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Review of *Zen War Stories*

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Zen War Stories Brian Daizen Victoria. London and New York Routledge-Curzon, 2003. Pp. 268+xviii. Paperback. ISBN: 0700715800.

Zen War Stories is a sequel to Victoria's *Zen at War* (1997), which explored the relationship between institutional Buddhism (especially Zen) and Japanese militarism before and during World War II. The first book discomfited many Western students of Zen by showing how almost all Japanese Zen masters and institutions had been fervent supporters of colonialism and the Pacific War. This book supplements the earlier one. There are actually not many battlefield tales, as Victoria acknowledges in the preface, but the additional historical material he has dug up is almost as important and uncomfortable for Western Buddhists.

Chapter One summarizes an interview with Nakajima Genjō (1915-2000), who had retired as head of the Hakuin branch of Rinzai Zen. After an early *kenshō* or enlightenment experience, he voluntarily enlisted in the Imperial Navy at age 21 and served for ten years. Victoria gives us an abridged version of his reminiscences, which end by emphasizing how stupid (because badly conducted) the Pacific War was and by apologizing to his comrades who fell in battle—but, as Victoria points out, not to the victims of Japanese aggression. Nakajima acknowledges hearing claims of a great massacre in Nanjing, yet remains firmly convinced that no such thing ever happened. “It was wartime, however, so there may have been a little trouble with the women” (7).

Chapter Two discusses how much the Imperial military was influenced by Zen monastic life. Even their mess kits were modelled after monk's eating bowls, although they became unpopular because made of aluminum, which the troops found too cold and metallic. The importance of modern weaponry was de-emphasized in favor of *seishin kyoiku* “spiritual education,” including a soldier's willingness to sacrifice himself in attacking. This turned out to be a fatal mistake, given the mechanical nature of modern warfare, especially American air superiority.

Chapter Three and a number of subsequent chapters highlight the role played by certain Zen masters and their disciples in domestic assassinations. These were prominent in the early 1930s and contributed to developing the emperor-centered, military-dominated society that Japan would become by

the end of that decade. For example, Lt. Col. Aizawa Saburō, a student of the Sōtō sect master Fukusada Mugai, assassinated Major General Nagata Tetsuzan in July 1935. At his trial he defended his actions as Zen-like: “I was in an absolute sphere, so there was neither affirmation nor negation, neither good nor evil” (33). His teacher Mugai defended him in the same way: “There is no doubt that, given Aizawa’s purity of character and self-sacrificing devotion, he felt compelled to do what he did in the face of present-day corruption” (34). Aizawa was nevertheless convicted and executed in 1936.

Inoue Nisshō (1886-1967) was another Zen-trained ultra-nationalist who led the “Blood Oath Corps.” In one notorious incident that group intended to assassinate twenty people and managed to kill two important figures, a former finance minister and the managing director of the Mitsui *zaibatsu*. During his 1933 court trial Inoue was asked about his “Zen-like” manner of thinking: “It is more correct to say that I have no systematized ideas. I transcend reason and act completely upon intuition” (215). His actions were defended in court by the well-known Zen master Yamamoto Gempō, his spiritual father, who declared: “In light of the events that have befallen our nation of late, there is, apart from those who are selfish and evil, no fair and upright person who would criticize the accused for their actions” (216). Inoue was more fortunate than Aizawa: he was sentenced to fifteen years in prison but was released in 1940 and became an advisor to the Prime Minister.

Chapter Four focuses on Ōmori Sōgen (1904-94), a Zen master skilled at martial arts and well known both inside and outside Japan. Victoria describes him as “The Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde of Zen.” *Zen at War* discussed his close association with the Toyama family, responsible for intimidation, blackmail and assassination. After the war Sōgen established Zen centers in the United States, became the president of Hanazono University in Kyoto and the only Zen master to have his own 15-line entry in the 1991 *Dictionary of the Right-Wing in Japan* for his active encouragement of fascism at home and imperialism abroad. Although lauded by some as “the greatest Zen master of modern times,” he always had an uncritical attitude towards the emperor and remained unreformed after the war. Victoria’s detailed critique of Sōgen’s own rationalizations of his wartime conduct shows them to be a combination of lies and half-truths.

