

**WARTIME NATIONALISM AND PEACEFUL REPRESENTATION:  
ISSUES SURROUNDING THE MULTIPLE ZENS OF MODERN JAPAN**

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The term “Zen” often conjures up images of hermitages on misty mountains, Zen eccentrics tearing up scriptures and paradoxical utterances aimed at triggering Enlightenment in the confused. Modern representatives of Zen have portrayed Enlightenment as transcendence of the ordinary human ego and an attainment of wisdom and non-violent compassion. When one looks at Japanese Buddhism over the past century, however, one encounters contrasting images. From the Meiji Restoration (1868) until the end of the Second World War, Buddhist institutions assisted Japan’s nation-building and expansionist imperialism, earning them the label, “Imperial Way Buddhism” (*Kôdô Bukkyô*), inclusive of “Imperial Way Zen” (*Kôdô Zen*).

Zen and other established Buddhist sects contributed to the Japanese war effort in a number of ways. They participated in propaganda campaigns; formed patriotic groups; encouraged lay Japanese to fight in the war, make sacrifices on the home front, and buy war bonds; made rounds of “patriotic alms begging;” donated funds for the construction of warplanes; ran training programs for officers; chanted *sutras* and performed ceremonies to promote Japanese victory; assisted the families of soldiers killed overseas; served as military chaplains; and propagandized in colonies and occupied areas, particularly by helping colonial officials in their efforts to “pacify” (*senbu*) those areas and turn colonized Asians into imperial subjects.<sup>1</sup>

Buddhist nationalists also lent ideological support to the reigning imperial ideology and the warfare it justified. For example, throughout WWII, in sermons, short essays for newsletters, and journal articles Buddhist leaders advanced a range of arguments legitimating Japanese

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<sup>1</sup> I outline Japanese Buddhist participation in the war effort in an unpublished piece, “Buddhism and the ‘Spiritual Mobilization’ of Japan, 1912-1945.” Also, see Kashiwahara Yôsen, *Nihon bukkô-shi, kindai* (Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kobunkan, 1990); Yoshida Kyôichi, *Nihon no kindai-shakai to bukkô* (Tokyo: Hyôronsha, 1970); and Brian Victoria, *Zen at War* (New York: Weatherhill, 1997).

militarism. Two main arguments were that, 1) the war was an expression of compassion, and 2) self-sacrifice during the war was a way for Japanese to repay their debt to the emperor. With the second argument, they linked the largely Confucian idea of the benevolent emperor with Buddhist formulations of *on*, the blessings one receives and the indebtedness one incurs because of those blessings.<sup>2</sup> In this way they aligned a central Buddhist doctrine with the crux of the imperial ideology: a benevolent emperor bestowing blessings on grateful and obedient subjects who, in turn, are willing to sacrifice themselves for the emperor in repayment of their debt to him.<sup>3</sup>

But why is it that ostensibly wise, compassionate, non-violent Zen Buddhists would lend their support to Japanese imperialism and even justify the killing it entailed? In his controversial book, *Zen at War*, Brian Victoria argues that the historical relationship between Zen and *bushidō* (the warrior ethos or code), or what has been termed the “unity of Zen and the sword” (*zenken-ichinyo*), “is the key to understanding the eventual emergence of ‘imperial-state Zen’ (*kōkoku Zen*).”<sup>4</sup>

While Victoria is correct in arguing that Zen has had numerous connections to samurai, their swords, and their ethos, and that this relationship was championed by certain modern Zen masters and writers like Nitobe Inazō (1862-1933), one must ask whether that relationship is “the key” to the emergence of nationalist Zen in the 20th century. From the thirteenth century to the Meiji Restoration in 1868, Zen did indeed maintain close ties with the samurai and influence their ethos,<sup>5</sup> but Victoria does not provide adequate evidence that it was the Zen-*bushidō* connection per se, as opposed to other factors, that constituted the main cause of Zen nationalism

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<sup>2</sup> In the Buddhist context, the four main *on* (*shion*) are the blessings one receives from 1) one’s parents, 2) the Buddha, 3) the ruler, and 4) all sentient beings.

<sup>3</sup> For an expanded discussion of these ideological moves, see my article, “The Mobilization of Doctrine: Buddhist Contributions to Imperial Ideology in Modern Japan,” in *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 26:1/2 (Spring 1999).

