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# Violence and (Non-)resistance: Buddhist *Ahiṃsā* and its Existential Aporias

Martin Kovan\*

## Abstract

This essay considers a paradigmatic example in Buddhist ethics of the injunction (in the five precepts and five heinous crimes) against killing. It also considers Western ethical concerns in the post-phenomenological thinking of Derrida and Levinas, particularly the latter's "ethics of responsibility." It goes on to analyze in-depth an episode drawn from Alan Clements's experience in 1990 as a Buddhist non-violent, non-combatant in war-torn Burma. It explores Clements's ethical predicament as he faced an imminent need to act, perhaps even kill and thereby repudiate his Buddhist inculcation. It finds a wealth of common (yet divergent) ground in Levinasian and Mahāyāna ethics, a site pregnant for Buddhist-ethical self-interrogation.

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## I

In his book *Instinct for Freedom* the contemporary dharma activist Alan Clements, a former Buddhist monk in the Burmese tradition of Mahasi Sayadaw, presents a dramatic incident from 1990 when he was with pro-democracy resistance fighters in the Burmese jungle following the military's re-assumption of power.<sup>1</sup> This real event has three protagonists: Clements himself, a (non-violent Buddhist) non-combatant observer in solidarity with the fugitive resistance-fighters living rough in the jungle; a Burmese former monk turned combatant resistance fighter called Maung Win (an "old friend" of Clements's from his years in the monastery); and a Burmese military soldier captured in a firefight, whom Clements calls the "enemy soldier" (and will be so designated here), and whom Clements (and the reader) discover to be a former Buddhist monk as well.<sup>2</sup>

The captured soldier is also thought to be the one who has fired the bullet that has just killed Maung Win in an ambush moments before. Just moments before that Maung Win and Clements have had a verbal altercation, in which the resistance fighter has challenged Clements's unwillingness to engage in battle. He shouts in Clements's face: "I'm sick of your judgment. We live under dictatorship. Do you know what that means? Haven't you seen enough?" (Clements 23). He has, as he reports, indeed seen "Villages ... smouldering, mortared into charred ruins. And among the ruins, massacres—My Lai-style. Severed heads, still blindfolded. Even the dogs had been killed, blackened to a crisp ... wailing mothers running, exhausted and starving, clutching their children. Some of the children were dead, mangled unrecognizably by land mines disguised as toys. I heard tales of brutal gang rapes by soldiers that went on for days and months" (21).

Has Clements seen enough? Unquestionably, Maung Win has, even where Aung San Suu Kyi, the national leader for democracy and

freedom in Burma, is “advocating non-violence as the best means of political change” (22). Maung Win accuses Clements of “idealism”; he points out that Clements has complete freedom inasmuch as with his U.S. passport “stuffed in his pocket” he can “leave anytime, and go sit in retreat—as if you know what freedom means” (23). Clements is left speechless, aware that despite his Buddhist pre-suppositions he has not thought out the full implications of the situation. Maung Win believes he does not have any other choice: “I couldn’t justify sitting in meditation while my brothers and sisters were being killed. Our teachers taught us to love even those who hate us. But try to love with a gun pointed at your head. After they tortured my brother, I disrobed and joined the resistance. My heart is with my people, not with my enlightenment” (23).

Clements attempts a riposte (“with a small shred of defiance”) by suggesting that “weapons and war” are not the only means to a possible resolution. Indeed, from his perspective as a Buddhist, they are not means at all. But Maung Win responds with what seems a definitive argument from the heart. He aggressively pushes Clements with his AK-47, shouting, “What if it was your girlfriend who was raped? What would you do? Sit back and be mindful? Become a dead Buddhist?” (23).

Clements, it appears, has no ready answer to this appeal. Both hisaporetic uncertainty, as well as Maung Win’s unequivocal commitment to human freedom at any cost, even the death of another by his hand, present difficult and unsettling challenges to Buddhist ethics, and require some elucidation. Clearly Clements and Maung Win stand in opposition despite the powerful justification each finds for their position. That is, despite the ‘rightness’ of each position, in one sense, they arrive at absolute disagreement, and this is more than a contradiction, it is an existential aporia. This aporia has its perplexing human side, too: they are also good friends, and still more, fellow Buddhists. How does such an ethical paradox occur, particularly in the Buddhist context?

The question that ultimately must be answered, from the normative position of Buddhist ethics, is: what is the right course of action? It will be seen, also from the standpoint of Buddhist ethics, that what an individual should do cannot easily be defined because each individual's unique karmic relation to the event at hand precedes any normative ethical claim. On the other hand, in this case each individual clearly must know both what their own karma demands and what a general Buddhist position should be, insofar as both are not only Buddhists but former monks of the tradition. It is incumbent on them to have access to a satisfying response, even where their destinies in the circumstance prove to have such radically different resolution.

## II

In a discussion of “the decision” in the context of Jacques Derrida's deconstruction of modern ethics, the American philosopher John Caputo offers an interpretation of a “genealogy” within European philosophy that bears a striking congruence to some elements of contemporary Buddhist understanding in the West. Caputo writes:

I want to underline a line that runs from Kierkegaard to Levinas to Derrida, which opens another line on deconstruction ... decision as a “leap” in an “instant of madness,” as an aporia (“paradox”) which passes through an “ordeal” of undecidability, which turns on the exception that the “single individual” makes of itself from universality, which requires the “suspension” of the universal, and which cannot wait for the System to be completed—what does this remind us of more than *Fear and Trembling*?<sup>3</sup> (Derrida and Caputo 139)

Kierkegaard's text might be seen as ancestral to the field of post-secular ethics—that ambiguous yet paradoxically determinative terrain

between ethics and religion, belief and faith, and knowledge and experience. I suggest that it is, despite a theoretical ambiguity, also “determinative” insofar as experience itself presents moral agents with unequivocal demands to act, or not act, on the bases of often non-conceptualized processes. As Caputo writes of the Derridean “decision,” a just decision “would always demand action in a ‘finite moment of urgency and precipitation’, and would always be ‘structurally finite’, that is, compelled to put an end (*finis*) to the deliberation in a moment of non-knowledge” (138).

