

Muay Thai as Sacred Combat

How Buddhist ritual transforms the nature of violence

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1. Introduction

“(The) Siamese boxing contest opens with a sort of weird dance [sic], to the strange of an orchestra. The dance symbolises that the fighters are looking over the ground for the combat. All during the rounds the orchestra plays, starting slowly and getting faster and faster, encouraging the boxers to fight furiously.”
(1910, Quoted in ICTM, 2019)

Lumpinee Stadium, Bangkok. The Muay Thai combatant receives a headpiece from their trainer, made up of old rags blessed by a Monk. Sacred tattoos mark their conditioned physique, believed to convey supernatural powers and protection from spirits. Yet, they are not merely bound by these spiritual frameworks, but also practise Buddhism, alongside 93.6% of Thailand’s population (Byrne, 2026). Thus, they must also operate within a religious framework prohibiting violence and killing (Keown, 1996, p. 12). How can a Buddhist state not only tolerate but actively celebrate institutionalised violence? Put differently, how can social spaces be created permitting the practice of ritualised and controlled violence in the context of a society practising a religion that doctrinally preaches non-violence?

In this investigation, I will argue that traditional Muay Thai practice takes place within the animistic (apotropaic) domain of Buddhism rather than the doctrinal (nibbanic) domain. The numerous rituals and spiritual symbols surrounding the fight aim to transform it from mere aggressive violence. In practice, the differing mental orientation of Monks fundamentally changes the nature of their actions. The ritual surrounding Muay Thai combat can create a similar mental shift, changing the nature of the fighter's violent actions. The Buddhist management of Muay Thai combat offers an additional way to manage the tension between violence and religious doctrine, without either doctrinal justification or principled rejection. However, as is demonstrated by the historical examples within Sri Lanka and Myanmar, the mechanisms containing violence within the Buddhist community carry a structural blind spot towards those outside of it.

My argument will develop through three stages. First, I will demonstrate that the apparent tension between doctrinal Buddhism and Muay Thai practices stems from a misallocation to the register of Buddhism within which it takes place. Second, I argue that the various components of Muay Thai's ritualisation genuinely change the fighter's mental orientation. And finally, my research will broaden in scope to reveal the implications of how Buddhist states manage the tension between religious duties and violence.

2. Western Frameworks

Western frameworks are employed as analytical lenses, rather than normative benchmarks, to reveal what is distinctive about the Buddhist approach through comparison and contrast. The first two (Just War Theory and non-violent approach), which I explore now, represent the two dominant responses to the religion-violence tension. The third, coming into play later, is Plato's account of the warrior's formation in the Republic, which anticipates the structural features of Muay Thai's ritual framework as a recurring pattern rather than a cultural peculiarity.

2.1 Just War

Having seen its most major developments under Augustine and Aquinas, Just War theory is the most predominantly practiced approach to violence in the West. Augustine laid the foundations for the need for a theory on Just War in a realist approach to human nature, acknowledging potential miscommunication, conflicting desires, and differing laws and religions (Langan, 1984, p.29). Aquinas later systematised the tradition, positing 3 central components (Aquinas and Dominicans. English Province, 1981, secs. II, Q. 40, Art. 1). First, war must be declared by a ruler holding legitimate power. Second, war must have just cause, meaning those being attacked must have wronged, thereby justifying the offensive state's response to defend itself, recover something unjustly taken, or punish wrongdoing. Third, the offender must have

the right intention. Ultimately, Western just war theory resolved the tension between Christianity and violence through specific doctrinal justifications.

2.2 Non-Violence

Alternatively, Richard Gregg's adaptation of Gandhian non-violence proposes non-violent responses to violence through a pragmatic lens over its moral status (1934). Gregg draws the concept of moral jiu-jitsu from Japanese Jiu-Jitsu, a martial art centred around using the attacker's force against them. The offender operates on the expectation of resistance coming from the other party, yet the adherent to non-violence provides none to overcome. The spectacle produced by the refusal to respond to violence with further violence triggers both the observers and the attackers themselves to realise the moral reality of the violent party. The ensuing moral exposure creates psychological instability, undermining the attacker's ability to maintain their violent actions. Crucially, the use of principles from Japanese Jiu-Jitsu presents martial combat as a potential moral education rather than a moral failure or merely a socially accepted cathartic release of violence. Therefore, the non-violent approach rejects violence on principle and pragmatism.

Both the just war and non-violent approaches represent opposing approaches to violence in the West. However, as I will now demonstrate, Buddhism takes a different path.

