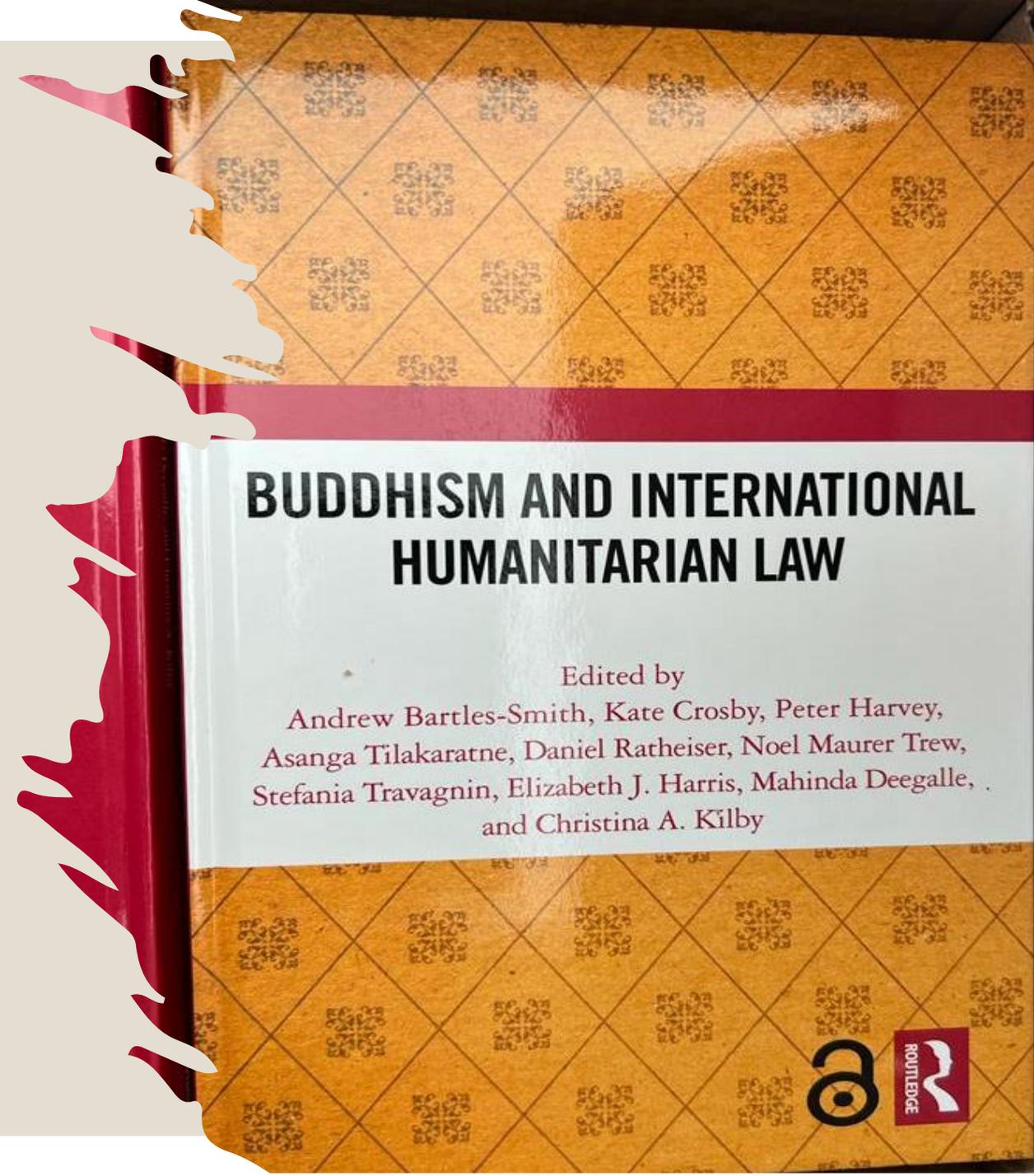


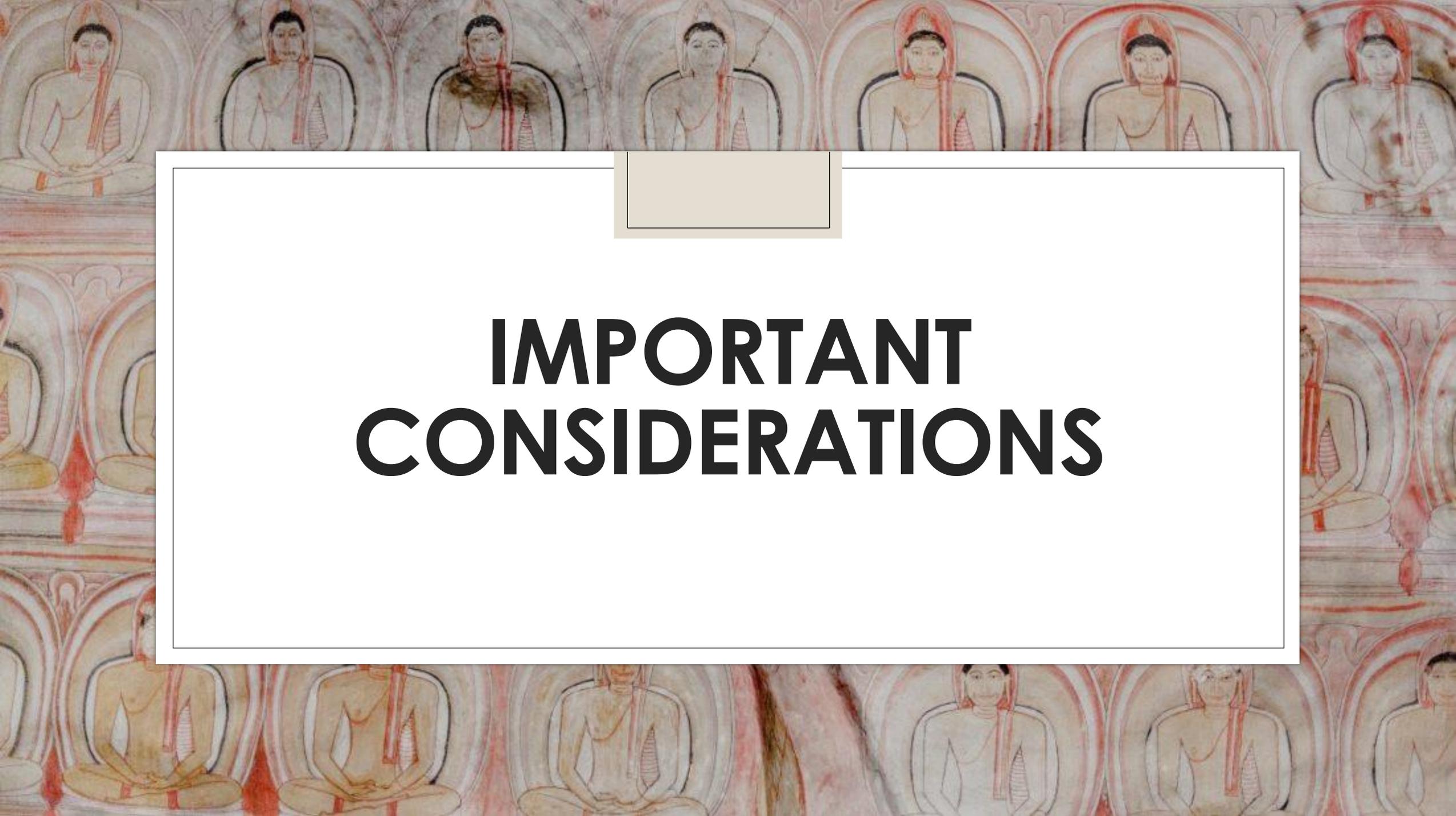
BUDDHIST GUIDANCE AND SUPPORT FOR ARMED FORCES

A Practical Guide

Buddhism and IHL project

- ❖ Buddhist guidance for combatants is scattered across a vast Buddhist literature
- ❖ An International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) project brought many of these Buddhist resources together and compared them with International Humanitarian Law (IHL) — also known as the law of war.
- ❖ Research from this Project is contained in a free open-access book: [Buddhism and International Humanitarian Law](#)
- ❖ This presentation condenses Buddhist guidance from this project on the conduct of war into clear practical guidance for modern combatants
- ❖ It includes Buddhist psychological resources that can support combatants to fight with skill and restraint
- ❖ Like the Buddhism project, this presentation draws on knowledge from the Therāvada, Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna schools





IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS

Buddhist expectations for combatants

- ❖ The Buddha was pragmatic about balancing Buddhist ideals with the social and political realities of his day
- ❖ He understood that not everyone would be uniformly capable or disposed to follow his teachings
- ❖ Indeed, Buddhist precepts are voluntary commitments, not divine laws or commandments
- ❖ A distinction must be made between Buddhist monastics seeking to achieve nirvana and lay people occupied with more worldly concerns, for whom Buddhist expectations are lower
- ❖ Whereas monastics must typically uphold over 200 Buddhist precepts, lay people are expected to follow the Five Precepts and aspects of the Noble Eightfold Path
- ❖ Buddhist lay people — including military personnel — must choose how many precepts they can realistically follow given their circumstances



A psychological and ethical system

- ❖ Buddhist scriptures contain teachings and principles which align with legal IHL rules
- ❖ But, Buddhism is primarily a psychological and ethical system concerned with addressing the motivational roots of human behaviour
- ❖ Buddhism focuses introspectively on intention (*cetanā*) and karma (intentional action)
- ❖ Promotes strict self-discipline to cultivate the skilful mental states conducive to ethical action
- ❖ Buddhist psychological resources are a powerful means to mentally train and support combatants to act with control and restraint



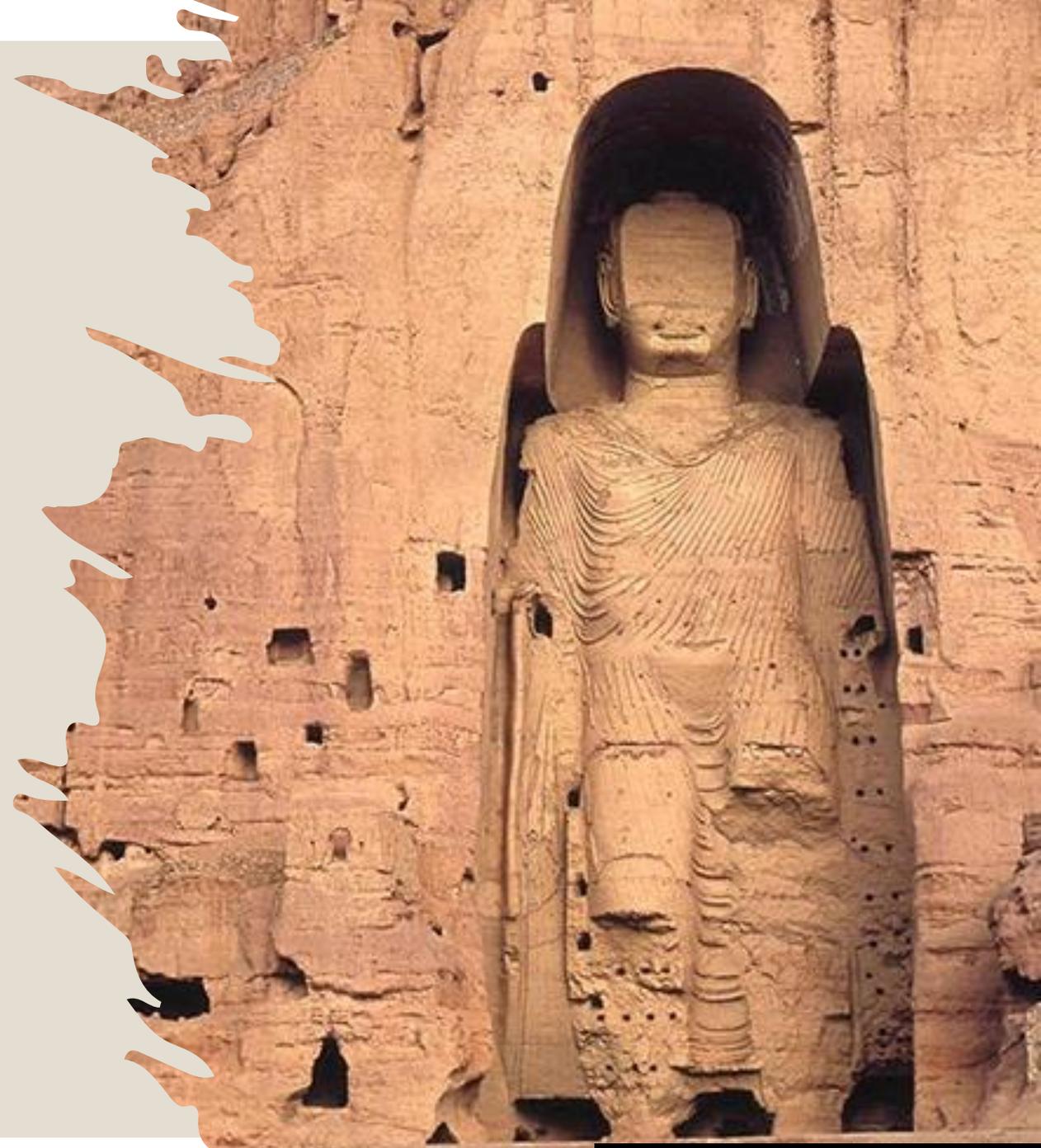
Protective war and military virtues

- ❖ The Buddha neither condoned nor condemned war
- ❖ He did not tell rulers to disband their armies
- ❖ He did not condemn soldiering as a wrong livelihood, though he did condemn the weapons trade as such
- ❖ The Buddha did not encourage soldiers to leave their military profession
- ❖ Many canonical Buddhist texts compare monastic with military virtues which were clearly admired
- ❖ The Buddha emphasised, moreover, that rulers are duty-bound to protect their people and maintain law and order
- ❖ He conceded that defensive wars might sometimes be necessary to prevent greater suffering



Centrality of non-harming

- ❖ But, the centrality of non-harming (*ahimsā*) to Buddhism means that Buddhists often hesitate to legitimize war
- ❖ While this might sometimes prevent war, and reduce the violence with which it is conducted, it has also impeded Buddhism from codifying clear just war rules
- ❖ Contemporary Buddhists tend to focus on conflict prevention and resolution
- ❖ Less consideration is given to how Buddhism might reduce suffering *during* war, and support combatants to limit the harm they inflict
- ❖ Buddhism is often therefore regarded as separate from war, or irrelevant to it
- ❖ Some Buddhist fighters see Buddhism as a handicap to war-fighting that they regard as necessarily brutal
- ❖ There is therefore a need to revitalize and repurpose Buddhist resources relevant to the conduct of contemporary warfare



Buddhism in the military?