<sup>4</sup> Victoria, *Zen at War*, p. 95.

<sup>5</sup> In his book, though, Victoria tends to construe *bushidō* as more Zen and less thoroughly Confucian than it actually were.

during the war.<sup>6</sup> And at one point he even undermines his causal argument when he writes, “what did post-Meiji Zen adherents find in the relationship between Zen and *Bushidô* that justified their own fervent support of Japan’s war effort?”<sup>7</sup> With that statement Victoria shifts from viewing the historical Zen-*bushidô* connection as the main cause of Zen’s support for the war to viewing that connection as grist for ex post facto justifications of that support. Moreover, Victoria allows for causal factors broader than the Zen-*bushidô* connection when, in raising the “question of the doctrinal and historical relationship between Buddhism and the state,” he mentions the broader historical pattern of “nation-protecting Buddhism” (*gokoku Bukkyô*).<sup>8</sup> Granted, the Zen connection to samurai and *bushidô* did constitute one dimension of “nation-protecting Buddhism,” but, as I will outline later in this article, there were larger and arguably more important social, economic, and political dimensions as well.

One of Victoria’s mentors, Zen scholar Ichikawa Hakugen (1902-1986), offered a different explanation. While noting historical connections between Zen and the samurai, Ichikawa focused on the non-dual epistemology of Zen, especially the notions of “becoming one with things” (*narikiru*) and “accepting and according with one’s circumstances” (*ninnun*). Insofar as one is steeped in Zen, “One tends to engage in a way of living that does not fight the pre-existing actuality pressing upon oneself but, contrariwise, accommodates it.”<sup>9</sup> To Ichikawa, this accommodationist, non-conflictual approach has led Zen to accept socio-economic conditions, submit to the government, and, especially at the time of WWII, get co-opted by those in power, all the while lacking any basis on which to resist or criticize.<sup>10</sup>

But to what extent does the Zen epistemology account for Zen nationalism during the war? Even allowing for the kind of epistemology

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<sup>6</sup> For a detailed analysis of Victoria’s arguments, see my forthcoming article in *The Eastern Buddhist*, tentatively entitled “Protecting the Dharma and Protecting the Country: The Continuing Question of Buddhist War Responsibility.”

<sup>7</sup> Victoria, *Zen at War*, p. 95.

<sup>8</sup> Victoria, *Zen at War*, p. 157.

<sup>9</sup> Ichikawa Hakugen, *Ichikawa Hakugen Chosakushû*, Vol. 3 (Kyoto: Hôzôkan, 1993), p. 101.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124.

Ichikawa sketches,<sup>11</sup> how could we measure the degree to which Zen leaders actually experienced things in that mode, especially when it entails subjective states said to be beyond “words and letters?” And even if many Zen leaders did in fact see reality in that characteristically Zen way, did that epistemology, as opposed to other possible factors, constitute the major cause of Zen nationalism? Might there not be other, less mystical reasons?

I argue that while the Zen link to *bushidō* and Zen’s epistemology do help us account for the religion’s jump onto the bandwagon of modern Japanese imperialism, we can find a better explanation in Zen institutional history, especially since the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>12</sup>

From the time of its introduction to Japan in the sixth century, Buddhism has usually functioned interdependently with those in political power, whether aristocrats, the imperial family, warrior governments, shoguns, oligarchs in the late nineteenth century, or military leaders during WWII. With few exceptions, Buddhists and rulers have cultivated a mutually beneficial and mutually legitimating relationship. This symbiosis has taken the form of patronage offered by those in power and, in a quid pro quo arrangement, Buddhist support for the “state.” Buddhists offered their support ritually by performing ceremonies and chanting sutras deemed to protect the ruler and his realm; institutionally with temples playing administrative roles for the state; and doctrinally through political readings of key Buddhist doctrines. One can safely construe the “nationalism” if not militarism of modern Buddhist institutions as a continuation of this traditional symbiotic relationship between Buddhism and the government.

The contours of and motivations for twentieth century Buddhist support for the state were further shaped by the particular historical context of modern Japanese Buddhism. From the 1860s, the institutional security of Zen and other Buddhist sects was threatened and in some cases undermined by a string of crises: the lingering effects of the loss of land, buildings, and revenue in the early Meiji period; the decline of the parishioner system (*danka seido*), which had given Buddhism a substantial economic and social niche during the Tokugawa period (1600-1867); doctrinal struggles; the loss of parishioners to “new religions” (*shink-shuky*) as urbanization from the late nineteenth century weakened traditional

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<sup>11</sup> Many scholars would not accept Ichikawa’s portrayal of Zen.

