

Eliminating Unnecessary Suffering in War: A Review on the Applicability of International Humanitarian Law and Selected Theravada Buddhist Principles in the Time of Armed Conflict

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International Humanitarian Law and Theravada Buddhism are two different disciplines. While International Humanitarian Law tends to protect humanity during an armed conflict, Theravada Buddhism seeks to attain the supreme bliss of ‘Nirvāna’ in order to make an end to the suffering throughout the long way of ‘Samsāra’. As a religious philosophy, Buddhism acknowledges that unskillfulness (akusala) based on greed (lōbha), hatred (dōsa) and delusion (mōha) is the cause of human suffering. On the other hand, International Humanitarian Law urges belligerents to balance military necessity and humanity by following the principles of Distinction, Proportionality, and Precaution, aiming to reduce suffering on the battlefield. Theravada Buddhist philosophy always emphasizes that the elimination of suffering is not a collective effort but an individual effort. Therefore, each individual is responsible for their own self-spiritual liberation. However, International Humanitarian Law addresses the elimination of suffering in an armed conflict as a collective effort. These efforts focus on promoting compliance with International Humanitarian Law, strengthening accountability mechanisms, advocating for the protection of civilians and non-combatants, and facilitating humanitarian assistance during armed conflict. Hence, this study tends to explore, whether there is a possible compatibility in between core principles of International Humanitarian Law with the fundamental teachings of Theravada Buddhist philosophy to reduce unnecessary suffering of mankind in war. Despite the inherent philosophical disparities, it can be identified possible alignments between Theravada Buddhist philosophy and International Humanitarian Law to reduce the suffering of mankind. Accordingly, the fundamental principles of Theravada Buddhist philosophy such as mettā (loving-kindness), karunā (compassion), and ahiṃsā (non-violence) make an alignment with the Principle of Distinction, Principle of Proportionality, and the Principle of Precaution in International Humanitarian Law.

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