

Brian (Daizen) A. Victoria, *Zen at War*. New York and Tokyo: Weatherhill, 1997. xii + 228 pages. ISBN: 0-8348-0405-0

Reviewed By Daniel A. Metraux

When I studied Zen Buddhism as part of a graduate course on Japanese thought at Columbia University over three decades ago, I came away with the strong impression that the goal of Zen practitioners is to discover inner serenity and social peace. We learned about the close connection between Zen and the *bushido*, the way of the warrior, but we never heard about the role that many of the leaders of Japan's Zen denominations, together with the hierarchy of the other mainstream schools of Japanese Buddhism, played in support of their nation's militarist leaders during the 1930s and 1940s. Thus, it came as a shock when I read a quote in Brian Victoria's book, *Zen at War*, by Harada Daiun, the head abbot for 40 years at Hosshin-ji, who in 1939 stated, "[If ordered to] march: tramp, tramp, or shoot: bang, bang. This is the manifestation of the highest Wisdom [of Enlightenment]. The unity of Zen and war of which I speak extends to the farthest reaches of the holy war [now under way]." (137)

Victoria's realization of the cooperative role that Zen and other Buddhist leaders played with Japan's military hierarchy during the 1930s and 1940s came gradually after several years of study in Japan. Victoria, a native Nebreskan, arrived in Japan as a Methodist missionary in 1961. He studied Japanese religions to better understand the people he was hoping to convert and soon found himself drawn to Buddhism, especially Zen Buddhism, because of its emphasis on peace and harmony and its apparent lack of a history of violence which had such a pronounced effect on Western religions. He eventually embraced Zen after several visits to Eihei-ji in Fukui Prefecture and was ordained as a Soto Zen priest in 1964.

Victoria soon embarked on a personal quest to discover concerning "what is and what should be the relationship of a Zen Buddhist priest to society and its members, to the state, to warfare, and to politics and social activism" (p. ix). He read the writings of numerous Zen scholars and priests and made what to him was a horrifying discovery, that many of the men he had come to respect as exemplars of the highest qualities of Buddhist practice, such as D. T. Suzuki, had enthusiastically supported Japan's war effort in China and the Pacific:

The ideas and people I encountered in this subterranean world of Buddhism were the exact inverse of those on the surface. Down below, warfare and killing were described as manifestations of

Buddhist compassion. The “selflessness” of Zen meant absolute and unquestioning submission to the will and dictates of the emperor. And the purpose of religion was to preserve the state and punish any country or person who dared interfere with its right of self-aggrandizement (p. x)

Victoria’s research led him to the conclusion that while the relationships that existed between Zen Buddhism and warfare and Zen and the state were at their most exaggerated form between the Meiji Era (1868-1912) and the end of World War II, the “unity of Zen and the sword” and the state have deep roots in Japanese history (p. xi).

The Zen monastery provided both the physical and mental training that proved to be most attractive to Japan’s military and government officials of the past, but also to Japan’s corporate elite today. “Discipline, obedience, conformity, and physical and mental endurance” as well as the “traditional Buddhist teaching of the non-substantiality of the self” are among the many features of Zen monastic life that has appealed to Japan’s various elites throughout history (p. 184).

Victoria asserts that the same spirit of self-renunciation that characterizes the contemporary Zen master’s exhortations to be a good worker can be found in those of Harada, Suzuki and others to be a good soldier.

The only difference between them is the object of loyalty and devotion. In premodern Japan, absolute loyalty was owed to one’s feudal lord. From the Meiji period onward the focus shifted to the central government and its policies as embodied in the person of the emperor. In postwar Japan the focus shifted once again, this time to the corporation and its interests –which are of course very closely connected in Japan with those of the state (p. 185)

The close relationship between Japan’s Buddhist leaders and the State emerged in the middle of the Meiji period when several leading Buddhists formed the United Movement for Revering the Emperor (Sonnoo Hoobutsu Daidoodan). This organization “repre-sented the organizational birth of a Japanese nationalism that was both exclusionist and aggressively anti-Christian in character” (p. 18). Buddhist leaders strongly supported Japan’s war efforts against China and then Russia and the subsequent subjugation of Korea as a Japanese colony. One line of reasoning that they adopted was based on Japanese Buddhism’s supposed preeminent position

within all of Asian Buddhism –that “Japanese Buddhists had a duty to “awaken” Chinese and Korean Buddhists from their indifference to war, an indifference which allegedly stemmed from the pessimistic nature of the Buddhism in those two countries (p. 20)”

By 1905 D. T. Suzuki and other Buddhist leaders had developed a philosophical platform that guided mainstream Buddhist thinking through Japan’s defeat in 1945:

(1) Japan has the right to pursue its commercial and trade ambitions as it sees fit.; (2) should “unruly heathens” (*jama gedoo*) of any country interfere with that right, they deserve to be punished for interfering with the progress of all humanity; (3) such punishment will be carried out with the full and unconditional support of Japan’s religions, for it is undertaken with no other goal in mind than to ensure that justice prevails; (4) soldiers must, without the slightest hesitation or regret, offer up their lives to the state in carrying out such religion-sanctioned punishment; and (5) discharging one’s duty to the state on the battlefield is a religious act. (p. 25)

The emergence of “imperial way Buddhism” (*koodoo Bukkyoo*) of the 1930s, which represented the total subjugation of the Law of the Buddha to the Law of the Sovereign (and the subjugation of institutional Buddhism to the state and its policies) was a direct progression from the Buddhists’ activities during the Russo-Japanese War (1904-05). Shiio Benkyo, a Joodo sect priest, asserted that the key historic characteristic of Japanese Buddhism was its “nationalism” (*kokkateki*). Since the Emperor embodied the state and Buddhism and the state were one, the Emperor and Buddhism must also be one and the same (p. 82).

