

Journal of Buddhist Ethics

ISSN 1076-9005

<http://blogs.dickinson.edu/buddhistethics>

Volume 23, 2016

*Buddhism and Violence: Militarism and Buddhism in
Modern Asia*

Reviewed by Kendall Marchman

Young Harris College
krmarchman@yhc.edu

Copyright Notice: Digital copies of this work may be made and distributed provided no change is made and no alteration is made to the content. Reproduction in any other format, with the exception of a single copy for private study, requires the written permission of the author. All enquiries to:
cozort@dickinson.edu

A Review of *Buddhism and Violence: Militarism and Buddhism in Modern Asia*

Kendall Marchman¹

Buddhism and Violence: Militarism and Buddhism in Modern Asia. Edited by Vladimir Tikhonov and Torkel Brekke. New York: Routledge, 2013, 264 pages, ISBN: 9780415536967 (cloth), \$125.00.

This book evolved out of a workshop hosted by the University of Oslo in 2009. As a result, it is a bit uneven, but there are many standout chapters overall. The book contains eleven chapters, distributed into three sections: Part I discusses nationalism, Part II focuses on militarism, and Part III examines Buddhist justification theories. The chapters feature an impressive roster of authors from around the world.

The book aims to rectify the common Western misperception that, unlike the Abrahamic traditions, violence is foreign to Buddhism. Many of the writers accomplish this goal, especially the chapters that focus on ongoing conflicts in Thailand and Sri Lanka. However, despite the title of *Buddhism and Violence*, readers seeking discussion about physically aggressive Buddhist monks actually committing violent acts will likely come away disappointed. Instead, the scholars in this book mostly

¹ Young Harris College. krmarchman@yhc.edu.

focus on how and why Buddhism in modern Asia is often swept up in nationalist rhetoric and campaigns. Buddhist monks are rarely on the front lines of these campaigns—though they are targets of violence—but they are often essential supporting voices for nationalist agendas. A few scholars note that even acquiescent Buddhist leaders who are not mouthpieces for their respective countries tacitly condone militarism and violence by not speaking out against it. The book is a welcome contribution to the field, and should benefit scholars teaching upper-level courses on religion and violence as well as those seeking information about how Buddhism and nationalism are so closely aligned in Modern Asia.

The book begins with an introduction by one of the editors, Vladimir Tikhonov. Instead of beginning with a discussion of modern Buddhism, Tikhonov points to the confluence of religion and statecraft around the world and throughout history. Examples from Christianity, Daoism, Confucianism, Hellenistic religion, and others are given to demonstrate how these religions wrestle with the prevalence of violence. Tikhonov recognizes the distinction in their philosophies between “illicit and licit violence.” While these traditions frowned upon the former, they recognized the necessity and inevitability of the latter. The recognition of the necessity and legitimacy of licit violence in conjunction with statecraft required theories that explained, codified, and most importantly, justified violent action. Tikhonov most often uses Christianity to demonstrate this process, going so far as not to even mention Buddhism until more than halfway through the Introduction. He begins his discussion of Buddhism by noting how Buddhist notions of violence are remarkably similar to the Christian stance: “On one hand, violence is seen as an endemic evil of the profane world bound by ignorance of truth, attachments, and cravings On the other hand, the early adepts of Buddha’s Law, very much like their Christian counterparts, prided themselves on being different from the fallen world” (6-7). He moves forward providing brief examples of how early Buddhism interacted with violence, most notably mentioning how the Buddha himself did not

preach non-violence to the Kings of his day due to the belief that it was a king's duty to strengthen and defend his kingdom. In other words, even the Buddha recognized the occasional necessity of violence. Tikhonov moves to the modern era in his conclusion. He points out how "post-Kantian modern intellectuals" who sought religious philosophies that espoused their modern peaceful ideals latched onto Buddhism, choosing to believe it was different (i.e., more rational) than other religions. This misperception of Buddhism is still alive and well in the West, and all the following chapters work to dismantle that notion.