The agnostic Buddhist Stephen Batchelor, for example, might be seen as rehearsing Kierkegaardian motifs in his own insistence on epistemic uncertainty, but moreso his distinction between knowledge and the singular, experiential instantiation of it. Caputo could speak accurately for Batchelor in his gloss on the Danish philosopher, in which “we act in ‘the night of non-knowledge and non-rule’ ... not because we have simply jettisoned all rules and thrown reason to the winds but because we are forced to reinvent the rule under the pressure of the present situation” (138).<sup>4</sup> The Zen Buddhist philosopher David Loy similarly focuses on a total social-historical contextualization of *sūnyatā*, in which all human projects of self-reification, of beliefs and ideas as much as persons and things, more or less unsuccessfully evade the primordial truth of the self empty of inherent existence. If the self can never be finally determined, for Loy and Buddhism, precisely because of its actual lack of self-nature, then much like the difficult status of the “decision” in Caputo and Derrida (and before them Kierkegaard), a dynamically real indeterminacy enters into the experience of both self and “its” decision-making.<sup>5</sup>

Derrida, as well as his colleague the twentieth-century phenomenological ethicist Emmanuel Levinas, indicate such indeterminacy, and the ontological “space” from which it might be said to emerge, as the *tout autre*, or “wholly Other” in which unprecedented forms have their

provenance: they cannot be determined until they have achieved actualization in conceptual, linguistic, aesthetic or ethical lived-experience. (Derrida's *différance* is used to "trans-conceptually" signify that not-determinable conceptual space in which signification is made possible at all.) The "wholly Other" can as equally for both these thinkers be actualized in a person, an event, a religious revelation, or the messianic person who (a Christ, a Buddha, a Mohammed) personifies it.

A parallel description might be given for the sense in which Buddhist forms, including its ethical ones, dissolve in an ontological access to *śūnyatā*. It is by virtue of such lack of inherent existence that potentially not-yet-determined apprehensions of "Buddhist" *prajñā* (or the wisdom that perceives such emptiness) also have their ontological matrix for appearance in the phenomenal realm. Buddhism, especially in its Zen forms, is rich with examples of the ways in which the realization of emptiness radically disrupts, in apparent paradox, the field of dualistic conceptualization which is grounded in the frequent opposition between the agent-subject, and its contested, ambivalent, often uncontrollable objects-ends.

The *tout autre* (or *différance*) and *śūnyatā* are not strictly equivalent, but what is irreducible and singular about such not-yet-formalized "meta-forms" is their proper emergence from an unconditioned indetermination of all regulative ideas and practices. Alan Clements (in still another turn of the discourse) like Levinas instantiates among other things "this difference, that in deconstruction this entire aporetic [see indented quoted above] turns not on *my* 'eternal happiness' but on the other, on 'the other's coming as the singularity that is always coming'" (Derrida and Caputo 139).

Of course such an emphasis on the primacy of the Other, and the ethical, is entirely central to the Mahāyāna, and for Mahāyānists it represents precisely the doctrinal shift that distinguishes it from the

earlier Hīnayāna Buddhist school. In this regard Clements is far from unique. What does distinguish him unusually within any Buddhist context is what Caputo finds in Derrida's reading of Kierkegaard and Levinas in which "the "obligation to the wholly other," which is what Levinas means by "ethics" prior to religion, is just what de Silentio means by the "religious" while making a teleological suspension of ethics" (139).

In other words, like Levinas, Clements regards an ethics of the intersubjective—the recognition of "inherent interrelatedness,"—as primary to religion; and like Kierkegaard (or in this case his pseudonymous de Silentio), Clements recognizes—in experience, and through the testing of extreme circumstance—such an ethical relation as *already sacred*, and therefore as being foundational to any rationalizable religious or ethical frame to which it might be subsumed or appended. This is unusual in the Buddhist context because the ontological status of Buddhism *qua* religion, and its ethics as an extension of that religion, is not generally subverted by Buddhists who identify both as foundational to their status as an ethical agent. Clements writes

The Dharma life is born out of realizing our essential interrelatedness: we cannot live without each other. This means feeling more than just one's own self-interest, or the interests of one's family. Defining ourselves as tribes and nations is in large part why we are teetering on self-extinction. We must really understand our inherent inseparableness. (Clements 4-5)

This is a call to the recognition of a universal intersubjectivity that lies at the heart of Buddhism, in particular the Mahāyāna, and with an emphasis that rarely appears outside the Mahāyāna context. Levinas, however, quite independently shares the same concern with the neglect of intersubjectivity as an ontological foundation, and by subjecting such neglect to a thorough metaphysical critique signifies to what degree its bases for self and its solipsism lead almost necessarily to alienation. For



Levinas and Clements (and Buddhism itself) such alienation is most pervasive between selves and the world they reduce to themselves, and their own version/s of knowledge. Levinas makes the bold rhetorical move of extending such ontological alienation to the origins of human violence itself. He writes: “Violence is to be found in any action in which one acts as if one were alone to act: as if the rest of the universe were there only to receive the action. Violence is consequently also any action which we endure without at every point collaborating in it” (*Difficult Freedom* 6).

