

Journal of Buddhist Ethics
ISSN 1076-9005
<http://www.buddhistethics.org/>
Volume 18, 2011

Buddhist Warfare

Reviewed by Henry M. Schliff

University of Colorado, Boulder
henry.schliff@colorado.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:
editor@buddhistethics.org

A Review of *Buddhist Warfare*

Henry M. Schliff¹

Buddhist Warfare. Edited by Michael K. Jerryson and Mark Juergensmeyer. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010, xi + 257 pages, ISBN: 978-0195394839 (paper); US \$29.95.

Today the public sphere is filled with sound bites and opinion pieces that persistently reduce religious traditions to a single unifying principle. A common trope from popular media says that Buddhism is a “peaceful religion,” but *Buddhist Warfare*, edited by Michael K. Jerryson and Mark Juergensmeyer, does not succumb to such credulity.² Rather, the editors of this volume present a collection of essays that offers a more realistic picture of the historical role of Buddhist institutions, including the often-incendiary effect of Buddhist organizations upon state politics. Yet this collection of essays is not directed at general occurrences of violence in Buddhism. Rather it examines specific historical and contemporary instances in which war has been condoned or overlooked, and where the concomitant atrocities of warfare have been re-scripted by Buddhist institutions and collectives. In point of fact, in his introduction Michael Jerryson writes that the foremost motivation for compiling this book was, “the goal of disrupting the social imaginary that holds Buddhist traditions to be exclusively pacifistic and exotic” (3). True to this intention, *Buddhist Warfare* presents its audience with

¹ University of Colorado, Boulder. Email: henry.schliff@colorado.edu

² This review considers a selection of essays from *Buddhist Warfare*. This was done intentionally to give the reader the broadest possible view of the text in a brief synopsis. Articles not mentioned here were not omitted due to lack of merit.

startling eruptions in a historical landscape presumed to be quaintly pastoral and utterly benign.

From the start the reader is offered sobering images of doctrinal responses to social instability that place political expediency and institutional survival above strict adherence to normative Buddhist ethics. Beginning the series of eight essays is Paul Demieville's unique historical study, "Le bouddhisme et la guerre" (Buddhism and War), originally published as a postscript to G. Renondeau's 1957 work, *L'Histoire des moines-guerriers du Japon*. Focusing its analysis on East Asia, the tone of the text sounds dated at times and the author on several occasions makes assertions that might strike the reader as problematic. For example, Demieville asserts that Indian and Tibetan Tantric Buddhist practices are a historical aberration or "invasion" (38). Setting aside such remarks as products of a certain bias within the academy of the time, Demieville's survey is important in unveiling the little known history of Buddhism's involvement in warfare and violence across China, Korea, Japan. The author also briefly delves into Tibet's checkered, sectarian political past. Addressing these countries as well as others, the remaining essays in the book provide us with a vast topography of Buddhist history throughout East, South and Southeast Asia—in all its complexity.

For pinpoint examples of Tibet's warring history one should turn to Derek F. Maher's "Sacralized Warfare: The Fifth Dalai Lama and the Discourse of Religious Violence" (77-90), which provides a careful Foucaultian analysis of the divergence between historical record and rhetoric. Maher's essay examines the manner in which the Fifth Dalai Lama, Ngag-dbang bLo-bzang rGya-mtsho (1617-1682) waged a war through violent campaigns and various forms of coercion. Maher engages in a methodical comparative analysis of extant records from the time of the Fifth Dalai Lama, including *Song of the Queen of Spring, Good Silk*

Cloth, and the *Sealed and Secret Biography*. The first of these texts demonstrates how the Dalai Lama was able to discursively construct the narrative history of Tibet in such a way as to exonerate himself from any culpability in colluding with Mongolian forces to brutally suppress bKa'-brgyud and Bon opposition to dGe-lugs-pa hegemony. Further steps were taken to polish his image in the *Good Silk Path*, an autobiographical account that was not published till a decade after his death, at which point political circumstances were sufficiently settled to allow the discursive engines of "truth" to further cement a favorable history of his reign. Within these treatises we see emphatic assertions of the Dalai Lama as an incarnation of Avalokiteśvara, a point that had not been previously emphasized. This soteriological authoring established bLo-bzang rGya-mtsho's authority as the compassionate agent of the state and a necessarily infallible voice for virtue (85). Maher's essay provides a clear analysis of how Buddhists have historically used discourse for the production of truth—and how political rhetoric and religious doctrine can imbue the powerful with virtue and thereby render all opposition anathema.

The exacting historical monograph by Xue Yu entitled "Buddhists in China during the Korean War" shows how the Buddhist ideal of expressing loving-kindness in the face of violence was corroded by steady capitulation to the Maoist state's calls for unquestioning nationalism. Yu argues that the history of the Korean War shows that "it seems impossible for Buddhists to substitute their precepts of nonviolence for their individual responsibility to defend their nation" (141). His argument is based on citations of popular scripture that insist individuals must meet violence and hatred with loving-kindness. Despite such doctrinal arguments most Chinese Buddhists rallied round the Communist Party, which had sounded the nationalist battle cry and was calling for the destruction of U.S. forces in Korea (141). Yu provides ample evidence for Buddhist involvement in the Chinese war effort,

including instances where leaders of the Chinese Buddhist community urged violence through scriptural justification. One of the most prominent advocates for Buddhist involvement in the war was the Venerable Juzan, who insisted that Śākyamuni Buddha was himself a nationalist and that, based on certain doctrines of the Yogācāra school, killing was permissible or even advisable if one could thereby liberate beings from *saṃsāra* (141-42).

