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The Comparision of Buddhist and Western Political Approach

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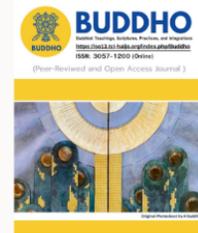


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Original Research Articles

The Comparisons of Buddhist and Western Political Approach

Thich Quang Chan*

Abstract

This documentary research examines the comparative foundations of Buddhist and Western political approaches, focusing on theories of justice, governance, violence, and ethical legitimacy. Drawing upon classical Buddhist texts, historical cases particularly the Aokan (Asoka) paradigm in Theravāda societies and Western political theory such as John Rawls' conception of justice, the study explores how differing civilizational assumptions shape political authority and public policy. The research highlights the Buddhist emphasis on moral intention (*cetana*), compassion (*karuṇā*), non-harm (*ahiṃsā*), and the interdependent relationship between the ruler, the Sangha, and the people, contrasting these with Western models grounded in institutional structures, legal rationality, and democratic conflict resolution. The findings suggest that while Western political science prioritizes procedural justice and structural arrangements, Buddhist political thought centers on ethical governance, moral restraint, and the cultivation of virtue as the foundation of political legitimacy. This comparative analysis contributes to broader debates in political theory, ethics, and cross-cultural governance by illuminating both convergences and tensions between Buddhist and Western political traditions.

Keywords: Buddhist Political Theory, Western Political Thought, Justice, Asoka, Nonviolence

Introduction

Political science has undergone significant expansion since the Second World War, marked by institutional growth, methodological diversification, and global diffusion (Easton, Gunnell, & Graziano, 1995; Almond, 1990). While Western political science particularly in the United States developed early as a formalized academic discipline with professional associations and standardized research methods, political thought in many non-Western societies evolved primarily through religious, philosophical, and ethical traditions rather than through institutionalized social science frameworks (Almond & Coleman, 1960; Gunnell, 2011). As a result, systematic comparative engagement between Western political theory and Buddhist political thought remains relatively underexplored within mainstream political science.

Western political philosophy, exemplified by John Rawls' theory of justice, emphasizes the basic structure of society, including institutions that regulate rights, obligations, opportunities, and the distribution of resources (Rawls, 1971). According to Rawls, justice is primarily a matter of fair institutional arrangements that shape social cooperation over time. In contrast, Buddhist political thought does not begin with abstract institutional design but rather with ethical cultivation, moral intention (*cetana*), and the alleviation of suffering (*dukkha*) as the ultimate goal of social life (Gethin, 1998; Harvey, 2000). This fundamental difference raises an important comparative question: What kind of social and political order is envisioned within Buddhist traditions, and how does it compare with dominant Western political models?

The Theravāda Buddhist paradigm, particularly as articulated through the historical example of Emperor Asoka, provides a valuable lens for exploring this question. Asoka's reign represents one of the earliest large-scale attempts to integrate Buddhist ethical principles into state governance. Following the devastation of the Kalinga War, Asoka rejected war as a means of glory or territorial expansion and instead promoted governance through Dharma, emphasizing compassion, tolerance, justice, and moral persuasion while still maintaining state authority and social order (Strong, 1989; Thapar, 1997). His model of rulership illustrates a form of ethical kingship in which sovereignty is justified not by power alone but by moral responsibility toward subjects.

At the same time, Buddhist political practice has never been monolithic. Historical and contemporary cases from Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, and other Buddhist societies demonstrate diverse political interpretations, ranging from royal Buddhism and nationalist movements to Engaged Buddhism, which integrates Buddhist ethics with democratic values, human rights discourse, and environmental concerns (Swearer, 1995; Queen & King, 1996). These developments invite sustained comparison with Western political approaches that emphasize democracy, pluralism, constitutionalism, and the peaceful resolution of conflict. Situating Buddhist political thought within a broader comparative framework allows for a deeper understanding of how ethical reasoning, conceptions of violence, justice, and political authority differ between Buddhist and Western traditions, and how these differences continue to shape political practice in contemporary societies.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Buddhist Political Thought in Primary Texts

Primary Buddhist literature, particularly the Pāli Canon, provides the foundational ethical and political principles underlying Buddhist conceptions of governance and social order. The Vinaya Piṭaka outlines monastic discipline and ethical conduct, emphasizing intention (*cetana*) as the primary determinant of moral responsibility, a principle that has significant implications for Buddhist approaches to political authority, punishment, and violence (Horner, 1988; Bodhi, 2000). While primarily directed at monastics, the Vinaya functions as a normative ethical model for lay society, influencing broader political and legal cultures in Theravāda societies.

