

Reducing anger in armed conflict

Buddhism and the principle of humanity

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This article examines a selection of Buddhist texts, mainly in Pali, that address the reduction of violence and the elimination of suffering, connecting them to the ‘Principle of Humanity,’ one of the most fundamental ethical principles underpinning International Humanitarian Law (IHL). Drawing on canonical and commentarial sources, it examines several practices taught by the Buddha that are capable of dissolving the entrenched mental patterns underlying both personal suffering and collective conflict. The analysis engages with the theory of ‘freezing factors,’ which refers to the persistence of certain moral, emotional, or cultural attitudes that inhibit reconciliation and sustain violent dynamics during armed conflict. Special emphasis is placed on Buddhaghosa’s exposition of ten methods for overcoming resentment, and on the cultivation of *mettā*, love-and-amity, as a foundation for social harmony. The article argues that these practices constitute a radical path towards dismantling the very conditions that sustain anger, suffering, and division, while also recognising their compatibility with IHL’s more pragmatic aim of reducing violence within conflict. Buddhist practices can restrain hostility and rage precisely because they are grounded in the aspiration for final liberation from suffering and ignorance, and for this reason, they can effectively help prevent the escalation of unrestrained violence, which would otherwise hinder or even jeopardise efforts towards resolving the conflict. By situating these teachings within contemporary discussions on the role of trust and reaffirmation of shared humanity, the article highlights their relevance for those engaged in conflict transformation today, and raises critical questions about the sociopolitical obstacles that continue to resist such a path.

Keywords: Buddhism; Theravāda; Pali canon; International Humanitarian Law (IHL); trust; conflict; dehumanisation; freezing factors; Buddhaghosa; *Visuddhimagga*; Divine Abode (*brahmavihāra*); action (*kamma*); Jātaka; gift, generosity (*dāna*); *saṃsāra*; dependent arising/origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*).

*I dedicate this work to Raniero Gnoli,
whose gently sublime teachings and
lifelong pursuit of harmony and beauty
continue to accompany me.*

1. Introduction¹

Peace should not be conceived merely as an abstraction or as a dream passing through the ‘gate of horn.’ Its realisation, which logically involves the reduction of anger and violence, must proceed through what may be called a ‘human gate,’ a gate that can be opened here and now with keys already held in our hands. In this sense, the Buddha’s words on amity and welfare in this very life (*ditṭhadhammāhita*) and the Principle of Humanity in International Humanitarian Law (IHL) provide a basis for concrete efforts towards peace. Hence, a constructive dialogue between these two perspectives appears not only possible but also desirable.

The teachings of the Buddha affirm the reality of suffering as an undeniable truth, offering a path that leads to the comprehension and the eradication of its causes. International Humanitarian Law acknowledges the reality that armed conflicts do occur, offering a legal framework that does not pursue the eradication of suffering but seeks instead to mitigate the consequences of such conflicts, including the suffering they inflict on human beings and other animals, the destruction of the natural environment, and the violation of other protected values.

This article argues that Buddhism can encompass both the goal of reducing suffering and the ultimate aim of eradicating it entirely, and that these aspirations are intimately connected: the complete cessation (*nirodha*) of the causes (*samudaya*) of suffering (*dukkha*) necessarily includes various degrees of diminishment of afflictions that unfold along the gradual path to liberation.

¹ Through this article, I wish to honour a broad community of scholars who have taught me the balance between a rigorous philological method in the study of Buddhist traditions and the vital need to bring the Dhamma into active engagement with the world we inhabit, and which future generations will inherit. While it would be impossible to name them all here without greatly expanding the scope of this note, their influential works are cited and listed in the bibliography. Among them, I would like to mention here those with whom I have been more closely connected—directly or indirectly—in recent years: Lambert Schmithausen, Bhikkhu Bodhi, Matthieu Ricard, Thích Nhất Hạnh, Venerable Payutto (Phra Dhammapitaka), P.D. Premasiri, Peter Harvey, Peter Skilling, and Elizabeth Harris. Finally, I would like to acknowledge the two anonymous reviewers for their valuable suggestions, as well as Mauro Maggi for his crucial observations and remarks.

This work is a revised version of a paper delivered at the conference *Reducing Suffering During Armed Conflict: The Interface between Buddhism and International Humanitarian Law*, organised by the International Committee of the Red Cross (Bangkok) and held in Chiang Mai, December 9–10, 2022.

It is important to emphasise that IHL does not, in any way, authorise, legitimise, or condone the use of force. Rather, its purpose is to regulate the behaviour of belligerents once hostilities have begun, by imposing limits on the means and methods of warfare, and by seeking to reduce suffering, particularly among those not taking part in the fighting. Among its guiding values, this article focuses specifically on the Principle of Humanity, which expresses the imperative to alleviate suffering and preserve human dignity, even amid armed conflict. IHL does not concern itself with the causes or justifications of war, nor does it aim to resolve its political, economic, or social roots. Yet it is explicitly affirmed in both treaty law and State practice that the existence of this set of rules must never be interpreted as conferring legal or moral justification for the initiation of armed conflict (Droege 2024: 993). This conception of IHL is closely linked to the idea of peace, as it seeks “to demobilise people’s minds, just as armies were demobilised, and rid them of the spirit of war still lingering in the world” (Palmieri 2024: 1032).

There is a growing interest in exploring these challenges through the lens of religious perspective and moral insight. In this context, the work of the Global Affairs Department of the *International Committee of the Red Cross* (ICRC) in Bangkok has been particularly noteworthy, especially for its engagement with Buddhist philosophy and practice. In collaboration with Buddhist scholars, both monastic and lay, they organised conferences and supported research initiatives aimed at addressing the experience of suffering in conflict and at mitigating the impact of violence through Buddhist ethical perspectives (Bartles-Smith 2024). This form of cooperation is both meaningful and effective, and it offers a valuable model for future interreligious and interdisciplinary engagement.

Framing the Buddha’s teachings as a source of support for efforts to reduce the harms of war, while conceptually aligned with the Principle of Humanity and many core values of IHL, should not be taken to suggest that Buddhism is susceptible to the same—likely misdirected—criticism sometimes levelled at IHL: namely, that efforts to mitigate the consequences of war might inadvertently be seen as justifying it. The final aim of the Buddhist tradition is the complete cessation of suffering (*dukkha*) through the realisation of Nibbāna, which is unborn (*ajāta*), unoriginated (*abhūta*), uncreated (*akata*), and unconditioned (*asaṅkhata*),² free from greed (*rāga*), hatred (*dosa*), and delusion (*moha*), which are the roots of all forms of suffering we may either experience or inflict. From this perspective, the very notion of a ‘Buddhist war’ is a contradiction in terms.³ Recognising the presence of suffering and

² Cf. Ud VIII.3 (PTS 80).

³ This theme, and the related notion of a ‘just war,’ has been addressed by a number of scholars. Premasiri offers a particularly clear analysis: “In summing up the inquiry into the question whether there can be any reasons in favour of a righteous war

working to lessen it does not imply passive acceptance of its existence, nor—even more so—any form of endorsement. If we were to accept suffering (and its most extreme exaltation, namely war) passively, we might cease acting to reduce it, or even feel justified in contributing to it, reassured by the delusion that nothing we do can bring suffering to an end. On the contrary, both IHL and Buddhism seek to mitigate it to some extent, and Buddhism, in particular, aspires to create the conditions for lasting peace, a peace achieved through innumerable, challenging stages that allow us to progressively experience moments of peace, apparently fragile, yet regenerative and indelible.⁴

2. Generating a ‘culture of conflict’

The hardship that human beings inevitably face when confronted with distress and pain not only distorts personal conduct in the absence of deep vision and awareness, but also shapes the collective imaginaries through which communities define themselves. When unacknowledged fears and uncertainties accumulate—both individually and socially—people may begin to construct illusory ‘enemies,’ beyond any actual hostile persons who may exist: onto these imagined figures, we project our fears, frustrations, and unresolved tensions. This externalisation becomes a convenient ‘scapegoat’—significantly, a non-human being—enabling both individuals and society to indulge in the illusion that, by acting in this manner, they are avoiding deeper structural and personal causes of

according to the canonical teachings of Buddhism, it should be reiterated that war, according to Buddhism is necessarily evil. Anyone who engages in it is compelled to commit acts of violence, at least against the enemy who needs to be subdued. Participation in any kind of violence is absolutely out of the question for those who seriously pursue the goal of Nibbana. Their only option is to win over those who are cruel and violent through kindness and compassion. Wars and conflicts are endemic in society, due to the strong tendency of people to protect their own possessions with miserliness (*macchariya*) and due to the jealousy that affects people who are deprived of certain possessions enjoyed by others” Premasiri (2003: 164–165). See also Scheible (2023: 283–295).

⁴ On Buddhism and war, see also Demiéville (1957). While Paul Demiéville’s influential essay has brought to light the historical participation of Buddhist institutions in armed conflict, particularly in East Asian Mahāyāna contexts, his analysis scarcely draws neither on Pali sources nor on the ethical consistency of the Theravāda canonical tradition. In contrast, the Pali canon presents a firm and unequivocal rejection of violence in all its forms. Killing is never portrayed as compatible with right intention (*sammā saṅkappa*), and is invariably associated with unwholesome (*akusala*) mental roots. I argue that Buddhist texts can contribute not only to clarifying some of the foundational principles underlying human rights, but also – and perhaps more significantly – to proposing practicable pathways for the promotion of social justice and peace. One particularly compelling idea is expressed in *Suttanipāta* 394: “(a) One should not kill (*hane*) a living being, (b) nor cause to kill (*ghātayeyya*), (c) nor allow (*anujāññā*) others to kill.” [Sn 394 (PTS, 69)]. The *Paramatthajotikā* (Pj II; PTS I, 376) explains that the first precept, “abstaining from the destruction of life” (*pāṇātipātā veramaṇī*), is to be purified in three respects (*tikoṭṭiparisuddhā*). Nonviolence must not only (a) serve as the guiding ethical principle in the layperson’s life, but for this precept to be perfectly and formally pure, the follower must also refrain from (b) asking others to kill, and (c) allowing others to do so. See Gethin (2004: 166–202, esp. 171–172, 180) and Ciczuzza (2022: 91–125, esp. 115).

suffering. In many cases, the perceived difference between ‘us’ and the ‘other,’ after undergoing a deliberate process of projection and distortion, is used to legitimise unethical behaviour or uphold an iniquitous political order grounded in exclusion and violence. This process, often termed ‘dehumanisation,’ reaches its peak when the supposed enemy is no longer seen as fully human, thus becoming a target for unrestrained hostility.⁵ Psychologist Nick Haslam identifies two primary forms of dehumanisation, which may operate independently or in conjunction (Haslam 2006: 352–364).⁶ The first denies *human uniqueness* (traits such as civility, moral sensibility, rationality, and related capacities), effectively equating the ‘other’ with animals, often provoking disgust or contempt. The second denies ‘human nature’ (traits like emotional responsiveness, interpersonal warmth, cognitive openness, and similar qualities), rendering the ‘other’ more like a machine, lifeless and interchangeable, and evoking indifference or detachment. What dehumanisation erases is not merely cultural heritage or rational capacity, but the ethical standing that binds human beings into a just community. Notably, this strategy of framing others as subhuman and thereby admitting violence is also described in Pali Buddhist literature:

During the ‘Interregnum caused by swords [and dominated by hatred]’ (*satthantarakappa*), they will perceive each other as wild beasts. Sharp swords will appear in their hands, and using those sharp swords, they will massacre each other, shouting the battle cry: ‘He is a wild beast! He is a wild beast!’ But, Bhikkhus, some of those beings will think: ‘Let us not be the massacrers; let us not be the victims’.⁷

Matthieu Ricard and Wolf Singer (Ricard and Singer 2017: 176) have explained the mental processes involved, showing how deeply vulnerable we are to propaganda and to simplistic answers that exploit our fears.