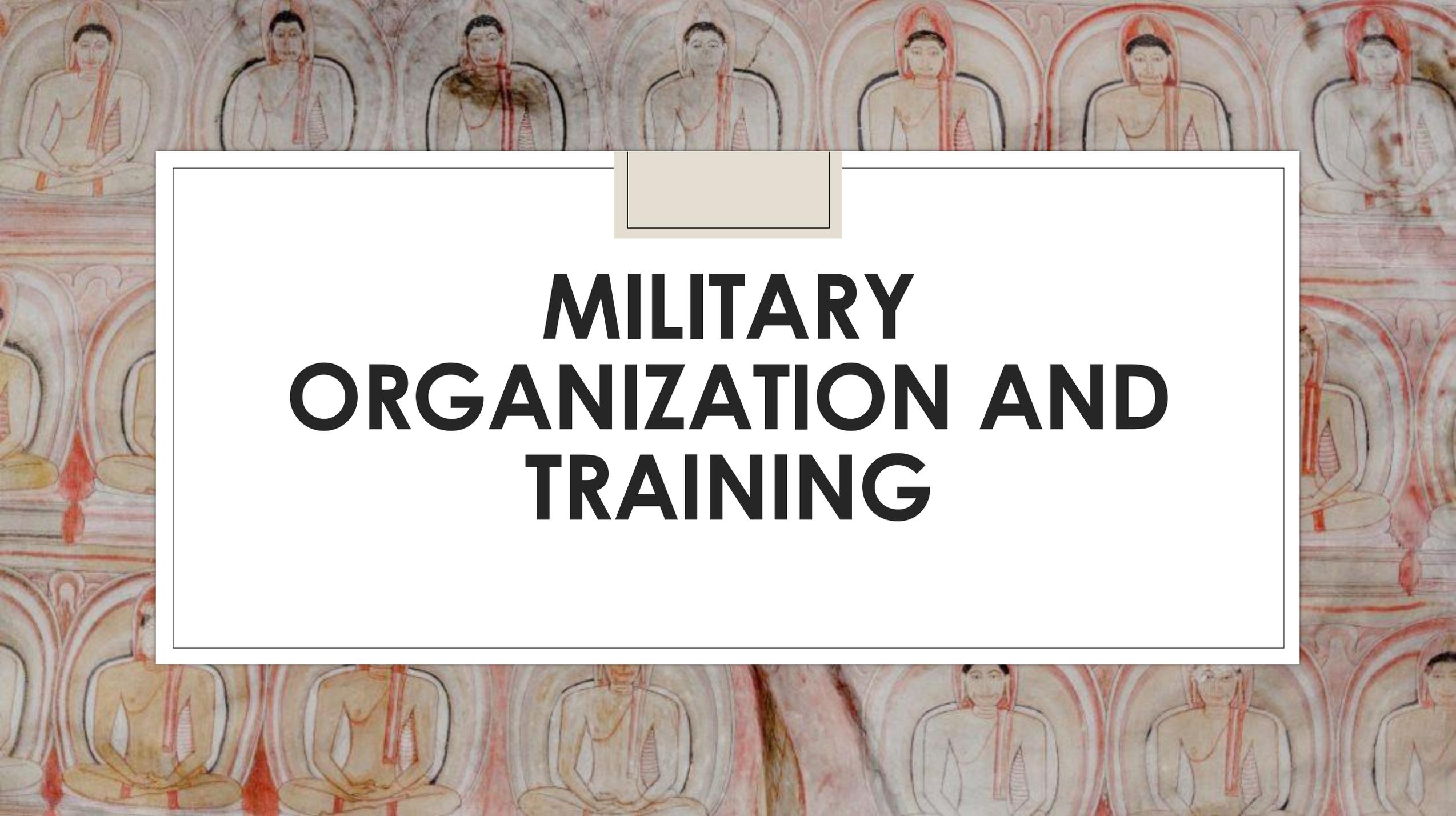
- ❖ War is a collective military undertaking
- ❖ Buddhist ethics and resources therefore need to be integrated into military doctrines and training if they are to change military behaviour
- ❖ Previously, some Buddhist kingdoms set Buddhist-inspired limits on warfare — the Konbaung Dynasty in Myanmar (1751—1885), for example
- ❖ These are forgotten models, often destroyed in the colonial era
- ❖ The actual content of contemporary military training in Buddhist majority militaries is overwhelmingly secular
- ❖ Buddhist majority militaries are more influenced by Western models, and are often former colonial armies.
- ❖ Buddhist ethics do not generally feature



Buddhism in the military?

- ❖ The idea that Buddhism might align with IHL and be practically applied to reduce suffering during war is not institutionalized
- ❖ Buddhist majority militaries are blamed for violations of IHL
- ❖ But to what degree are they therefore Buddhist in practice?
- ❖ Buddhist Clergy often play an important role in bolstering the morale and spiritual welfare of troops outside military contexts —giving blessings and sermons, for example
- ❖ But clerical penetration into military structures is limited





**MILITARY
ORGANIZATION AND
TRAINING**

Buddhism and military organisation

- ❖ For relevant Buddhist teachings to have effect, they must be integrated into military organisation and training at all levels of command
- ❖ Where appropriate, a Buddhist military chaplaincy department should be established
- ❖ Otherwise, clerical support to combatants should be secured in other ways from nearby monasteries or other Buddhist communities
- ❖ Arrangements should be made so that all ranks have access to support from either military chaplains or nearby clerics
- ❖ Buddhist principles must form part of the core values of the military, and be integrated into military training
- ❖ They must inform military ethics, rules of engagement and interpretation of IHL rules



Military chaplains and clerical support

- ❖ According to IHL, and Buddhism, military chaplains or equivalent religious personnel must play a non-combatant and exclusively religious and humanitarian role
- ❖ They enjoy the same special IHL protections as medical personnel, and are permitted to use the Red Cross and Red crescent protective emblems
- ❖ Ideally, Buddhist chaplains should have access to — but remain separate from — the chain of command, a position in which they can advise and support commanders and troops in an impartial way without getting involved in hostilities
- ❖ Where military chaplaincy arrangements are not possible, regular spiritual support for combatants from Buddhist monks and clerics should be facilitated away from battlefield and military contexts



Military chaplains and clerical support

- ❖ Ideally, Buddhist chaplains should be trained in counselling, and combatants must be able to consult them individually and in confidence
- ❖ Buddhist chaplains/clerics must be a position to support both combatants and their families
- ❖ They must be trained in Buddhist ethics relevant to armed conflict, and in the main principles of IHL
- ❖ Ideally, Buddhist military chaplains, clerics, IHL and military ethics experts should collaborate with one another to promote common humanitarian norms



Buddhist military Chaplains

- ❖ The nature of Buddhist chaplaincy or clerical support will depend on the Buddhist school to which the military adheres
- ❖ Mahāyāna Buddhism has a long history of clerical support to the military and military chaplain-like arrangements (going back to medieval China, Japan and Korea)
- ❖ Several Western militaries also now employ Buddhist military chaplains
- ❖ Some Buddhist military chaplains are non-combatant military personnel (in the US and South Korean militaries, for example) and accompany combat units on the frontlines
- ❖ Other Buddhist military chaplains are civilians, and have an advisory and support role away from the frontlines (UK, for example)



Buddhist military Chaplains

- ❖ Theravāda Buddhism is stricter about distancing monastics from military involvement. Militaries in most Theravāda Buddhist contexts do not therefore recruit military chaplains, and clerics must support combatants at a distance from the frontlines and military bases
- ❖ The Theravāda Thai military has solved this issue by recruiting highly qualified monks who defrock upon becoming chaplains, and can therefore work within the military and accompany troops to the frontlines. Since they are no longer Buddhist monks, however, they can not perform some Buddhist ceremonies



Buddhism and military training

Some important points need to be emphasised during military training:

- ❖ Buddhism does not end when war begins
- ❖ Far from a handicap, Buddhism — like IHL — provides pragmatic solutions to war-fighting challenges
- ❖ Similarities between strict monastic and military discipline and training
- ❖ Combatants should master their weapons so that they can use them in a precise, targeted and restrained way
- ❖ Buddhist training precepts cultivate mental skills and discipline
- ❖ Buddhism emphasises self-awareness and control of thoughts and emotions
- ❖ Buddhism emphasises mental health and resilience



Meditation

- ❖ Proven to enhance mental functioning and resilience, to develop 'mental armour' in combatants
- ❖ Proven to reduce fatigue, stress and strong emotions that debilitate combatants' cognitive, emotional and moral faculties, and therefore their capacity to fight with precision and restraint
- ❖ Used in many modern militaries
- ❖ Extensive research has been carried out to prove its beneficial effects for combatants, in the US military in particular



Buddhist-inspired martial arts

- ❖ A number of Buddhist-inspired martial arts in the Mahāyāna Buddhist world are both meditation and fighting tools
- ❖ Shaolin monks etc.
- ❖ Emphasis on self-defence, restraint and the skilful control of physical force
- ❖ Research shows that martial arts also reduce aggression in young people, and might therefore enhance military restraint
- ❖ These traditions might encourage the development of Buddhist-inspired military training in modern militaries that emphasises the restrained and controlled use of military force



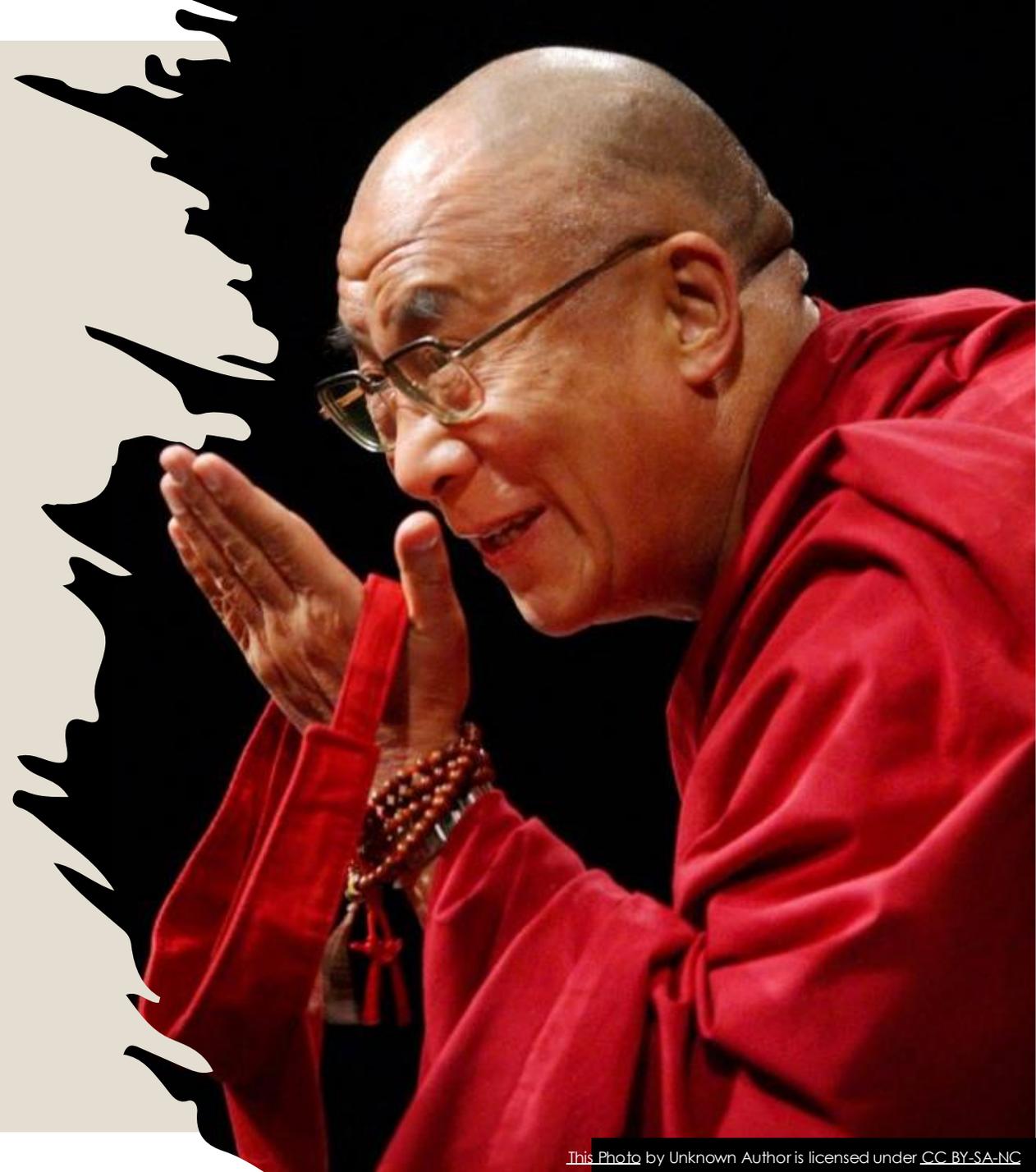
Buddhist intellect and innovation

- ❖ Buddhism encourages intelligent and innovative solutions to military challenges that reduce harm, boost morale and win over the enemy
- ❖ Buddhist texts such as the Jātaka stories show how victory might be creatively achieved with minimal violence
- ❖ Encourages compassionate insight into the humanity and psychology of an enemy
- ❖ Encourages self-regulation and the capacity for ethical thinking
- ❖ Knowledge of Buddhist principles and IHL rules must be complemented by the skills to apply them in war



Dalai Lama on the military

- ❖ "I have always admired those who are prepared to act in the defence of others for their courage and determination. In fact, it may surprise you to know that I think that monks and soldiers, sailors and airmen have more in common than at first meets the eye. Strict discipline is important to us all, we all wear a uniform and we rely on the companionship and support of our comrades.
- ❖ Although the public may think that physical strength is what is most important, I believe that what makes a good soldier, sailor or airman, just as what makes a good monk, is inner strength. And inner strength depends on having a firm positive motivation. The difference lies in whether ultimately you want to ensure others' well being or whether you only wish to do them harm"





PREPARATION FOR WAR

War preparation to prevent war

- ❖ In order to reduce the suffering of war, rulers must first prevent it, if possible
- ❖ Early Buddhists realized that in order to prevent war, they had to prepare for it
- ❖ Buddhist rulers have a responsibility to defend and protect people and sentient beings under their care
- ❖ The “gift of fearlessness” (*abhaya-dāna*), for example, is an important Hindu-Buddhist protection concept — emphasises the responsibility of rulers to provide physical and psychological security in the broadest sense



