

Buddhism and Violence

Intellectual Output 2 Unit V



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3	<i>Giovanni Bulian, Ca' Foscari University of Venice</i>	17/09/2018

Introduction

The idea that Buddhism is a peaceful tradition is commonly accepted: since its diffusion in the modern West, Buddhism has always had a special place in the hierarchy of religions, precisely because of its intrinsic reference to non-violence (*ahimsā*). Buddhism is generally considered a non-fundamentalist and pacifist religious tradition that deviates from violence, war, militarism and generally from any aggressive ideological position. Such a stereotyped interpretation has led to the consideration that the rejection of violence in Buddhism makes its religious followers pacifists and Asian societies are often expected to conform to the modern Western standards of peaceful behavior. The idea that “Buddhism is a peaceful religion” is based on a **selective reading and understanding** of this tradition, **focusing on its philosophical-ethical aspects and on the practice of meditation** (which allegedly should bring on a peaceful attitude), ignoring other ritual, doctrinal and socio-political aspects.

More information on:

- [Buddhist Practice \(1\). Meditation and Transfer of Merit](#)
- [Buddhist Practice \(2\). Funerary Rites, Feasts, Exorcisms](#)

Such an image is nowadays widespread in the world, especially in Western culture, thanks also to mass media broadcasting and to the New Age culture that have assimilated Buddhism to the pacifist countercultural movements of the 1960s. However, this idea of Buddhism – often associated with so-called “positive Orientalism”, based on the idea that Asian religions are less aggressive and more spiritual than Christian teachings – is challenged by various historical episodes in which Buddhism has been implicated in political and ideological wars. Also from a doctrinal point of view there are some contradictions: ideological justifications for not contradicting the basic moral principle of *ahimsā* and to support doctrinally the use of violence have often been sought by interpreting the teachings reported in the *sutra*. For example, “preventive murder” is thought to prevent the victim from committing other crimes that would encase him in the cycle of rebirths (*saṃsāra*). From this perspective, violence must be considered an instrument of salvation and liberation which may also be present in Buddhist ritual activities, particularly in **Tantric (Vajrayana) Buddhism** in which magical practices were used to symbolically fight demons and enemies of the **Dharma** (i.e. Buddhism teachings). Other doctrinal justification for violence can be seen in certain writings of **Zen practitioners during the Second World War**: illumination can be obtained also on the battlefield, through the selfless devotion to one’s own nation. Similarly, Buddhism has also been used as an **instrument** of political engineering **for collective identity affirmation and nationalism**.

As a final remark, it must be noted that, notwithstanding such a presence of violence, **it is incorrect to speak about ‘Buddhist fundamentalism’**. Fundamentalism is marked by strict literalism, since interpretation outside the literal meaning of sacred texts is seen as corruption. In Buddhism, however, the **various possible interpretations** of sacred texts (which are way more numerous than the cases in Christianity or Islam) is made **possible and sanctioned by the doctrine of “Skillful Means”**: the Buddha himself taught different doctrines, because he adapted his sermons to the level of the audience; this means that the

existence of different interpretations and teachings is widely accepted as a positive value.

More information on:

- [Buddhism and modernity](#)
(esp. Source 3 “A Zen master’s pro-war thoughts” and relative analysis in Teacher’s section)
- [Main doctrinal traditions \(3\).Vajrayana \(Tantric Buddhism\)](#)
- [Main doctrinal traditions \(2\). Mahayana developments](#)
(esp. the paragraphs on the concept of “**Skillful Means**”, and the “Intercultural and interdisciplinary information” paragraph)

Case study 1 – *Sōhei*, the Japanese warrior monks

Sōhei (“soldier monk”) is a term used in historiography to refer to certain types of Japanese paramilitary groups associated with Buddhist temples during the feudal period. The figure of the *sōhei* was born approximately in the 9th century and lasted until 1580, when the *shōgun* understood that their existence was a serious political threat. To achieve a political-military project aimed at the reunification of Japan, Oda Nobunaga, and later Hideyoshi Toyotomi, eradicated the armies from the monasteries. The **doctrinal base that allowed the monks to become warriors** can be found in the *Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra* (Sutra Mahayana of the Great Pass beyond suffering), a text derived from the **Mahāyāna Branch** of Buddhism, which explicitly invited lay people, and not only, to **take weapons against the enemies of Dharma**. However, it should be kept in mind that the *Sōhei* monks, who belonged to different Buddhist schools (in particular, the Tendai, Shingon and Pure Land schools), fought each other for political rather than spiritual reasons.