⁵ A similar reading of this theme, free from any explicitly religious framework, is found in the work of Toni Morrison, who compellingly demonstrates how the creation and dehumanisation of the other stem from a profound lack of self-love and self-esteem: “The necessity of rendering the slave a foreign species appears to be a desperate attempt *to confirm one’s own self as normal*. The urgency of distinguishing between those who belong to the human race and those who are decidedly non-human is so powerful the spotlight turns away and shines not on the object of degradation *but on its creator*. [...] ‘I am not a beast! I’m not a beast! I torture the helpless to prove I am not weak’” (Italics mine). See Morrison (2017: 29–30).

⁶ On the notion of ‘human being,’ it is worth noting that according to the Vinaya, a human being, a ‘human form’ (*manussa-viggaho*), is considered to exist from the moment of the first arising of mind (*citta*) and the initial manifestation of consciousness (*viññāṇa*) in the mother’s womb, continuing until the moment of death. This entire interval is designated as the ‘human form.’ Vin 1.1.3 (PTS III, 72).

⁷ See *Cakkavatti-sihanādasutta*, DN 26.21 (PTS III, 73). The commentary explains: “Those who perish in the *satthantarakappa* are, for the most part, reborn in hell (*niraya*). Why? Because of the intense mutual aggressiveness” (*satthantarakappena naṭṭhā yebhuyyena niraye upapajjanti. kasmā? aññamaññaṃ balavāghātātāya*, Sv, PTS III, 854).

When society reinforces the in-group–out-group dichotomy and declares the out-group members hostile, evil enemies, it calls on all the instincts that we have inherited that were initially meant to be useful for the defence of one’s own kin. Once this manipulation of cognitive schemata has been accomplished, aggressive acts that would be considered highly unethical when performed against in-group members are perceived as moral duties when directed at out-group members. Hence, tribal warriors, crusaders, nation-defending soldiers, and, alas, terrorists and torturers often act in accordance with outer imperatives and inner drives, experience no conflict, and may even pass as heroes rather than murderers within their own community.

Matthieu Ricard further clarifies these points, quoting Aaron Beck (Ricard 2015: 396):

As the psychologist Aaron Beck explains in *Prisoners of Hate*, the members of a group that has been designated as the enemy are first of all *homogenized*; they lose their identities as individuals, and victims become interchangeable. They are then *dehumanized* and no longer perceived as being able to inspire empathy: ‘They could just as easily be inanimate objects, like mechanical ducks in a shooting gallery or targets in a computer game. Finally, they are *demonized*.... Killing them is no longer optional; they *must* be exterminated.... We attack the projected image, but harm or kill real people.’

Once pervasive mistrust and a persistent propensity for conflict—states of mind that may seem like voluntary choices but are in fact largely strengthened by external forces—have taken hold, we may come to regard these conditions as ‘ours’ and feel compelled to defend them. This zone of ‘illusory and harmful comfort’ is sustained and reproduced through mechanisms that scholars have described as ‘freezing factors:’ the educational system, the military, political institutions, mass media, and cultural production, all of which are used in unwholesome ways to shape public consciousness, reinforce resistance to transformative processes aimed at reducing conflicts, obstruct the flow of dialogue and reconciliation, and stifle the possibility of ending suffering (Bar-Tal 2013a: 289).

3. Causes of ‘freezing’

Conflicts are a constant presence in human life, varying only in intensity. Their power cannot be diminished without a profound commitment to awareness and wisdom, and from this perspective, Buddhism may offer a particularly valuable contribution. As Daniel Bar-Tal observes in his study of intractable conflicts: “In the context of high fear, a society in intractable conflict tends to stick to certain beliefs about the causes of threat, about the conflict, about the adversary, and about ways of coping with the dangers. It has difficulty entertaining alternative ideas, solutions, or courses of actions” (Bar-Tal 2013a: 228). Recent scholarship on the psychological mechanisms underlying our inability to respond to hatred and violence has identified several forms of ‘freezing.’ These forms of psychological blockade prevent us from reawakening our own humanity, which can become paralysed

during conflict, whether armed or unarmed.⁸ It is essential to recognise, however, that the entrenchment of conflict-supporting beliefs is not merely the result of structural or ideological forces, but is also deeply rooted in individual cognitive and emotional dynamics, the very foundations upon which such forces depend for their obstructive influence.

Freezing is sustained by three interrelated factors: cognitive needs for coherence and certainty; motivational drives to preserve identity and maintain group belonging; and emotional investments tied to fear, safety, and loyalty. Freezing is also reinforced by external and psychological pressures that deepen resistance to change. Chronic threats, such as ongoing violence, terrorism, and fear, create a constant state of danger that closes minds and limits openness to new possibilities. Distrust, too, plays a central role: it emerges early in conflict, grows with each act of violence, and leads to fixed expectations that the rival will only cause harm, making peace seem impossible. Over time, people become habituated to conflict, adapting to its hardships and finding security in the familiar patterns of hostility. Attempts at peace feel risky, uncertain, and disruptive. Lastly, emotional and material investments in the conflict, primarily through lives lost, make it hard to step away without feeling that past sacrifices would be in vain. Together, these factors – threat, distrust, habituation, and investment – strengthen the barriers to peace and entrench the cycle of conflict (Bar-Tal 2013a: 279–305).

This model resonates strongly with Buddhist analysis of the human mind, in which a number of unwholesome mental factors, such as attachment (*rāga*), hatred (*dosa*), delusion (*moha*),⁹ and then fear (*bhaya*),¹⁰ hindrance (*nīvaraṇa*),¹¹ clinging (*upādāna*),¹² entrenched and illusory views (*ditṭhi*),¹³

⁸ I have been fortunate to consult various significant works on this complex subject, and the following have been particularly helpful and straightforward in clarifying how conflicts may arise, be sustained, and escalate: Greenberg *et al.* (1992: 212–220), Kruglanski and Webster (1996: 263–283), Beck (1999), Bar-Tal (2013a). It is worth noting that several of these scholars are based in Israel, and their work reflects a long-standing engagement with the psychological and social dimensions of conflict and coexistence. Their research provides valuable insights into the dynamics of protracted violence and offers meaningful contributions to broader efforts aimed at understanding and transforming such conditions.

⁹ See Harvey (2000: 239–285), Nyanaponika (1978, esp. 50), Anālayo (2009: 733–739), and Harris (1994: 21–33). The violent consequences and war-related outcomes stemming from attachment to sensual pleasures (*kāma*) are systematically outlined in MN 13, 10–15 (PTS I, 86–87).

¹⁰ For an analysis of the concept of “fear” (*bhaya*), see Giustarini (2012: 511–531).

¹¹ The hindrances (*nīvaraṇa*) are: sensual desire (*kāmacchanda*), ill will (*vyāpāda*), dullness and drowsiness (*thinamiddha*), restlessness and remorse (*uddhaccakukkucca*), and doubt (*vicikicchā*). See AN 1.2.1–10 (PTS I, 3–5).

¹² See Vism XVII, 241–248 (PTS 567–571). The forms of clinging (*upādāna*) are four: sense-desire (*kāma*) clinging, [false] view (*ditṭhi*) clinging, rite and ritual (*silabbata*) clinging, and self-doctrine (*attā*) clinging.

¹³ On the attachment to views and opinions, see Gethin (2004: 211–229) and Fuller (2022: 35–38).

behavioural attachments (*silabbataparāmāsa*),¹⁴ and the like, form the basis of entrapment in the cycle of *saṃsāra*, and consequently of both personal and collective suffering. In both diagnostic models, the origin of conflict (and suffering) lies in cognitive closure: individuals cling to narratives and identities that promise security but ultimately perpetuate division and reactivity.

It is more accurate to regard the psychological elements associated with ‘freezing’ not only as external constructs imposed by political, cultural, or social superstructures, but also as deeply embedded tendencies of the human mind. Such tendencies can be mobilised and amplified through intentional manipulation, including forms of propaganda and emotionally charged narratives in media or political discourse; they are not generated by these tactics but are deliberately employed through them. Thus, it seems that enduring conflict, whether personal or collective, is sustained not merely by external conditions but by the internal lack of pliability of mind, a process that must be understood and transformed at its roots. The Buddhist tradition thus offers a powerful interpretive lens for understanding the inner architecture of conflict persistence, complementing and deepening contemporary socio-psychological theories. Pali texts, in particular, contain interpretive insights that help illuminate these complex dynamics. In the *Mahānidānasutta*, for example, the Buddha presents an expanded formulation of ‘dependent origination’ (*paṭiccasamuppāda*), tracing the genesis of conflict in a way that not only links psychological and existential factors but also explicitly incorporates social dimensions. At the heart of the problem lies the ‘protection’ of what is mistakenly regarded as ‘ours’ and ‘immutable,’ whether a material possession or a mental construct. Such attachment leads to entrenchment, a kind of ‘freezing,’ which in turn gives rise to various forms of violence.¹⁵

¹⁴ Generally this compound is translated as “clinging to ethics and observances.” In the *Linatthappakāsanī* (PTS III, 245), which glosses the passage *silāñca vatañca parāmasatīti silabbataparāmāso* (Sv, PTS III, 988), the verb *parāmasati* is interpreted as “to touch beyond” (*parato āmasati*). The commentary adds: “By thinking: ‘Purity comes through conduct, purity comes through vows,’ he goes beyond the path of purification (*visuddhimaggaṃ atikkamivā*).” Thus, *parāmasati* here does not imply a mere overvaluation of ethics and observances, but rather their absolutisation as self-sufficient and exclusive means of purification, detached from the broader path.

¹⁵ “Now, craving (*taṇhā*) is dependent on feeling, seeking (*pariyesanā*) is dependent on craving, acquisition (*lābha*) is dependent on seeking, ascertainment (*vinicchaya*) is dependent on acquisition, desire and passion (*chandarāga*) is dependent on ascertainment, attachment (*ajjhosāna*) is dependent on desire and passion, possessiveness (*pariggaha*) is dependent on attachment, stinginess (*macchariya*) is dependent on possessiveness, defensive protection (*ārakkha*, i.e., an unwholesome defence of what is wrongly perceived as ‘mine’) is dependent on stinginess, and because of defensive protection, dependent on defensive protection, various evil, unskillful phenomena come into play: the taking up of sticks and swords; conflicts, quarrels, and disputes; accusations, divisive speech, and lies” (DN 21.9; PTS II, 58–59). The exact sequence of conflict dynamics appears elsewhere in the canon, for instance in AN 9.3.23 (PTS IV, 400–401). Particularly noteworthy is the *Madhupiṇḍikasutta* (MN 18.8; PTS I, 109–110), which analyses the effects of eliminating definitions (*saṅkhā*) and concepts (*saññā*) associated with the mental proliferations (*papañca*) that torment the mind. This process unfolds through the gradual removal of attachment (*ajjhosāna*), which

Addressing this same problem, the Buddhist canonical texts contain various methods for dissolving these internal ‘freezing’ mechanisms. As we will see in the following paragraphs, these teachings were later systematised with remarkable clarity in the exegetical work of Buddhaghosa. The practices taught by the Buddha are not designed merely to alleviate symptoms, but to uproot their causes. While International Humanitarian Law focuses on limiting the damage and consequences of violent conflict, the Buddhist approach aims to dissolve the underlying mental and emotional structures that make conflict possible in the first place. Though distinct in their methods and immediate objectives, the two perspectives are profoundly compatible in their shared commitment to reducing suffering. Both are, in different ways, grounded in compassion as their motivating principle. As previously discussed, the Buddhist path to liberation, aimed at the complete cessation of suffering, can be conceived as a boundless set—in the sense of set theory—that contains within it the smaller subset represented by IHL. A path that aspires to end suffering must necessarily encompass principles that seek to mitigate immediate harm, even in situations of armed conflict.