It is another version of the hypostatization of self that Buddhist metaphysics has long been at pains to refute; denying intersubjectivity implies a self illusorily distinct from the world which it objectifies in a reductionism of “being,” or “the Same,” and appropriates to its own (Same) ends. B. C. Hutchens comments that “Levinas’s work is rich with descriptions of the hypostatization of self ... the self desires definition and stability” (43-44); the hypostasized self “never completely possesses itself. Hypostasis is a process without attainable end because self fails to coincide with itself ... It never attains fulfillment or completion in its hypostatic struggle to be a fully self-determined being” (45). The parallel between Levinas here, and what has been adumbrated of Loy’s Buddhist thought, above, is clear.

The only deliverance from the inevitable “pride and dominating imperialism characteristic of” (Levinas, *Otherwise* 110) such a totalizing, and substantial, self is “not through the freedom that it enables, but through responsibility” (Hutchens 41). For Levinas, freedom of and for the self is ontologically subsequent to and dependent on a responsibility to and for the self and the other at once; he even claims that freedom would be impossible without a thoroughgoing recognition of universal ethical responsibility. He denies that there can be an autonomous and rationally self-determined agent who acts from deontological categories

that the self freely chooses to endorse. For Levinas, there can be no such choice because the obligation to and for the other being is *indeclinable*. He writes:

The epiphany of the Absolutely Other [*tout autre*] is a face by which the Other challenges and commands me through his nakedness, through his destitution ... The I is not simply conscious of this necessity to respond, as if it were a matter of an obligation or a duty about which a decision could be made; rather the I is, by its very position, responsibility through and through ... Hence, to be I signifies not being able to escape responsibility (Levinas *Basic* 17).

In what follows I will return to Clements's predicament in the war-zone of Myanmar to consider a paradigmatic example of the nature of such responsibility and will reflect on why and how it brings to contemporary (trans-)Buddhist enquiry a possibly neglected dimension of existential immediacy. Taking both Buddhist-ethical as well as Levinasian grounds into account, such an analysis allows for seeing how Clements engages *the* fundamental Buddhist precept, that of non-killing, and discovers in it the unavoidable imperative of the self and its autonomy and the paradoxical responsibility in which they are grounded for both Buddhist and Levinasian ethics.

### III

All three protagonists (described in Part I, above) are uniquely situated in the conflict and none of them are fully aligned in their political or ethical affiliations. The *single thing* they share is that they have been Buddhist monks, which means that they have been educated to some degree about the Buddhist ethical prescription of non-violence, the first of the

fundamental five precepts of Buddhist ethics for monastics and laity alike. Otherwise, the situation is complex:

- Two are combatants; Clements is not. The combatants are Burmese; Clements is American. (As Maung Win observes, Clements has a passport with which he can leave or seek asylum at any time.)
- Maung Win has apparently killed others in the course of the armed resistance; Clements has not; the enemy soldier has, apparently, just killed Maung Win prior to being captured.
- Maung Win has killed in the name of freedom—of the people, for the nation, in the name of peace. His motivation is ostensibly positive and life-affirming. The enemy soldier, as Clements’s description of the abuse of the people by the Burmese military implies, has killed from the lust for power, sheer aggression and an unbridled craving for domination of the bodies and minds of innocent people. In other words, both Maung Win and the “enemy soldier” have killed their fellow Burmese, but their motivations have come from diametrically opposed axiological principles.
- Clements shares Maung Win’s principles of freedom but he *does not* share Maung Win’s view of the best means with which to achieve their shared ends.

These are some of the basic underlying determinants of the ethical conflict these three protagonists share. That is, they share the same conflict, but they approach it in radically different ways. In Buddhist metaphysics, the emptiness of inherent existence (*śūnyatā*) of things and the dependent-arising (*pratītyasamutpāda*) of events means that the ethical relations pertaining also to the dynamics within such events do not

have fixed reference to absolute prescriptions. Though actions have effects, there are no essential qualities within either; a particular action will not always have the same effect. The effect will rather be determined by the motivation giving rise to the action.

It is the case here that all three protagonists can refer to the general structure of Buddhist ethical prescriptions: the five precepts (*sikṣāpada*);<sup>6</sup> the admonition against the five heinous crimes or “deadly sins” (*ānantarya*);<sup>7</sup> and others included in the Noble Eightfold Path (*aṣṭāṅgikamārga*).<sup>8</sup> However, it is *not* the case that the three protagonists will have a univocal interpretation of these prescriptions, either theoretically or in practice. Their interpretations will be determined by their individual karmic volitions (*cetanā*), by the kind of perception each has of the singular moment in which they find themselves, and by contingent factors such as conditioned emotions—whether (for example) anger might be more immediately present because an injustice has just been witnessed. Even trivial (yet entirely influential) causes might have arisen such as “The rats have been eating the flour again,” or “It has been raining too long and it is getting to me,” or even just sheer impatience or discomfort or exhaustion. Due to having varying psychological makeup, there are many reasons why people do things, and although some of them might be seen to be comparatively trivial, that does not lessen their causal efficacy.