3. Theravada Buddhism

When discussing Buddhist doctrine, I refer to the Theravada tradition, translated from Pali to "The way of the elders", as it only accepts the Pali canonical scripture as authentic, and is predominantly practiced in Thailand (Harvey, 2000, p.4). Mahayana is the other major Buddhist tradition, mainly diverging from Theravada in the ultimate goal of practice: attaining the bodhisattva ideal of aspiring to the enlightenment

of all beings and remaining active in the world to assist others in doing so, rather than the Theravada ideal of achieving Nibbana.

Doctrinal Theravada Buddhism does not posit the existence of a creator God in the theistic sense, but rather affirms the existence of certain supernatural beings such as gods, spirits, and cosmic forces. Dharma, the Buddha's teachings and natural law of the universe, guides the life of the Buddhist practitioner. Buddhist followers are broadly construed into two categories (Lester, 1973, pp.47–48). The Bhikkhu (monks) renounce the world, dedicating themselves to following the canonical doctrinal teachings, seeking to achieve Nibbana. The layman (everyday practitioner) remains in the household, unable to adhere strictly to ideal doctrine. Within society, the relationship between Bhikkhu and layman is both reciprocal and complementary. The former provides the ideal for spiritual conduct, whilst the latter takes care of material necessities. Yet, this is not to say they receive equal treatment. Even when partaking in the same activity as a layman, the Bhikkhu's actions are depicted differently, gesturing towards their enlightened state. The layperson eats food, consuming it for pleasure, satisfaction of hunger, and social connection; the monk, performing the same physical action, nourishes himself for the purpose of sustaining the physical vessel necessary to achieve nibbana. This highlights how changes to the cetana, mental factors or intention accompanying an action, can change the inherent nature of the action itself. Not exclusive to eating, it applies to various other actions such as walking, speaking, sleeping, or even seeing/perceiving.

The Buddhist canon does not contain an equivalent Just War doctrine, instead preaching non-participation and detachment from conflict. The first precept prohibits the killing of living beings, and the principle of ahimsa preaches non-violence (Beal, 2024, p.57). Furthermore, as argued by Keown, there is something intrinsically wrong with taking any life; taking a person's life holds an objective dimension which, dissimilar to Augustinian Just War, is unaffected by the killer's state of mind (or intent) (Keown, 1996, p.12). However, Buddhism can be categorised into three functional types: Nibbanic, Kammatic, and

Apotropaic (Spiro, 1982, pp.11-14). The Nibbanic register (practised mainly by Monks) contains normative, doctrinal Buddhism within the Pali Canon and the monastic ideal. The lay majority practices Kammatic Buddhism. Instead of focusing on achieving Nibbana, they pursue the accumulation of good karma, ensuring a favourable rebirth rather than escaping the cycle altogether. The animistic elements of the practice are contained within the Apotropaic domain, which concerns itself with sacred objects and interaction with spirits. Keown's analysis operates over nibbanic doctrinal Buddhism, where absolute adherence to the first precept applies regardless of the accompanying mental orientation. However, Muay Thai operates within the kammatic and apotropaic registers, since the fighters are themselves Laymen and the spiritual elements are animistic. Within the apotropaic register, ritual operates as a technology to condition the cetana before and during the act, whereas, within the nibbanic register, the cetana is evaluated as it naturally arises. Thus, as Spiro argues, the apparent tensions between Buddhism and Muay Thai practice stem from a category error, with sole reference to the Nibbanic register, the compatibility of violence within the Kammatic and Apotropaic dimensions is often ignored. Having established the misallocation of Muay Thai practice to the incorrect analytical register, the paper now turns to the specific elements through which the apotropaic transformation operates.

4. Buddhist Components of Muay Thai

The ritual architecture surrounding Muay Thai constitutes a systematic technology for reorienting the cetana accompanying combat. But before examining the ritual mechanisms, it is worth establishing a comparative source through which to understand their function. Plato's Republic provides a strikingly similar account for managing the warrior through ritual and artistic formation rather than rational instruction alone. The structural parallel reveals that the challenge of containing and properly orienting violent capacities is a recurring theme of how societies seek to manage the tension between martial

culture and social order. Therefore, through this lens, the ritual elements can be understood, not merely as cultural practices but also instances of a recognisable pattern.

In the Republic, Plato wrote that warrior classes are erected by necessity (2007, pp.55–60). Warriors will be chosen for their spiritedness, referring to their aggressive, energetic, and competitive drive, as well as their philosophic nature. However, their dangerous traits require careful formation of both body and soul, a challenge paralleled in Muay Thai.