4. Challenging self-Insulation and hostility

The Buddha taught a path for eliminating suffering in this very life, even if the process, in Buddhist soteriology, may unfold over several lifetimes. While these teachings were primarily addressed to monastics, the entire system thrived on its interpenetration with the lay society: hence, these ethical insights are undoubtedly highly relevant for lay practitioners across historical periods. The reading of these texts, along with their commentarial interpretations, may serve as a source of reflection and guidance in a wide range of circumstances, not only during times of serenity but also in periods of grave difficulty, including situations of armed conflict.

Numerous teachers of this and the previous century have actively embodied socially engaged forms of spiritual practice, dedicating themselves to the pacification of the human mind in the face of profound social suffering. Among those who have sought to bring Buddhist practice into the complexities of the modern world, Matthieu Ricard and Thích Nhất Hạnh stand out as two of the most influential. Matthieu Ricard clearly explained the only possible routes to take if we really want to end conflicts or at least reduce rage among human beings (Ricard 2015: 378):

in turn leads to the eradication of ignorance (*avijjā*) and culminates in pacification. Both discourses offer a complementary account of the same process: the arising of conflict, violence, and suffering from unwholesome mental factors. However, the former focuses on identifying their origin, while the latter traces the path towards their cessation.

Three main factors counteract the desire to harm others: *altruism*, or kindness, which will cause us to be sincerely concerned with the fate of others; *control of our emotions*, which allows us not to give in to sudden impulses; and *moral scruples*, which make us hesitate at the idea of harming others, or regret having harmed them.

Thích Nhất Hạnh has also offered a profound reflection on this theme, stating (Thích Nhất Hạnh 2001: 134–135):

The majority of us wait until a war breaks out in order to begin some kind of effort to stop it. Many of us do not know that the roots of war are everywhere, including in our own thinking and way of life. We are not capable of seeing the war while it is still hidden. We begin to focus our attention on the war only when the war breaks out into the open and people start talking about it. Then we feel overwhelmed by the intensity of the war. We feel helpless. We take sides and feel that one is right and the other is wrong. We condemn one side, but we have nothing to contribute towards ending the destruction caused by the war. [...] Violence can never bring about peace and understanding. *Only by looking deeply in order to understand the true roots of violence can we achieve peace.*

In this article, the focus is on drawing directly from the canonical texts in the Pali language, adhering as closely as possible to the Buddha's own words, while occasionally drawing also on Sanskrit Mahāyāna sources for comparison.¹⁶ Particular emphasis is placed on the interpretations offered by one of the greatest masters of the past, Buddhaghosa. He was a Brahmin from Magadha who lived his monastic life at the Mahāvihāra in Anurādhapura, in Sri Lanka, during the fifth century.¹⁷ Buddhaghosa's systematic presentation of the Buddha's teachings became the standard commentarial tradition across the Theravāda world. The figure of Buddhaghosa, along with many other thinkers from Indian intellectual traditions, both religious and secular, surely deserves a place in the history of philosophy, where it would offer perspectives that profoundly enrich our understanding of the human condition.

The *Visuddhimagga*, or *Path of Purification*, is generally regarded as the *magnum opus* of Buddhaghosa and one of the most significant post-canonical texts in the Theravāda tradition, serving as both a comprehensive manual for meditation and a detailed commentary on the Buddhist path to liberation. Composed in the fifth century CE in the Pali language, this seminal work offers a systematic codification of Theravāda Buddhist doctrine. The entire ninth chapter is devoted to the Four

¹⁶ We could also devote our efforts to other texts that present the Buddha's teachings on different forms of protection against fear. These are well represented by the *Dhajaggasutta* (see SN 1.11.1.3 [PTS I, 218–220]), often used as a *parittasutta*, a “protective sutta,” in the Theravāda tradition. However, we will address this theme in another work. On the *Dhajaggasutta*, see Skilling (1997: 64–66; 2024: 185–188, 330).

¹⁷ On the life, works, and philosophical importance of Buddhaghosa, see Heim (2014; 2018) and Gamage (2025).

Brahmavihāras, the ‘Divine Abodes’ (*brahmavihāra*) or ‘Immeasurables’ (*appamaññā*).¹⁸ It provides a wealth of detail, offering valuable insight into how *mettā* and the other Immeasurables can be cultivated and practised to weaken the mental factors that give rise to suffering and conflict.¹⁹ Four reasons for practising the Brahmavihāras are listed: the promotion of welfare (*hita*), the removal of suffering (*dukkha*), the cultivation of joy at others’ success (*sampattipamodana*), and the development of mental equity (*majjhatta*).²⁰ Notably, three of these—*mettā*, *karuṇā*, and *upekkhā*—are explicitly cited in the Aṅguttara Nikāya as antidotes to aggressiveness (*āghāta*).²¹

In this very chapter, Buddhaghosa not only advocates the use of the Brahmavihāras to heal resentment and aggressiveness, but also acknowledges that such efforts may not yield immediate success. He therefore offers additional strategies to be employed when hostility persists despite initial attempts.²² As noted in earlier sections of this article,²³ these ten methods can be viewed as a uniquely insightful guide, a kind of precious spiritual compass that, while oriented towards the final liberation from suffering, can also help us recognise and restrain aggressiveness, even in extreme circumstances such as armed conflict. The following sections offer a detailed consideration of each method.

It is worth noting that these methods embrace the full spectrum of Buddhist practices, doctrines, and philosophies. No particular elements are privileged as more ‘beneficial’ than others, nor is there

¹⁸ The four Brahmavihāras are: love-and-amity (*mettā*), compassion (*karuṇā*), gladness (*muditā*), and equanimity (*upekkhā*). On the Brahmavihāras, see also Dhammadinnā (2014: 52–129), Anālayo (2019: 2620–2628), Garfield (2021: 131–151) and Garfield (2025: 95–123).

¹⁹ See Vism IX, 1–124 (PTS 295–325). Although Buddhaghosa, in the *Visuddhimagga* (chapter IX), analyses all four Brahmavihāras—*mettā*, *karuṇā*, *muditā*, and *upekkhā*—in succession, only *mettā* receives an extensive procedural treatment. At the conclusion of the *karuṇā* section, Buddhaghosa states: “Beyond this point, the elaboration in terms of the fivefold non-specified pervasion (*anodhisoparaṇā*) [beings, living beings, all forms of existences, individuals, and those who possess a reincarnated body], the sevenfold specified pervasion (*odhisoparaṇā*) [women, men, noble ones, ignoble ones, Gods, humans, and those destined to suffer in hells], and the tenfold directional pervasion (*disāpharaṇā*) [the eight cardinal directions plus *zenith* and *nadir*], as well as the benefits such as ‘he sleeps happily,’ etc., should be understood in the same way as explained for *mettā* (Vism IX, 83: *tato paraṃ... veditabbā*).” See also Paṭi II, 14 (PTS II, 130–139). The *Mahāṭīkā* explicitly confirms this interpretation, observing that, although the canonical Pāli mentions only the word *karuṇā*, one should nonetheless take for granted the explanatory elaborations found in the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*, as well as the benefits and meditative strategies detailed in relation to *mettā*. It concludes: “The rest follows the method already explained.” This structural indication justifies the present article’s focus on *mettā* as representative of the broader Brahmavihāras’ method, with the understanding that the other three immeasurables follow an analogous meditative and doctrinal pattern.

²⁰ Vism, IX, 109–110 (PTS 321–322).

²¹ See AN 5.4.2.1 (PTS III, 185–186). Throughout this study, I translate the Pali term *āghāta* as “aggressiveness,” in order to reflect its etymological root *ghan* (to strike, to harm). The term suggests more than mere anger or dislike: it expresses a strong and active orientation towards hostility, often with a connotation of retaliation or violence.

²² This process is discussed by Harvey (2000: 243–245), Heim (2017: 177–178 and 2020: 30–32).

²³ See the conclusive part of § 3.

any attempt to dissect the tradition into selective fragments. They include the law of karma, the cycle of rebirth, trust (*saddhā*), impermanence (*anicca*), non-self (*anattā*), the Buddha's previous lives, and more. Such an approach demonstrates that no aspect is excluded or dismissed; rather, all teachings are regarded as valuable in the effort to overcome suffering.²⁴ This allows us to recognise that Buddhism is a complex and organic tradition, one that must be approached and studied in its wholeness.

4.1. Step One

The first approach to pacifying resentment (*paṭigha*)²⁵ towards a hostile person (*verī*) is to cultivate within oneself a state of mind imbued with *mettā*, a profoundly rich concept that is almost impossible to render accurately in English. To better grasp the depth of this term and, by extension, the significance of this first method for reducing violence, it may be helpful to begin with a brief philological digression.

As Bhikkhu Bodhi notes, the word *mettā* encompasses a range of nuances that are difficult to capture fully in any single word of translation (Bodhi 2017: 1408, n. 708): “The word *mettā* is derived from *mitta* ‘friend,’ but ‘friendliness’ conveys too casual a meaning and ‘good will’ or ‘benevolence’ may miss the emotional resonances of *mettā*.” The history of the term in early Indian religious texts, as discussed by Lambert Schmithausen (Schmithausen 1997: 31) and Mudagamuwe Maithrimurthi (Maithrimurthi 1999: 47–114, esp. 57–58),²⁶ includes meanings such as ‘alliance’ or ‘friendship,’ ‘mutual trust,’ and even a kind of ‘non-belligerence pact.’ However, when adopted into Buddhist usage, the term also evolved to express an ethical quality that is unconditional, selfless, and boundless. A form of love comparable to that of a mother, as vividly illustrated by the metaphor in the *Mettasutta*.²⁷

Translations such as ‘friendliness,’ ‘benevolence,’ or even the conventional yet unsatisfactory ‘loving-kindness,’ tend to sound somewhat abstract or sentimentalised in modern English. On the other hand, choosing ‘love’ as a translation carries different risks, notably, the potential for possessive or romantic connotations that are absent from the Buddhist conception of *mettā*. Writing ‘Love,’ with a capital letter, might evoke the notion of ‘divine love,’ which is not part of the conceptual framework

²⁴ See Bodhi (2021: 163–184).

²⁵ It is important to note that this hostility does not arise from an immediate threat, but rather from the recollection of past wrongs (*aparādha*) committed by that person. It may therefore be more accurately understood as a form of retributive sentiment, here, in fact, indicated by the term *paṭi-gha*.

²⁶ See also Gethin (2004: 185–187) and (Garfield 2021: 132).

²⁷ Sn 149 (PTS 26).

of Buddhist thought.²⁸ At least in the context of this article, which addresses political and ethical dimensions, we have chosen to leave *mettā* mostly untranslated, while recognising that the strongest possible rendering—as will become clear in the following discussion of the *Paramatthajotikā*—would likely be a combination of selfless ‘love’ and ‘amity,’ which could be expressed as ‘love-and-amity.’

To awaken this sense of selfless love-and-amity, one begins by repeatedly entering into and emerging from the concentration on *mettā*, focusing first on those who are dear, towards whom feelings of goodwill arise naturally and without resistance. Then, one should generate and develop *mettā*²⁹ towards the hostile person until the resentment subsides.

