




## Book Review

# If You Meet the Buddha on the Road: Buddhism, Politics, and Violence

Michael Jerryson. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018, 226 pages, ISBN 978-0190683566 (hardcover), \$125; \$34.99 (ebook).

Antonio Terrone   
Northwestern University

**W**HILE I was working on this review of Michael Jerryson's book *If You Meet the Buddha on the Road*, I received news of his sudden and premature death. I was shocked and deeply saddened at the surprising news. An established scholar and fine young man, father, husband, and friend, Michael's absence will be felt, and his presence missed. Michael was a friendly and gracious person, whom I remember as always having a smile on his face. A successful and innovative researcher in the field of Buddhist studies, he specialized in the study of interpretations of violence in various forms of Buddhism, especially in the Theravada tradition of Thailand and greater Southeast Asia. For those of us who admired his work, whom I trust are many, Michael has left a wealth of articles and books in which he introduces us to facets of the complex relationship between Buddhism and violence. *If You Meet the Buddha on the Road: Buddhism, Politics, and Violence* was his latest monograph and one that will surely become a reference in the field.

There is no doubt that the post-9/11 war on terror and religious violence has generated waves of interest in the academic study of the intersections between religion, violence, politics, and terrorism. These past two decades have seen a major generation of college-level classes and teaching materials, as well as articles and books on the religious treatment of violence in various traditions and cultures around the world. Due to the international events of the twenty-first century, topics related to war, terrorism, killing, social conflict, state violence, nationalism, torture, suicide, and religious extremism have garnered strong academic appeal. The 2021 takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban, a religious and military organization that embraces violent means to achieve its political ends, is but one example of why studies in religion and violence are so important and timely. However, the study of religion and violence does not only concern rogue states; it also pertains to gender discrimination, sexual abuse, and psychological trauma, as well as the role of chaplaincy in the military.

I cannot start this review of Michael Jerryson's *If You Meet the Buddha on the Road* anywhere but from the book title. This refers to a proverb attributed to Linji Yixuan, a ninth-century Chinese Rinzai Zen Master: "If you meet the Buddha, kill him!" As with most Zen teachings, this saying was meant to shock and confuse the adept to trigger insight, spontaneity, and detachment from conventional and conceptual thinking. It is intriguing, though, to reflect on the violent metaphor employed here to convey a pathway to pursue liberation. Murder and killing are used here to address the ultimate purpose of Buddhist practice, which is the realization of enlightenment.



Jerryson's book provides many examples of how local cultures within Asian Buddhist societies understand, absorb, interpret, and practice violence. From the Japanese Buddhist *Sōhei* fighting monks on Mount Hihei, to the inclusion of martial skills among monks at the Shaolin Temple, to Zen institutions' support of and participation in World War II, to Tibetan Buddhist monks taking up arms to resist Mao Zedong's "Peaceful Liberation of Tibet" in the late 1950s, to others choosing to self-immolate through auto-cremation as an act of political protest, all of these demonstrate different understandings and interpretations of violence as a part of Buddhist practice. Jerryson focuses especially on one sensational event that has made world news in recent years, namely the large-scale political rallies against the Rohingya minority mostly living in the Arakan state of Myanmar, rallies led by the Burmese Buddhist monk Ashin U Wirathu, who sought to defend Buddhism from the perceived growth of Muslim citizens in the country. By virtue of his Buddhist authority, U Wirathu gave numerous speeches, which regularly enflamed crowds of Burmese Buddhists and turned many of them into murderously violent and aggressive mobs attacking Rohingya communities and caused a mass displacement crisis in 2017 (9–10).

*If you meet the Buddha on the Road* is organized into six chapters, followed by a postscript. In these chapters, Jerryson examines Buddhist doctrinal interpretations of violence, as well as state violence, violence in monasticism, gender discrimination, Buddhist military chaplaincy, Buddhist and Muslim coping strategies in dealing with trauma, and blasphemy. In chapter one, "Buddhist Paths to Violence," Jerryson offers a discussion of Buddhist doctrine, logic, and heuristics that "offer spaces to justify violence" (18), including historical case studies such as wars in Sri Lanka and Japan. Chapter two, "State Violence and Buddhist Monks," focuses on the relationship between Buddhism and politics through examples from Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Thailand. Interestingly, here Jerryson argues that Buddhist monks in these countries are not just passively and indirectly involved in their government's rule, but they are often actively exercising political power in the affairs of the state through criticizing the state, political dissent, and revolutions (60–72). Chapter three, "The Violence of Gender Discrimination," walks the controversial terrain of gender inequality in the Buddhist tradition and especially the lack of fully ordained female monastic orders in various Buddhist societies. The violence of gender discrimination is here first evinced through a discussion of doctrinal justification of gender discrimination and then analyzed through the example of the official Thai government and monastics' rejection of and resistance to the ordination of women in Buddhism. In chapter four, "The Negotiation of Violence: Buddhist Military Chaplains," Jerryson continues his analysis of Buddhist engagements with violence, moving into the curious relationship between Buddhism and the military in Thailand, including a fascinating discussion on the role of Thailand's Buddhist military chaplaincy (120–125). In chapter five, titled "The Violence of Trauma," the relationship between Buddhist devotees and their coping skills in zones of conflict is investigated with a focus on mental health. The benefits of Buddhist meditation, or lack thereof, among Thai people is approached in comparison with the Thai Malay Muslim community. Jerryson observes that the crux of the benefits of religiosity and the ability to cope with violence lie in the presence of habitual practices and religious activities during times of conflict, concluding with evidence that, while largely absent in the former group (Buddhists), it is abundant in the latter (Thai Malay Muslims). The last chapter embraces the phenomenon of blasphemy, slander, and cosmic violence in Buddhism. Chapter six, "Violence against the Buddha: A History of Blasphemy," explores the ways Buddhist doctrine in general and Buddhist people in particular experience violence and harm. Looking at both textual sources and lived practices, Jerryson can examine both doctrinal and cultural reactions to slander and disrespect, especially against Buddhist sacred images.

