser violence committed. These are manifestations of systemic violence, as opposed to simply being the systemic violence that continues to oppress. If we are not to commit violence on our own, these acts of violence against us will be continued by those in power. This violates the thought of ahimsa; if we can stop violence from recurring, we ought to stop it, especially if this violence is just a physical manifestation of a violence as lingering and as silent as systemic violence.

How then can we justify violence against those in power? This is the main brunt of this section: earlier, we learned about the Buddhist justifications to fight and dethrone unjust kings. In their ethical framework, unrighteous kings will cause misfortune to fall upon their kingdoms. In a similar vein, with kings relating to

those in power and kingdoms being countries, we can compare this ethical point of view to modern democratic countries, with those in power being those who are voted in through democracy (or perhaps, corruption) and those with large sums of money (themselves commonly becoming politicians). This means the masses, we the people, have an obligation to dethrone those in power if they are corrupt or are not doing their duty in a virtuous manner. It is only right to accrue better merit and to create a society that is conducive to the right path and the right skill.

It is no secret that Philippine politicians frequently engage in corruption, and they even more frequently get away with it. One infamous example is the Priority Development Assistance Fund (PDAF) Scam that burst into the headlines when it was exposed in 2013. Here, a large number of politicians have been revealed to have been involved in this pork barrel scam, using the PDAF funds on “ghost projects” that were implemented through Janet Lim Napoles’ companies, where there was no tangible output. Those involved in the scam—various members of Congress—could access their PDAF funds through this method. Congress members who have been revealed to be part of this scam are the politicians Bong Revilla, Juan Ponce Enrile, and Jinggoy Estrada.

Rizalina Seachon-Lanete, Bongbong Marcos, Conrado Estrella, Edgar L. Valdez, Rodolfo Plaza, Erwin Chiongbian, Samuel Dangwa, Robert Raymund Estrella, and Gregorio Honasan. Many of them have been put in prison, such as Bong Revilla, but have since been released and have returned as senators in the Philippine Senate. Bongbong Marcos, otherwise known as Ferdinand Romualdez Marcos Jr., is the son of the late dictator Ferdinand Marcos. He is now the President of the Republic of the Philippines.

It is an aimless effort to wonder how they got back into power—the answer is simple. A combination of money and power. It is, at its core, corruption. Unjustness. Under Buddhist ethics, this love for power and money is exactly what will bring ruin to a kingdom.

Other than Bongbong, the Marcoses are notorious for their abuse of power and corruption. In 2018, former first lady Imelda Marcos pleaded guilty to graft and was arrested. The anti-graft Sandiganbayan sentenced her to serve 6 to 11 years in prison for each of the seven counts of violating the anti-corruption law. She illegally funneled around \$200 million to Swiss foundations in the 1970s. Her husband was a major dictator in the Philippines who led to many deaths and unjust imprisonments after he declared Martial Law in 1972 ([NBCNews.com](https://www.nbcnews.com), 2018).

Another major and infamous example was during the time of former President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo in the “Hello, Garci” scandal. The President allegedly rigged the 2004 national election so that she would win the presidency. This subsequently caused hundreds of national and local positions to be contested during the election. The scandal arose in 2005 when audio recordings of a phone conversation between President Arroyo and the Election Commissioner Virgilio Garcilano were leaked. This showed a more direct link between unjust kings and faulty systems: Arroyo still became the President, but only because the Electoral Laws of

the Philippines were equally faulty (de Quiros, 2007).

All these have in common are unjust and unvirtuous people placed in power. They worked their way into that power. This causes the country to suffer the consequences of a king who does not accrue merit and does not make a kingdom that is conducive to following the right paths and the correct ways. Misfortune and hardship abound. If we are to apply Buddhist ethics, one of the best ways to deal with this is to overthrow those in power, usually violently, so that we can install a better king who is more just. A just leader can also allow a country to become just, creating a better country for all, with better policies and better laws. The rub is that the old kings must first be violently overthrown. Buddhism is conducive to this anti-authoritarian line of thinking, while the Catholic tendency and historical momentum of believing in those in authority and doing nothing to challenge them for fear of challenging the one who is rightfully in authority causes the people to be complacent and subservient.