It is worth noting that the first method for removing hostility and calming hatred, which can escalate to uncontrollable levels, relies on *mettā*. This practice marks the beginning of both personal and social pacification, and, though it may seem the most immediate (and almost self-evident) method, it is in fact the key to recognising the intimacy of those we ordinarily perceive as strangers. The subsequent methods for reducing resentment serve as additional supports, but the cultivation of *mettā* remains fundamental. The obstruction of this pacifying mental flow represents the first form of ‘freezing,’ and appears to underlie all subsequent barriers that arise between ourselves and others.

Concerning the meaning of *mettā*, probably the most profound passage in the canon that describes it is the *Mettasutta* in the *Suttanipāta*, together with its commentary, the *Paramatthajotikā*.³⁰ In this exegetical text, it becomes clear that the concept of *mettā*, although etymologically derived from *mitta* ‘friend,’ extends far beyond a narrow circle of individuals, reaching out towards the entire world, without boundaries.

Here, loving-kindness is derived from ‘friend’ (*mitta*), because it is fattened (*mi-jjati*) and it protects (*tā-yati*); that is, it is moistened through a wish to promote well-being and it safeguards from the arrival of harm. Loving-kindness (friendliness) is the state of a friend. [...] Without enmity (*a-vera*): devoid of enmity, without the manifestation of the volition of enmity even at intervals; without adversaries (*asapatta*): the absence of hostile persons (*vigata-paccatthika*); for a person who dwells in loving-kindness is dear to humans, dear to nonhumans, and there is no one hostile to him. Hence, because of the absence of hostile persons (*paccatthika*), that mind is said to be “without adversaries”

²⁸ Some scholars have hesitated to translate *mettā* as “love,” possibly due to its theological connotations, particularly within the Christian tradition. Yet the ethical dimension of *mettā*, as a wish for the well-being of all beings, shares certain resonances with aspects of Christian agapic love. See Jennings (1996: 209–217) and Hick (2013: 240–249, esp. 246).

²⁹ The term *mettāyantena* (*Vism* IX, 14; PTS 298) is glossed as *mettāyanameva hi idha paṭighavinodanaṃ adhippetam*, “for here, the removal of anger is intended specifically through the cultivation of *mettā*” (*Vism-mhṭ*, My I, 354). A few paragraphs earlier, the term *mettāyanto* (*Vism* IX, 3; PTS 296) is explained as *mettam karonto, mettam bhāvento ti attho*, “one who generates (*karonto*) or develops (*bhāvento*) *mettā*: this is the meaning” (*Vism-mhṭ*, My I, 351).

³⁰ Sn 143–152 (PTS 25–26) and Pj (PTS I, 234–252).

(*asapatta*). For ‘hostile person’ and ‘adversary’ are synonyms. This is the commentary on the meaning by way of individual terms.’³¹

4.2. Step Two

If resentment does not vanish, the practitioner may apply a second method. This approach is particularly noteworthy for highlighting the unwholesomeness of responding to anger with anger. It illustrates that a mutually beneficial settlement³² frequently constitutes the most favourable and constructive outcome, particularly when it results from the deliberate renunciation of retaliation in favour of a non-violent response. An echo of this principle is also found in *Dhammapada* 42:

Whatever a foe may do to a foe, or an enemy to an enemy,
a mind wrongly directed does to that person something even worse.

In this same spirit, Buddhaghosa quotes two verses from the *Saṃyutta Nikāya*, which underline the spiritual dignity and practical wisdom of forbearance: refraining from returning anger not only pacifies conflict but benefits both oneself and the opponent. This second method thus shifts the practitioner’s focus from direct emotion to reflective insight into the consequences of reactive behaviour:

Indeed, whoever is angry in return towards a person who is also angry creates more serious problems for himself! But one who does not return anger towards an angry person wins a war that is hard to win.

³¹ Translation by Bikkhu Bodhi, in Bodhi (2017: 580–581).

³² In more colloquial contexts, ‘win-win’ is often used to describe beneficial outcomes for all parties involved.

He leads his life for his own welfare and the benefit of others,³³ because, recognising that the other is angry, he remains calm and peaceful, being endowed with mindfulness.³⁴

The second method for overcoming resentment in the *Visuddhimagga* combines both ethical recollection and pragmatic reflection. It begins with the recollection of the Buddha's unsurpassed forbearance and self-mastery in the face of abuse, urging the practitioner to emulate this moral standard and to refrain from retaliation. This leads to the realisation that non-retaliation benefits both parties, creating a reciprocal benefit in which the conflict subsides and dignity is preserved.³⁵

Yet, Buddhaghosa goes further, presenting a list of seven disadvantages that arise for the one who succumbs to anger, all of which are gratifying to the enemy.³⁶ This rhetorical strategy shifts the focus from spiritual cultivation to a worldly deterrent model: it reminds the practitioner that anger not only harms spiritual progress but also degrades one's social standing, appearance, and rebirth destiny.

In this way, the second method reflects a dual finality: it appeals both to the aspiration for inner transformation and to the fear of being defeated by one's own unguarded emotional reactions. It is

³³ It is interesting to note that Buddhaghosa inserts here (*Vism* IX, 15; PTS 299) and, again, a few paragraphs later (*Vism* IX, 23; PTS 301), the trope of a torch from a pyre, which also appears in several canonical sources: *Chavālātasutta*, AN 4.2.5.5 (PTS II, 95–96), *Piṇḍolyasutta*, SN 3.22 (PTS III, 93), *Jīvikasutta*, and It 91 (PTS 89–90). The simile of the cremation-brand (*chavālāta*) burning at both ends and defiled in the middle is used to characterise a person who harms both themselves and others, particularly through reactive anger. The commentary elaborates: “If grasped at either end, it burns the hand; if grasped in the middle, it defiles with dung” (*dvīsu koṭīsu gayhamānaṃ hatthaṃ dahati, majjhe gayhamānaṃ gūthēna makkheti*, AN-aṭ, PTS III, 117). Such a person is of no use either “in the village” or “in the forest,” that is, neither in worldly nor in spiritual life, because they are unfit for any constructive purpose, much like a piece of wood that is both dangerous and defiled. The image vividly illustrates the ethical and practical consequences of reactive anger and inner defilement: harm comes not only to oneself, but to anyone who attempts to engage with such a person. It is a powerful commentary on the futility of retaliatory violence and the necessity of inner purification as a precondition for benefiting either oneself or others. Interestingly, this typology parallels Carlo M. Cipolla's satirical yet insightful classification in Cipolla 2011 (1976), where the “stupid” person is defined precisely as one who harms both others and themselves, the “lose-lose” quadrant of human behaviour. The Buddhist simile, however, couches this in an ethical-psychological frame rooted in *kilesa* and *akusala kamma*. A similar structure is found in a series of suttas of the AN (from AN 4.2.4.5 to AN 4.2.5.10 [PTS IV, 85–101]), where a comparable typology is explicitly developed. The key pattern is laid out in the *Attahitasutta*, AN 4.2.5.8 (PTS IV, 98), and elaborated in *Chavālātasutta* (AN 4.2.5.5, PTS II, 95–96), *Rāgavinayasutta* (AN 4.2.5.6, PTS IV, 96–97), *Khippanisantisutta* (AN 4.2.5.7, PTS IV, 97–98), and *Sikkhāpadasutta* (AN 4.2.5.9, PTS IV, 98–99). See also DN 33.1.11 (PTS III, 233).

³⁴ See SN 1.7.1.1 (PTS I, 162). This is followed by a list of seven things (*dhamma*) that are gratifying and advantageous to an enemy who encounters a man or woman overcome by anger. Cf. AN 7.2.1.11 (PTS IV, 94–98).

³⁵ This echoes the form of wisdom (*paññā*) known as *kosalla* (Sanskrit: *kausalya*), the ability to understand (*pajānanā*) what constitutes improvement (*āya*), what constitutes decline (*apāya*), and what can be the most pragmatic means (*upāya*) that “cause the production of such and such things.” See Vibh 16.4 (PTS 325–326) and *Vism* XIV, 16–18 (PTS 439–440).

³⁶ These disadvantages are: ugliness (*dubbaṇṇa*), suffering (*dukkha*), lack of good fortune (*na pacurattha*), lack of wealth (*na bhogavā*), lack of good reputation (*na yasavā*), lack of friends (*na mittavā*), and lack of a good rebirth (*sugati*). See the list also in *Kodhanasutta*, AN 7.2.1.11 (PTS IV, 94–98).

therefore less contemplative than the first, based on *mettā*, but profoundly effective as a moral and psychological intervention.

4.3. Step Three

If the previous two methods do not succeed, the practitioner should shift focus from faults to virtues. Instead of dwelling on what is irritating in the other person, whether attempting to overcome it through *mettā* or by transforming both his own anger and that of his opponent into a peaceful attitude, the practitioner should deliberately reflect on some positive and controlled quality in that person, a purified aspect of behaviour that inspires serene and clear confidence (*pasāda*) when recalled. Buddhaghosa says:

If, while he strives and exerts himself in this way, his resentment subsides, then that is good (*kusala*). But if it does not subside, then whichever qualities in that person are peaceable and purified, and which, when recollected, give rise to serene and clear confidence (*pasāda*),³⁷ he should recollect those particular qualities and then his aggressiveness (*āghāta*) should be removed.³⁸

He will carefully examine whether anything positive can be found in the opponent's conduct, bodily, verbal, or mental. If no such quality can be identified, that is, if the person's behaviour appears entirely unwholesome, the practitioner is advised to shift the emotional basis of their reflection. In such a case, *karuṇā*, compassion, is aroused by contemplating the karmic consequences of such a conduct: "Though this person now dwells in the human realm, before long he will surely fill one of the hells."³⁹ Here, compassion functions as a kind of fallback mechanism within the third method: it allows the practitioner to transform resentment not through observation and recollection of wholesome aspects

³⁷ In the third method for dispelling aggressiveness (*āghāta*), Buddhaghosa recommends that the practitioner recollect specific qualities (*dhamma*) in the offending person that are peaceful (*vūpasanta*) and purified (*parisuddha*), and which, when recalled, give rise to *pasāda*, a state of serene clarity and gentle appreciation. *Pasāda* functions as the emotional and cognitive antidote to hostility. The instruction closely parallels the practice of *anussati*, recollective meditation, wherein the mind is stabilised and uplifted by turning towards wholesome attributes, such as the virtues of the Buddha (*buddhānussati*) or the moral integrity of others. In this context, the recollection is not abstract or idealised, but practical and discriminating: one is to ignore the unwholesome aspects of the other person and to focus exclusively on those that are conducive to confidence and composure. In doing so, the practitioner gradually trains perception away from aversion and towards a balanced, appreciative awareness, thus preparing the ground for the reintroduction of *mettā*. The appearance of the term *pasāda* is doctrinally significant: it signals that the emotional tone of this recollection is not merely neutral objectivity, but one suffused with gentle confidence, mental clarity, and a non-reactive heart.

³⁸ Vism IX, 16 (PTS 299). See also the first and the second *Āghātapaṭivāyasaṭṭa*, AN 5.4.2.1-2 (PTS III, 185–191).

³⁹ Vism IX, 20 (PTS 300).

but through an empathetic engagement with the suffering that underlies the other's conduct. Thus, the third method culminates in a dynamic movement from appreciative recollection to compassionate contemplation, consistently directed towards the calming and uprooting of aggressiveness (*āghāta*).

4.4. Step Four

In the fourth method, the reactive anger that answers another's hostility is calmed through rational analysis rooted in the law of impermanence (*anicca*) and the absence of a self (*anattā*): both the receiver of aggression and the agent of retaliation are, in fact, momentary constructions; there is no enduring subject who is harmed, nor a stable self who strikes back.