Buddhist ethics tends generally not to account for such contingent factors. Of course, patience (*kṣānti*), one of the Six Pāramitās, should be applied in all cases, but it appears that there may be cases when patience loses some relevance. Maung Win has lost patience in his struggle for his people’s freedom. Clements supposes he can apply the full battery of Buddhist ethical prescriptions against this worst of human foes, the rampaging Burmese military, but he discovers that “even compassion

felt like a glib cliché—a dogmatic shield that had nothing to do with my true feelings. Everything I thought and said reeked of rhetoric” (22).

We could well ask Clements what are his “true feelings” at this juncture. He is clearly conflicted; he is the Everyman with whom most of his readers could identify. He means well in re-entering Burma at some risk to his personal safety, but there is an admitted disengagement in these words as well—Clements would like to help, but is unsure to what degree his solidarity really helps in the immediate conflict he witnesses. Maung Win holds out the ethical gauntlet as the Resistance prepares to go out and “find the enemy soldiers before they find us”: “He turned to me and asked solemnly: ‘Coming or staying?’” (23).

The question has multiple resonances: beyond risking life and limb, is Clements willing to leave the relative security of his Buddhist ethical formation, to cross the line into an ethical no-man’s land where his spiritual destiny is at stake, to potentially engage and confront the dimension of his own karmic provenance to discover what it might, wholly unexpectedly, hold in store for him? Might he find that it is his destiny to kill for those he loves? Does he love the “enemy soldiers,” Burmese and fellow-Buddhist, enough to take their lives from them, for the sake of a greater peace? Can Clements go that far, and then be able to justify it not merely on a Buddhist ethical level, but any level at all?

For Levinas, as Hutchens suggests below, the onus of responsibility is clear, even where it is uncertain just how it would come to be manifested *in situ*: “Whenever genocide occurs, one has a stake in accountability even though one is neither performing it nor even threatened by it. One is responsible for the suffering and death of the victims and responsible for the perpetrators of the atrocities, even those executed against us” (Hutchens 24). Levinas is relatively unhelpful here, even where he makes his position clear. Even if such responsibility is granted (as for example a Mahāyānist, or Clements himself, might be

willing to do), what is still unclear is how this responsibility takes action, the ways in which it is compelled to manifest in any given case.

Clements reports that during his vigil keeping armed guard over the captured enemy soldier who has just apparently killed his friend Maung Win, he “felt splintered with rage and disoriented with a terrible sorrow. My mind oscillated between two thoughts: ‘How easy it would be to shoot this guy’ and ‘Am I prepared to die?’ Both thoughts were repulsive” (24). What is worse is that the enemy soldier makes explicit for Clements his real dilemma by asking: “Would you tell me ... why are you risking your life for my country?” (24).

#### IV

One response to the question of the enemy soldier could simply be that Clements is not, as a non-combatant, authentically risking his life at all: he is not taking arms and going out to the border-raids where he might be killed in crossfire. He is certainly courageous, but nevertheless is in a position of safety in comparison to his combatant colleagues. Is he there, then, to serve his own pride, to bolster his Buddhist self-righteousness by “fighting” for the right side? Is he there essentially out of self-interest? If so, would not that effectively invalidate his ostensible reasons for joining the struggle? Is this potentially what Maung Win, with his sense of literal self-sacrifice, seeing no choice anymore but to pursue a violent course, registers in Clements’s position and justifiably resents? (Maung Win could, in fact, have chosen to stay in the monastery as a non-violent resistor, and could, perhaps, have lived to see the “Saffron Revolution” of August 2007.)

Does Clements confront in the circumstance the subconscious shadow of selfishness to his own conscious sense of (Buddhist) “right action,” and does it, as psychoanalysis has long claimed, haunt him with

the recognition of motivations of which he has rarely, if ever, been aware? Does the question of the enemy soldier itself register the same psychological insight as Maung Win's: namely that Clements might be there not so much on false pretences, but on ignorant or naïve ones, that despite all the good will with which he has entered the country, he does not know or understand the deepest reasons why he is there. In this case, his intention in terms of serving the Burmese people is compromised because he is actually more pre-occupied with his own spiritual destiny, his self-representation as a good, self-sacrificing man and Buddhist, and, concretely speaking, his current confusion.

After all, he cannot respond easily to either Maung Win or the captured enemy soldier who, in a moment of irony, he has himself been commanded by the resistance members to guard. So he questions his own motivation: "His question forced me to think the unthinkable. Why was I sitting in a free-fire zone with a pistol pointed at this soldier's head? Was I crazy? There was something truly absurd about it all" (Clements 24). Where Maung Win and his enemy have made unambiguous existential choices, Clements is the Hamlet in the drama, required to act but apparently paralyzed; as he says, the situation is for him absurd.

But it is not absurd for Maung Win, nor presumably for his enemy, who knows he could be killed at any moment. For Maung Win, the existential situation has in its stakes the freedom of his people, even of his enemies, who in the aftermath of war could potentially be reconciled to their fellow Burmese and join in the reconstruction of peace for the country. These are serious stakes, as Maung Win well knows, and hence his frustration with Clements. Despite this, however, Clements's sense of absurdity deserves some consideration: if it is absurd for him, is it also *essentially* absurd that, ethically speaking, Maung Win's peace should have to be won through such means?

Certainly for Buddhism, while Maung Win's motivation is admirable, the means to its achievement are wholly misguided—which is of course the guiding insight of Aung San Suu Kyi (and with her Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., His Holiness the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, or A. T. Ariyaratne of Sri Lanka—all of whom maintained or maintain Buddhist-, Hindu-, or Christian-inspired *ahiṃsā* with varying degrees of political success). In this sense, Clements is right: using violence to end violence is both contradictory and ultimately futile because it perpetuates the human tendency to assume that force is the only effective measure against force itself. It is a defeatism that cannot move, enclosing itself in a self-perpetuating circle of ultimate stasis. It goes nowhere when there could, for Clements's and Buddhism's purpose, be other directions to go.