The Sutta Piṭaka further elaborates political and social ethics through discourses on kingship, justice, and social harmony. Texts such as the Cakkavatti-Sīhanāda Sutta present the ideal of the righteous ruler (*dhammarāja*), whose legitimacy derives from moral conduct, generosity, and protection of the people rather than coercive power (Walshe, 1995). These teachings emphasize nonviolence (*ahiṃsā*), compassion (*karuṇā*), and social responsibility as essential components of governance.

Classical commentarial literature, particularly the works attributed to Buddhaghosa, systematizes these ethical principles and clarifies distinctions in moral culpability related to violence, intention, and the moral status of victims (Buddhaghosa, 1976; Gethin, 2004). These interpretations significantly shaped Theravāda political ethics by allowing limited exceptions to nonviolence while maintaining ethical restraint as the governing norm.

Historical Buddhist Governance and the Aokan Paradigm

Historical chronicles and inscriptions provide insight into how Buddhist political ideals were institutionalized. Emperor Asoka Maurya represents the earliest and most influential example of Buddhist governance at the imperial level. Asoka's edicts articulate a model of rule grounded in Dharma, promoting religious tolerance, nonviolence, social welfare, and moral education, while retaining state authority and legal enforcement (Strong, 1989; Thapar, 1997).

The Mahāvamsa, the Sinhalese Buddhist chronicle, further illustrates the application and reinterpretation of Buddhist political ethics in legitimizing kingship and warfare in Sri Lanka (Geiger, 1993). While celebrating righteous kingship, the text introduces theological justifications for violence under exceptional circumstances, particularly in defense of Buddhism. Scholars have critically examined how such narratives contributed to Buddhist nationalism and political exclusivism in modern contexts (Tambiah, 1992; Bartholomeusz, 2002).

Western Political Theory and Concepts of Justice

Western political theory provides a contrasting framework centered on institutional design and procedural justice. John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* conceptualizes justice as fairness, emphasizing the basic structure of society as the primary subject of justice, including political

institutions, legal systems, and economic arrangements (Rawls, 1971). Rawls' approach prioritizes impartial rules, equal rights, and distributive justice over moral character or intention. Liberal democratic theory further emphasizes pluralism, constitutionalism, and peaceful conflict resolution as essential to political stability (Dahl, 1989; Habermas, 1996). Unlike Buddhist political thought, which privileges ethical cultivation, Western political models rely heavily on institutional checks and balances to regulate power and minimize harm. Comparative political theorists have noted that Western political science historically marginalized non-Western traditions by treating them as cultural or religious rather than political systems (Almond & Coleman, 1960; Gunnell, 2011). Recent scholarship has begun to address this gap by integrating Buddhist perspectives into global political theory debates (Cummiskey, 2014; Queen, 2005).

Contemporary Buddhist Politics and Engaged Buddhism

Modern Buddhist political engagement reflects diverse responses to colonialism, nationalism, and globalization. In Southeast Asia, the close relationship between the Sangha and the state has produced both legitimizing and constraining effects on political authority (Swearer, 1995). In countries such as Sri Lanka and Myanmar, Buddhist nationalism has been associated with exclusionary politics and religious violence (Tambiah, 1992; Jerryson, 2016). Conversely, Engaged Buddhism has emerged as a reformist movement integrating Buddhist ethics with Western democratic ideals, human rights, and environmental activism (Queen & King, 1996; Sivaraksa, 2002). This movement demonstrates the adaptability of Buddhist political thought and its capacity to engage constructively with modern political frameworks.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs a comparative normative political theory framework, integrating Buddhist ethical-political theory and Western liberal political theory to analyze differing conceptions of justice, authority, and governance.