This fourth method draws on insightful reflection: one who reacts with anger not only mimics the wrongdoer but also inflicts further harm upon oneself. The practitioner is asked to consider: why surrender the clarity of one's own mind simply because another has acted harshly? What benefit can there be in copying ignoble behaviour?

Even assuming the harm did indeed occur, it is now a phenomenon that has passed. The one who committed it, like all beings, is subject to change from moment to moment due to the impermanent (*anicca*) nature of existence. There is no enduring agent of harm to remain angry with. The very person who caused the offence has already changed; the mental and physical processes that gave rise to the deed have ceased. To remain angry is therefore to cling to a moment that no longer exists, much like grasping at a wave that has already passed. In this way, resentment dissolves not through emotion, but through clear discernment of the impermanence of both self and other, and the unwholesomeness of sustained hostility.

Because all the *dhammas* last only for a mere instant (*khaṇika*), the aggregates (*khandha*) by which that harmful act was done

have already ceased. So now, with whom are you angry?

Whoever wants to inflict suffering on another, in the absence of that person, then whom is he harming?

And since you yourself become the cause of your own suffering, why, then, be angry with him?⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Vism IX, 22 (PTS 301).

4.5. Step Five

When resentment has not been subdued by prior methods, the practitioner should reflect on the moral law of *kamma*, contemplating the fact that both he himself and the one who caused offence are the owners of their actions. First, he is to consider his own responsibility: “What is the point of becoming angry? Is this not a form of *kamma* rooted in aggression that will lead to future harm?” He recalls that he is the owner, heir, kin, and refuge of his actions, and will inherit their results. Anger, in this light, is not a path to awakening or liberation, but rather one that leads to spiritual downfall, suffering, and distance from the Dhamma, likened to a man grasping a burning ember or excrement with the intent to throw it at another, only to burn or defile himself instead.⁴¹

Next, he applies the same reflection to the other person: the one who has caused harm is likewise the heir of his own actions. The angry person creates for himself the same downward path, and no one else can alter that outcome. In this way, resentment is abandoned not through sympathy or forgiveness, but through a thoughtful recognition of moral causality: each being is bound to the consequences of their deeds. To retaliate in anger is futile, like throwing dust against the wind, only to have it blow back in one’s face.

The method culminates in the verse from the *Dhammapada* 125, which encapsulates this ethic:

When a fool corrupts a man who is not corrupted,
Who is purified and free from every blemish.
Such evil falls back on the fool himself,
As dust thrown up against the wind.

The complete symmetry in treating self and other, a kind of mirroring of responsibility, emerges most remarkably in this fifth method. The reflection on *kamma* is not an act of self-pity, nor is it a moral judgment cast upon others. Rather, it is a honest and balanced recognition that each person, oneself and one’s opponent alike, is entirely responsible for the consequences of their actions. No double standards can be applied, and no hypocrisy escapes unnoticed: the same law governs all. Just as one must contemplate the karmic implications of one’s own anger, one must acknowledge that others, too, are bound by their own choices. This disciplined neutrality transforms the practitioner’s attitude not through sentimentality or moral superiority, but through the clarity that comes with accepting the inescapable logic of ethical causality.

⁴¹ On the trope of a torch from a pyre, see footnote 33.

4.6. Step Six

If resentment still remains after trying all previous methods, a further recommended remedy is to recall the Buddha's virtues (*guṇa*) displayed during his former lives, specifically, his unwavering patience and absence of hatred throughout his countless existences as a Bodhisatta, a future Buddha. This sixth method is based on the idea that one who aspires to the path of liberation must also reflect on the example set by the Master himself, who endured extreme suffering without allowing hostility to arise.

Through a series of Jātakas, the stories of the Buddha's previous existences, Buddhaghosa presents a vivid collection of stories, both mythic and moral, in which the Bodhisatta, whether as king, monkey, elephant, or nāga, is subjected to betrayal, violence, mutilation, and humiliation.⁴² In each case, he responds not with anger, but with restraint, compassion, and clarity of purpose. From the Khantivādī story, where he is flogged and dismembered without losing patience, to the Chaddanta Elephant and Saṅkhapāla Nāga tales, in which he voluntarily gives up his tusks or endures brutal torture while maintaining his vows, the recurring theme emerges clearly: restraint in the face of violence is not weakness, but ethical strength.

These accounts are not intended merely as inspiring tales, but as mirror models for the practitioner. They present moral archetypes, embedded in cultural memory, that function to depersonalise anger and displace the narrative of retaliation. Reflecting on the Bodhisatta's conduct reorients the emotional response towards a broader ethical vision: one that transcends individual pain and aligns with the goal of awakening. Though their settings vary (royal courts, forests, rivers, charnel grounds, and so forth), they all convey the same ethical principle, voiced again and again in a desperate yet resolute refusal of revenge: resentment is not dispelled by retaliation, but by the steady practice of non-hatred.

As it is said by Buddhaghosa in the conclusion of his description of the Sixth Method, analysing the *Mātuposaka-jātaka*:

And not only these, but he performed countless other marvellous acts in many other Jātakas such as the *Mātuposaka* and the like. Now that [you are aware] he has attained omniscience and possesses the virtue of patience as unmatched by anyone in the world with its gods, it is altogether improper and unseemly to give rise to thoughts of resentment, having taken the Blessed One, the Teacher, as your example.

⁴² The quoted Jātakas are: *Silava-jātaka* (51), *Khantivādī-jātaka* (313), *Cūladhammapāla-jātaka* (358), *Chaddanta-jātaka* (514), *Mahākapi-jātaka* (407), *Bhūridatta-jātaka* (543), *Campeyya-jātaka* (506), *Saṅkhapāla-jātaka* (521), *Mātuposaka-jātaka* (455).

This is the heart of the message: Buddhaghosa presents the lives of the Bodhisatta as a living example of restraint from all violent thought. These hagiographies become a model that, for one who follows the Buddha's path, represents not only a kind of commitment to peaceful conduct, but also a steadfast anchor amid the dangers we might face, those coming from others as well as those we risk creating ourselves.

4.7. Step Seven

Among the ten methods for removing resentment, the seventh stands out for its emotional immediacy. Drawing on the fourteenth sutta of the Anamatagga-saṃyutta,⁴³ Buddhaghosa evokes not a doctrinal abstraction of *saṃsāra*,⁴⁴ but its deeply personal consequences: in this cycle of rebirth without a discoverable beginning (*anamataggiya*),⁴⁵ there is no being who has not, at some point, been one's mother, father, sibling, or child. This recollection is not philosophical in tone, but affective and imaginal. It emerges from a part of the Saṃyutta Nikāya in which the notion of *saṃsāra* as boundless is employed to dismantle all forms of human craving and attachment, including the deluded belief in permanence and, most centrally, the notion of a self.

It is not easy, bhikkhus, to find a being who in this long course has not previously been your mother ... your father ... your brother ... your sister ... your son ... your daughter.⁴⁶

So he should think:

This person, once upon a time, could have been my mother! Having borne me in her womb for ten months, she removed my urine, faeces, phlegm, and snot as if they were sandalwood paste, without

⁴³ See *Mātusutta* (in the Anamatagga-saṃyutta) SN 2.4.2.4. (PTS II, 189–190).

⁴⁴ It is worth noting that Buddhaghosa does not mention the word *saṃsāra* alongside *anamataggiya* in his quotation from the Saṃyutta Nikāya, as he usually does elsewhere in the *Visuddhimagga* (see, for instance, *Vism* VII, 8, PTS 198).

⁴⁵ The word *anamatagga*, which here appears as *anamataggiyāni* to refer collectively to its various occurrences in the Anamatagga-saṃyutta, is masterfully analysed by Bhikkhu Bodhi in his translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya (Bodhi 2000: 795): “*anamataggo 'yaṃ bhikkhave saṃsāro*. Spk resolves *anamatagga* into *anu amatagga*, explaining: ‘Even if it should be pursued by knowledge for a hundred or a thousand years, it would be with unthought-of beginning, with unknown beginning (*vassasataṃ vassasahassaṃ nāṇena anugantvā pi amataggo aviditaggo*). It wouldn't be possible to know its beginning from here or from there; the meaning is that it is without a delimiting first or last point. *Saṃsāra* is the uninterruptedly occurring succession of the aggregates, etc. (*khandhādināṃ avicchinnappavattā paṭipāṭi*).’ The BHS equivalent of *anamatagga* is *anavarāgra* (e.g., at *Mvu* I 34,7), “without lower or upper limit.” For various explanations, see CPD, s.v. *an-amat'-agga*.”

⁴⁶ Translation by Bhikkhu Bodhi, in Bodhi (2000: 659).

disgust; she nurtured me, carrying me on her hip, rocking me on her chest, and tending to me with her own body.

The same kind of reflection should then be extended by imagining the person as his father, brother, and other relatives. The result is expressed clearly in Buddhaghosa's words: "All of them have given me this and that support and help: it is unseemly to defile my mind towards them."

When one is caught in the heat of anger or resentment, unable to reflect rationally or abstractly, Buddhaghosa recommends a visceral shift in perspective: he suggests visualising the person who now provokes anger as one's own mother, and so on. In doing so, the distant enemy is reconfigured as kin, not metaphorically, but in the literal, karmic sense proposed by the Buddha.

This reframing represents a deliberate enlargement of the natural boundaries of empathy, which are ordinarily reserved for those within one's familial or social 'clan.' Living beings are generally evolutionarily and emotionally inclined to feel love, loyalty, and protective concern for members of their own kin group, while reacting to outsiders with indifference or suspicion. By contemplating the boundless reach of *saṃsāra*, the practitioner is urged to extend that sphere of felt intimacy beyond its instinctive limits. The person who now arouses anger is seen not as an outsider, but as someone whose suffering once mattered to us, someone for whom we once sacrificed, or who once sacrificed for us. This reversal of moral distance creates the conditions for empathy where reactivity might otherwise arise.

This method rehumanises the other, not through reasoning or analysis, but through a contemplative remembrance of shared vulnerability and care. It is a powerful emotional intervention, offered precisely at the moment when moral reasoning may be least accessible.

4.8. Step Eight

If the seventh method still fails, one should reflect on the benefits of a selfless love-and-amity (*mettānisamsā*) as taught by the Buddha in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* and quoted in detail also in the *Visuddhimagga*.⁴⁷

This method invites the practitioner to reflect on what is lost (inner peace, health, concentration, and even favourable rebirth) by indulging in resentment. It is important to note that such reflection is not self-centred, but is, rather, the first breath of an all-pervasive *mettā* that naturally should begin

⁴⁷ See *Mettasutta*, AN 11.2.5 (PTS V, 342) and *Vism IX*, 59–76 (PTS 311–314). This sutta is also considered a protective (*paritta*) sutta.

with oneself. As Buddhaghosa says: “Having transformed oneself into a friend (*sakkhi*), the desire for the welfare and happiness of other beings arises as well.”⁴⁸ Here, the natural concern for well-being is used to redirect the mind towards non-hatred. In a philosophical system grounded in mutual contingency, individual spiritual progress is never detached from conditions, contexts, and the support of others. It unfolds within a mutually beneficial paradigm. For this reason, even personal advancement on the path towards liberation cannot be described as ‘selfish’ in any sense.