These rich and complex chapters of the book are then ushered out by another gem of scholarly writing in the shape of the "Postscript: Buddhist Authority, Politics, and Violence," comprised of twenty-two pages

exploring the role of cultural authority, religion, and political charisma in the study of violence in Asian Buddhist societies. Written in collaboration with Matthew J. Walton, a political scientist (University of Toronto) who also works on Buddhist political thought in the Theravada tradition, this final essay offers an overview of Western scholarship on religion and authority, as well as an argument that, in order to fully understand Buddhist involvement in politics and violence, local culture should be given an equal authoritative agency to Buddhist orthodoxy and orthopraxy.

The study of religion, violence, war and killing can be approached through various methodologies and perspectives, including those that are scriptural, theological, and doctrinal. The approach Jerryson advocates for is one he terms the cultural approach, in contrast to the more common approaches he labels as the doctrinal (orthodoxy) and practice approach (orthopraxy) (177). Although his study is largely grounded in Thai and Theravada Buddhism, Jerryson's observations can be applied universally to the study of Buddhism and violence in Asian societies. Thailand, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka are all Buddhist societies where the application of religious authority, beyond scriptural and ritual, is also importantly connected to the monastic community (178). In other words, although the study of Buddhist interpretations of violence can be approached through reading canonical and noncanonical scriptures, the situation becomes complicated when it comes to acts of either verbal or physical violence perpetrated by figures who represent the Buddhist tradition. While Jerryson criticizes scholars who are guilty of "either ignoring or essentializing culture" and thus treating it as "epiphenomenal" (183), in the case of Myanmar, for instance, as well as in a number of other Southeast Asian Buddhist societies, the monastic community incarnates a cultural status that extends beyond their scriptural and ritual performance (188). In these societies, monks represent authority, and their words (and often actions) are "almost always accepted without argument or question by the laity and even by the junior monks, at least publicly" (189).

When it comes to the issue of authority, the domain that deserves more attention is the curious interaction between the military (an art or profession of war) and Buddhism (a path toward peace and happiness). Jerryson dedicates substantial attention to this relationship in Southeast Asia, focusing on the fascinating function of Buddhism in the military (in Thailand, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka), and the role of Buddhist military chaplaincy in chapters four and five. His discussion is as eloquent as it is convincing. How do soldiers who choose a professional career aimed at killing, destroying, or harming other human beings (in other words, a profession of causing pain, either directly or indirectly) make sense of their spiritual and moral commitments and vows? What kind of strategies and justifications, not to mention counseling, does a Buddhist military chaplain offer to soldiers who are engaged in war and conflict? In this regard, Jerryson points out that rather than the act of killing, fighting, harming, or even torturing, per se, a soldier's role in fighting morally centers on the "intention" behind the act and on *jus in bello*, the law that governs their just conduct in war. Buddhist chaplains are meant to encourage good intention and good conduct (122). Some perplexities, however, may easily arise regarding this sensitive issue. In a brief comment about Buddhist ethics in the military, Jerryson reflects on the similarity drawn between the Buddhist justification of military killing and that of Hindus as depicted in the *Bhagavad Gita*. In the well-known passage describing Arjuna's personal conflict and Krishna's assistance, Jerryson reports that in Sri Lanka, as in Thailand, soldiers fight for a good reason, that of dharma, without anger, but with a calm mind (122–123). However, more could have been said here about the profound differences between the Buddhist and Hindu interpretations of violence, given that the latter's defense of violence in war relies on the individual's responsibility for their own class (*varna*), in this case Arjuna's *kṣatriya* (warrior) caste in society. This is a concept that Buddhist doctrine not only refuses to accept, but also criticizes heavily as it upholds instead the doctrine of the permanence of the soul (*ātman*).

No less important in the book is Jerryson's contribution to the ongoing discussion about gender-based discrimination within Buddhism. To expand the notion of violence beyond its physical episteme requires addressing forms of psychological as well as moral violence that include gender-based discrimination and violence. Here Jerryson does an excellent job in presenting this issue as it comes up in Thailand, where not only do many women suffer because of the prohibition to ordain enforced by the strong patriarchal-based *saṅgha*, but also, as Jerryson demonstrates, Thai society does not provide women with moral support in general (81).

There is no paucity of scholarly publications on the relationship between Buddhism and violence and we should remember a few, including Mikael S. Adolphson's *The Teeth of and Claws of the Buddha: Monastic Warriors and Sōhei in Japanese History* (University of Hawaii Press, 2007), Brian Daizen Victoria's *Zen at War* (Weatherhill, Inc., 1997), Michael Jerryson's *Buddhist Fury: Religion and Violence in Southern Thailand*, and of course Michael Jerryson and Mark Jurgensmeyer's edited volume, *Buddhist Warfare* (Oxford University Press, 2010). However, for treating all of the important topics listed above with erudition, as well as for its well-written, highly readable style, *If You Meet the Buddha on the Road* is destined to become an essential companion to the study of Buddhist analysis and justification of violence in its many aspects. Not only can this study be useful to scholars as a reference, but it should also be considered by instructors interested in this topic for adoption in their college-level classes, both on Buddhism and on religion and violence.