1. Buddhist Ethical–Political Framework

The Buddhist framework is grounded in three interrelated principles:

- 1) Ethical intention (*cetana*) as the basis of moral and political responsibility
- 2) Non-harm (*ahiṃsā*) and compassion (*karuṇā*) as guiding norms for governance
- 3) Interdependence of ruler, Sangha, and people, exemplified in the Aokan model of kingship

Political legitimacy within this framework arises from moral conduct and the promotion of collective well-being rather than from procedural or electoral mechanisms alone (Harvey, 2000; Cummiskey, 2014).

2. Western Institutional–Normative Framework

The Western framework draws primarily on Rawlsian liberalism and democratic theory, emphasizing:

- 1) Justice as fairness and institutional neutrality (Rawls, 1971)
- 2) Rule of law and constitutionalism as safeguards against abuse of power (Dahl, 1989)

3) Peaceful conflict resolution and pluralism as foundations of democratic governance (Habermas, 1996)

In this framework, ethical outcomes are pursued through institutional arrangements rather than reliance on individual moral virtue.

3. Integrative Comparative Model

By placing these frameworks in dialogue, this study analyzes how ethical intention versus institutional structure, moral authority versus legal legitimacy, and compassion versus procedural justice shape political thought and practice across cultures. The comparative framework allows for critical evaluation of both traditions and highlights the potential contribution of Buddhist political ethics to contemporary political theory, particularly in debates on violence, justice, and moral governance.

Objectives

The objectives of this documentary research are as follows:

1. To analyze the foundational principles of Buddhist political thought, particularly within the Theravāda tradition, with emphasis on ethics, justice, governance, and nonviolence.
2. To examine Western political approaches, especially modern theories of justice and democracy, as articulated in political philosophy and political science literature.
3. To compare Buddhist and Western political perspectives on key issues such as state authority, legitimacy, violence, punishment, and public policy.

Research Methodology

This research employs a qualitative documentary research methodology (Documentary Study), focusing on the systematic analysis of primary and secondary textual sources relevant to Buddhist and Western political thought.

Research Design

The study adopts a comparative and interpretive approach, analyzing political concepts within their historical, philosophical, and ethical contexts. Rather than empirical fieldwork, the research relies on textual interpretation and theoretical comparison.

Data Sources

The documentary materials include:

1. Primary Buddhist texts, such as the Pāli Canon (Vinaya Piṭaka, Sutta Piṭaka, and related commentaries, including works attributed to Buddhaghosa).
2. Historical chronicles and inscriptions, particularly those related to Emperor Asoka and Theravāda political traditions (e.g., Mahāvamsa).

3. Western political theory texts, including works by John Rawls and other scholars of justice, democracy, and political ethics.

4. Secondary academic literature, including books, journal articles, and scholarly analyses on Buddhism, political theology, nationalism, Engaged Buddhism, and Southeast Asian political development.

Data Analysis

The collected documents are analyzed using thematic and comparative analysis, focusing on: Concepts of justice and legitimacy, Attitudes toward violence and punishment, The role of moral intention versus institutional structure, Relationships between religion, state, and society. Key themes are identified and compared across Buddhist and Western traditions to highlight similarities, differences, and underlying philosophical assumptions.

Scope and Limitations

The study concentrates primarily on Theravāda Buddhist contexts and selected Western political theories. It does not claim to represent all Buddhist or Western political traditions but aims to provide a focused and theoretically grounded comparison.

Results

This section presents the findings of the study in accordance with the three research objectives. The results are organized thematically to reflect (1) foundational principles of Theravāda Buddhist political thought, (2) dominant Western political approaches to justice and governance, and (3) comparative insights into state authority, legitimacy, violence, punishment, and public policy.