Bhikkhus, when the liberation of the mind through selfless love-and-amity has been pursued, developed, and cultivated, made a vehicle and basis, carried out, consolidated, and properly undertaken, eleven benefits are to be expected. What eleven? These are the eleven benefits: (1) One sleeps well; (2) one awakens happily; (3) one does not have bad dreams; (4) one is dear to human beings; (5) one is dear to non-human beings; (6) one is protected by deities; (7) one is not injured by fire, poison, or weapons; (8) the mind quickly becomes concentrated; (9) the expression of one’s face is serene and bright; (10) one dies unconfused; and (11) if there is no further penetration, rebirth takes place in the Brahmā-world.⁴⁹

4.9. Step Nine

If anger still remains, the practitioner is invited to analyse the object of rage into its constituent elements (*dhātu*).⁵⁰ One should ask: “What exactly am I angry at? The head hairs? The nails? The urine? The earth element? The eye-consciousness base?,” and so forth. This contemplative deconstruction of the so-called enemy into elements (*dhātu*), aggregates (*khandha*), bases (*āyatana*), and consciousness (*viññāṇa*) leads to the realisation that there is no self-existing entity to be hated, but only impermanent components. When we look at the abhorred person in this way, the resentment has no basis to rest on:

There is no foundation or support for anger, just as a mustard seed cannot settle on the tip of an awl, or a picture cannot be painted in the ether, [as if space were a canvas]. In the same way, even for the person who has been artificially imagined (*parikappita*) as an ‘enemy,’ there is no basis for anger, because his hair and so on, cannot be hated, as apart from those there is no person!⁵¹

⁴⁸ See Vism IX, 10 (PTS 297). I am grateful to Giuliano Giustarini for drawing my attention to this part of the text. See also Garfield (2021: 134).

⁴⁹ Vism IX, 37 (PTS 305).

⁵⁰ See Maithrimurthi (1999: 213).

⁵¹ See Vism-mhṭ (My, I, 361) ad Vism IX, 38 (PTS 306): *kodhassa patitṭhānaṭṭhānaṃ na hotīti yathā āragge sāsapassa, ākāse ca cit-takamassa patitṭhānaṭṭhānaṃ natthi, evamassa “verī”ti parikappite puggale kodhassa patitṭhānaṭṭhānaṃ na hoti, kesādīnaṃ akujjhitabbato, tabbinimuttassa ca puggalassa abhāvato.*

This method is philosophically profound and draws directly on the doctrine of non-self (*anattā*).⁵²

4.10. Step Ten

Finally, if none of the above are effective, the practitioner may give what belongs to him to the other, or accept something from the other. This gesture of generosity (*dāna*) has a dual purpose: it reduces animosity in the giver, and may also subdue hostility in the other person. The Tenth Method presents generosity (*dāna*) not merely as a private virtue, but as a profound transformative force capable of dissolving resentment and promoting social harmony. In the context of International Humanitarian Law, which seeks to mitigate harm and foster respect even amid conflict, this principle resonates deeply.

Buddhaghosa says:

He should try the sharing of a gift (*dāna*). One may give what belongs to oneself to the other, or accept something from the other. However, if the other's livelihood is not purified (*bhinnājīva*) and possesses requisites unfit for use, then one should give only what belongs to oneself. By acting in this way, resentment towards that person entirely subsides. And any lingering anger, carried from past encounters, also vanishes at that very moment.

The closing lines of the stanza quoted at the end beautifully encapsulates this transformative potential: generosity 'tames the untamed' and fosters noble speech and conduct.

There are interesting parallels between Buddhist generosity (*dāna*), as it appears here in Buddhaghosa's functional description as one of the methods for reducing resentment, and modern theories of the gift as a force for social cohesion and conflict resolution. Émile Durkheim saw the act of

⁵² A more detailed explanation of the *dhātus* and their role in meditative practice can be found throughout the canon. See the *Mahāsatipaṭṭhānasutta* (DN 22), the entire *Dhātusamyutta*, in the Saṃyutta Nikāya, various sections of the Abhidhamma-piṭaka (*Dhammasaṅgaṇī*, *Vibhaṅga*, *Dhātukathā*), as well as in the *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha* (9.6 ff.). The subject is also treated extensively in the *Visuddhimagga* (III.103 ff., PTS 110 ff.: the meditation subjects are forty: 10 *kaṣiṇā*, 10 *asubhā*, 10 *anussatiyo*, 4 *brahmavihārā*, 4 *āruppā*, 1 *saññā*, 1 *vavatthāna*). The *Pubbesambodhasutta* (SN 2.3.4.2; PTS II, 170–171) presents a powerful reflection on the instability and unreliability of the elements, emphasising their susceptibility to *dukkha*, *anicca* and *vipariṇāma*. Each element—earth (*paṭhavi*), water (*āpo*), fire (*tejo*), and air (*vāyo*)—offers momentary gratification (*assāda*), yet inevitably becomes a source of affliction and danger (*ādīnava*). Nevertheless, these same elements also provide the foundation for escape (*nissaraṇa*) from desire and attachment, culminating in the attainment of Nibbāna. It is noteworthy that the *Aṭṭhakathā* (PTS II, 154) draws an explicit parallel between the Four Noble Truths and this threefold analysis: *assāda* corresponds to *taṇhā*, *ādīnava* to *dukkha*, *nissaraṇa* to *nirodha*, and the path of understanding the cessation aligns with the truth of the Noble Eightfold Path. This meditation is echoed in the *Visuddhimagga*'s ninth method for removing resentment, where Buddhaghosa advises the practitioner to reflect: "Why be angry at the teeth or the tongue?" (*Vism* IX, 38).

giving as a social ritual that reinforces collective solidarity by binding individuals into reciprocal moral obligations. Building on this, Marcel Mauss, in his seminal work *The Gift*, explored how systems of exchange create enduring social ties through the obligation to give, receive, and reciprocate.⁵³ While Mauss emphasises reciprocity and social obligation, Buddhaghosa's Tenth Method highlights how giving can dissolve resentment by transforming hostile relationships into ones of mutual benefit and ethical elevation. Both view the act of giving as more than a transaction, as a moral intervention capable of reshaping social bonds.

It is worth noting that *dāna* is one of the ten *pāramīs* (perfections), and is traditionally regarded as a fundamental virtue of a righteous ruler. These ten perfections are enumerated at the conclusion of Chapter IX of the *Visuddhimagga*. In Mahāyāna schools, particularly in the *Prajñāpāramitā* literature, *dāna* is described as a practice that, when performed by Bodhisattvas, clearly reveals the absence of self and the emptiness of the inherent existence of all phenomena:

At the time when the Bodhisattva, coursing in Perfect Wisdom (*prajñāpāramitā*), gives a gift, he does so having stood in a thought without outflows, and he does not review a sign, i.e. him who gives, him to whom he gives, what he gives, who am I that gives. He gives his gifts with a thought free from signs, without outflows, free from cravings and ignorance. He does not review that though, nor that gift, and so on up to all the Buddhadharmas.⁵⁴

The gift, understood as a 'perfection,' clearly reveals the emptiness of the parties involved, namely the donor, the recipient, and the object given. In this context, the very idea of resentment or hostility appears absurd, as such feelings would lack any basis or object onto which they could be directed.

Dāna functions here as a moral disarmament. It might neutralise hostility by restoring dignity and recognising shared humanity, even between those who might otherwise see each other as adversaries, through voluntary acts of giving that equalise and uplift. In both Buddhist ethics and IHL, the ideal is to break cycles of harm by recognising and acting on the inherent worth of others, turning former sources of resentment into opportunities for shared benefit and peaceful coexistence.

⁵³ See Komter (2005: 109–112, 195–212).

⁵⁴ Translation by Edward Conze, in Conze (1975: 557). See *Aṣṭādaśasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitā Sūtra* (ed. by Edward Conze, in Conze 1974: 12): *yasmin samaye bodhisattvo mahāsattvaḥ prajñāpāramitāyāṃ caran dānan dadāti. so 'nāsrave citte sthitvā dānaṃ dadāti. sa tatra anāsrave citte sthito nimittaṃ na samanupaśyati. ko dadāti kasmai vā dadāti. kena vā dadāti ko vā dadāmi. sa nimittāpagatena cittena dānaṃ dadāty anāsraveṇa vīgatatrṣṇeṇa vīgatāvidyena, sa tac cittaṃ na samanupaśyati. tad dānaṃ na samanupaśyati. yāvat sarvabuddhadharmeṣu kartavyaṃ.*

5. The enemy in war and the enemy in peace

Within the philosophical and psychological analysis offered by the *Visuddhimagga*, the term ‘enemy’ (*paccatthika*) refers not only to an external adversary but also—and more significantly—to internal mental states that oppose the four Brahmavihāras and obstruct the cultivation of wholesome qualities.⁵⁵ Indeed, Buddhaghosa identifies two kinds of enemies for each of the four Brahmavihāras: a ‘far enemy,’ a mental state that stands in clear opposition to the corresponding virtue, and a ‘near enemy,’ a deceptively similar state that subtly undermines it.⁵⁶

This profound analysis of human responses to suffering reveals the necessity of deeply understanding the dynamics of the ‘near enemy’ in order to overcome the more obvious ‘far enemy.’ I would carefully—yet deliberately—venture to liken the ‘near enemies’ to the so-called ‘freezing elements,’ understood as the most complex and deeply rooted dynamics that hinder efforts to address the causes of intractable conflict. That is to say, while it is evident that love-and-amity (*mettā*) must be cultivated in order to overcome destructive ill will (*vyāpāda*),⁵⁷ one must proceed with caution, because a far more insidious enemy, namely attachment (*rāga*), often lies hidden within a mind untrained in awareness and lacking clear insight into the nature of reality. This subtle distortion bears a striking resemblance to certain forms of psychological rigidity, such as the illusion of moral exclusivity, attachment to the belief in holding exclusive authority over absolute values, or the entrapment within structural and prejudicial patterns of fear and hatred. These characteristics parallel the socio-psychological barriers that sustain and entrench intractable conflicts, commonly referred to as ‘freezing factors.’

To clarify further: we must cultivate and apply *karuṇā* ‘compassion’ if we wish to gradually diminish the power of violence and cruelty (*vihimsā*), forces traditionally described as the ‘far enemy’ of *karuṇā*. Yet this is not sufficient. *Karuṇā* must also be cultivated in relation to its ‘near enemy,’ namely the disguised and subtler origins of cruelty and violence. These unwholesome roots are quite different from the ‘far enemy’ for they are more concealed and often more insidious than their visible and direct counterparts. This ‘near enemy’ is the grief and distress (*domanassa*) that we reserve exclusively for our own well-defined circle, our in-group, our household. It is no coincidence that the Pali term used to

⁵⁵ See *Vism IX*, 98–101 (PTS 318–320).

⁵⁶ An insightful analysis of the “two enemies” is offered by Jay Garfield in Garfield (2021: 135–144).

⁵⁷ See also *Mp* (PTS I, 47) *ad AN 1.2.7* (PTS I, 4). Six things lead to the abandonment of ill will: learning the mark of love-and-amity (*mettānimitta*), cultivating meditation on love-and-amity (*mettā-bhāvanānuyoga*), reviewing ownership of kamma (*kammassakatāpaccavekkhanā*), abundant reflection (*paṭisaṅkhānabahulatā*), good friendship (*kalyāṇamittatā*), and suitable conversation (*sappāyakathā*).

describe this is *gehasita*—literally ‘house-bound’ and here rendered as ‘worldly’—evoking both physical and psychological confinement.

This form of emotional suffering lacks the expansive quality of true compassion. It is confined to what is perceived as ‘ours,’ closed off from the suffering of others, and sustained by attachment (*kāmaguṇa*). Such attachment is nourished by patterns of selfishness, rigidity, ideological closure, fear, and hatred, the very foundations of a culture of conflict. *Gehasitaṃ domanassaṃ* ‘worldly grief and distress,’ are born of a frustrated and undeveloped longing for possession. It blinds us to the universality of *dukkha*, distorts our perception of the deep entanglement among all our lives, and can lead to the dangerous belief that our suffering is categorically distinct from that of others. Tragically, it may even convince us that the only way to eliminate our own suffering is to inflict it upon others, those whom we have come to regard, often without justification, as its source.