The headband entitled Mongkol (blessing), worn during pre-fight rituals, is presented to the fighter by their trainer. The trainer plays a key role in this ritual, symbolising the retention of knowledge and legacy of past fighters, and the ceremony represents the continuation of said lineage. The Wai Kru Ram Muay (pre-fight dance) also pays respect to teachers and ancestors whose knowledge they build upon. Fighters often mimic mythical warriors, honouring their spiritual ancestry, and consecrate the ring as a sacred space through circumambulation, walking clockwise around it, and prostrating at each corner, laying their forehead down and sealing the area off. The accompanying music, called Sarama, elevates the performance and continues throughout the fight (phlueng muay), adapting to the tempo of the combat (ICTM, 2019). Plato identified music as a potent beneficial tool to control the warrior spirit as it operates on the non-rational dimension of the soul. However, according to him, bad artistic influence can be equally damaging as good art is beneficial. The value is derived from the character traits depicted within the piece. Therefore, by imitating mythical warriors, the Muay Thai fighter is not only honouring these figures but also attempting to emulate their emotional orientation. Sak Yant tattoos, applied to prevent physical harm and ward off malevolent spirits, operate as a living object within their body. Their potency depends on the fighter's conduct, necessitating self-control outside the ring, ensuring a holistic influence on the warrior spirit. Lastly, offerings are made to appease local spirits at a Phra Phrum (guardian deity of a location), since the combat takes place in their locale (Dawson, 2024, pp.44–45).

The Mongkol and Wai Kru instil social esteem through lineage identification; the Sarama, as anticipated by Plato, operates over the non-rational dimension; the Sak Yant embeds cetana reorientation physically;

the Phra Phrum manages obligations to spirits occupying the combat space. The fighter's actions within the ring are fundamentally altered compared to those of one who has not undergone them, mirroring how the Monk's actions differ from those of the layman. The rituals change the cetana (mental orientation), and within the Abhidhamma framework, the analysis of the mind and body within the Theravada tradition, the cetana constitutes the action. It is a stronger claim than the Augustinian position, since within the Abhidhamma two identical physical movements become different actions when accompanied by different mental orientations. The ritual preparation of the Muay Thai fighter is therefore not disguising violence but genuinely transforming the nature of the act being performed. A Kantian perspective may argue that mental orientation merely changes the moral evaluation of an action, not the action itself (Kant, 1785/2005, 4:397-4:399). Yet, this paper's core argument operates within the Abhidhamma framework, which claims that an action cannot be described independently of the accompanying cetana, and thus depends on accepting this claim.

The claim is supported outside of the Buddhist tradition. Collins (2008) argues that, due to confrontational tension and inhibiting fear, violence is difficult for individuals to commit. Martial arts training can either increase or decrease real-world violence depending on whether it furthers emotional competence or lowers thresholds of inhibition. Furthermore, Wacquant's (2004) study conducted on a Chicago boxing gym found that the gym operated as a disciplining institution that reduced street violence committed by practitioners. These findings highlight the empirical plausibility of the claim that violence can be transformed, refined, and controlled beyond the release of violent impulses.

5. Thai Nationalism

Having established how ritual transforms combat at the individual level, the focus now turns to the political dimension. Understanding how the Thai state formalised Muay Thai as a national cultural practice reveals a complex operation deploying Buddhist concepts to legitimize a practice in tension with its ethics.

In the West, religious belief and practice are often separated from social and political life. However, such is not the case within the Buddhist tradition. The government itself is a religious institution, since the “king was (historically considered) the political embodiment of a nation of Buddhists” (Baker and Phongpaichit, 2009, p.107). During the 1900s, Thailand underwent an ideological unification employing the Buddhist concept of Samakkhi (ibid, p.116). It is originally a Pali term defined as the communal harmony of Buddhist practitioners; it was later instrumentalised by the Thai government and used beyond its originally intended meaning. Thailand’s newfound self-definition as ideologically unified and militarily experienced provided the socio-political backing for the formalisation of Muay Thai into a spectator sport, which occurred during the same period. The construction of Muay Thai as a vehicle for Buddhist national identity is not an incidental component of the practice but rather structurally embedded within it. The combatant undergoes rituals that construct a masculine Buddhist subject whose spirit embodies Samakkhi. The construction of Muay Thai as a vehicle for masculine Buddhist identity raises questions about the position of female Muay Thai fighters that the tradition has not yet fully theorised (Davies and Deckert, 2018). The transformative properties are either gender neutral or oriented to the masculine subject, leaving an open question, for which either answer carries implications for both the tradition’s self-understanding as well as the functioning of the apotropaic transformation on female practitioners. Nonetheless, through the development of Samakkhi, the Thai state elevated Muay Thai from a practice with cultural backing to one with explicit theological legitimisation. By incorporating Samakkhi into Thai national culture, Buddhist doctrine became a tool for the state to suppress dissent. Political opposition thus became a spiritual failure. These issues of the nationalisation of Buddhist principles extend outside of Thailand, causing mass civil and military violence in Sri Lanka and contemporary Myanmar.