Clements is in a difficult position because he recognizes the absurdity for *both* true and confused reasons: his spiritual instinct for non-violence is correct, but he has not interrogated its deepest motivations. He is not to be blamed for this; most people would be struggling to determine what is “right action” in such a case. The extremity of the context has brought him face to face with his—and our—ignorance. While compassion might “feel like a glib cliché,” this is also exactly the context in which he (and we) might apply it most intelligently.

I have already alluded to the way in which for Buddhism various kinds of ethical provenance are largely determined by the karmic “seeds” that allow for certain phenomenal events to occur at all. Certainly the phenomenal event of Clements pointing a loaded gun at another human being, who, he soon discovers, is also a fellow Buddhist and former monk, is by any account a complicated and curious karmic circumstance. It is not by any means certain what could, or is likely to, happen in this loaded situation: Clements could be attacked himself, or accidentally use the gun in his hand, even stumble into the fire and die, ignominious, experiencing a fool's death with all of his deepest Buddhist aspirations



flailing in the ethical miasma of indeterminacy, confusion, desperation, uncertainty, and sheer human clumsiness. (I've drawn attention to such contingencies as often being responsible for irreversible conclusions, and they would be no less applicable to the present case.)

Clements's reflections at this pregnant moment are also interesting by virtue of their *emphasis*: he considers, *contra* his Buddhist inculcation, how easy it would be to kill the enemy, and whether he himself is prepared to die, rather than whether he is prepared, as a Buddhist, to kill another being and accept karmic responsibility for the action. If it would "be easy" to kill "the enemy," surely it would not be easy for the further evolution of his Buddhist acquisition of wisdom and positive merit: in those terms, it would be positively hard, to rationalize, spiritually justify and then, in the long-term (the attainment of which itself is impossible to pre-empt) achieve the purification of such action. Clements would also be maiming, if not killing, the very possibility of his own liberation. Yet he concludes: "As time in the jungle expanded my reality, I was to learn that there comes a time when spiritual aspirations and pacifist ideals cease to have meaning. One is willing to kill for freedom" (22).

In the end, Clements agreed with Muang Win; there are times when freedom demands ignoring the prohibition of violence that is a fundamental Buddhist principle. This claim is among the very strongest that can be made in Buddhist, or any, ethics. But is it true? Can there be conditions where pacifist ideals "cease to have meaning," and can we find Buddhist precedent for them? One precedent we can look to for illuminating the question, is to Gautama Buddha himself, who apparently in his prior incarnations as a bodhisattva, was like Clements also willing to kill for freedom. But unlike Clements, he actually did so, as we will discuss below.

## V

The dichotomy registered here between what Clements knows to be ethically right—the position of universal non-violence—and the aporia it can and does run up against in extreme circumstance, epitomized in war and violence generally, is built into Buddhist ethics itself. (He can then be indulged on a second count as well. Precisely what allows Clements to “know” his position to be right is itself a good question for Buddhist epistemology no less than Buddhist ethics.) Where the Buddhist prescriptions for action (such as those passingly noted in Part III above) present relatively commonsense adumbrations for wholesome (*kusala*) action that most could agree upon, it is not at all clear how they apply in cases such as this.

There needs to be another criterion for determining value claims than an ethical prescription which is universally normative. In an “ethics of emptiness,” we can consider how such a non-normative Buddhist ethics might play out. If the individual acts in an ontologically essenceless world, her perceptions of the event, her reactions or conclusions to it, and how she should then behave in it will then occur in an a-causal context. That is, causes and their effects, being essenceless also, are only causal appearances relative to her perception. (Hence their non-normativity: the reality of a situation is not just relative to individual perception, it is actually constituted by it. Normativity can only properly function in a consensual perception of “reality,” its apparent conditions and its “rights” and “wrongs”, as it conventionally does in the moral world as we know it. Failing such consensuality, and the reification of causal terms it ontologically requires, normativity cannot function.)

While an ethics-in-emptiness cannot be normatively determined because it is engendered by the singular, essenceless agent, insofar as emptiness itself has, for Buddhism, universal pervasion, then any action made or undergone by that agent *also* transcends any really-existing

unique agent, is the action of a singularity expressing a selfless karmic function. I act, in a very particular way unique to my karmic conditions, yet I do so in an ontological context transcendent to any inherently-existing self. I *think* I act, yet my actions have universal pervasion in ontological emptiness. (Jacques Derrida, too, recognizes the “singular universality”—as an equivalence of the singular *in* the universal and vice versa—of the “messianic” recognition of the ethically “impossible,” and its actual irruption in human action. Derrida and Caputo 22)

This is not to suggest that for apparently-existing selves, such as for all moral subjects who make apparently objective ethical decisions, the traditional Buddhist-ethical frame (as adumbrated in Part III above) is not wholly appropriate. Emptiness, as Candrakīrti and a host of Buddhist canonical commentary has made clear, does and should not compromise the meaning of right action for such apparent moral agents. The status of the relative value of such ethics is thus not in question. The status of the agent who upholds such ethics in absolute terms, however, is. From the side of emptiness, such an “objective” process is a misnomer because there is no actually-existing “subject” for whom ethical injunctions are finally true (or false). They are, like all causal phenomena or distinctions of value, empty of inherent value, substance or efficacy. They are karmic skillful means, producing (ideally) good effects. Any signification they possess remains on a level relative to the samsaric reification of self and its presumed agency in an infinite and dependently-arising universe.