Foundational Principles of Theravāda Buddhist Political Thought

The analysis reveals that Theravāda Buddhist political thought is deeply grounded in ethical considerations, particularly the principles of nonviolence (*ahiṃsā*), compassion (*karuṇā*), moral intention (*cetana*), and the primacy of mental states over outcomes. Political authority, within this framework, is not understood as an autonomous or coercive force but as a moral instrument for the protection and promotion of the Dhamma, the Sangha, and the welfare of the people.

A central historical model underpinning Theravāda political philosophy is the Aśokan paradigm. Emperor Aśoka's reign marked a transformative moment in Buddhist political history, wherein sovereignty was explicitly linked to ethical governance. The findings indicate that Aśoka rejected conquest driven by national glory or material gain, instead advancing the notion of "conquest by Dhamma", emphasizing moral persuasion, religious tolerance, and compassion. However, this rejection of aggressive war did not equate to absolute pacifism. Aśoka retained

military forces, upheld punitive measures, and accepted defensive violence as a legitimate function of kingship when directed toward maintaining social order and protecting the Dhamma.

The Theravāda tradition thus supports a qualified nonviolence, where violence is condemned as intrinsically unwholesome (*akusala*), yet exceptions emerge based on intention, mental state, and the moral status of the affected parties. The Vinaya Pitaka demonstrates a graded system of moral culpability, in which punishment depends on intent, awareness, and consequences. This ethical logic extends into political governance, shaping Buddhist understandings of justice, punishment, and state responsibility.

Western Political Approaches to Justice and Governance

The findings show that Western political thought particularly modern theories of justice and democracy conceptualize politics primarily through institutional design, legal equality, and structural arrangements rather than moral intention. The work of John Rawls exemplifies this approach, emphasizing the basic structure of society as the foundation of justice. In this framework, justice is achieved through fair distribution of rights, duties, and resources, governed by impartial rules and institutions.

Western political science has expanded significantly since World War II, evolving into a highly specialized and fragmented discipline. This expansion has produced diverse theories of democracy, state legitimacy, and public policy, but has also resulted in conceptual fragmentation and normative uncertainty. Unlike Buddhist political thought, Western theories generally maintain a clear separation between ethics and politics, allowing for the legitimization of coercion, punishment, and warfare through legal-rational justifications such as national interest, sovereignty, or procedural legitimacy.

Democracy, as articulated in Western theory, is fundamentally based on peaceful conflict resolution, pluralism, and the institutionalization of dissent. Religious engagement with democracy in Western contexts often emerges when theological frameworks align with these principles. Where religious traditions adopt exclusionary or absolutist theologies, democratic outcomes are weakened, and political violence becomes more likely.

Comparative Perspectives on State Authority, Violence, and Punishment

Comparative analysis highlights significant contrasts between Buddhist and Western approaches to state authority and legitimacy. In Theravāda political thought, legitimacy arises from a tripartite relationship between the ruler, the Sangha, and the people. The Sangha plays a central role as a moral authority that validates sovereign power, while simultaneously depending on the state and the laity for protection and material support. This interdependence creates a moral check on political power that is largely absent in secular Western political systems.

In contrast, Western legitimacy is derived from constitutional authority, popular sovereignty, and legal procedures, rather than moral or spiritual endorsement. The state is viewed as an impersonal institution rather than a moral actor accountable to religious authority.

With respect to violence and punishment, the study finds that Buddhism employs a context-sensitive ethical calculus, where intention, mental condition, and the moral status of the victim significantly affect culpability. Canonical and commentarial sources demonstrate that killing is not judged uniformly; harm inflicted upon virtuous beings (such as Buddhas or arahants) is treated as the gravest offense, while violence against those deemed morally deficient may be viewed as less blameworthy. This ethical flexibility has historically enabled the justification of political violence under certain conditions, including the protection of Buddhism itself.

Western political systems, by contrast, generally emphasize intentionality and legality, but do not differentiate punishment based on the moral worth of victims. Violence is legitimized through legal frameworks such as just war theory, criminal law, and state sovereignty, rather than through assessments of spiritual virtue.

