

Book review

Journal of Global Buddhism 11 (2010): 53-55



Buddhist Warfare

By Jeff Wilson. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009, 260 pages. ISBN 978-0-19-537193-2 (hardback), \$35.00.

Reviewed by Daniel S. Margolies
Professor of History
Virginia Wesleyan College
dmargolies@vwc.edu



Copyright Notice: This work is licensed under Creative Commons. Copies of this work may be made and distributed non-commercially provided attribution is given to the original source and no alteration is made to the content.

For the full terms of the license:
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0>

All enquiries to: <http://www.globalbuddhism.org>

B o o k R e v i e w

Buddhist Warfare. Edited by Michael K. Jerryson and Mark Juergensmeyer. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. 257 pages, ISBN 978-0-19-539484-9, \$29.95 (paperback), \$99.00 (cloth).

Reviewed by Daniel S. Margolies

This important collection of essays considers global Buddhist violence in a variety of interdisciplinary historical, comparative, and ethnographic perspectives. The essays present and analyze a diverse and surprising (and sometimes horrifying) array of “individual and structural cases of prolonged Buddhist violence” over time and space with the intention of “disrupting the social imaginary that holds Buddhist traditions to be exclusively pacifistic and exotic” (p. 3).

Buddhist Warfare considers tangible and intangible forms of violence in varying terms of discourse, text, and performance. It tackles a broad array of temporal and theoretical issues invoking the diverse historical roles of “compassionate violence,” the connections of violence to religious nationalism, the uses of violence and warfare in spreading and protecting the Dharma, and most importantly, perhaps, the overarching relationship between Buddhism and the state which has regularly and systemically justified, fostered, and produced violence in numerous forms. Most importantly, this volume illuminates the meaning of Buddhist violence by complicating and directly challenging limited definitions of violence and the notion of a single coherent Buddhist tradition, let alone a non-violent one.

Buddhist Warfare firmly establishes the need to consider violence in numerous forms as essential categories for consideration in understanding the development of diverse Buddhist societies. This volume will be of interest to scholars of Buddhism in many eras and subjects because of its broad coverage and it speaks indirectly to current issues of interest in the study of global Buddhism despite a generally historical emphasis. Theoretical and analytical considerations and contemporary case studies take up approximately half of this volume while the balance of the essays cover historical epochs stretching over several centuries.

Jerryson’s concise and rich introduction lays out the themes of the volume with great clarity and places Buddhist violence in global perspective with an emphasis on the diversity of “Buddhisms” in considering violence in conjunction with the role of the state. The coverage of the early periods which this volume provides are essential for understanding the political context of Buddhism and its links to state structures and interests. Jerryson explains the development of a “social contract” in the ubiquitous nexus of sangha and state across countries and time periods in which Buddhism became selected and supported by the state and in turn provided “the rationalization for the state’s sanctioned use of violence” (p. 13).

An interesting theme that runs through this volume is consideration of the tenor of Buddhist violence in addition to the existence and complicated application of this violence, which these

essays conclusively prove exists across the spectrum of Buddhist societies, texts, and beliefs. There is also a brief appendix of incidents of Buddhist violence which would be more useful if not so cursory.

The volume opens with a translation (by Michelle Kendall) of Paul Demiéville's classic 1957 essay "Buddhism and War" which provides a deep historical reading of the place of soldier-monks in East Asia. Stephen Jenkins, in considering the *Arya-Bodhisattva-gocara-upāyaviśaya-vikurvaṇa-nirdeśa Sūtra* proves that "the violence of the Indian Buddhists' imagination... was extreme" (p. 63) and in turn gave "conceptual resources" to kings which included warfare and torture and the "validation of compassionate violence" including killing (p. 69). Derek F. Maher examines the writings of the Fifth Dalai Lama (1617-1682) to explore the numerous ways "discourses of power" were expressed in support of violence and warfare and "couched in specifically Buddhist terms" (p.78). Vesna A. Wallace explores the gruesome varieties of violence from punishment to execution used in the repression of shamanism, the spreading of the Dharma, and the overall consolidation of power by Buddhist Khans in Mongolia from the late sixteenth to the early twentieth centuries. This essay does an effective job of detailing the "integrated governance" which connected state and religious laws as well as guided the extent of violence over time (p. 94). In a similar vein, Xue Yu presents a study of the role of Chinese Buddhists who actively and enthusiastically supported the Korean War effort as a way of ingratiating themselves with the Communist state. In this case, "patriotism served almost as a new religion" (p. 151).