More information on:

- [Main doctrinal traditions \(2\). Mahayana developments](#)
- [Buddhism in Japan](#)

Case study 2 – Aum Shinrikyō

The attack on the Tōkyō subway system was a terrorist gas attack on March 20, 1995 which was carried out by the religious sect of Aum Shinrikyō (“Ohm teaching of the Truth”) inspired by the founder Shōkō Asahara. Aum Shinrikyō was a new Japanese religious movement whose doctrine was based on Buddhism, Hinduism, Japanese popular religious tradition, and Christian esotericism. The attack took place through the use of sarin gas and caused 12 deaths and over 6,200 cases of intoxication. It is considered the most serious attack in Japan since the end of the Second World War. The **ideological justification** for this criminal action was that, according to the members of the Aum Shinrikyō, **the act of violence itself had to be used to eliminate the negative Karma** of the people who lived in this corrupt world. Partly taking up the tantric teachings of Tibetan Buddhism – for example, the *poa* ritual, which consisted of guiding the souls of the dead into higher spiritual realms –, the ultimate mission of the Aum Shinrikyō was to enhance its salvation activity in order to

transform the world spiritually. For this reason, Asahara and his disciples never considered themselves as criminals or murderers but saviors, highly trained in esoteric doctrines, whose mission was to eradicate bad karma and guide human souls to a better spiritual realm.



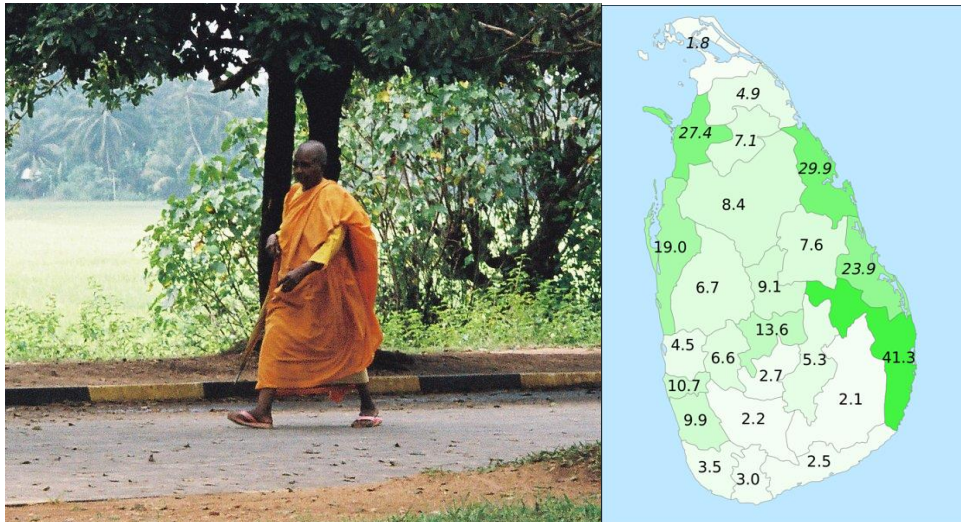
Anti-AumShinrikyō demonstrators in Japan. Source: Wikicommons

More information on:

- [Main doctrinal traditions \(3\).Vajrayana \(Tantric Buddhism\)](#)

Case study 3 –Buddhism and the collective identity in Sri Lanka

From 1983 to 2009 Sri Lanka was involved in a bloody civil war between the Tamil Tigers – a militant communist and nationalist Tamil group present in the northeastern area of Sri Lanka who wanted an independent state – and the Sri Lanka government, which exploited Buddhism for political ends. The **instrumental use of Buddhism for nationalist political ends** was based above all on the fact that most of the population is Buddhist: most of the local population is Buddhist (about 70%), while the remaining population is made up of Tamils and Muslims. The clear demographic preponderance of Buddhist believers has led to the development of extremist political organizations such as the "Buddhist power force" whose leaders are Buddhist monks. This extremist organization has in many cases incited the crowds to destroy mosques and burn houses and shops belonging to Muslims. The Government suggested that the integrity of the nation be guaranteed only by preserving its territorial unity and that the politics of identity must be projected into **an idea of the sacred space of the nation**. Through the active preaching of Buddhist monks, the Government tried to mobilize the Sinhalese population towards **rediscovering the fundamental (Buddhist) roots of the Sinhalese identity**: in other words, the Sinhalese must rediscover their heroic past, with the models of warriors who in ancient times defended the Buddhist faith. Through the religious narrative of the mythical unity of the nation, the political forces of the government attempted to impede the internal division of Sri Lanka by demonizing the Tamil adversary seen as the enemy to be fought.