Efforts to reduce violence and suffering require more than momentary remedies; it is not sufficient to apply the notion of ‘compassion’ to intense emotional states such as rage and to assume it will automatically yield wholesome results. We must examine the deeper roots of the problem and identify even the most subtle or disguised enemies within. This represents, of course, a high level of spiritual maturity, likely difficult to actualise during conflict. However, it helps clarify the true sources of rage and may increase our capacity to recognise its roots and find ways to mitigate its devastating effects. And we must also be prepared to accept that this path not only serves to limit violence during conflict, but also opens the way to a profound shift in how we see human existence in its entirety.

It is important to emphasise that the reduction and eventual elimination of violence, as envisioned in the Buddhist tradition, is not itself framed as a battle between ‘good’ and ‘evil,’ even if one might be tempted to characterise it as a form of ‘just war’ (*iustum bellum*).⁵⁸ The cultivation of the four Brahmavihāras does not aim to ‘destroy’ enemies. Rather, their very presence removes the ground on which unwholesome mental states would otherwise take root, depriving them of the basis they require to arise. What is revealed here is not an oppositional struggle, but a fundamental incompatibility: the mutual exclusivity of compassion and violence. As the text makes clear: “For truly, it is not possible that one would be cultivating compassion and at the same time harming living beings and the like; this is without basis and illogical (*aṭṭhāna*).”

⁵⁸ The Buddha, in the Pāli canonical texts, does not endorse any notion of a just war, and “the Buddha’s attitude to the war was absolute, context-independent and non-negotiable” (Maithrimurthi 2014: 41). See also footnote 3.

It is therefore worth including here the passages in which Buddhaghosa develops his analysis of *mettā* and *karuṇā*.⁵⁹

For the Brahmavihāra of *mettā*, attachment (*rāga*) is a ‘near enemy’ because of their resemblance in showing virtues (*guṇadassana-sabhāgatāya*), like a man’s foe who is drawing near. Attachment insinuates itself cunningly and swiftly (*lahuṃ otāraṃ labhati*); therefore, *mettā* should be carefully guarded against it.⁶⁰

Destructive ill will (*vyāpāda*),⁶¹ on the other hand, is the ‘distant enemy,’ because of the clear distinction from [and opposition to] what is similar [to *mettā*]. It is like a man’s enemy who stays hidden in a mountain wilderness or in other remote places. Therefore, *mettā* may be developed without fear in that regard.⁶² Indeed, it is impossible that one would be cultivating *mettā* and at the same time producing anger; this is without basis and illogical (*aṭṭhāna*).

[Concerning ‘compassion’ (*karuṇā*)], “grief and distress (*domanassa*) arise when one fails to obtain—or when one considers that one has failed to obtain—visible forms cognisable by the eye (and all the other senses) that are desirable, agreeable, pleasing, charming, and connected with the pleasures of the world; or when one recalls what was formerly obtained in the past but is now gone, has ceased, or has changed. This kind of sorrow is called ‘worldly grief and distress’ (*gehasitaṃ domanassaṃ*).”⁶³ The idea of ‘worldly grief and distress’ is here presented following that reasoning: it is a ‘near enemy’ because of its association with the appearance of misfortune (*vipatti-dassana-sabhāgatāya*).⁶⁴

⁵⁹ See Vism IX, 98–99 (PTS 318–319).

⁶⁰ The commentary (Vism-mhṭ, My I, 380) adds: “Attachment disguises itself wearing the face of your friend (*mittamukhasapatto viya*), while in reality being one of your most treacherous enemies, and it corrupts by assuming a similar form (*tulyākārena dūsanato*). Attachment insinuates itself cunningly and swiftly (*lahuṃ otāraṃ labhati*), displacing *mettā* even in a single moment of clouded awareness (*satisammosamattena*), because this attachment is capable (*araha*) of developing in relation to the very same object as *mettā*.”

⁶¹ The Pali term *vyāpāda* is often translated as “ill will,” but this risks underplaying its ethical severity. Etymologically related to “perishing” or “ruin,” *vyāpāda* refers to a deeply rooted mental state of hostile intent, marked by a desire to harm or see another suffer. It carries the connotation of destructive ill will, directed both outwardly towards others and inwardly corrosive to the one who harbours it. In the Abhidhamma and meditative traditions, it is one of the five hindrances (*nīvaraṇa*) and a direct obstacle to concentration and insight.

⁶² The commentary (Vism-mhṭ, My I, 380) adds: “‘Without fear’ (*nibbhaya*) means: without doubt and suspicion (*anussaṅkha-parisaṅkha*). When *mettā* has been firmly established, it is difficult for *vyāpāda* to annihilate it.”

⁶³ Here, Buddhaghosa quotes directly from MN 137.12 (PTS III, 218).

⁶⁴ See Vism IX, 99 (PTS 319). The Vism-mhṭ (My I, 380) explains: “Concerning those beings towards whom compassion arises through the perception of misfortune, such as the loss of wealth, and so on, if, with regard to them, there is a confused mental effort (*ayoniso ābhoga*) focused merely on that object (*tannimitta*), then sorrow (*soka*) may arise in the mode of the aforementioned grief and distress (*domanassa*). That [grief] is the near enemy (*āsannapaccatthika*) of compassion. In this text, sorrow (*soka*) is indicated under the category of mental displeasure (*domanassasīsa vutta*).”

Because of the clear distinction from what is similar [to compassion], cruelty (*vihiṃsā*) is the distant enemy.⁶⁵ Therefore, one should practise compassion free from fear of that. For truly, it is not possible that one would be cultivating compassion and at the same time harming living beings and the like; this is without basis and illogical (*aṭṭhāna*).

<i>Brahmavihāra</i>	Near Enemy (<i>āsanna-paccatthika</i>)	Far Enemy (<i>dūra-paccatthika</i>)
<i>Mettā</i> (love-and-amity)	Attachment (<i>rāga</i>)	Destructive ill will (<i>vyāpāda</i>)
<i>Karuṇā</i> (compassion)	Worldly grief and distress (<i>domanassa</i>)	Cruelty (<i>vihiṃsā</i>)
<i>Muditā</i> (sympathetic joy)	Worldly gladness (<i>somanassa</i>)	Discontent (<i>arati</i>)
<i>Upekkhā</i> (equanimity)	Worldly indifference based on not-knowing (<i>aññāṇupekkhā</i>)	Attachment and aversion (<i>raga-paṭigha</i>)

6. Trust

Scholarly perspectives on conflict resolution increasingly point to ‘trust’ as a foundational element in mitigating the tragedies of war. Yet despite its acknowledged importance, the concept remains relatively underexplored, partly because it unfolds across a kaleidoscopic range of dimensions, making it difficult to define and analyse with clarity. Three broad approaches to trust are generally identified. The ‘rational approach’ views trust as a calculated decision made under conditions of uncertainty, weighing the likelihood that the other party will act in a trustworthy manner. The ‘psychological approach’ emphasises intuition over calculation, suggesting that trust formation depends on situational factors that influence a person’s propensity to trust. Finally, the ‘structural or constructivist approach,’ particularly in International Relations, emphasises the role of identities and social norms in shaping trust among actors.⁶⁶ However it is conceptualised, trust is increasingly acknowledged as a central factor in addressing the roots and resolution of armed conflict.

⁶⁵ “Because of the clear distinction from what is similar [to compassion]’ (*sabhāgavisabhāgatāya*): in relation to beings, the desire to remove suffering corresponds in nature to compassion (*karuṇā-sabhāga*), whereas the act of inflicting suffering has the nature of cruelty (*viheṣā*) and is opposite in kind (*visabhāga*). [So, cruelty (*vihiṃsā*)] is called the ‘distant enemy’ of compassion because of the clear distinction from what is similar [to compassion], just as an enemy (*sapatta*) who stands far from a man and, though trying to draw near him, would succeed only after a long time.” *Vism-mhṭ* (My I, 380).

⁶⁶ “In sum, research on trust has become more prevalent in International Relations as the political significance of the theme has been increasingly recognised. We already have a [sic] much sharper conceptual and theoretical tools and a multifaceted

Interestingly, Daniel Bar-Tal also emphasised this aspect. He locates the beginning of any possible decrease of violence during conflict in the idea of trust: “Trust is one of the most basic ingredients in successful conflict resolution, but it already plays a major role in de-escalating intractable conflicts” (Bar-Tal 2013: 340–341). Many other scholars have found that trust is the most important key element for any attempt to stop a war. It is a highly fragile tool and also somehow contradictory: “The most demanding case is breaking the vicious cycle of deepening distrust and beginning the slow construction of trust. There is a certain asymmetry: ‘Distrust is harder to unlearn when conditions change to justify trust, than is trust when conditions change to justify distrust’ (Hardin 2002: 107). Therefore, the situation of interpersonal or intergroup conflict, by definition implying distrust, presents the most difficult challenge. Regaining trust in the enemy sounds like a *contradictio in adiecto*. [...] but the alternative is hopelessness and despair” (Sztompka 2016: 20).

This is a crucial point: trust does not emerge solely from empirical evidence or rational calculation. If it did, the effort to cultivate it would likely prove unsustainable. Trust is not synonymous with complete certainty; rather, it arises through a complex mediation between strategic reasoning and a kind of intuitive confidence that cannot be fully explained. It functions as a keystone: seemingly unnecessary, yet essential, without it the bridge between opposing positions collapses, and long-standing patterns of division and violence quickly reassert themselves. In any form of trust, even the kind required to support a conflict resolution process, there is inevitably an element of risk, since we can neither predict all possible responses from the ‘other’ nor fully control our own reactions. The only meaningful way to reduce this element of uncertainty is to begin dissolving the boundaries between ourselves and the ‘other.’ Trust requires a deliberate step beyond suspicion, a readiness to see the former enemy not as a ‘beast’ but as a fellow human being. Even in political contexts, such trust begins as a kind of leap: fragile, morally charged, and rooted in a shared sense of vulnerability. Trust does not emerge when conditions are perfect, but when the cost of continued mistrust becomes too heavy to bear.⁶⁷

set of empirical knowledge than 20 years ago. Yet, many questions related to trust and distrust are only preliminarily explored in IR. We can trust that research on trust will flourish also in the future.” Haukkala, van de Wetering and Vuorelma (2018: 160–161, 166).

⁶⁷ This collaborative approach, grounded in trust, is especially vital in the context of today’s global challenges, including ecological degradation and social fragmentation. As Michael Tomasello observes: “And so, in the current view, the most plausible evolutionary scenario is that new ecological pressures (e.g., the disappearance of individually obtainable foods and then increased population sizes and competition from other groups) acted directly on human social interaction and organization, leading to the evolution of more cooperative human lifeways (e.g., collaboration for foraging and then cultural organization for group coordination and defense)” (Tomasello 2014: 124).

Precisely because the study of this theme remains in its early stages, it is worth presenting the perspective offered by the Buddhist canonical texts on this crucial matter. While canonical texts refer to multiple forms of ‘trust,’ ‘confidence,’ ‘faith’ (Pali: *saddhā*, Sanskrit: *śraddhā*),⁶⁸ the form that most closely parallels the psychological and rational models discussed in political science and conflict resolution scholarship appears in the *Upanisā Sutta*, within the context of a distinctive formulation of *paṭiccasamuppāda*, one that scholars refer to as ‘Transcendental Dependent Arising.’⁶⁹ This formulation offers a path of understanding how the seemingly ‘intractable’ cycle of suffering (*dukkha*) can be reversed when a particular form of trust (*saddhā*) is developed.