Yu's essay provides a valuable analysis of the workings of institutional Buddhism in China after 1949, when all governmental support had dried up. The one problematic aspect of Yu's argument is that it is at times overstated. At one point Yu comments that it "seems impossible" for Buddhists (on the whole) to "substitute their precepts of nonviolence for their individual responsibility to defend their nation" (141). The author's position regarding the institutional authorities of Chinese Buddhism and their sympathetic responses to vitriolic nationalism between 1951 and 1953 is undeniable, and is supported by the record of Buddhist networks funding the Chinese military. However, this hardly seems to warrant the conclusion that the actions of Buddhists and Buddhist institutions in one historical time period reflect Buddhist behavior historically and cross-culturally.

Most of the articles in *Buddhist Warfare* are textual studies; an exception is Daniel W. Kent's article, "Onward Buddhist Soldiers: Preaching to the Sri Lankan Army" (157-77). This piece on soldiers in the Sri Lankan military is entirely ethnographic. Rather than attempting to elicit a Buddhist justification for war from his informants, Kent inquires about their moral and religious concerns regarding war. Kent argues that scholars should begin to consider how Buddhists interpret, reconcile, and otherwise contend with their actions in wartime rather than always being concerned with religious justification. In this regard, he concludes that members of the Buddhist military in Sri Lanka are not

at all concerned with justification but rather with how their intentionality can stave off the inevitably harmful karmic consequences of their actions (159). Kent also considers the ethical bind of monastics who are compelled to speak to the needs of their followers and yet can be drawn into sponsoring state violence. The value of Kent's article is that he does not attempt to dismiss Buddhist involvement in war as incidental to the broad arch of Buddhist history but treats the matter directly, without excuses or condemnation.

Several essays in this volume offer minimally problematic issues. Demieville's occasionally Eurocentric slant and Yu's apparent overstatements are two examples mentioned already. However, considering *Buddhist Warfare* as a whole I only have one significant criticism. This is the inclusion of Brian Daizen Victoria's essay, "A Buddhological Critique of 'Soldier-Zen' in Wartime Japan" (105-30). The problem I see with including Victoria's article has little to do with its quality or the depth of knowledge it expresses nor the fascinating nature of its subject matter. Rather this essay struck me as incongruous with every other essay in the text in terms of methodology. To use Victoria's own words, he has "left the realm of 'objective scholarship' to pursue a partisan agenda" (105). True to this claim, the bulk of Victoria's article traces a trajectory of progressively essentialist language that by implication would invalidate not only the heterodoxical views expressed by Zen militarists during World War II but also nullifies many orthodox systems of Mahāyānist philosophy that developed in Northern India, Nepal, and Tibet.

For example, Victoria writes, "The only legitimate Buddhist use of *samādhi* power is the facilitation of true spiritual growth and understanding" (121). This assertion presupposes a degree of simplicity in defining 'true spiritual understanding' when viewing the wide horizon of Buddhist praxis that raises significant problems of 'authenticity.' Even

more troublesome is Victoria's subsequent claim that, "perhaps... the entire Mahāyāna school, has failed to recognize the danger of *misusing* meditation power" (122). I would argue that such a stance in fact extends beyond a partisan agenda, which might call upon scholars and theologians to answer a perceived need for reform within a particular collective of Buddhist sects or within a particular doctrinal arena (e.g. Zen, Cittamātra, and so on). Victoria's presentation speaks rather as a categorical indictment of the whole of Mahāyāna Buddhism. Analogically, this would be like a Dominican priest arguing that *all* Catholics regardless of their historical, cultural, or doctrinal orientation had fundamentally misunderstood the concept of the Holy Spirit. The methodological error appears in Victoria's argument when he attempts to use militant Zen in the context of wartime Japan to illustrate what he sees as pervasive doctrinal errors throughout the history of Mahāyāna Buddhism. This reformist approach noticeably contrasts with the other essay in *Buddhist Warfare*, which consistently maintain a high level of academic rigor regardless of any subjective biases.

Michael K. Jerryson's, "Militarizing Buddhism" is the final essay in this collection. The article is an ethnographic survey investigating cooperation between the Thai military and certain monastic institutions. These awkward and volatile situations have resulted in Buddhist soldiers being ordained while on active duty (184) and the housing of soldiers within monastic compounds that has led to the fortification of many Southern Thai monasteries (197-200). Though such practices are doctrinally abhorrent to a longstanding institution of peaceful monastics adhering to strict *vinaya* codes, such clandestine ordinations and the obvious activities of structural militarization regularly occur and have in Jerryson's words, become a "public secret" known by all but never spoken of (185). Jerryson's work elucidates a theme common to many of the essays in this volume: that Buddhist institutions have often colluded with militarist regimes through a need for self-preservation. The

dangerous counterpoint to this, however, is that as Buddhist institutions have militarized they have incurred the anger of Muslim groups in Thailand threatened by the site of military barracks within monastic compounds (204-05).

The afterthoughts of Bernard Faure address in concise terms the problem of accepting at face value that “Buddhism” is a religion of peace. Using Faure’s own words, the essays in this volume seem to begin with the assumption that “Buddhist teaching fundamentally condemns killing” (212). As Faure rightly notes, such a stance assumes an essential and persistent Buddhist doctrine, normative to all cultural and historical locations. An epilogue that questions the assumptions of a work that is intent upon questioning the assumptions of our cultural milieu provides a poignant conclusion to this text. In conclusion, the collected articles that compose *Buddhist Warfare* offer up a battle cry for those who believe in considering religious traditions for what they are, not as idealized fabrications devoid of the rough edges that constitute reality.