This perhaps begins to explain why and how, as related in the *Mahāyāna Upāya-kauśalya Sūtra*, in one of his past lives the future Buddha takes the life of a man who, on a ship whereon they jointly travel, secretly intends to murder all five hundred travelers before robbing them (other readings have 999 travelers, others fewer). The bodhisattva has enough developed clairvoyance to know the thief-murderer’s intentions,

and much like Maung Win in the Burmese jungle, decides that for the greater good and protection of five hundred innocent people he will kill the wrong-doer himself, knowingly and willingly accruing the negative karma of the action to his karmic account.

Because the mass-murder has not yet been committed, the bodhisattva must be very confident of his clairvoyant claims. It is paradoxical because should the future Buddha be right, he is unable to confirm it by seeing the mass-murder played out before him; if wrong, he will never know that either by being able to witness the event he foresees *not* occurring. He presumably also knows his karmic credit is unusually good, as a bodhisattva as well as in his confidence in killing the would-be murderer first and so taking such negative karma upon his spiritual account. (Along with the case of the well-meaning Clements, we might similarly question the motivation of the bodhisattva and ask whether he acts out of self-aggrandizement, a desire to serve the spiritual pride of the self which, while highly developed is, *qua* bodhisattva, technically not yet enlightened—pride itself being one of the last, and most intractable, obstacles to its final attainment.)<sup>9</sup>

The future Buddha's status here as a bodhisattva, and therefore the altruistic motivation and rightness of action he is compelled to can only be taken on trust; failing such trust, however, the parable is riddled with ambiguity. Trusting to it as an illustration of right action also entirely depends on an understanding and acceptance of the clairvoyance and view of *śūnyatā* which more centrally defines the achievement of a bodhisattva and the a-causal ontology in which he acts. Without this view, it is difficult to find justification for the future Buddha's murderous action. Because, simply, on the "mundane" level of our ordinary thinking, the future Buddha may have been wrong. (This too is paradoxical: he would not presumably *be* the future Buddha if he was wrong; but then if he was right, those of us who are *not* future Buddhas, or cannot deter-

mine the question either way, can take little guidance from his example in this parable. In which sense then do we read its message?) It is for a similar reason that capital punishment is decried by many as a potentially disastrous form of retributive punishment (apart from its inhumanity), given the ever-present possibility of being mistaken.

Despite the possibility of being mistaken, Maung Win and the future Buddha *act*, whereas Hamletesque and self-divided, Clements sweats in the jungle heat, shakily holding a pistol to a stranger's head, and "has no idea" why or what he is doing there. Maung Win and the bodhisattva, apparently, *do* know, given their common cause in the universal value of abiding peace (despite, again paradoxically, their wholly violent course in attempting to achieve it). Knowing, and ethically choosing *why* one acts is what, for Buddhist ethical *motivation*—which itself determines the currency exchange rate of all karmic transactions—makes all the difference. We might then hypothetically ask at this point:

- Does Maung Win *know* he similarly has enough karmic credit to engage in murder, and thus act undetermined by the wholly ignorant causes that appear to motivate his enemy and *his* apparent quest for peace in Myanmar?
- Does the enemy soldier also *know* he is only playing the "empty" role of the "enemy soldier" because his karma demands it, or is he deeply ignorant, indoctrinated by those still more ignorant than himself in a tragedy in which he is merely a doomed, nameless extra? (His namelessness in Clements's narrative is not coincidental: in this story it signals his abject isolation from either frame shared by the other two.)
- Does "to know" in this case mean to know the Buddhist *selflessness* of self and action, and can either of these combatants, as well as any three of these protagonists in this samsaric yet empty hologram of horror,

really claim a selflessness that would illumine their respective karmic apportioning in it?

Clements, at least, can be seen by his own testimony to be caught between a relatively abstract, yet wholly compelling, faith in non-violence, and the existential *kōan* of circumstance which shows him innocent people being senselessly slaughtered. He is disturbed by what it means to keep fidelity to the former as well as passively witness the latter without otherwise engaging in conflict itself.

Maung Win is bravely human and selfless in his self-sacrifice, but also presumably, as a former Buddhist monk, is aware of the nature of Buddhist *anattā* and perhaps has even realized it to a high degree (Clements, if he knows, which is unlikely, does or cannot tell us). The resistance fighter might even be a bodhisattva, a Buddha-to-be, who like the future Gautama wears the wounds of negative karma, willing to atone for it in subsequent purifications. Although he has left the monastery, Maung Win might, as he leaves the tent with AK-47 raised in his impatience with Clements, be walking out into a profound episode of his career towards actual Buddhist enlightenment. He may know, following his training as a monk, that such action is his spiritual imperative; hence, his action may be fearless and unequivocal, motivated only for one end—peace between his own (Buddhist) brethren.

Such a possibility might ask the difficult question: is this why such warfare occurs? Does such irredeemable conflict serve a greater spiritual end? Does it serve as the epic fiction in which to elaborate, act out and engender great spiritual destinies? Does the one, so entirely appalling, in the terms Clements describes, engender or karmically require the other, as a matter of necessity? Is such conflict then redeemable after all? Or would it seem, as it does for Clements, absurd to even ask the question?

