



Brian (Daizen) A. Victoria, *Zen War Stories*

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BRIAN VICTORIA concludes his work *Zen War Stories* with the admonition that adherents of all the world's major faiths need to look more critically at the historical relationship of their own faith to state initiated warfare. Victoria suggests that there is huge disparity between the highest ideals of peace and universal well-being found in most major religions and the "historical reality of their consistent endorsement

of governmental war policies” (229). Too often nations launch “just wars” with the blessing of their religious hierarchy in the firm belief that wanton killing and destruction of the enemy is warranted because of the necessity to remove evil from the world and to preserve the lives of one’s own people.

Victoria writes that:

When their countries go to war, Buddhist and Christian believers alike are encouraged to ignore the ethical prohibitions against killing so fundamental to their respective faiths. Equally important, there is no suggestion of any personal responsibility for their murderous acts. Instead, it is an expression of Buddhist compassion to kill; it is God’s will to kill.... (230)

Victoria’s purpose in *Zen War Stories* is to develop this theme through a thorough examination of the close ties between Japanese institutional Buddhism and militarism during World War II. Victoria in this sequel to his 1997 *Zen at War* examines the writings and conduct of Japan’s military government to demonstrate how the regime acquired the cooperation of Buddhist leaders and embraced Buddhist teachings into state ideology that justified the obligation for every citizen to unquestioningly serve the state and support its murderous expansion across Asia.

Victoria, currently a senior lecturer at the University of Adelaide in Australia, asserts in an interview with *The New York Times* just prior to the publication of *Zen War Stories* in early 2003 (with Allan M. Jalon, “Meditating on War and Guilt, Zen Says It’s Sorry,” 11 January) that while more traditional forms of Zen stress an inward search for understanding and mental discipline, Japan’s wartime military trainers instead transformed the self-denying egolessness of Zen into a “form of fascist mind-control.” Zen priests and writers who cooperated with the militarists helped by “romanticizing” the links between Zen and Bushido. They stressed a connection between Buddhist compassion and an acceptance of death which eventually led to collective martyrdom and the killing of one’s enemies. Indeed, Victoria believes that the fanaticism of some of the leaders of Japan’s Buddhist leaders of the era approaches that of today’s murderously militant Islamists.

Victoria raises crucially important questions about the relationship between religion and state as well as casting new light upon twentieth-century Japanese history. He demonstrates that Zen Buddhism as well as the other leading schools of Japanese Buddhism, which purport to espouse the most peaceful of creeds, willingly became allies of a military machine which embarked on one of the most, if not the most, horrific campaigns of barbarism the world has ever seen. That even Buddhism, in theory the most peaceful of creeds, could have been so extensively corrupted by a military agenda, gives one many insights into human nature, not least, by comparison, into the contemporary phenomenon of Al Qaeda fanatics and patriotic crusaders in the United States. Victoria goes as far as to demonstrate repeatedly that Zen scholars such as D. T. Suzuki, who is the most famous teacher of Zen Buddhism in the West, lent full support to the marriage between Buddhism and Japanese militarism. Japanese military and government leaders promoted the idea of a link between Zen, the

ideal of Bushido, and the modern Japanese military as early as the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905. Zen promoted the ideal of a self-less soldier or citizen who would willingly give his life to serve the Emperor and the State. Since the goal of Zen is to free oneself from “attachment to the small, egocentric self” (122), a Zen-based ideology would unite the people behind the military’s drive to make Japan the dominant power in Asia.

Victoria quotes Lt. Colonel Sugimoto Goro, whose posthumous book *Taigi* [Great Duty] became especially popular among young officers after his death in China in 1937:

The reason that Zen is necessary for soldiers is that all Japanese, especially soldiers, must live in the spirit of the unity of the sovereign and subjects, eliminating their ego and getting rid of their self. It is exactly the awakening to the nothingness (*mu*) of Zen that is the fundamental spirit of the unity of sovereign and subjects. Through my practice of Zen I am able to get rid of my self. In facilitating the accomplishment of this, Zen becomes, as it is, the true spirit of the imperial military. (124)

The concept of selfless devotion was the key theme of the Japanese army’s 1941 manual, the Field Service Code (*Senjinkun*). Japanese military leaders hoped that the publication of this booklet would recapture the essence of the traditional Bushido warrior code that emphasized the samurai’s willingness to give his life away at any moment in service to his lord. The Army through the Code told the young army recruit, “That which penetrates life and death is the lofty spirit of self-sacrifice, for the public good. Transcending life and death, earnestly rush forward to accomplish your duty. Exhausting the power of your body and mind, calmly find joy in living the eternal duty” (118).

Victoria strongly questions the moral responsibility of Japan’s wartime Zen leaders who in his view did everything in their power to transform not only soldiers, but also civilians as well, in to a mass collection of “walking dead.” “They did so by interpreting the Buddhist doctrine of the non-existence of the self, coupled with the oneness of life and death, in such a way as to produce an unquestioning willingness to die on behalf of the emperor and the state. In infusing the suicidal Japanese military spirit, especially when extended to civilians, with the power of religious belief, Japan’s wartime Zen leaders revealed themselves to be thoroughly and completely morally bankrupt” (144).

Victoria is especially critical of the many Zen and other Buddhist leaders and writers who while glorifying the Japanese military tradition and demonstrating strong support for the Japanese soldier fighting in China and elsewhere, show complete and utter indifference to the millions of victims of Japanese aggression. This feeling of callousness towards Japan’s former enemies continues to this day as is evidenced in the refusal of the Japanese government to admit and apologize for such wartime brutality as the trade in “Comfort Women.”

Victoria has carried on his discussion about Zen and Japanese Buddhism since the publication of *Zen at War* in 1997 not only in *Zen War Stories*, but in other inter-

views and articles as well. 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 April 2003 in *Kansai Time Out* (Christopher Stephens, “Zen’s holy war: Christopher Stephens speaks with priest and historian Brian Victoria”):

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.

http://www.japanfile.com/culture_and_society/religion/zenholywar.shtml

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 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.

The reader is, however, going to be disappointed by Victoria’s lack of an in-

depth conclusion. He makes the coherent point that governments and the military routinely co-opt religion and religious leaders to advance their own war aims, a conclusion dramatically demonstrated in both his Zen war books. Victoria might insist that his case is so strong that a more comprehensive closing argument is not necessary, but he could have used a broader concluding section to raise further questions and to discuss the broader implications of his very troubling findings. In any case, *Zen War Stories* when coupled with *Zen at War* is must reading for any serious scholar of Japan's involvement in World War II.

Another problem is that the person who reads both of Victoria's volumes will see a lot of repetition of major themes. Victoria says that *Zen War Stories* is a logical continuation of *Zen at War*, but the fundamental message is the same. Although there is no question that the author's research and writing in both volumes is superb, one may wonder why he chose to write a companion volume rather than updating and revising *Zen at War*.

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