

**Buddhist motivation  
to support IHL,  
from concern to  
minimize harms  
inflicted by military  
action to both those  
who suffer them and  
those who inflict  
them**

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- This paper focuses on how Buddhist ethics contains ideas and principles which would urge those in a combat situation to minimize the harm they do to others, within the requirements of their military goal. This IHL principle is in line with both compassion for others and a concern to limit the bad karmic results to the combatant of their intentional killing and maiming. The motive for an act of killing can worsen or lessen its karmic results, and non-combat actions such as helping the wounded can generate good karmic results which can dilute, though not cancel, the bad karma of killing. Harm to both humans and non-humans is to be avoided wherever possible, but killing a human is worse than killing an animal. The *Mahāvamsa* passage on combatants killed by King Duṭṭhagāmaṇi's army as mostly being less than human, such that killing them produced little or no bad karma, is a totally implausible statement to put in the mouths of monks which the text says were *Arahats*.



## Key IHL principles:

- The principle of *distinction* requires that the parties to an armed conflict always distinguish between civilians and civilian property on the one hand, and combatants and military objectives on the other, and that attacks may only be directed against combatants and military objectives.
- The principle of *proportionality* dictates that incidental loss of civilian life and property or injury to civilians must not be excessive in relation to the concrete and direct military advantage anticipated.
- The principle of *precaution* requires verifying that targets are military objectives and giving the civilian population an effective warning before the attack. It can also entail restrictions on the timing and location of an attack.

- Monks, killing living beings, if practiced, cultivated, and repeated, leads to the hells, leads to an animal womb, leads to the world of ghosts. The slightest karmic result of killing living beings leads to shortness of life as a human being. (A.IV.247)





*Mahāvamsa* (XXV.109–110):

That deed presents no obstacle on your path to heaven. You caused the death of just one and a half people [*manujā*], O king. One had taken the refuges [i.e. were Buddhist], the other the Five Precepts as well. The rest were wicked men of wrong view [*micchādiṭṭhī ca dussīlā*] who died like (or: as considered as) beasts [*pasu-samā*]. You will in many ways illuminate the Buddha's teaching, so stop worrying. (Translated by Richard Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism*, 141, with Pali added)

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‘Striking down of a living being’ is, as regards a living being that one perceives as living, the will to kill it (*vadha-cetanā*), expressed through body or speech, occasioning an attack which cuts off its life-faculty. That action, in regard to those without good qualities (*guṇa-*) – animals etc. – is of lesser fault (*appa-sāvajjo*) when they are small, greater fault when they have a large physical frame. Why? Because of the greater effort involved. Where the effort is the same, (it is greater) because of the object (*vatthu-*) (of the act) being greater.

*In regard to those with good qualities – humans etc. – the action is of lesser fault when they are of few good qualities, greater fault when they are of many good qualities. But when size or good qualities are equal, the fault of the action is lesser due to the (relative) mildness of the mental defilements and of the attack, and greater due to their intensity. (M-a.I.198, cf. Khp-a.28–9 and As.97)*



- He who does harm with violence to non-violent innocent people, goes very soon indeed to one of these ten states: sharp pain, or disaster, bodily injury, serious illness, or derangement of mind, trouble from the king, or grave charges, loss of relatives, or loss of wealth, or houses destroyed by ravaging fire; upon dissolution of the body that ignorant man is born in hell. (Dhp.137–40)

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The possibility that an act of killing a living being can be motivated by wholesome (*kusala*) states of mind is simply not allowed in Abhidhamma Buddhist psychology; the intention to kill another being always crucially involves hatred or aversion (Gethin 2004). While certain acts of killing may be manifestations of stronger and more intense instances of anger, hatred or aversion, no act of killing can be entirely free of these. There can be no justification of any act of killing as entirely blameless, as entirely free of the taint of aversion or hatred. In Abhidhamma terms, acts of killing can only ever be justified as more or less *akusala*, never as purely *kusala*. ... there is no possibility of killing in war being *kusala*.

(Rupert Gethin. 2007. 'Buddhist Monks, Buddhist Kings, Buddhist Violence', in *Religion and Violence in South Asia: Theory and Practice*, edited by John R. Hinnells and Richard King, pp. 62–82. London: Routledge, pp.70–1).