6. Historical Nationalism

The mechanisms present in the Thai case, such as the identification of a sacred community, framing certain groups as threats to Buddhist national integrity, and the deployment of religious authority for political purposes, are not culturally specific. The paper now shifts focus to historical cases of Buddhist nationalist violence in Sri Lanka and Myanmar, demonstrating the same mechanisms in other Theravada Buddhist contexts. Crucially, they highlight the dangerous potential of these mechanisms when ritual constraints are absent.

The Sinhalese chronicles provide an account of Sri Lankan Buddhist history and are the primary sources for Buddhist nationalist rhetoric in conflict. Notably, Non-Buddhist enemies were equated to animals, thereby largely diminishing their moral status, and thus their death would result in minimal karmic cost at most (Mahānāma and Geiger, 2020, paras.109–111). More relevant, in the Ayutthaya Kingdom, now forming modern-day Thailand, since the King was considered both a political and religious leader, a war conducted under his authority against enemies of the Dhamma or in defence of the Buddhist community was deemed righteous.

Sri Lankan nationalist ideology is rooted in the belief that it holds the sacred status of “Dharmadwipa” (Island of the Dharma), the Buddhist Promised Land (Bartholomeusz, 2002, pp.38-40). The Tamil minority was perceived as a potential threat to the island’s unity, framing the ensuing conflict as Dharma Yuddhaya, the closest Buddhist equivalent to Just War. More recently, in Myanmar, an association for the protection of the Buddhist race and religion, named the Ma Ba Tha movement, employed the same logic of ethnic and nationalist self-defence to justify their violent campaign against the Rohingya, a muslim minority (Matthews and Walton, 2017; OHCHR, 2019).

The Buddhist mechanism for transforming violence suffers from an analogous limitation to Platonic republican thought. Whilst both frameworks function effectively to contain violence in a ritualised setting, they give minimal consideration to members outside their community. Notably, the Platonic justification for the warrior class stems from the acquisition of land from other states. Yet it makes no moral consideration of the states whose land is being seized. Similarly, the same resources that enable violence to be contained within Muay Thai's ritualised framework, such as the identification of a sacred community and the framing of a spiritual threat towards the Buddhist nation, are specifically those used to justify violence against non-Buddhists when the ritual constraints are missing. The core differentiator between the Muay Thai case and those in Sri Lanka and Burma is therefore not the underlying mechanisms legitimising the use of violence but the presence of ritual constraints keeping the violence bound to the particular social space. Crucially, this suggests that the blind spot is structural rather than merely incidental, embedded in the community-bound nature of the transformatory mechanism itself.

7. Conclusion

This paper has argued that, once the practice of Muay Thai combat is evaluated within the apotropaic domain of Buddhism rather than by the nibbanic standard, the apparent tension disappears. The ritual architecture surrounding Muay Thai constitutes a systematic framework to reorient the combatant's mental state. Within Buddhist moral psychology, mental reorientation changes the inherent nature of the action: for example, the monk nourishing himself and the layman eating involve identical physical movements, albeit with different ontological meanings. The Muay Thai fighter is not managing a morally compromised act through ceremony. Rather, the action is altogether different after a ritual-induced mental reorientation.

Whilst Just War theory develops doctrinal criteria by which violence is justified, and the non-violent approach refuses to accommodate violence altogether, Buddhism does neither of these. It takes a third

path, transforming the nature of the violent actions through ritualised practice. An identical physical movement, such as the fighter striking his opponent, is constituted as a different act depending on the mental orientation produced by the subject's ritual preparation. The result produced is not a rationalisation of violence but rather a genuine ontological transformation within the Buddhist framework. Plato's parallel account of warrior formation reclassifies the approach as a recurring structural pattern rather than a cultural peculiarity. Beyond the scope of martial arts, the Thai government's transformation of samakkhi (unity of Buddhist practitioners) highlights the potential manipulation of this mechanism for political purposes. Buddhism's management of violence through ritual transformation reveals a structural pattern for how religiously grounded states can maintain religious legitimacy while simultaneously sanctioning practices that appear to violate their moral foundations, a pattern whose implications are highlighted by the historical examples within Sri Lanka and Myanmar.

A notable limitation of this investigation is the exclusive reliance upon English-language sources. A complete account of the co-constitutive relationship between Buddhism and Muay Thai would require the inclusion of Thai-language sources, thereby accounting for the most comprehensive historical and anthropological scholarship. Bearing the limitation in mind, the findings of my research are threefold. First, the apotropaic (animistic) domain provides the correct framework for analysing Muay Thai's relation to Buddhist Ethics. Second, the ritual mechanisms of Muay Thai provide a genuine architecture for transforming the moral character of combat, not merely symbolically but constitutively. Third, the case study has revealed an understudied method for managing tension between violence and religious commitment by transforming the action, yet the mechanism neglects the moral status of members from outside communities.

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