Public Policy and Development: Buddhist and Western Models in Practice

The case of Thailand illustrates how Buddhist and Western political-economic models intersect in practice. While Thailand has experienced rapid economic growth, modernization has largely followed a top-down, centralized development model inspired by Western modernization theory. This approach produced significant gains in GDP and public health but also deepened rural–urban inequality, weakened local participation, and marginalized indigenous cultural practices.

The findings suggest that these outcomes conflict with Buddhist ethical ideals emphasizing equitable distribution, community participation, and moral governance. In response, alternative movements such as Engaged Buddhism have emerged, integrating Buddhist principles with Western democratic values to advocate nonviolence, environmental protection, and participatory development.

Discussion

This study examined the relationship between Buddhist political thought—particularly within the Theravāda tradition and modern Western political theories of justice, governance, and political development, with special reference to Southeast Asian contexts. The findings demonstrate that Buddhist political ethics constitute neither a form of absolute pacifism nor a direct analogue to Western liberal democratic theory. Rather, Buddhist political thought represents a historically contingent, ethically layered, and context-sensitive system of governance that prioritizes moral intention, social harmony, and the preservation of the Dharma. The discussion below addresses the study’s findings in relation to the three research objectives.

Foundational Principles of Theravāda Buddhist Political Thought

In relation to the first objective, the findings reveal that Theravāda Buddhist political thought is grounded in ethical governance rather than institutional formalism. Core principles such as compassion (*karuṇā*), non-harm (*ahiṃsā*), moral restraint (*sīla*), and intention (*cetanā*)

function as the ethical foundations of political authority. Governance, from this perspective, is not merely a mechanism for maintaining order but a moral enterprise oriented toward the cultivation of social harmony and collective well-being.

The Asokan paradigm emerges as the most influential articulation of these principles. Emperor Asoka's concept of "conquest by Dharma" reframed sovereignty as a moral responsibility rather than an instrument of domination. His rejection of aggressive warfare, coupled with the continued maintenance of state authority, illustrates a form of Buddhist political realism that accepts the necessity of governance and coercive power while seeking to morally constrain them through compassion, restraint, and ethical intention (Strong, 1989; Thapar, 1997). This aligns with interpretations that view Asoka not merely as a historical ruler but as a foundational figure in Buddhist political theology (Strong, 1989).

Doctrinal analysis of Vinaya and Sutta literature further underscores the centrality of intention in moral evaluation. While violence is unequivocally classified as *akusala* (unwholesome), moral culpability is assessed through a nuanced consideration of mental states, contextual necessity, and karmic consequences (Horner, 1988; Bodhi, 2000). This ethical framework challenges simplified portrayals of Buddhism as advocating absolute nonviolence in all political contexts and instead reveals a graduated moral reasoning that accommodates the complexities of state authority and social protection.

Western Political Approaches to Justice and Democracy

Addressing the second objective, the study's findings highlight significant contrasts between Buddhist political ethics and dominant Western political theories, particularly modern liberal theories of justice and democracy. Western political philosophy, exemplified by Rawls's (1971) theory of justice, emphasizes individual rights, distributive fairness, and institutional arrangements as the foundation of a just society. Justice is primarily understood as fairness embedded within the basic structure of social institutions.

While Buddhist political thought shares Rawls's concern with the moral foundations of society, it diverges in its normative emphasis. Rather than centering on individual rights and procedural justice, Buddhist frameworks prioritize ethical leadership, karmic responsibility, and communal well-being. Justice, in this context, is less about legal equality and more about the moral quality of rulers and the intentions guiding political action. Consequently, political legitimacy derives not from popular sovereignty or constitutional arrangements alone but from adherence to ethical principles consistent with the Dharma.

These differences suggest that Buddhist political thought operates according to a virtue-ethical paradigm, in contrast to the rights-based and contractarian orientation of much Western political theory. Nonetheless, the study finds points of convergence, particularly in contemporary interpretations that seek to reconcile ethical governance with democratic participation.

