

Muay Thai as Sacred Combat: How Buddhist ritual transforms the nature of violence

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01. Introduction

Core Questions

Despite the large quantities of research on Buddhist teachings on non-violence, little work has been done investigating how ritualised practices of violence can be morally sustained in a Buddhist society. Muay Thai is the national sport of Thailand, and most of the fighters are practicing Buddhists (Byrne, 2026). The sport involves numerous spiritual practices connected to Buddhist teachings. Many fighters are even blessed by Monks before a fight.

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?

How have Buddhist principles been instrumentalised to justify violence towards outside communities, and how do these cases relate to Muay Thai's ritualised transformation of violence?

Methodology

I divided my research into multiple phases, each providing the groundwork for the next, to arrive at a theoretically sound result.

- Provide an overview of Western approaches to violence
- Study the Buddhist approach to violence
- Develop the role of these ideas into Thai Nationalism
- Identify sources drawn upon to justify violence
- Analyse historical examples of Buddhist violence



“(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)

02. Western Frameworks

- Just War Theory
- Developed by St Augustine and Thomas Aquinas to reconcile Christianity with the military needs of the Roman state (Aquinas and Dominicans. English Province, 1981, secs. II, Q. 40, Art. 1)
 - Justifies violence doctrinally, centered around the intention of actions

- Non-Violence
- Gandhian approach adapted by Richard B Gregg to target Western audiences (1934)
 - Rejects violence on principle on pragmatic grounds, as it is the most effective means to resolve conflicts

Both approaches offer the prevalent approaches to violence in the Western canon. However, Buddhism employs an alternative mechanism for dealing with violence

03. Theravada Buddhism

In Thailand, Theravada Buddhism is the predominant denomination. Followers seek to become an arahant, an enlightened being, thereby reaching Nibbana and escaping the cycle of rebirth (Harvey, 2000, p.4). However, when referring to Buddhist positions on violence, individuals often solely draw upon doctrinal Buddhist practice. Instead, Buddhism has three distinct domains: Nibbanic, Kammatic, and Apotropaic (Spiro, 1982, pp.11-14). Buddhism is only explicitly incompatible with violence in one of the three domains. Monks abide within the Nibbanic domain, thereby having to follow doctrinal Buddhist teachings. On the other hand, the Laypeople (everyday practitioners) abide in the Kammatic realm and are not expected to have the same level of commitment. The relationship between both groups is both reciprocal and complementary.

A crucial component of my research is the different framing of actions performed by each category of practitioner (Lester, 1973, pp.47-48). The layperson eats, whilst the monks nourish themselves. This is due to the different goal of these similar actions. The Buddhist concept of cetana dictates that the mental orientation of the agent can change the inherent nature of a physical movement, becoming a different action altogether.

In Sri Lanka, Buddhist Nationalist ideas were not merely theoretical justifications for violence, but tangibly changed events. In 1959, the prime minister was assassinated by a Monk following his response to the “Sinhala only” policy. (Brekke, 2006, p. 200)



“But we want them to be gentle in their dealings with their own people, and fierce in their dealings with the enemy” (Plato, 2007, paras. 375b-c)

04. Buddhist Components of Muay Thai

- Mongkol
- A headband, blessed by a Monk, worn before combat.
 - Placed upon their head by their trainer, symbolising the value of heritage and past knowledge
- Sak Yant
- Sacred tattoos applied by Monks
 - Represents a living thing residing in the fighter's body
 - Protects against malevolent spirits
- Wai Kru Ram Muay
- Pre-fight dance performed along to traditional music
 - Fighters imitate sacred warriors, and honour ancestors

The numerous rituals redirect the mental orientation of the fighter, thereby changing the nature of the violent actions, and containing the violence to a controlled ritualised social space. (Dawson, 2024, pp.44-45)

05. Thai Nationalism & Historical Repercussions

During the early 1900s, Thailand underwent a period of unification, employing the Buddhist concept of samakhi, referring to the unity of a community of Buddhists, as a cornerstone of Thai national identity (Baker and Phongpaichit, 2009, p.107). They employed a theological concept for political purposes. Political dissent thus became spiritual failure.

In the Sinhalese chronicles, non-Buddhist enemies were equated to animals, whose killing was justified in defence of Buddhism (Mahānāma and Geiger, 2020, paras.109-111). During the Sri Lankan civil war, the home of Theravada Buddhism was depicted as the Buddhist promised land (Bartholomeusz, 2002, pp.38-40). This was taken to justify its defence against the Tamil minority, who threatened the island's unity.

06. Conclusion

The findings of my research are threefold. First, Muay Thai's relation to Buddhist Ethics must be approached through the lens of the apotropaic (nibbanic) domain. Second, the rituals surrounding Muay Thai provide a genuine architecture for transforming the nature of combat and contain it. Third, the case study has revealed a further method for managing tension between violence and religious commitment by transforming the action, yet this same mechanism may justify the neglect of the repercussions of violence on outside communities.



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