Buddhist leaders insisted that Japan’s war effort was both just and glorious because victory meant the spread of Japan’s superior civilization and Buddhism to all of the oppressed peoples of Asia. Japan would liberate Asians from the tyranny of the Western Christian imperialists and would provide them with the keys to the modernization and improvement of their own lives. The Japanese soldier may take a few lives here and there, but that was a small price to pay for the glorious new way of life that would dawn on Asia with the final Japanese victory.

Victoria includes an interesting chapter where he presents the views of a number of prominent Japanese Buddhists who opposed this close Buddhist support for and attachment to the state as well as Japan’s war effort. The largely lay-run Youth League for Revitalizing

Buddhism (Shinkoo Bukkyoo Seinen Doomei), founded in the 1920s, not only took exception to institutional Buddhism's explicit subservience to the state, but also was deeply involved in social action on a variety of fronts. It denounced the excesses of capitalism and took notice of the suffering of Japan's farmers and laborers.

The League's leaders put forth the proposition that international cooperation, rather than narrow nationalism, was the Buddhist approach to world peace. Unfortunately, the activities of Youth League leaders and other Buddhist groups and individuals who opposed the government were closely monitored by the police. By the late 1930s many of these individuals had been arrested or harassed by police and the organizations had been very effectively shut down. Those Buddhists who opposed government policies lost any opportunity to express their opinions.

Japan's defeat on 15 August 1945 brought an end to imperial-way Buddhism and imperial-state Zen and the sects of institutional Buddhism quickly changed certain aspects of their daily liturgy to reflect the demise of imperial Japan. However, they were a lot slower in responding to questions of how to explain their wartime conduct and whether their actions had been a legitimate expression of the Buddha Dharma or a betrayal of it. Victoria notes that a few individuals like D. T. Suzuki did talk about mistakes that Buddhists had made during the militarist era, but even he chose to blame State Shinto for the war crimes (p. 150) and could not resist trying to find positive aspects of Japan's war effort. Victoria also presents the work of postwar Buddhist scholar Ichikawa Harugen, who painstakingly identifies twelve historical characteristics that affected the manner in which institutional Buddhism reacted to the development of a militaristic Japan. To Victoria's chagrin, there were only four declarations addressing war responsibility by leaders of traditional Buddhist sects and none of these declarations was issued until more than four decades after the end of the war.

Victoria, currently a senior lecturer at the University of Adelaide in Australia, has carried on his discussion about Zen and Japanese Buddhism since the publication of *Zen at War* in 1997. His ideas about institutional Zen in Japan have hardened to the extent that he seems to have little use for these sects and their priests. He clarified his sentiments in an interview published in April of 2003:

There is a Zen belief that you can transcend good and evil. And once you've done this, you act in a spontaneous and intuitive manner. But once you believe that discriminating thought is no longer important - in fact, that not only is it not important, but that

it has to be discarded - then all ethical concerns disappear. I see that disappearance as a very self-serving development in Zen history in Japan that enabled Buddhists to work with the warriors, who were basically trained killers and who wanted to ensure that their privileged position in Japanese society would be maintained forever. In this way, Zen became the handmaiden of the warrior class - which was itself, of course, the State.

I will go so far as to say that institutional Zen Buddhism in Japan is not Buddhism. And therefore, what has passed as Zen has for a very long time been a distortion of Buddhist teachings. When Buddhism was introduced to Japan in the sixth century by Prince Shotoku, it was introduced as 'nation-protecting Buddhism.' In the teachings, as we know them, of Shakyamuni Buddha, there is no suggestion that Buddhism protects the nation. This is the fundamental error, in my opinion, in Japanese, and for that matter, Chinese, Korean and Vietnamese Buddhism - they lost their ability to be independent and became servants of the State. And in Japan, it offered the warrior a method of overcoming his fear of death on the battlefield and gave him a method of mental concentration through meditation that actually enhanced his martial abilities. If the Zen tradition in Japan is to realize its potential, it has to clearly separate itself from these two traditions." ¹

Brian Victoria's *Zen at War* is a disturbing study of how Zen and other Buddhist leaders seem to have seriously violated traditional Buddhist teachings about love, compassion and non-violence. The strong sense of jingoistic Buddhist nationalism and the strong sense of compatibility between Buddhist and militarist leaders is an important aspect of Japanese history that needs to be explored in greater depth.

Victoria presents us with a carefully documented study. His greatest strength is his introduction of many of the leading Buddhist leaders of the era and what they had to say on such subjects as Buddhism and the state. Rather than making sweeping bold statements, Victoria, working in a very lawyer-like manner, builds his case step by step, scholar by scholar. After reading the words of so many Buddhist supporters of the war effort, the reader comes away with the strong feeling that there was indeed strong complicity between the Buddhist establishment and Japan's militarists during the Pacific War.

¹ Christopher Stephens, "Zen's Holy War: Christopher Stephen's speaks with priest and historian Brian Victoria" in *Kansai Time Out*, April 2003 http://www.japanfile.com/culture_and_society/religion/zenholywar.shtml

The reader is, however, going to be disappointed by Victoria's lack of a coherent conclusion. He might insist that his case is so strong that a closing argument is not necessary, but he could have used a concluding section to raise further questions and to discuss the broader implications of his very troubling findings. In any case, *Zen at War* is must reading for any serious scholar of Japan's involvement in World War II.