<sup>12</sup> Though Victoria and Ichikawa acknowledge this causal factor in their writings, they subordinate it to their central arguments concerning the Zen-*bushidō* connection and the Zen epistemology.

linkages between the laity and family temples in rural areas and led to anomie in dislocated, disenfranchised industrial workers; government restrictions on Buddhism in the 1930s; external criticism by Marxists and Shinto ideologues; and internal criticism by a host of reformers since the Meiji Restoration.

The 1920s provided one of several opportunities for overcoming those setbacks. At that time Buddhist sects aligned with the state in a shared adversarial relationship with new religious movements and communism,<sup>13</sup> as seen when, for example, Buddhist leaders collaborated with officials in the Home Ministry and Ministry of Education to run edification (*kyōka*) campaigns to eradicate “dangerous thought.” Much to the chagrin of established Buddhist sects, new religious movements and communism were siphoning off parishioners; and from the state’s perspective, they were lifting up objects of allegiance and ultimacy that were transcendent of the emperor and constituting mass movements the state could not control.<sup>14</sup> Later, in the 1930s and early 1940s, though under increasingly tight government control, Buddhist leaders, by cooperating with the war effort in the ways sketched above, could further protect and strengthen their sects.

In short, while recognizing the possible roles of the *Zen-bushidō* connection and the Zen epistemology as lifted up by Victoria and Ichikawa, I would argue that it was primarily as part of the historical pattern of “Buddhism for the protection of the realm” (*gokoku-bukkyō*), accentuated by the desire to ensure institutional survival in the face of a series of crises, that Zen Buddhists collaborated with the Japanese state, offered rhetorical support for imperialism and the war effort, and thereby earned the label, “Imperial Way Zen.”

This leaves us with the question of how one might account for the popular images of Zen as compassionate, peaceful, and non-violent. Several scholars have pointed out how much of the modern Japanese discourse about “Zen,” and by extension, much of what we read in English about “Zen,” bears traces of conditions at the time of the formulation of that discourse in the late nineteenth century. As mentioned earlier in this article,

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<sup>13</sup> In a broad sense, inclusive of not only Marxist thought with its critique of religion but also the communist and socialist political parties and unions with their criticisms of religion in Japan and, in some cases, allegiance to Moscow and the Comintern. See Sheldon Garon, *Molding Japanese Minds* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), Ch. 2.

<sup>14</sup> Garon, *Molding*, pp. 83-4.

Japanese Buddhists were recovering from persecution caused by policies aimed at creating a new political order based on “Shinto,” or more precisely, on a new formulation of “Shinto.” After being denounced for supposed degeneration and parasitism on Japanese society, Buddhists in late nineteenth century Japan were attempting to portray the tradition as a constructive social force and essential component of Japanese culture.<sup>15</sup>

On the international front, Japanese Buddhists were formulating arguments to the effect that Buddhism was a world religion, just as Japan as a whole was attempting to construct itself as a world power.<sup>16</sup> One strategy for making Buddhism out to be a world religion is evident in the writings of such Zen missionaries as D.T. Suzuki. As Robert Sharf and others have pointed out, Suzuki attempted to represent Zen as having an underlying essence: a pure and immediate experience, a “trans-ego” and trans-cultural experience, a clear perception of truth that is beyond all cultural conditioning and particular religious systems.<sup>17</sup> This emphasis on experience was not unique to Suzuki’s discourse on Zen in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Suzuki and other Japanese intellectuals were aware of the attacks on religion in the west since the Reformation and the Enlightenment, and they were influenced by William James and other western thinkers who were attempting to defend religion by taking their last stand in the subjective inner sanctum of religious experience after conceding points about rituals, clerics, institutions, and theological systems that stood in tension with reason and empirical verification. Along these lines Suzuki often claimed that Zen is not a religion per se, but rather something universal at the base of all religions.<sup>18</sup> (Interestingly, the universal truth was represented as being instantiated *only*

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<sup>15</sup> For an extended discussion of these facets of Japanese Buddhism in the nineteenth century, see James Edward Ketelaar, *Of Heretics and Martyrs in Meiji Japan: Buddhism and Its Persecution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

<sup>16</sup> Ketelaar, *Of Heretics*, pp. 138-9.