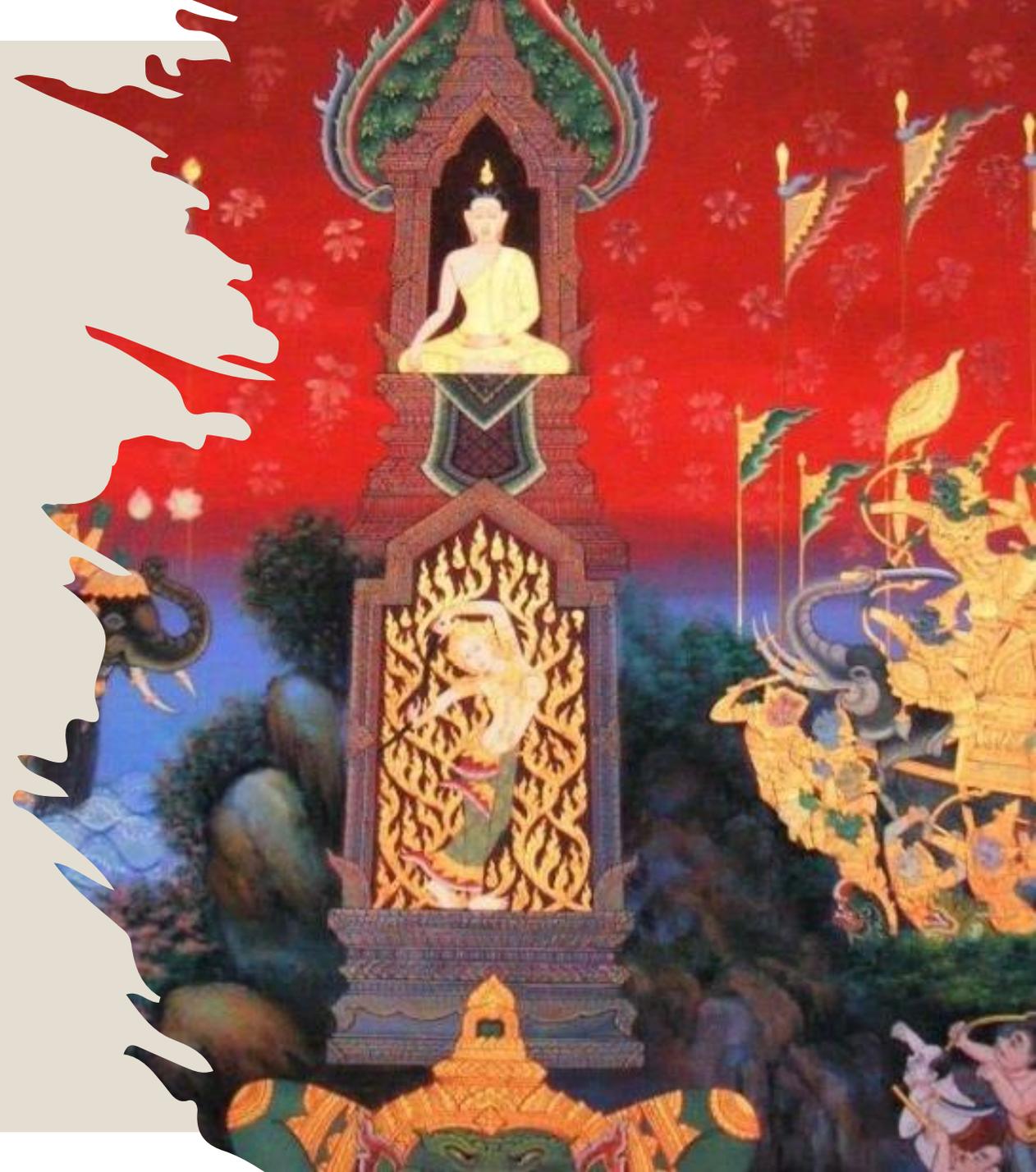
War preparation to prevent war

- ❖ As far as possible, Buddhist rulers should emulate the ideal *cakravartin* "wheel turning" king who rules according to Dharma in a just, ethical and beneficent way
- ❖ Accordingly, rulers must maintain strong, multidimensional (four-limbed) armed forces both as a deterrent, and as a defence against attack
- ❖ They must cultivate strong friendships and alliances, and overawe potential enemies using soft Buddhist power
- ❖ In the modern context, this requires development of advanced diplomatic and communications capabilities
- ❖ Also advanced intelligence, digital and information warfare capabilities to anticipate and subvert potential enemy threats, thereby preventing the outbreak of more lethal forms of war



Prevention of imminent attack

- ❖ Some Buddhist texts provide guidance on preventing imminent attack as follows:
- ❖ Attempt negotiation, diplomacy and communication operations to dissuade the enemy from attacking, also by mobilizing Buddhist clerics
- ❖ Mobilize friends and alliances for mutual deterrence and defence
- ❖ Provide gifts/concessions where necessary/advisable
- ❖ Launch intelligence, communications and psychological operations to reduce the threat, and to subvert and incapacitate the enemy. In today's context this might involve forms of non-lethal digital, cyber, hybrid and new generation warfare
- ❖ Buddhist chanting, meditation and use of mantras etc. can also be used to prevent war, and to provide spiritual and psychological support



Preparation for imminent attack

According to the *Ārya-satyaka-parivarta*, an early Mahayana Buddhist text:

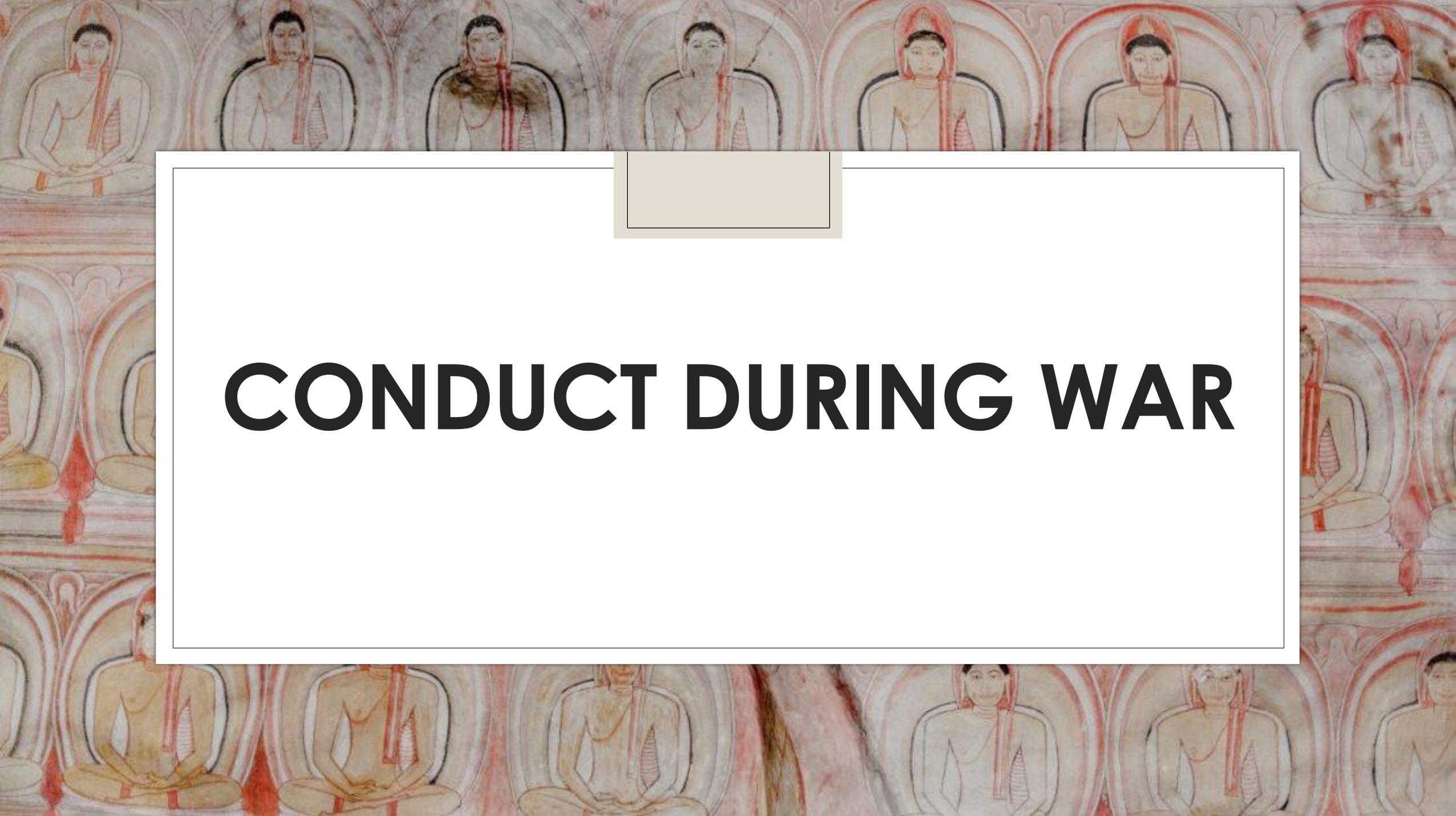
“Government and military leaders should keep three thoughts in mind when readying for war:

- ❖ The complete protection of their people
- ❖ Defeat of the enemy
- ❖ Capture of the enemy alive

Government and military leaders can reduce the karmic consequences of war, and gain immeasurable merit if:

- ❖ They have previously made every possible effort to avoid war
- ❖ They are motivated by compassion and heedfulness
- ❖ They are ready to sacrifice themselves and their wealth for the protection of their people”





CONDUCT DURING WAR

The aim of war is not to cause harm

- ❖ The aim is not to cause harm but to end the war as quickly as possible and/or with minimal harm
- ❖ According to the Milinda Pañha:

“... as the strong man who, when he enters into a terrible battle, is able the most quickly to get hold of his enemies' heads under his armpit, and dragging them along to bring them as prisoners to his lord, that is the champion who is regarded, in the world, as the ablest hero – just as that surgeon who is able the most quickly to extract the dart, and allay the disease, is considered the most clever”



Assess the harm of every military action

- ❖ IHL embodies a balance between humanity and military necessity
- ❖ Buddhism interrogates whether each and every military action is necessary in the light of alternative — including non-military — options
- ❖ The Buddhist determination of military necessity is exacting
- ❖ Starting from the earliest military planning, options other than the infliction of harm should be explored
- ❖ Failing this, the use of force should be as restrained and directed as possible, targeting only those combatants or military objects that pose an immediate threat
- ❖ Whenever feasible, enemy combatants should be neutralized, incapacitated and captured rather than harmed or killed
- ❖ This also dictates the military tactics and the choice of weapons used



Minimize harm, remain heedful

- ❖ Destruction of civilian objects, infrastructure, means of livelihood, animals and the natural environment should be minimized
- ❖ Maximum effort should be made to repair the damage that has been done
- ❖ While mistakes, such as the killing of non-combatants, might not be deliberate, they might nevertheless be critiqued for lack of heedfulness (*appamāda*) or mindfulness, in line with the IHL principle of precaution
- ❖ This degree of restraint in such high-stress combat situations requires a high degree of skill, mental control and personal bravery



Minimize collateral damage

- ❖ Military necessity and proportionality are central to the application of IHL
- ❖ Commanders subjectively determine the amount of collateral killing that is acceptable
- ❖ What should a “reasonable” military commander should do in particular circumstances?
- ❖ The Buddhist focus on karma and intention raises the self-awareness of combatants
- ❖ Prevents military necessity and proportionality from being too loosely interpreted



Minimize collateral damage

- ❖ A Buddhist “reasonable” commander should be highly restrictive in the use of military force
- ❖ Requires the compassion, intellect and strategic vision to deploy non-harming — including non-military — means whenever possible
- ❖ Corresponds to unconventional hearts-and-minds approaches in which military force is just one aspect of a multi-dimensional and otherwise less harmful response



High standard of Buddhist restraint

- ❖ Comply with IHL as a minimum standard
- ❖ But, do not wrongfully interpret IHL to allow disproportionate collateral killing and destruction
- ❖ Complement IHL with higher Buddhist standards of restraint, as well as psychological self-awareness and self-control



Ārya-satyaka-parivarta

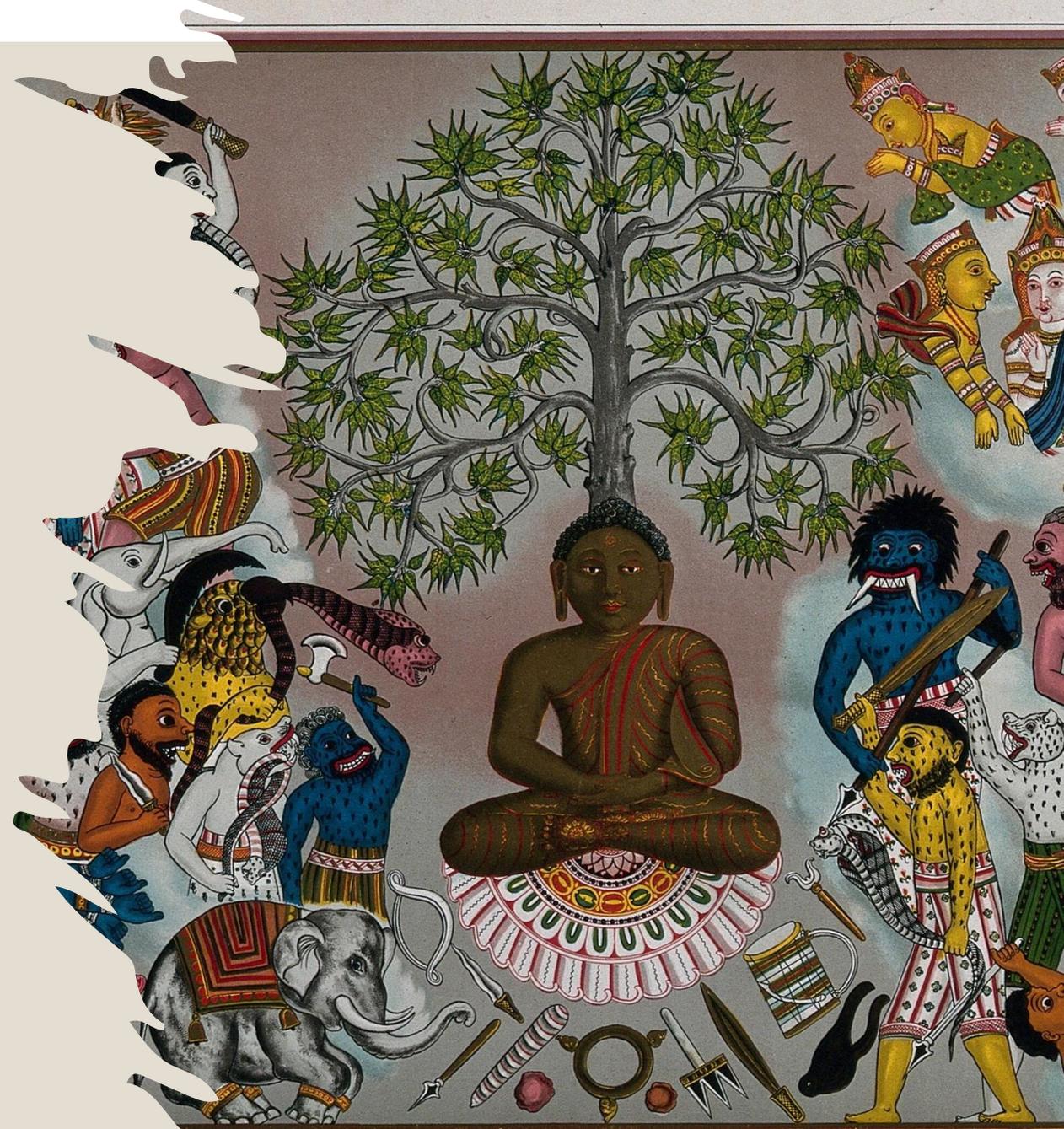
❖ According to this early Mahayana text:

“. . . a ruler should protect sentient beings without burning their surroundings or ruining it, etc. A ruler should not vent his anger through cities or villages, ruining reservoirs, wrecking dwelling places, cutting down fruit trees, or destroying harvests, etc. In short, it is not right to destroy any well-prepared, well-constructed, and well-extended regions. How is this? These are sources of life commonly used by many sentient beings who have not produced any faults”



The Five Precepts

- ❖ These are core Buddhist precepts for lay Buddhists, including combatants
- ❖ Combatants will likely break the first precept against killing
- ❖ They should nevertheless continuously reaffirm it to avoid unnecessary killing
- ❖ The second precept (against stealing) aligns with IHL prohibitions on pillage and confiscation of civilian property
- ❖ The third precept (against sexual misconduct) aligns with IHL prohibitions of rape and other sexual violence
- ❖ The fourth precept (against wrong speech) is relevant to the IHL prohibition on perfidy (the abuse of IHL protections) and abusive speech constituting cruel and degrading treatment
- ❖ The fifth precept (against intoxicants) is conducive to the mental clarity required to adhere to Buddhist and IHL principles during war



Buddhist-inspired rules of engagement

- ❖ Some Buddhist-inspired rules of engagement might be summarized as follows:
- ❖ Prioritize protection of comrades and civilians — do not hesitate to protect them with lethal force if necessary
- ❖ Avoid harm when possible
- ❖ Encourage enemies to surrender, or capture them, when feasible
- ❖ Incapacitate rather than kill, when feasible
- ❖ If necessary, kill precisely and with minimal suffering
- ❖ Target only active combatants, minimize collateral killing



Buddhist-inspired rules of engagement

- ❖ Minimize damage to civilian property, infrastructure and cultivated areas
- ❖ Minimize harm to sentient beings and the natural environment
- ❖ Respect places of worship
- ❖ Avoid sieges or fighting in populated areas whenever possible

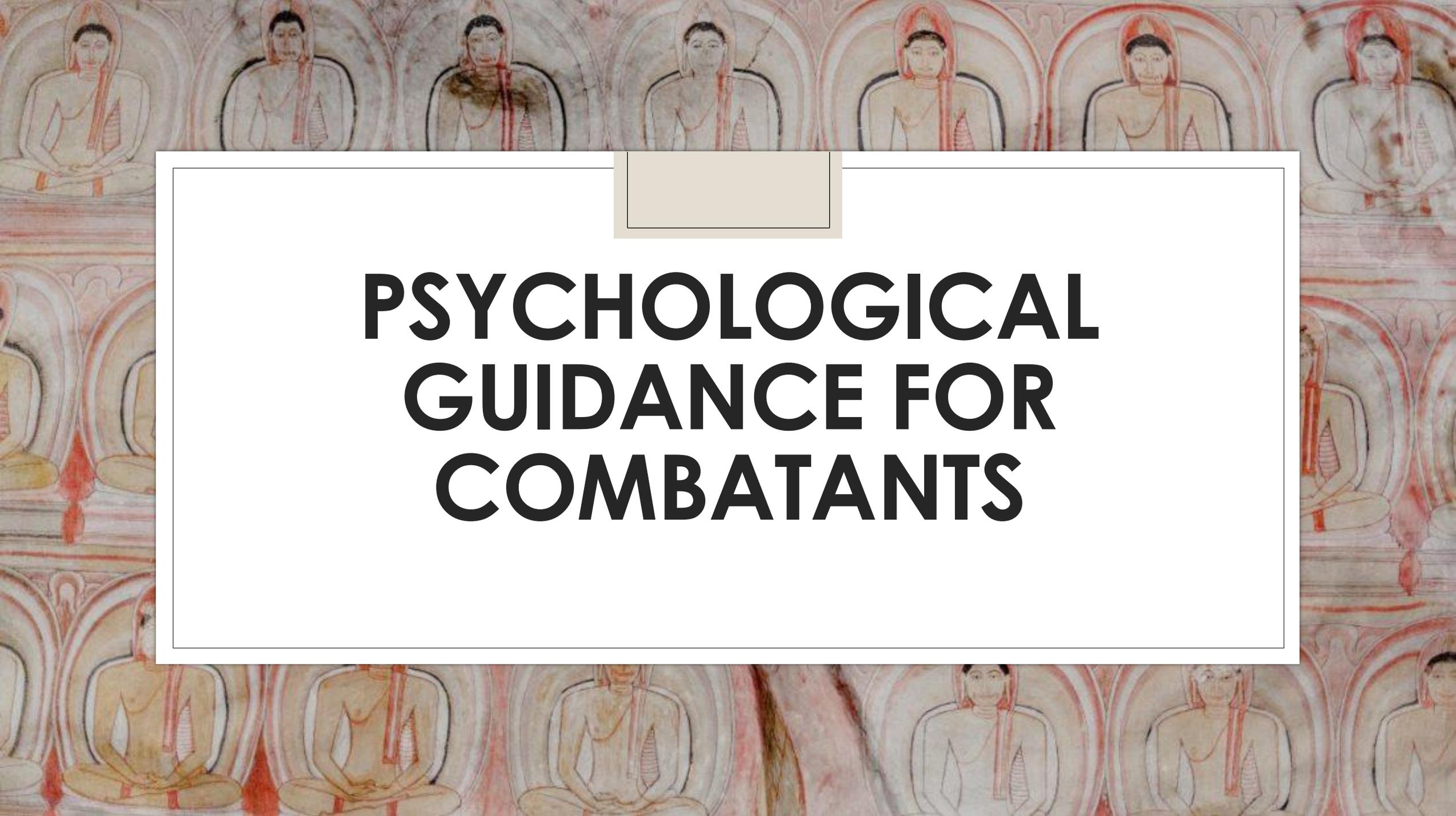
(Siege warfare is discouraged in Buddhist texts due to the negative effects on the civilian population)



Buddhist-inspired rules of engagement

- ❖ Do not follow illegal orders which violate IHL rules
- ❖ Care impartially for the injured on both sides
(Impartiality is also a key Buddhist virtue)
- ❖ Treat Prisoners of War (PoWs) and detainees according to IHL standards as a minimum. Do not torture or ill-treat them





PSYCHOLOGICAL GUIDANCE FOR COMBATANTS

Karma and intention

- ❖ Karma depends on — or is — intention
- ❖ If unavoidable, harm or kill with as compassionate and altruistic intentions as possible
- ❖ Karma depends upon the nature of the action. The greater the desire and effort to harm or kill, the worse the karmic penalty
- ❖ Karma also depends on nature of the victim of the action. It is worse to harm a good as opposed to a bad person, a human as opposed to an animal, and a large as opposed to a small animal, due to the greater effort and intention required
- ❖ But enemies (“bad people”) should not be demonized
- ❖ Combatants are individually responsible for their karma
- ❖ Combatants are responsible for the actions of their comrades, and the group karma of their units. They should intervene to stop abuses by them



Thich Nhat Hanh

“If you see someone who is trying to shoot, to destroy, you have to do your best in order to prevent him or her to do so. You must. But you must do it out of your compassion, of your willingness to protect, and not out of anger. That is the key”