In the first chapter, "Sinhala Ethno-nationalisms and Militarization in Sri Lanka," Mahinda Deegalle displays the role of the Sinhalese Buddhist community in "one of the most violent and militarized societies on the planet" (15). Over the last three decades, the division between the Sinhala and Tamil nationalisms intensified, mainly due to the development of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which terrorized Sri Lanka for three decades until their recent defeat in 2009. Political parties often led by elected Buddhist monks are essential supporters of the Sri Lankan military efforts to put down the LTTE. Ven. Athuraliye Rathana, leader of the Jāthika Hela Urumaya (JHU) party that seeks to create a Buddhist religious state, carries the moniker "war monk" due to his assertion that Sri Lanka will only be a harmonious society after the elimination of the Tamil Tigers. "We have to kill the killer to save the innocent. We can bring happiness to people by destroying the LTTE" (17-18). Deegalle notes that, incredibly, Rathana is just a moderate in his party. Additionally, Buddhist monks aided the two violent insurrections led by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), a Marxist political group. The second insurrection from 1987-1989 was particularly violent, and possibly included young revolutionary monks assassinating established senior Buddhist monks. Despite its own terrorist actions, the JVP has developed as a legitimate parliamentary party largely based on its strong desire to eliminate the LTTE. Deegalle goes on to demonstrate how Sri Lanka continues to militarize rapidly, despite the defeat of the LTTE in 2009. The military is heavily involved throughout various sectors of Sri Lanka,

prompting the renaming of the Defense Ministry to the Defense and Urban Development Ministry. The success of the military in these endeavors led to the nomination of General Sarath Fonseka, leader of the war against the LTTE, who was backed by the JVP against then president Mahinda Rajapaksa. Deegalle discusses the aligning of the JVP with the opposition due to perceived threats to destroy Theravāda Buddhism that are believed to be sponsored by the current government.

The book's second chapter, "Military Temples and Saffron-Robed Soldiers: Legitimacy and the Securing of Buddhism in Southern Thailand," is the first of four chapters that focus on Thailand. Marte Nilsen begins the chapter with a compelling first-hand account of his visit to a temple in the Patani region of Thailand that he mistakes for a military camp due to the amount of soldiers and military vehicles stationed there. Seventy to eighty percent of the population in the Patani region identifies as Malay Muslim, and violence and unrest continue to escalate despite a history of religious diversity in the region. Nilsen lucidly discusses the two central reasons for these conflicts: the government's affiliation with Buddhism, and the Muslim separatist movements fighting against what they view as an attempt to assimilate Malay Muslims into the normative state culture. The Muslim insurgency targets important Buddhist temples (and monks) in the region, which have become symbols of state power. Nilsen writes that these attacks are "not only considered as an attack on Buddhism and one of its most cherished landmarks, it is also comprehended as an attack on the Thai nation, as religion (i.e., Buddhism) constitutes one of the three pillars of what is regarded as Thai. The holy trinity in Thai modern history, Nation, Religion, and Monarchy represents what is often referred to as Thainess, and is of great importance to the securing of Buddhism in the Patani region" (41). The lack of distinction between the state and Buddhism in Thailand has conflated the Thai and Buddhist. Thus, Buddhist temple grounds become *de facto* military bases. Soldiers go on paid leave to become ordained monks, while previously ordained monks take up arms to protect their temples. This heavy intermingling between the state and Buddhism only

perpetuates the problem for the separatist movements, and also alienates non-aggressive Muslim citizens in the region. Nilsen labels this phenomenon as “Dhammaraja-Buddhism,” in which the State and *Sangha* enter into a mutually beneficial reciprocal relationship that legitimates and propagates each side. Thus, in exchange for protection from the Muslim insurgents, the modern Thai *sangha* promotes state-approved Thai culture in conjunction with Buddhism. Furthermore, both sides see the necessity for violence against the insurgents threatening both State and *Sangha*, which only serves to further escalate these conflicts.

In the third chapter, “Reconsidering the Historiography of Modern Korean Buddhism: Nationalism and Identity of the Chogye Order of Korean Buddhism,” Cho Sungtaek calls for a more nuanced discussion of the reestablishment of the Chogye Order as a Korean Buddhist response to the end of the Japanese colonization. Cho reveals the teleology present in the nationalist narrative that promotes Korean Buddhism while denigrating Japanese Buddhism. The narrative also ignores the contributions of the modernist and reformist Korean Buddhists during the colonial period. Instead of continuing to focus on this simplistic and problematic narrative, Cho suggests that this history should be viewed within the framework of “dilemmas” that move beyond the dichotomy of anti-Japanese or pro-Japanese. The remainder of the chapter examines two of these dilemmas: modernization or Korean selfhood and the brighter past or the dismal present. Cho highlights key figures and moments on either side of the dilemma. Cho argues that the main benefit of the dilemmatic framework is that it does not ignore the influential events that led to Korean Buddhism in its current form, unlike the nationalist narrative.