The existence of violence and warfare (or at least its justification) within each society is explored by each of these essays, but they are generally unconcerned with determining if each new manifestation of Buddhist violence stood within the Buddhist tradition or alternatively as a denial of it. Conversely, Brian Daizen Victoria offers an impassioned Buddhological critique that argues that "soldier-Zen" in Imperial Japan "so grievously violated Buddhism's fundamental tenets that the school was no longer an authentic expression of the *Buddhadharma*" (p. 106). Victoria argues that the alignment of Buddhists with state interests which was so clearly evident in Imperial Japan (as well as in all the other essays in this book) in fact meant the "sangha has become corrupt and degenerate," adopting a "slavish subservience" and "becoming the de facto pimp and prostitute of the state" (p. 128).

The rich ethnographies of Buddhists in the Sri Lankan army, by Daniel W. Kent, and militarized Buddhism in Southern Thailand, by Jerryson, that close this volume are notably new approaches to these topics and each give strong literature reviews and new theoretical and methodological guidance for consideration of Buddhist violence from current comparative perspectives. Kent offers a new study of how Buddhists engage in war by talking directly to the soldiers and monks involved. This fieldwork allows him to move beyond a static or traditional study of Buddhist justifications for war to understand how it worked—and works—in practice. In this way he accesses how individuals interpreted karma and intentionality in their acts and truly expands our understanding of how Buddhists actually engage in war today.

Jerryson draws from fieldwork over four years to examine Thai militarization of both Buddhist roles and spaces to deepen longstanding studies of state Buddhism and guide new approaches to contemporary religious violence. He emphasizes the study of experience and

practice over textual analysis to explore the complicated and quite secretive phenomenon of soldiers becoming monks, a practice that represents “a powerful clash between Thai Buddhist doctrine and the Thai lived Buddhist tradition” (p. 185). He also considers the impact of this militarization of monasteries as it further ties Buddhism directly into the state with a consequential and catalytic impact on the religious and political balance in Thailand. Jerryson’s essay is a model of analysis and evidence and is one of the best executed studies in this solid collection.

Bernard Faure’s excellent concluding essay considers the overall implications of this volume in wide connection with a panoply of scholarship on Buddhist violence and provocatively indicates many fruitful avenues for further scholarly inquiry. Countering Victoria in particular, Faure rather straightforwardly argues that any “view of an authentic early Buddhism” that rejected violence “flies in the face of reality” since “Buddhism has always been closely associated with rules” and was “an instrument of power” (p. 216-217). In his interpretation, “there is no generic, fundamental (or even mainstream) Buddhism” so it is no surprise that the historical record contains all manner of contradictory positions on violence, running the gamut of “pure affirmation and pure rejection, including various types of denial” (p. 217). Faure also argues that the close association of the health and survival of Buddhism with the state has never been more essential than it is today in times of intolerance and widespread religious violence of all forms.

Additionally, Faure argues for a much more nuanced consideration of the form and nature of violence, pushing beyond studies of state sponsored acts and warfare. He notes that “well-ordered violence begins with oneself” especially in “interiorized forms of violence known as asceticism” (p. 219). Monastic discipline can be viewed as a form of violence as can well-known individual Buddhist acts of self-immolation. Faure also believes that consideration of violence should be broadened to include violence against women. He calls for greater interdisciplinarity and theoretical sophistication in the understanding of the causation of violence by calling for new studies drawing from frameworks that have often fallen outside Buddhist studies, including the approaches of Émile Durkheim, Michel Foucault, René Girard, George Bataille, and Maurice Bloch (though Maher does apply Foucault in this volume). Faure concludes with the provocative thought that perhaps “it is time to ask ourselves whether being Buddhist does not require a confrontation with the violence that lurks at the heart of reality (and of each individual), rather than eluding the question by taking the high metaphysical or moral ground” (p. 223).

This book is essential reading for Buddhist scholars with any specialty, if only to foster new consideration of the systemics of Buddhist politics and new textual readings, historical framings, and theoretical frames. This volume provides fresh perspectives that make it a true contribution to the study of Buddhist violence and to Buddhist studies within global trends of religious violence. The book adds new material to complement the important recent collection *Buddhism and Violence* (Michael Zimmerman, ed, 2006, Kathmandu: Lumbini International Research Institute) and also, in a comparative frame, slots neatly in with the extensive new writings on Buddhism and the state and on global fundamentalisms and terrorist violence.