

Book Review



Buddhism and violence: militarism and Buddhism in modern Asia

Edited by Vladimir Tikhonov and Torkel Brekke.
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The past decades have seen individual Buddhists and Buddhist organizations become involved in violence caused by nationalism and militarism and use violence to settle disputes between conflicting parties. In contrast, most Buddhists still refrain (or believe in refraining) from engaging in violent acts. How shall we evaluate the violent choices of individual Buddhists and specific Buddhist organizations? Do these phenomena challenge the assumption that Buddhism is a peaceful tradition? These critical questions have led to a rethinking in both academia and Buddhist organizations on the nexus of Buddhism and violence.

The contributors to this timely volume explore how individual Buddhists and Buddhist organizations in both Theravāda and Mahayana (i.e., Sri Lanka, Thailand, Japan, Korea, and China) contexts respond to armed conflicts and how Buddhist narratives are utilized to justify Buddhist involvement in violence. This volume features an introduction, by Vladimir Tikhonov, a conclusion, by Torkel Brekke, and eleven chapters. Based on the cases of Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Korea, in chapters 1-3, Mahinda Deegalle, Marte Nilsen, and Cho Sungtaek focus on how nationalism and militarism involve individual Buddhists and Buddhist organizations in violence.

Chapters 4-7 address the interconnections between militarism and aggressive Buddhists. Michael Jerryson analyzes the rise of militant Thai Buddhism in the armed conflict in Southern Thailand. Iselin Frydenlund focuses on the complex interconnections between Buddhism and militarism in contemporary Sri Lanka. Ian G. Baird reveals the involvement of Buddhists in anti-communist operations, and Micah Auerback stresses the significant contradiction between the peaceful images of high-ranking Japanese Zen figures and their advocacy for the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905).

Chapters 8-11 reveal how Buddhist doctrine is re-interpreted to justify Buddhist violence. From a critical perspective, Chapter 8, by Suwanna Satha-Anand, explores the question of violence in Thai Buddhism. Chapter 9, by Xue Yu, explores the dynamics of Chinese Buddhists' justification of violence. In the next chapter, by Kawase Takaya, translated by Micah L. Auerback, the anti-war and peace movements among Japanese

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Buddhists after the Second World War are discussed further. The final chapter, by Vladimir Tikhonov, explains Korean Buddhists advocacy for militarization in response to Japanese colonization.

The contributors conclude there are at least three factors leading to Buddhist involvement in violence. First, it is difficult for Buddhism to remain separate from military force and ideological confrontation in the Asian nations in which Buddhism is practiced. In some cases, states prefer “controlling violence rather than eradicating it”(p.10), while the politically active Buddhists or Buddhist organizations support a military solution to armed conflicts. This results, in the words of Iselin Frydenlund, in a “general absence of pacifism among monks” (p.113). Historically, some Buddhist and Buddhist organization also took active part in anti-Communist movements in Southeast Asia. It is also noteworthy that some Buddhist leaders played essential roles in promoting militarization of individual Buddhists and specific Buddhist organizations. The most well-known case is perhaps Kittivuddho, at the time perhaps the leading and most outspoken monk in Thailand, stating that killing communists “is not really killing” (p.182).

The second contributing factor leading to Buddhist violence lies in the re-interpretation of Buddhist doctrine where individual Buddhists “invariably make their own choices” (p. 68), and some aggressive Buddhists re-identify killing as a companionate act or sacrifice. In this view, Buddhists should not be regarded as pacifists and their enemies should be described as “beasts or lesser humans” (p. 182). As Xue Yu analyzes, aggressive Buddhists follow the justification of killing found in the *Mahā-upāya-kaśālya Sūtra* and the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*, that is, companionate killing would only take place, when both the killer and the killed do “not possess any evil thought” (p. 205). In fact, this pre-condition could hardly be fulfilled. In most cases, both the killed and the killer would be filled with resentment and rage.

The final factor identified as leading to Buddhist violence grows from the militarization promoted by nationalist, ethnic, and religious organizations. In the case of the southernmost provinces of Thailand, where Buddhists have been direct targets of the anti-Buddhist population, some Buddhist monks have equipped themselves with weapons and taken on the role of protectors. However, rather than resolving the tensions between Buddhist organizations and the population, this has caused “greater division rather than national unity in Thailand” (p. 48). Militarization of the Buddhist community in the Southern Thailand has led to mutual mistrust and alienation between the Malay Muslim population and Buddhists. As a result, armed conflicts between Buddhists and Muslims are still on the increase.

In short, *Buddhism and Violence* succeeds in exploring the intertwined interconnections between Buddhism and violence, rather than ending any debate on whether Buddhism is by nature more or less violent than any other religion. This well-researched volume will definitely raise awareness of academics, policy makers, and students. At the same time, it deserves a wide readership, especially among general readers concerned with the nexus of Buddhism and violence.