Michael Jerryson authors the outstanding fourth chapter, “A Path to Militant Buddhism: Thai Buddhist Monks as Representations.” The chapter overlaps quite a bit with the Nilsen chapter, but whereas Nilsen focuses on temples, Jerryson turns his attention to the monks. Like Nilsen, Jerryson uses first-person experience to illustrate how seriously Thai citizens respond to the attacks and murders of Buddhist monks.

“Yes, monks have been killed, and if we find these murderers, we’ll shoot them on sight,” responds a local policeman to Jerryson’s questioning (76). Other examples of the brutal suppression tactics against the Malay Muslims are included as well. Jerryson argues that the identity of the Buddhist monk is a sacred, auspicious symbol to the dominant Thai culture. Ubiquitous representations of these monks highlight their sacrality and patriotism. Therefore, “a monk working to spread the Buddhist teachings is seen as serving his State *and nation*,” Jerryson writes (79). In some cases, monks are literally government ambassadors dispatched by the Queen Sirikit’s Volunteer Monk Program (VMP) to the South to represent and defend both State and *Sangha*. The state’s promotion of Buddhism only serves to breed intolerance of other religions. Jerryson concludes with a powerful example of how the media ignores the context of violence in order to expand the scope of a story to a religio-national threat, which also heightens the stakes. In agreement with Nilsen, Jerryson concludes that the intertwining of State and *Sangha* in Thailand is only increasing the militarism in the region and thus escalating the conflict.

In the fifth chapter, “Canonical Ambiguity and Differential Practices: Buddhism and Militarism in Contemporary Sri Lanka,” Iselin Frydenlund challenges the normative discourse of Buddhism as a non-violent religion. Frydenlund turns to monastic views of the last Sri Lankan peace process from 2000–2008 to demonstrate how the *sangha* is an advocate for the increased militarism of the State. Again, there is considerable overlap here with Deegalle’s first chapter; both articles point to the “just war” ideology that is implicit in the political rhetoric against the LTTE. However, Frydenlund delves further into the practices which Buddhist monks perform to aid the military. Like in Thailand, there is a symbiotic relationship between the military and local temples, though there are no military monks currently in Sri Lanka. Instead, monks serve as chaplains and offer blessings to the military soldiers. Each side is offering the other protection, be it physically or spiritually. Frydenlund argues that this is all possible due to the historical ambiguity of the Bud-

dhist canon: “While radical pacifism evidently is found in the canon, so also the assumption that violence belongs to a separate sphere of activity, that of the warrior caste (kings)” (112). The current militarism of Sri Lanka and Thailand should not be labeled as a deviant version of Buddhism, because even the Buddha recognized the dharma of the kings. Therefore, the idea that violence is somehow foreign to Buddhism should be dismissed in favor of a more descriptive discourse that reflects modern realities in Asia today.

Ian G. Baird provides a case study of indirect Buddhist involvement of violence in the sixth chapter, “The Monks and the Hmong: The Special Relationship between the Chao Fa and the Tham Krabok Buddhist Temple in Saraburi Province, Thailand.” The Tham Krabok Temple went above and beyond to provide support to Laotian Hmong insurgents from the 1970s to the 1990s. Baird chronicles how the abbot during this period, Luang Por Chamroon Parnchand, mixed his political anti-Communist views with Buddhist practice to skirt the Buddhist *Vinaya*. As many as 40,000 Hmong resided or were affiliated with the temple at its peak during the 1990s. The temple provided them relatively safe lodging either on the grounds or in nearby villages. In addition, the temple aided the immigration of over 15,000 Hmong to the United States. Most importantly, however, the temple was a *de facto* base of operations for the Hmong-led insurgency against the Laotian communist government. Baird is unable to state definitively, but evidence suggests that Luang Por Chamroon used his governmental connections in Thailand and China to provide the insurgents with weapons and training, which would be in direct opposition to the *Vinaya*. Regardless, through the tremendous support the temple gave the insurgency, they were indirectly involved in the violence across the border. Although currently the temple is not as involved in the Hmong community, Baird discusses how the Hmong still appreciate Tham Krabok, and that it may even become a Hmong pilgrimage destination in the near future.