Left: A Buddhist monk in Sri Lanka Right: distribution of Islam in Sri Lanka, the figures shown is the percentage of Muslims in the districts.
Source: Wikicommons.



Tamil protesters in England. Source: wikicommons

Case study 4 – Myanmar, nationalism and Buddhist extremism

As in the case of Sri Lanka, Buddhism has also been the object of political instrumentalization in Myanmar where, from 1988 to 2011, the **military regime of Burma forced the Buddhist conversion of ethnic minorities as part of its campaign of political and cultural assimilation**. By promoting Burmese Buddhist nationalism as a cultural ideology and as an instrument of political legitimization, the military regime attempted to bring a religious syncretism between Buddhism and its totalitarian ideology. In 2007, the strong political pressures triggered a series of protests and pacifist political demonstrations led by political activists and students including women and Buddhist monks. These protests were collectively called the **Saffron Revolution**, which took the form of a nonviolent resistance campaign. However, Myanmar had now become a stronghold of Buddhist nationalism led by

intransigent nationalist monks: at the beginning in 2012, the so-called “969” movement led by Buddhist monks had helped to create anti-Islamic nationalist movements urging the Buddhists to boycott Muslim communities. Among the ancient militant organizations is the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) to which many terrorist acts, associated with the 969 nationalist movement, have been attributed particularly in Myanmar and neighboring nations.

More information on:

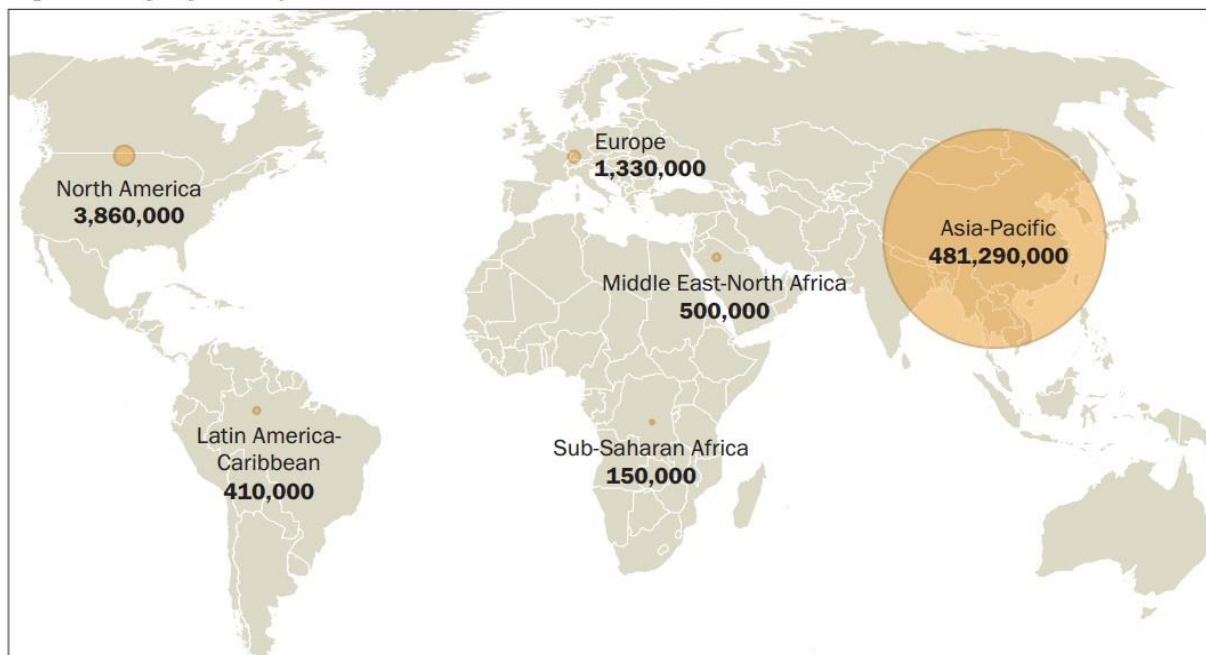
- [Buddhism in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia](#)



Left: Protest against Burmese military regime in 2007, Portland, Oregon. Author: Jan Van Raay. Source: Wikicommons
Right: Monks protesting in Burma, September 2007

Regional Distribution of Buddhists

Population by region as of 2010



Present-day diffusion of Buddhism throughout the world. Source: PewResearch Center