Maung Win as a “moral agent” from the ethical view is clearly acting in a way that will generate further negative (samsaric) effects. However, such a conclusion does not account for the absolute grounds for his doing so, beyond his apparent agency: those can only be speculatively hypothesized, as above. Yet to conclude he has simply failed the imperatives of ethics is a response incommensurate with his intent, which has been to save his countrymen and bring peace to his nation. It would appear that attempting an analytic understanding of (often intractable) violent conflict, particularly in the Buddhist context which unique among world religions is explicit in its ethical repudiation of violence, runs up against an unavoidable aporia: it cannot be objectively explained to satisfaction. As Clements (the Everyman) puts it:

I reflected both on his crime and the collective stupidity he was a part of, [and] asked myself ... “Was there, in fact, intrinsic evil? ... And if so ... from where does this wickedness arise? From sexual repression? Humankind’s irrational drive for domination and power? A tortured childhood? A blueprint from birth? From the genetics of our reptilian past? Or was it karma—an ancient action contorting one’s behaviour? Or are we in a cold universe without true meaning? Why do humans have hearts with darkness? Whatever the source, the conditions are clear... And human beings for one reason or another perpetuate the torment with enormous fervor and conviction. Am I exempt? ... Am I beyond the possibility of an act of violence that from another perspective is an “act of evil”? (36)

Clements, however, in the urgency of his existential situation, suggests a contextualized response, nuanced in its presentation not of answers, but of layers of ambiguity. When Clements realizes the other might also fear *his* death, as Clements does, and sees a tear run down the

other's cheek, he and the "enemy soldier" potentially are able to recognize a mutual identity, that of the Buddhist monk. But Clements must assuage his doubts. Now a soldier possibly trying to deceive Clements and gain control of the situation by subterfuge, the "enemy" asks Clements to find a photo in his back-pocket from his time in the monastery, and "suddenly I went with my instincts. They told me to recognize our shared humanity. I took the risk and lowered the gun ... He looked at me for a few seconds, his large brown eyes were deeply saddened and welling with tears ... Trust was the final obstacle between us ... I wanted to believe him" (36).

Levinas's formulation of such an encounter speaks clearly to Clements's experience:

The Other (l'Autre) thus presents itself as human Other (Autrui); it shows a face and ... infinitely overflows the bounds of knowledge. Positively, this means that the Other puts in question the freedom which attempts to invest it; the Other lays him- or herself bare to the total negation of murder but forbids it through the original language of his defenceless eyes (*Basic 12*).

For Levinas, in other words, the "putting in question" of the freedom to act is inherent in the face-to-face encounter before any act can even be considered, and its non-violent command is engendered absolutely by virtue of its provenance in an "infinite" transcendence. Levinas asks, "Does not this putting into question occur precisely when the Other has nothing in common with me, when the Other is wholly Other, that is to say, human Other (Autrui)? When, through the nakedness and destitution of his defenceless eyes, he forbids murder and paralyzes my impetuous freedom?" (*Basic 16*).

Such is the case here: Clements and the enemy soldier, he writes, "entered each other's eyes and hearts. I felt him for one brief second as



my brother” (37). The photo of the soldier-as-former-monk is a seal and sign for Clements of the nameless soldier’s authentic or at least potential depth of spirit, and of something that almost automatically connects them (even should the soldier not know of Clements’s former monk-status, though he has in fact been informed of this by Clements in their exchange).

The moment is also, indirectly, testament to the power of religious identity to forge, despite other differences (and for better or for worse), a fundamental bond between those who are otherwise strangers, speaking different languages and cherishing disparate ideals. In this case, good will, or perhaps mutual good karma, has abided; it is one brief second long enough, and though we do not know what becomes of the captured militiaman, Clements himself remains on this side of the ethical divide. He has not killed, but unlike Arjuna on the Kurukṣetra battleground of the *Bhagavadgītā*, unlike the future Gautama Buddha of the *Upāya-kauśalya Sūtra*, and perhaps unlike the selfless, but also angrily self-righteous Maung Win, Clements stays securely on the subject-object field of duality. The Other remains Other, even though the momentary gift of fellow human feeling has offered him a sublime view of human (not quite, in Derrida’s terms, “impossible-”) possibility. He writes, “Doubtless, there is evil in this world. How and why are beyond any of us to know. What we do know is that the human heart is not sectioned off into black and white regions of pure good and absolute bad ... I recommitted myself to looking deeper into my own heart of darkness” (37).

Clements’s own crisis (in “empty” experience—mirage-like, with the ontological status of a movie, a rainbow, a hologram—as much in the hard raw of the Burmese jungle) seems relatively resolved, though he has not justified why and how one can be “willing to kill for freedom,” insofar as *he himself has not done so*. We might wonder, along with a philosopher such as Levinas, whether violence, even grounding the nature of

thinking itself, begins with the power of the mind to render experience intelligible (Levinas *Basic* 16). Because if Clements's claim is true, we would need to ask: what would it mean to understand such a course even vicariously, and can that ever meaningfully occur?

For example, I can rationalize and even sympathize with the actions of an "innocent" hostage (her innocence, in the Buddhist view, is only apparent: it is purely her negative karma that determines her predicament) who defends herself against terrorist aggression by a definitive attack of her own. But that is not the same as *knowing* that I myself am willing to do the same. Levinas would seem to imply its impossibility: "I can wish to kill only an existent absolutely independent, which exceeds my powers infinitely, and therefore does not oppose them but paralyzes the very power of power" (*Totality* 198) insofar as every human Other is, for Levinas, constituted by just such a power. Clements leaves the question unanswered, despite his affirmation of the use of lethal force, and apart from the implication of his narrative which suggests that only terrible and beautiful experience itself can furnish a possible answer.