<sup>17</sup> Many Buddhologists, especially those with Kantian and constructivist theories of knowledge, have challenged the accuracy and plausibility of Suzuki’s Zen epistemology.

<sup>18</sup> In this paragraph, I am paraphrasing Robert H. Sharf’s argument in “The Zen of Japanese Nationalism,” in *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism Under Colonialism*, Donald S. Lopez, Jr., ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

in Japanese culture, and this discursive strategy has provided ready support for claims of Japanese cultural uniqueness and superiority.)

That Suzuki and other modern Japanese Buddhists attempted to privilege Buddhism in these ways should come as no surprise, for they faced the same western imperialism by which their Chinese, Indian and other Asian neighbors had been subjugated. In one respect the essentialist and exceptionalist moves in Zen circles were directed toward formulating a universal Zen that could hold its own in its encounter with Christianity and western claims of religious and cultural superiority.

The divergence between representations of peaceful Buddhism and the actuality of “Imperial Way Buddhism” during the war derives in part from this type of Orientalist discourse, which permeated the transmission of Buddhism to the west. Since the nineteenth century, Buddhism and other “Oriental” religions have held the imaginations of westerners seeking a peaceful, mystical alternative to ostensibly intolerant, violent and spiritually moribund western religions. In key respects western seekers have been on a quest for a projection, and their gurus in Asia have responded by representing their religions partly in consonance with the Orientalist projections of their followers, thus displaying what some have termed “secondary Orientalism”<sup>19</sup> or “reverse Orientalism.”<sup>20</sup> For example, in *Zen and Japanese Culture*, D.T. Suzuki preaches an intuitive, non-violent Japan over and against a rational, violent west, about which he writes, “The [western] intellect presses the button, the whole city is destroyed and hundreds of thousands of human souls are crushed ignominiously to the ground. All is done mechanically, logically, systematically, and the intellect is perfectly satisfied, perhaps even when it destroys itself together with its victims.”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> See Bernard Faure, *Chan Insights and Oversights: An Epistemological Critique of the Chan Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), Ch. 2.

<sup>20</sup> See Bernard Faure, “The Kyoto School and Reverse Orientalism,” in *Japan in Traditional and Postmodern Perspectives*, Charles Wei-Hsun Fu and Steven Heine, eds. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995).

<sup>21</sup> Daisetz T. Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 338; quoted by Faure, *Chan Insights and Oversights*, p. 70.

The idealized, ahistorical, “mystical” representations of Zen and other Asian religions also derive from a main venue for those representations in the century since the “1893 World’s Parliament of Religions: Interfaith Dialogue.” In interfaith dialogue and the many English books on Zen it has spawned, the portrayal of “Zen” has been ahistorical, essentialist and focused on religious experience and metaphysical doctrines as opposed to the rituals, popular beliefs, and institutions constitutive of the religious life of most Zen Buddhists in Japanese history.

For Zen Buddhists like Victoria and Ichikawa, more than the issue of representation, the key issue is that of whether postwar Zen has wrestled with its activities and rhetoric during the war, at least insofar as those actions and words stand in tension with broader Buddhist values of compassion, non-violence, and vows to liberate all sentient beings, not just imperial subjects. Since 1945, Zen leaders and institutions have shown little inclination to look squarely at, analyze, and discuss publicly the issue of war responsibility. Some have claimed that while Zen writings and sectarian declarations about the war are few, Zen Buddhists have in fact reflected on and evolved beyond the political stances they took during the first half of the twentieth century. But actual evidence to support that claim is scarce, for Zen leaders have almost never spoken publicly about widely debated postwar issues related to those of the 1930s and 1940s, such as politicians’ attempts to legalize government support of the Yasukuni Shrine for the war dead, the scant portrayal of Japanese imperialism in textbooks that must be approved by the conservative Ministry of Education, the postwar retention and recent official recognition of the national anthem and flag of wartime Japan, attacks by rightists on public figures critical of the imperial system, and the human rights problems faced by resident Koreans, the *burakumin* and others. Some might argue that social ethics is not the proper domain of Zen, and that attention to such issues would distract Zen leaders from their proper focus on religious practice in the monastery. But those leaders, and the institutions they direct, have never been and could never be divorced from society, politics, the state, and all the moral challenges they present over the course of history.