Unlike the standard formulation of the *paṭiccasamuppāda*, which traces the causal chain leading to suffering and rebirth,⁷⁰ this version outlines a progressive path of mental and ethical development. If this transformative recognition of the cycle of grief arises, it originates in *dukkha*, suffering. From there, the awakening process begins with *saddhā*, trust or confidence, and culminates in *vimutti* (liberation) and *khaya-ñāṇa* (knowledge of the destruction) of the taints (*āsava*).⁷¹

In this Transcendental Dependent Arising, trust marks a turning point, a pivotal reversal from the cyclic and self-perpetuating sequence of *samsāra* to the liberative path. Unlike in the mundane chain, where suffering leads back to ignorance, here, suffering, when thematically reflected upon and imbued with trust, triggers an existential and ethical shift that can initiate spiritual development.

Embedded as it is in a soteriological and sapiential path, this form of trust is described in the commentaries as a deliberate inner resolution (*adhimokkha*),⁷² a well-considered decision, marked by a

⁶⁸ Four types of “trust” or “confidence” (*saddhā*) are described in the commentarial Pali tradition: (1) Trust in what one clearly perceives will be realised (*āgamanīya-saddhā*), characteristic of Bodhisattas who perceive the truth without relying on others’ instruction; (2) Trust grounded in direct realisation already attained (*adhigama-saddhā*), characteristic of fully awakened beings such as arahants and Buddhas; (3) Serene trust and devotional confidence (*pasāda-saddhā*), characteristic of those moved by declarations such as “The Blessed One is a Fully Enlightened Buddha,” who place their trust in the guidance of others; and (4) Trust as consideration of correspondence (*okappana-saddhā*), characteristic of those who prefer to verify the truth for themselves and, upon doing so, affirm: “Yes, it is indeed so.” See AN-ṭ (My III, 3).

⁶⁹ See Bodhi (1980: 18–23) and Payutto (: Phra Dhammapitaka 1995: 85–97).

⁷⁰ Ignorance (*avijjā*) → Kamma formations (*saṅkhāra*) → Consciousness (*viññāṇa*) → Mentality-materiality (*nāmarūpa*) → Six-fold sense base (*saḷāyatana*) → Contact (*phassa*) → Feeling (*vedanā*) → Craving (*taṇhā*) → Clinging (*upādānaṃ*) → Existence (*bhava*) → Birth (*jāti*) → Suffering (*dukkha* = *jarāmaraṇa*).

⁷¹ Faith or trust (*saddhā*) → joy (*pāmojja*) → rapture (*pīti*) → tranquillity (*passaddhi*) → happiness (*sukha*) → concentration (*samādhi*) → knowledge and vision of things as they are (*yathābhūtanāṇadassana*) → disenchantment (*nibbidā*) → dispassion (*virāga*) → emancipation (*vimutti*) → knowledge of destruction of the cankers or taints (*āsavakhaye ñāṇa*).

⁷² See SN-ṭ (My II, 65). This refers to a superior form of “resolute trust” (*adhimokkha*), more advanced than the resolution associated with incipient insight (*taruṇavipassanā*) and included among the minor imperfections or defilements (*upakkilesa*)

trust that arises anew, again and again (*aparāparaṃ uppajjanasaddhā*),⁷³ in light of one's deepening awareness of the suffering inherent in *saṃsāra* (*vaṭṭadukkhā*), which it ultimately seeks to transcend. *Saddhā*, in this context, is closely linked to a form of knowledge that is purified of cognitive defilements,⁷⁴ a discerning understanding of reality as it truly is. This form of trust is not a fixed belief or creed, but a refined and ongoing process of insight.⁷⁵ It must be continually renewed, reaffirmed, and confirmed through reflection and testing against lived experience. It is sustained by the deep confidence that genuine human connection is, in fact, the only viable means of breaking the recurring cycle of violence and suffering. Significantly, this trust is directed towards the Three Jewels – the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Saṅgha—as well as towards the law of 'cause and effect,' 'action and fruit of action' (*kamma-phala*), reflecting a discernment that penetrates every aspect of conditioned existence and places all phenomena within the universal principle of dependent origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*).

A clear explanation of *saddhā* as arising when the mind becomes sufficiently clear, undistorted, and serene to perceive what is truly worthy of trust is also found in Mahāyānic traditions, for instance in the commentary to Vasubandhu's *Triṃśikā*, written by Sthiramati.⁷⁶ Their view echoes the interpretation of the Theravāda school: 'trust' or 'confidence' (*śraddhā*) is connected to mental purity and serenity (*prasāda*). It is incompatible with the opacity of mind (*cittakāluṣya*) and, because of its presence, the defilements (*kleśa*), the secondary defilements (*upakleśa*), the impurities (*mala*), and the opacity (*kāluṣya*) are eliminated. *Śraddhā* 'trust' is a firm conviction (*abhisampratyaya*), a mental purity and serenity (*prasāda*), and a heartfelt aspiration (*cetasāḥ abhilāṣa*), directed towards the real existence (*astitva*), the inherent goodness (*guṇavattva*), and the efficacy (*śakyatva*) as they pertain to the law of action and effect (*karma-phala*), the Four Noble Truths (*satya*), and the Three Jewels (*ratna*). It is therefore not a leap over reason, but the product of understanding released from distortion, prejudice, and partiality, a purified cognition that intuitively aligns with the truth, noticeably with the law of the cause-and-effect relationship. In this sense, *saddhā* is absolutely not a blind belief, for the very reason that it is not connected with any form of rationality that is under the influence of fear or ego.

that may arise during early stages of meditative development. See also Vism XX, 105–124 (PTS 633–637), and Vism-mhṭ (My II, 431).

⁷³ See Spk (PTS II, 53) *ad* SN 2.1.12.3 (PTS II, 29–32).

⁷⁴ See, for instance, the metaphor of the purification of water in the *Milindapañhā* 2.10 (PTS 34–35).

⁷⁵ On *saddhā*, see the analysis by Giustarini (2006: 161–179, esp. 165 and 174).

⁷⁶ See Buescher (2007: 76), *ad* *Triṃśikā-vijñaptikārikā* 10d. A related discussion appears in *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* 2.25. Vasubandhu and Sthiramati stand among the most influential thinkers in Buddhist philosophy and Asian thought.

In the *Upanisā Sutta*, trust functions as a liminal event, a gateway between states of being. It marks the moment when the cycle of suffering (*dukkha*) begins to turn, not by escaping pain, but by confronting it with the openness to move beyond it. In both contemplative and social domains, faith/trust is the hinge on which transformation turns, the moment of risking a new possibility in place of old patterns. As such, *saddhā* is not only a turning point on the path to liberation but also a transitional doorway, a crossing from fragmentation to integrity, from enmity to amity, from existential despair to the first glimmer of peace.

Seen through the lens of peacebuilding and conflict mitigation, this new paradigm undermines the assumption that one party necessarily must destroy the other to secure its own benefit, and challenges the presumption that the cycle of suffering is unbreakable and eternal. Trust (*saddhā*) affirms what may be called a revolutionary truth: while enormously difficult to achieve, a mutually beneficial outcome is possible. It carries the insight that no conflict is inherently intractable, a core principle clearly embodied in the Third Noble Truth (*nirodha*), the cessation of suffering.

7. Conclusions

Through an attentive reading of canonical and exegetical sources, this article has shown how several core Buddhist principles—above all the Brahmavihāras and the ten methods for removing anger, masterfully systematised by Buddhaghosa—can contribute to reducing violence in times of war and peace, having been cultivated and applied by monastics and lay practitioners across a wide range of circumstances.

An important point to highlight is that the so-called ‘periods of peace,’ upon closer examination, undeniably harbour significant psychological conflicts and communal tensions.⁷⁷ Any endeavour to understand and calm such hostilities while they remain at a low intensity is structurally similar in nature to the efforts required when conflict escalates into acts of cruelty or barbarity, for whether they remain latent or become manifest, such hostilities arise from the same unwholesome mental roots. Moreover, it seems plausible to suggest that the cultivation of heightened awareness, compassionate attentiveness, and shared responsibility during times of peace can help dispel the illusory sense of innocence and impunity that arises when others’ suffering is seen as distant from our own, and help us recognise that it is, in fact, much closer than we are often willing to admit.

⁷⁷ In the Mp (PTS III, 329) *ad* AN 5.5.2.5 (PTS III, 254), it is clearly said that the abundance of enmity (*verabahulo*) can be in the form of people who can be enemies and as unwholesome [mental] enmity. See Bodhi (2012: 1746, note 1221).

These principles, bequeathed by the Buddha and reaffirmed over centuries by countless masters of Asian Buddhist thought, aim at a profound understanding and eradication of human suffering. The path to liberation inevitably traverses domains in which hatred, greed, and delusion have gained such dominance over the mind that they may give rise to war itself. Yet even in these extreme circumstances, the Buddha’s teachings retain their power to counter violence and foster healing. And when the horrors of war have passed, they can still offer guidance to those who have shed their national uniforms but continue to fight inner and borderless battles with the myriad of sufferings that persist. Those teachings may help them erode the very foundations upon which what may initially appear as banal evil can grow into absolute tragedy. The famous dictum: “War is simply the continuation of politics by other means,”⁷⁸ can be reinterpreted from a Buddhist perspective by setting aside the reference to politics and instead shifting the focus to what is seen as the deeper root of conflict: “War is simply the external continuation of inner hatred-greed-delusion by other means.”

Naturally, one must ask how a path that not only counteracts violence but also dismantles its most insidious causes could ever be proposed to—let alone accepted by—those who benefit from sustaining conflict.⁷⁹ Yet this challenge can only be met by a community of individuals bound by trust and *mettā*.

References

Abbreviations and texts

AdSPG	<i>Aṣṭādaśasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitā</i>
AN	Āṅguttara Nikāya
ChS	Chaṭṭha Saṅgāyana Tipiṭaka 4.1
Cone	A Dictionary of Pali by Margaret Cone
DN	Dīgha Nikāya
MN	Majjhima Nikāya

⁷⁸ “Der Krieg ist eine bloße Fortsetzung der Politik mit anderen Mitteln” (Howard and Paret 1976: 87).

⁷⁹ It is worth noting that the elimination of suffering and hostility was unmistakably recognised by Buddhist masters as an extraordinarily difficult task. As stated in the *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī* (Sv, PTS III, 719 ad DN 21.2.1, PTS II, 275): “Until the fetter of envy and miserliness (*issā-macchariya-saṃyojana*) is abandoned, even though devas and humans may wish for a state free from enmity and other wholesome qualities, they are nevertheless not freed from hostility and its accompanying defilements.” Yet the entire trajectory of the Buddhist path rests precisely on the conviction that, despite the weight of habit, resignation, and discouragement, the achievement of a life burdened by less suffering and illuminated by a more enduring peace remains possible, even in this very life.

Mp	<i>Manorathapūraṇī</i>
My	Page number in the Burmese edition
Paṭis	<i>Paṭisambhidāmagga</i>
PED	Pali-English Dictionary by Rhys Davids and Stede
Pj	<i>Paramatthajotikā</i> II (Vol. I)
PTS	Pali Text Society Editions
Sn	<i>Suttanipāta</i>
SN	Samyutta Nikāya
Spk	<i>Sāratthappakāsinī</i>
Sv	<i>Sumaṅgalavilāsinī</i>
Ud	<i>Udāna</i>
Vibh	<i>Vibhaṅga</i>
Vin	Vinaya
Vism	<i>Visuddhimagga</i>
Vism-mhṭ	<i>Visuddhimagga Mahāṭikā</i> (or <i>Paramatthamañjūsā</i>) by Dhammapāla (ChS edition)

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