I have presented a comprehensive viewpoint of Buddhism through Southeast Asian culture, connected Buddhism and its influence to Philippine cultures, justified the use of its ethical ideals, found examples where Buddhist societies have found violence to be justified and necessary, and then applied this line of thinking to how we ought to deal with unjust leaders in the Philippines. Buddhism is far from a nonviolent religion, and even its concept of ahimsa can become one of using necessary violence to stop further violence from occurring. Therefore, under a Buddhist lens, physical violence by the masses to overthrow and/or violently depose those corrupt officials is a viable and justifiable position and should be seriously considered if we are ever to summon good fortune and a better society for ourselves.

The Philippines, in particular, is long known to have been a victim of multiple colonizations, most important of which is the fact that it used to be a colony of the United States of America (under the name “The Philippine Islands”), and in modern geopolitics, it is considered a neocolony of the United States. Within the Philippine context, Fanon’s ideas of the Colonized intertwine completely and inseparably with Benjamin’s conception of the Mere Man. The colonial Filipino identity persists as perpetual resistance against the invader, a reactionary populist view that is constantly wielded by Filipino politicians as an effort to appeal to the “Man of Charisma” form of politics that has since become important (and, based on what can be read later on in the section dealing with Pre-colonial Philippine societies, has always been important) in modern-day Philippine society.

In following the revelations gleaned by Reynaldo Ileto, it is tantalizing to realize the potential of religious narratives among the Filipino masses (Ileto, 2011). Among the masses of Filipinos, they see themselves as represented completely by Christ’s suffering in Pasyon plays, which are plays where Christ’s life story is re-told. These Pasyon plays are reminiscent and are no doubt of the same field and artistic realm as the stage plays common in other places of Southeast Asia, where stories of great religious figures are regaled again and again. Examples of these are

the Ramakien in Thailand, the Sanghyangs and Arjas of Bali, and even the famous Darangen and Singkil dance dramas of the Southern Muslim Mindanao populations.

Catholicism in the Philippines is so deeply rooted that it is more often seen as a symbol of culture rather than religion. It has, in essence, become an oppressive structure in and of itself. Among the youth of the Philippines, Catholicism has become a disciplining force, limiting and mandating what a boy or girl should wear, how they should act, and what they should think. Buddhism, on the other hand, has no such hegemonic function. Thus, it is easier to see Buddhism as a liberatory paradigm rather than as an oppressive or invasive one.

There is psychoreligious potential in the emancipatory doctrines of Buddhism. More importantly, Buddhism does not demand the worship of a god, and therefore is not inherently incompatible with the already magic-first thinking of the average Filipino Catholic. Filipino Buddhism is overripe with the potential for binding a new Filipino Danas (lived experience) into the Masses. The story of the bodhisattva messiahs who sacrifice themselves for the greater good, undergoing suffering to eventually reach the light, echoes the suffering endured by Jesus and therefore echoes the suffering experienced by the Masses. It must be said that the ancestral memory of Buddhism (belief in reincarnation, godly manifestation, the persistent belief in karma, shrine worship, respect for the dead, mummification, cremation, and many more that are seen as Catholic practices now but started off as Dharmic practices) will no doubt ease this transitory process. To create a mass that is truly liberated will require a cognitive shift. To find a truly revolutionary consciousness requires understanding that one must move past what has been established and move further from the oppressive. To do that, we must start with the one thing the Filipino Masses are intricately and deeply intertwined with: their faith and spirituality.

By wielding the ancestral memory of Esoteric Buddhism, the Filipino masses can be mobilized to move toward the direction of interdependence. Rejecting the growing liberal individualist values ingrained upon them by American colonialism, they can instead embrace a philosophy that is more collectivist without dissolving the individual into a faceless, unimportant being. The tenets of Buddhism advocate working towards the revelation of the Pure Land of Sakyamuni in this world—in essence, not waiting for heaven to come to us, but creating that very heaven upon our world, so that all may cultivate enlightenment and that all sentient beings may ultimately be free.

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