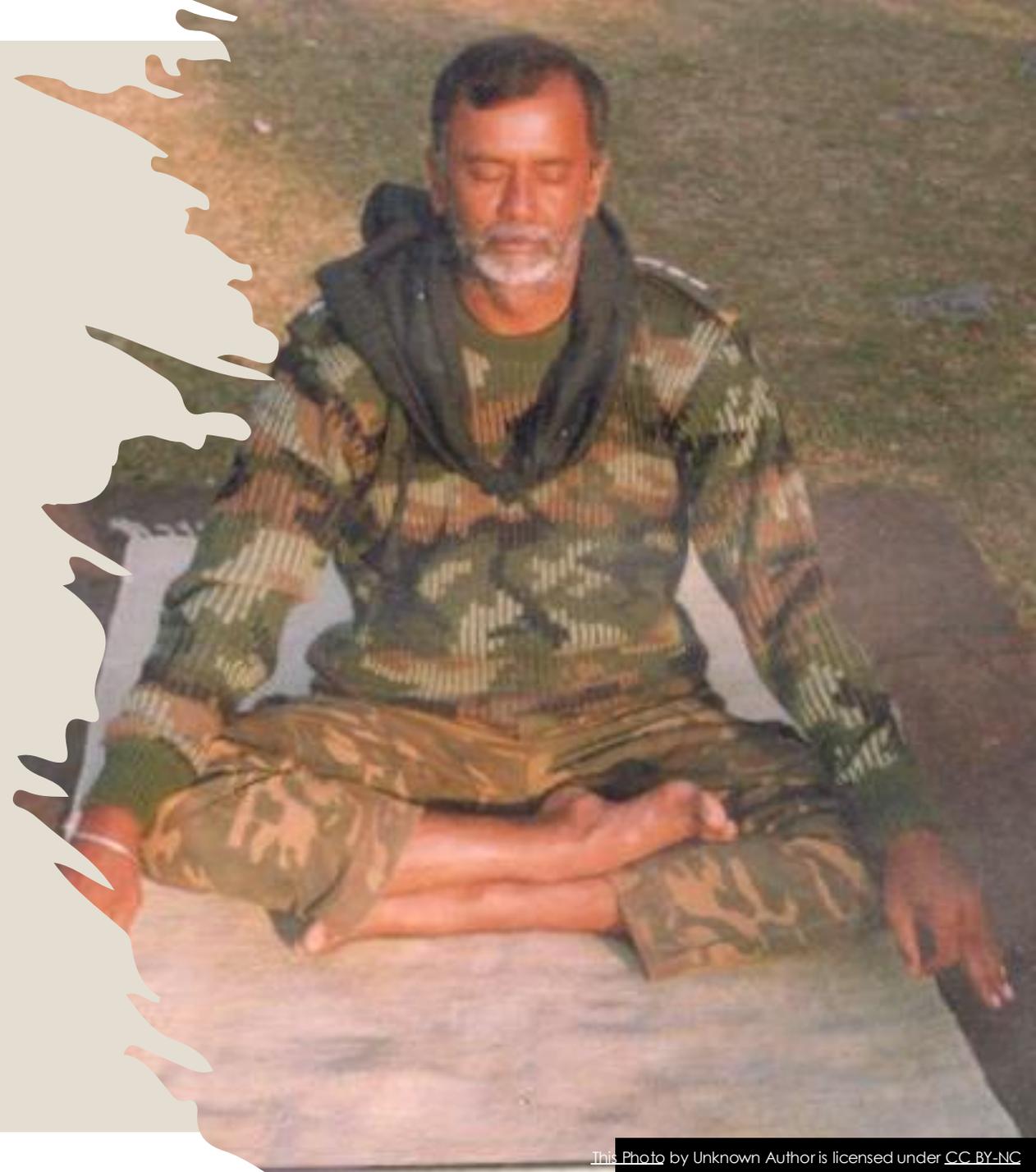
Merit-making

- ❖ Good karma from merit-making does not prevent bad karma from coming to fruition, though its positive effects can compensate to some degree
- ❖ Financing the construction of Buddhist places of worship does not compensate for war crimes
- ❖ Buddhist combatants can make merit more effectively through impartial Buddhist/humanitarian care and assistance to victims of war in which they are involved



Mental qualities

- ❖ If soldiers are to act with precision and restraint, they must first control their minds
- ❖ This is difficult amidst the confusion and trauma of war, when fatigue, stress and strong emotions such as fear, anger and hatred can reduce combatants' capacity for ethical thinking and restraint
- ❖ Buddhism recognizes that conduct in war is as dependent on the mental state of combatants as external conditions
- ❖ The best soldiers combine an almost monastic discipline with the highest ideals of bravery and restraint
- ❖ The question for Buddhist combatants is not simply "What should I do?" but "How can I become the kind of combatant who can do it?"



Restraint

- ❖ Restraint is everywhere in Buddhist teachings
- ❖ Restraint is a form of mental armour
- ❖ Combatants must protect themselves through restraint before they can effectively protect others
- ❖ According to the Samyutta Nikāya I.1 68–9:

“Those who engage in misconduct of body, speech, and mind Even though a company of elephant troops may protect them, or a company of cavalry . . . still they leave themselves unprotected.

For what reason? Because that protection is external, not internal . . .

But those who engage in good conduct of body, speech, and mind protect themselves Because that protection is internal, not external . . .

Conscientious, everywhere restrained, one is said to be protected”



The Noble Eightfold Path

- ❖ Core psychological guidance for lay Buddhists, including combatants:
- ❖ Right View — to see things as they are, not distorted by desire, fear or ignorance
- ❖ Right Intention — to cultivate intentions of goodwill and harmlessness, letting go greed, hatred and cruelty
- ❖ Right Speech — speak truthfully and kindly, avoid harsh or divisive speech, promote peace and compassion
- ❖ Right Effort — cultivate wholesome states of mind, guard against laziness
- ❖ Right Mindfulness
- ❖ Right Concentration



Positive mental states or virtues

These are also military virtues, and should be cultivated by combatants

❖ The Four Immeasurables (*brahmavihāras*):

- Loving-kindness (*mettā*)
- Compassion (*karunā*)
- Empathetic joy (*muditā*)
- Equanimity and impartiality (*upekkhā*)

❖ Also:

- Energy, perseverance and courage (*virīya*)
- Self-sacrifice (*tyāga*)
- Patience, forbearance, tolerance (*khanti*)
- Heedfulness (*appamāda*)



Psychological guidance for combatants

To summarize:

- ❖ Meditate where possible
- ❖ Stay calm, keep a cool head
- ❖ Clear mind of anger and hatred
- ❖ Harm or kill without bad intentions
- ❖ Compassion is particularly important
- ❖ The compassionate use of force is more heedful, therefore better intended, calibrated and targeted



Other Buddhist resources

- ❖ Traditionally Buddhist combatants use other Buddhist resources during war:
- ❖ Chanting of protective canonical verses and scriptures (*paritta*)
- ❖ Reciting of mantras
- ❖ Carrying of relics
- ❖ The wearing of protective amulets etc.
- ❖ The benefits of meditation are scientifically proven. The effects of these other methods are not easily assessed
- ❖ Buddhism allows their use to prevent or reduce violence, and to protect and reassure combatants and civilians
- ❖ Buddhism discourages their use with the intention to harm or kill, therefore violating Buddhist precepts, unless absolutely necessary



Post-conflict support

- ❖ Meditation techniques are an aid to treating moral injury
- ❖ Moral injury = Shame and guilt-based disturbances caused by perpetrating, failing to prevent or witnessing transgressive acts that violate deeply held moral or ethical beliefs
- ❖ In the military context, moral injury can be caused by breaking Buddhist precepts and IHL rules, failure of leadership and unclear rules of engagement
- ❖ Symptoms include difficulty to forgive oneself or others, anger, social withdrawal, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and suicide
- ❖ Shame over wrongdoing (*hiri*) and concern for its consequences (*ottappa*) are important Buddhist qualities
- ❖ For many combatants the karmic or psychological results of their actions are very real
- ❖ Buddhist chaplains and clerics often provide post-conflict support to combatants and military veterans



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- ❖ **Military Chaplains and Equivalent Religious Personnel under International Humanitarian Law** *International Review of the Red Cross*, (2025)
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