Micah Auerback contributes the seventh chapter, “A Closer Look at Zen at War: The Battlefield Chaplaincy of Shaku Sōen in the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905),” which uses Shaku Sōen’s *Diary of Subjugating Demons* to illustrate the role of Zen chaplains during the Russo-Japanese war. Sōen was one of the highest ranking Rinzai clerics in Japan at the time, and eventually gained some notoriety in the West as well. Sōen framed the war as a cosmic battle in which the Japanese were compassionately destroying their enemies in the same way in which the Buddha worked against evil. During his sermons to the soldiers, Sōen taught that a clear and equanimous mind could thwart any enemy attack; unfortunately, his accounts of the devastation of war prove his teaching false. Captivating poems and excerpts from Sōen’s writings are included that describe scenes that led to his probable psychological trauma after the war. Auerback suggests that these vivid descriptions of the atrocities of war paired with the message of Sōen’s chaplaincy reflect the mind of a man struggling with his beliefs. Auerback writes, “How, these texts seem to ask, could a Buddhist aspiring to save all sentient beings urge them to die with selfless fortitude? In the next breath, they reply: how could he not?” (164). Chapter seven is an outstanding inclusion in the book due to the importance of Sōen’s first-person accounts of war.

In chapter eight, “The Question of Violence in Thai Buddhism,” Suwanna Satha-Anand highlights some pivotal moments in modern Thai history in which the *sangha* legitimated and justified militant action of the state. Satha-Anand is quick to mention that the State Buddhism in Thailand should be mostly characterized as non-violent throughout history; however, political tensions have led to violence, especially in the twentieth century. Siam joining World War I is the first moment examined. Trained and educated in Europe, King Rama VI of Siam was a strong supporter of the Allies during the war. In 1917, Siam sent over a thousand troops to the war, but the war had ended by the time of their arrival. Nevertheless, the King’s decision was challenged by Phra Thep Moli Sirichantoe, a high-ranking Thai monk. He labeled military knowledge and activity as bad knowledge that leads to corruption. The King’s uncle

was the Supreme Patriarch of the *sangha*, and he wrote a sermon rebuking Phra Thep Moli's challenge to the King. The Supreme Patriarch justifies Siam's involvement in the War citing the King's righteousness and sovereign duty to enact punishment against those who he finds deserving. The chapter shifts next to the 1970s, when a leading monk named Kittivuddho declared that "Killing Communists is not de-meritorious" (182). Satha-Anand reviews the fivefold reasoning behind Kittivudho's claim, which cite concepts of compassionate killing, utilitarianism, and Buddhist precedent as defense. Lastly, the chapter discusses the religious violence against non-Buddhists in the last few decades. Satha-Anand tracks this shift to ultra-conservatism as the possible result of a policy change to allow more oversight to the Ministry of Culture and Religion. While this would not seem to be an issue for the dominant religion in Thailand, religious minorities (e.g., the Muslims as seen in the Nilsen and Jerryson chapters) often become victimized due to policies that protect Thai culture, which is inextricably bound to Buddhism.

The ninth chapter, "Buddhism and the Justification of War with Focus on Chinese Buddhist History," mainly provides an overview of the many ways in which Buddhists have justified violence throughout history. Xue Yu's historical overview is strong, and the chapter introduces many basic ideas and texts in both the Theravāda and Mahāyāna traditions. It is disappointing that the chapter title indicates a focus on Chinese Buddhist history because it is really only discussed in a few paragraphs; in fact, Thai and Japanese history are given equal space. Brief examples are provided illustrating Chinese Buddhists supporting the military's efforts against the Japanese invasion. More insight into any one of these examples would have contributed greatly to the book. Regardless, the chapter does introduce some important concepts, and likely would have better success were it moved closer to the beginning of the book.