Comparative Perspectives on Authority, Violence, and Public Policy

With respect to the third objective, the comparative analysis reveals both complementarities and tensions between Buddhist and Western political perspectives on state authority, legitimacy, violence, punishment, and public policy. Historically, Buddhist political traditions have permitted limited exceptions to the prohibition of violence when such actions are framed as necessary for preserving the Dharma or maintaining social stability. The Mahāvamsa account of King Duṭṭhagāmaṇī exemplifies this logic, attributing moral weight unevenly based on religious virtue and intention (Geiger, 1993).

While such narratives have functioned to legitimize state violence, they also expose the ethical risks inherent in religiously grounded political authority. These risks are evident in modern manifestations of Buddhist nationalism in Sri Lanka and Myanmar, where religious identity has been mobilized to justify exclusion, coercion, and violence (Bartholomeusz, 2002; Jerryson, 2016). These cases underscore the potential for dehumanization when moral authority is monopolized by religious or ideological claims.

At the same time, the emergence of Engaged Buddhism represents a significant reinterpretation of Buddhist political ethics in dialogue with Western democratic ideals. Engaged Buddhist movements integrate traditional values such as compassion, mindfulness, and non-harm with modern political concepts including human rights, participatory governance, and environmental justice (Queen, 2005; Swearer, 1995). The findings suggest that Engaged Buddhism offers a viable normative alternative to both authoritarian Buddhist nationalism and purely secular, technocratic models of governance.

The Thai case further illustrates the limitations of development strategies divorced from ethical and participatory frameworks. Despite sustained economic growth, Thailand continues to experience pronounced inequalities between urban and rural populations. This development trajectory highlights the shortcomings of technocratic governance lacking moral accountability and social inclusion (Baker & Phongpaichit, 2005; Darlington, 2000). Buddhist ethical critiques of materialism and attachment thus remain highly relevant, offering normative resources for more inclusive and participatory approaches to public policy.

Summary

Overall, the findings affirm that Buddhist political thought provides a distinctive ethical framework that both challenges and complements Western political theories. By emphasizing moral intention, ethical leadership, and communal well-being, Theravāda Buddhism contributes valuable insights into debates on justice, governance, and political legitimacy in both traditional and modern contexts.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Buddhist political thought, particularly within the Theravāda tradition, offers a complex and historically grounded framework for understanding justice, governance, and social order. Rooted in the Asokan paradigm, Buddhist political ethics emphasize moral leadership, intentionality, and the interdependence of ruler, Sangha, and populace. While Buddhism unequivocally condemns violence at the ethical level, its political application reveals contextual flexibility shaped by concerns for social stability and the preservation of the Dharma.

In comparison with Western political theory, especially Rawlsian justice, Buddhist political thought diverges in its prioritization of moral intention over institutional neutrality and individual rights. Nevertheless, both traditions converge on the importance of structural justice and ethical governance. The study further concludes that modern reinterpretations, such as Engaged Buddhism, offer promising pathways for integrating Buddhist ethics with democratic ideals and contemporary political challenges. Overall, the findings affirm that Buddhism is neither inherently authoritarian nor inherently democratic; rather, its political expression depends on historical context, interpretive authority, and ethical orientation.

Recommendations**Body of Knowledge**

This research contributes to Buddhist studies and political theory by: Clarifying the ethical logic underlying Buddhist approaches to violence and governance. Demonstrating the historical continuity between Asokan kingship and contemporary Theravāda political cultures. Bridging Buddhist political ethics with Western theories of justice, highlighting both convergences and tensions. Providing a critical framework for understanding Buddhist nationalism and Engaged Buddhism as competing political theologies.

Practical and Policy Implications

1. Governance should prioritize ethical leadership, restraint in the use of coercive power, and social compassion.
2. The Sangha can function as a moral check on political authority, provided it maintains ethical integrity and independence.
3. Development policies should incorporate participatory and community-based approaches consistent with Buddhist ethical values.

For Future Research

1. Conduct comparative analyses between Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna political ethics.

2. Explore empirical case studies of Engaged Buddhist movements and their policy impact.
3. Investigate the role of digital media in transforming Buddhist political discourse.
4. Examine postcolonial reinterpretations of Buddhist political theology in global contexts.

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