Another approach might be to begin to consider that *knowing* and even *understanding* the imperative acts of such a case are not finally constitutive of the meaning(s) such acts might have for us. That is, we may engage ethically, as Clements appears to here, from that dimension of the mind that is more or less unaware of its motivations, rationales and grounds for further action. We may pursue actions without engaging the critical thinking faculty at all, but it is too simple, and potentially misleading, to call such action (for example) unconscious. What, for example, is the ethical status of Clements's undeniable altruism, given its confused constitution? Is it less than ethical, or *moreso*, because of it? Does to know *why* we act, positively or negatively modify the grounds for actually doing so?

After all, Maung Win would be unlikely to suffer any question of what he “knows” of his integrity and the actions it drives him to. If Clements, as here, cannot act apart from an ultimate surrender to “trusting his instinct,” might that be seen as a virtue of omission, or conversely, a failure of insight or nerve, or neither? He claims, clearly, that he does not know, and nor immediately do we. But then, for Buddhism, the *telos* of self-disclosure that allows for incremental awakening to occur, the sense in which we come, through praxis, wisdom and the guidance of a wise teacher, to come to know precisely the “darkness” and ignorance of the heart and mind, and overcome them, would seem to be undermined.

Another Buddhist-ethical aporia? It might be said, in a tentative conclusion, that in aporia there is the manifestation of an absolute value; yet it cannot be comprehended by the dualistic mind. It is not “as if” at this point for Maung Win, ethics breaks down. It is that it *really* does so, and that understanding what such breakdown might signify crucially requires a new frame of reference. In such incomprehension lies a literal opening to non-dual (Buddhist) insight, irrespective of its moral provenance. Violence is unequivocally to be deplored; it does however permeate human life on differing levels with terrifying consistency and will never be ended through an oblique hope that it somehow go away. Perhaps a challenge would lie here in renewing the notion of ethical “aporia” itself: not as a dead-end, an ethical no-man’s land of paralysis, but as the living experience of a field for awakening—dense and opaque, like a jungle, yet traced with a myriad of unseen paths. Clements is articulating such a challenge in the raw of life, one with which thousands, if not millions, of Buddhists in Tibet, Myanmar, Sri Lanka or China, to name only the most obvious contexts, are however today comparably faced. It is also one that most contemporary Buddhists can be thankful they are not usually required to confront. Unfortunately, that does not mitigate the dichotomy or satisfactorily answer to the urgent call of those, such as

Maung Win, who can be seen as martyrs to a noble cause as well as unwilling defectors from the noble tradition of Buddhism.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I will use “Burma” and “Myanmar” interchangeably depending on the relevant context (e.g. Myanmar is its political rather than generally cultural reference). The latter is itself a political designation given by the ruling junta of General Than Shwe, which itself remains in power in contravention of international law. The country’s true name, then, remains contested.

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that despite Clements’s formation in the Burmese Theravāda, as a non-aligned dharma activist and former monk he invokes a more general Buddhist, including Mahāyāna, frame of reference, which also includes non- or trans-Buddhist dimensions such as the South African cultural value of *ubuntu* (popularly communicated for example by Archbishop Desmond Tutu) which he consistently draws on in (2003) as elsewhere. Also, Aung San Suu Kyi, as perhaps the most significant Buddhist figure in this context, draws for her non-violent stand on sources such as Gandhi and Luther King, Jr., western secular ethics and even her love for great European literature. Of Maung Win and his military enemy, it might be said that irrespective of their Theravādan heritage, the existential status of their actions would seem to refer critically beyond religious affiliation and so render the latter functionally negligible. This last point, however, does not diminish the theoretical significance of Maung Win’s action for Buddhist ethics; it merely signifies that it is circumstantially tangential to claim to what traditional school of Buddhism he (let alone his enemy) could be said to “belong.”

<sup>3</sup> Elsewhere Caputo writes that “In these thinkers both premodern religious and postmodern themes are made to intermingle in a fascinating

way, an intermingling aptly captured by the phrase ‘post-secular’” (in Phillips 165, n.6).

<sup>4</sup> See Batchelor, 1983, 1990, 1997.

<sup>5</sup> See Loy, 1992, 1996, 2002. I have discussed Batchelor and Loy in these contexts in detail in another study and can only briefly invoke them here.

<sup>6</sup> These are: not to kill, not to steal, not to engage in illicit sexual practice, not to lie, and not to use intoxicants.

<sup>7</sup> These five, which all result in an immediate rebirth in the hell-realm, are: parricide, matricide, killing a saint, breaking up the Saṅgha, and causing, with evil intent, the Tathāgata to bleed.

<sup>8</sup> In its full designation as the Eight Branches of the Holy Path (*āryamārgasya aṣṭāṅgāni*), these include among the eight the ethical injunctions of right speech (*samyakvāk*), right terminal action (*samyakkarmānta*), right livelihood (*samyagājīva*), right effort (*samyagvyāyāma*) and right remembrance (*samyaksmṛti*).

<sup>9</sup> This example of *upāya* as violent force is however not common in the Mahāyāna *sūtra*-s, and certainly not prevalent in the Pāli canon, but consistent enough to present a wealth of normative ambiguity for further study. See similar Mahāyāna references for force as ‘skilful means’ in the *Mahā-Upāya-kausālya Sūtra*, the *Ārya-bodhisattva-gocaropāya-viṣaya-vikurvaṇa-nirdeśa Sūtra*, and the *Mahā-parinirvāṇa Sūtra*.

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