The last two chapters of the book make a great pairing; chapter ten, "Anti-War and Peace Movements among Japanese Buddhists after

the Second World War,” discusses the perspective of the colonizers, while chapter eleven, “Violent Buddhism: Korean Buddhists and the Pacific War, 1937–1945,” provides the voice of the colonized. Micah Auerback provides a lucid translation of Kawase Takaya’s work in chapter ten, which begins with an overview of Japanese Buddhism during World War II. Takaya demonstrates how, in the same way Western colonists used Christianity, Buddhism was a tool for the Japanese imperial forces. A Buddhist Federation was established that disseminated imperial propaganda in their teachings and supported missionary excursions to spread the propaganda to the colonized. The majority of the chapter, however, discusses how some Buddhists were on the front lines of the peace movement after the war. Intriguingly, Takaya points out that only a handful of Japanese Buddhist clerics in the peace movements were actually from major Buddhist denominations, and even then, their message was rarely taught within their denominations due to political detachment that resonated across post-war Japan. Instead, two new religious offshoots of Nichirenism, Risshō Kōseikai and Nipponzan Myōhōji, have taken the lead. Takaya discusses the charismatic founders of each movement as an advantage to responding to the war and leading the peace movement. Meanwhile, the clerics from the larger denominations were somewhat paralyzed from a lack of self-reflection about their role as aggressors in the war, or felt victimized by the government.

In the final chapter, Vladimir Tikhonov recounts the varied responses of Korean Buddhists during Japanese colonization. In addition to pairing well with the previous chapter, Tikhonov’s research advances Cho Sungtaek’s call for a more nuanced discussion of Korean Buddhism in relation to the Japanese colonization. Although the Japanese allowed some freedoms, they tightly controlled the leadership and messages of Korean temples and monasteries. Korean Buddhists made “Faustian bargains” with the Japanese in which they were granted more socio-economic autonomy in exchange for loyalty to the Japanese colonial agenda. Thus, Buddhist clerics conveyed patriotic zeal, collected monetary donations, and led prayer meetings that benefited the Japanese mil-

itary. Toward the end of the war as the Japanese began conscripting the Koreans into the military, Korean Buddhists offered justifications for killing and dying on behalf of the “imperial cause” (233). Tikhonov highlights the discourse offered by the Korean Buddhists in defense of their decisions. He concludes with a discussion of how easily the Buddhist community shifted the colonial narrative to apply to the “northern Communist devils” during the Korean War, and how closely Korean Buddhism and the military continue to be aligned.

Co-editor Torkel Brekke authors the conclusion, and again repeats the call to eliminate the discourse of “peaceful Buddhism,” especially in comparison to similarly misguided discourses like “violent Islam.” Afterward, Brekke offers a summary of each chapter and a recap of all the themes apparent throughout the book, many of which have already been mentioned above: the complexity of Buddhism in modern Asia; the appropriation of Buddhist discourse by state leaders to legitimize violence and war; and the manipulation of Buddhist narratives and figures as symbols to intensify threats and expand the scope of conflicts toward the cosmological.

Buddhism and Violence has many strong chapters, and definitely accomplished its stated goal of demonstrating how, like other religions, Buddhism does not always refrain from conflict. Although the book’s simple title definitely serves its purpose in that it will attract readers, it should be amended to note the key role that nationalism serves in each chapter of the book. The central role of nationalism and Buddhist violence throughout the book may leave its readers wondering what Buddhist violence looks like apart from nationalism, if it exists at all. As the first sentence of the preface indicates, the book is a result of a conference on Buddhism, nationalism, and militarism. It is arguably a more apparent theme in the book than violence, which is of course featured in the title. Additionally, many of the chapters overlap to such a degree that co-authored chapters should have been considered. This could have greatly strengthened some chapters, while also benefiting the reader.

Moreover, the space gained from co-authored chapters would have permitted discussion of Burma, Tibet, and other regions that were ignored. Although China is the supposed feature of chapter nine, it is really only discussed in a few paragraphs. These and other omissions are glaring when considering the four chapters on Thailand. It is also worth noting that there is no discussion of self-inflicted violence, which has always been and remains to be an important facet of Buddhist violence. Lastly, as is often the case with books that evolve out of conferences, there is some unevenness with the quality of the writing and research. Unfortunately, many typographical errors are included throughout the book as well.

Nevertheless, *Buddhism and Violence* is a mostly wonderful collection of essays that provide a great introduction to both recent and ongoing Buddhist conflicts in Asia. The book is a benefit to the field, and will provide a great starting point for scholars looking for more on this subject. Many of the chapters are accessible enough to be included in upper-level undergraduate courses. The book will certainly challenge the preconceived notions of many of its readers. The authors of this book clearly demonstrate that Buddhism should not be set apart when discussing the issue of religious violence.