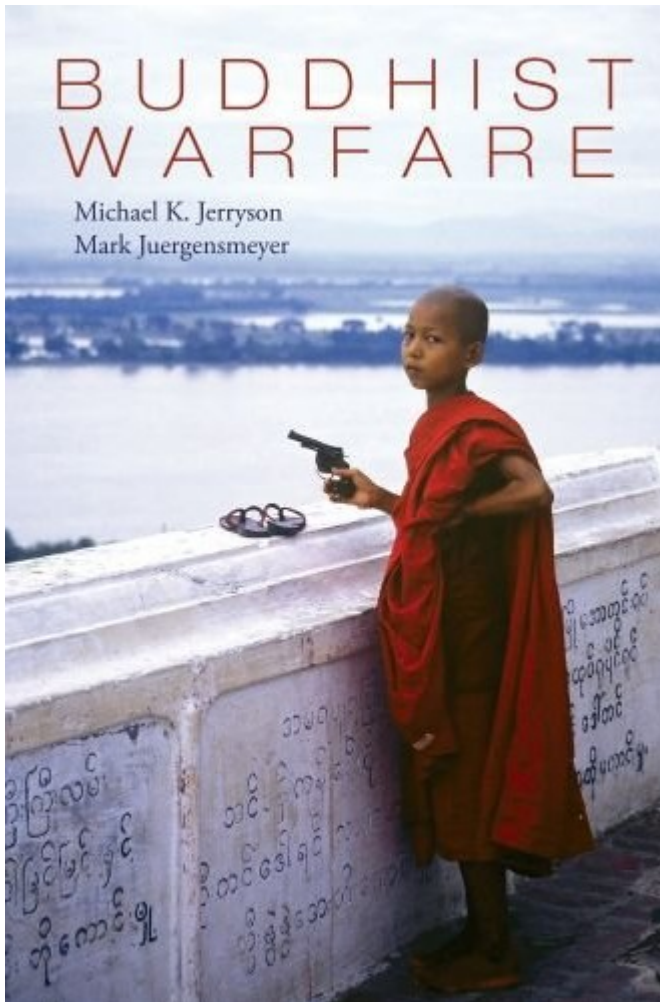


If you meet the Buddha

By [David Heim](#)

October 15, 2010

In Review



Buddhist Warfare

by Michael K. Jerryson and Mark Juergensmeyer, eds.
Oxford University Press

Generalizing

about a religion is a dangerous thing. A generalization that had seemed safe was that Buddhism is a peaceful religion. It's all about compassion, isn't it—about renouncing desire and learning to empty yourself?

Yes,

but that very project can turn violent. The Buddhist teaching of "no self" can be used to justify killing the no self in front of you. Historically it has been used in precisely that way, according to essays in the new book *Buddhist Warfare*.

The authors cite a

17-century Zen master who wrote: "The uplifted sword has no will of its own, it is all of emptiness. It is like a flash of lightning. The man who is about to be struck down is also of emptiness, and so is the one who wields the sword."

What's most shocking, as reviewer Katherine

Wharton [points](#)

[out](#), is not that Buddhists have engaged in sustained violence. It's that the killing has been defended with "with detailed reference to the Buddha's central philosophical tenets."

It's

a reminder that all religions have distorted ways of being practiced. And a reminder that the connection between a particular religious belief and a particular practice is not always obvious—or exactly what the religion textbook writers say it is.