Chapter Five addresses the militaristic and antisemitic writings of Yasutani Haku’un, well-known in the West as one of the founders of the Sanbō Kyōdan school. Victoria summarizes his 1943 book *Dōgen Zenji to Shshōgi*, “Master Dogen and the Treatise on Practice and Enlightenment,” which

supports “reverently assisting in the holy enterprise of bringing the eight corners of the world under one roof,” i.e., Japanese imperialism. Dōgen’s Dharma, we read, is characterized from beginning to end by its emphasis on the great duty of reverence for the emperor. And what about the Buddhist precept of not taking life? Those who understand the spirit of the Mahayana precepts must be ready to kill: “of course one should kill, killing as many as possible. One should, fighting hard, kill everyone in the enemy army. The reason for this is that in order to carry compassion and filial obedience through to perfection it is necessary to assist good and punish evil. However, in killing one should swallow one’s tears, bearing in mind the truth of killing yet not killing” (72).

This sophistry was complemented by Yasutani’s attack on modern education as a corruption of the pure Japanese spirit, because it makes “shallow, cosmopolitan-minded persons” (86). Might some university courses in the humanities have made Yasutani’s own views less shallow? Despite the absence of Jewish people in Japan, his book included strong antisemitic remarks about “scheming Jews” and their “demonic views,” mainly because Jewish-rooted ideas about liberty and democracy were examples of *aku by-odo* “evil equality,” which contradicted the proper social relations between spiritual superiors and inferiors. Like many others, Yasutani understood the Japanese spirit as superior to the liberalism and individualism of the West, which affirmed life but were unable to affirm death. In developing this point, however, perhaps Victoria goes too far in seeing a “disturbing parallel” between the Nazi Holocaust and the Rape of Nanjing, arguing that the journey from demonized other to massacre is very short. However brutal the Japanese treatment of China, it was not an attempt at genocide.

Chapter Seven discusses the official *Field Service Code* that urged troops never to surrender. It was written by Imamura Hitoshi, a brilliant military strategist and Zen practitioner, so we are not surprised to learn that the major influence on it was the Zen view of life and death. “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 what is to be esteemed is duty, not life. One should take as one’s ideal the realization that even though the body perish, one lives on in the eternal life of the nation through the oneness of life and death” (118). Both the Rinzai and Sōtō sects promoted the Code, which was also applied to laypeople and was used to inculcate fanatical resistance to the expected Allied invasion. Victoria is horrified by this and concludes: “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, his emphasis).

One might respond that this represents only the military's understanding of Zen, but he gives a wartime quotation from D. T. Suzuki that is uncomfortably similar: "It is the warrior spirit that can be rightly said to represent the Japanese people. I believe that if the warrior spirit, in its purity, were to be imbibed by all classes in Japan - whether government officials, military men, industrialists, or intellectuals - then most of the problems presently troubling us would be swept away as if at the stroke of a sword" (119, from "The Japanese People's View of Life and Death" [1942]). However, the shock and suffering of defeat led to a different emphasis in Suzuki's lectures to the emperor eight months after surrender: "The ego of the nation-state is a form of self-attachment. Wherever the self exists there is always fighting" (202).

Chapter Eight discusses the duties of Buddhist military chaplains, who emphasized devotion to the emperor and accepting one's karma. Chapter Nine translates the confessions of one such chaplain, the Nichiren priest Fukushima Nichi'i (1909-87). It is a gruesome account of how local people in northern China were treated and killed, with no evident pangs of conscience despite—or because of?—the author's fervent faith in the *Lotus Sutra*. Unfortunately, the chaplains' emphasis on selflessness and karma worked to encourage such war atrocities: "If my life was not important, an enemy's life became inevitably much less important. This philosophy led us to look down on the enemy and eventually to the mass murder and ill treatment of captives" (Azuma, 146).

The main focus of Chapter Ten, "Buddhism—The Last Refuge of War Criminals," is the way imprisoned wartime leaders used Buddhism to justify their behavior and destiny. I found this section somewhat tenuous, however, in its attempts to link these particular militarists with Buddhism, as if their personal rationalizations constituted a kind of guilt by association for Japanese Buddhism. Victoria adds a more interesting post-surrender story about Emperor Hirohito, whose advisors debated whether he should try to escape retribution by retiring to become a Buddhist priest—shades of earlier emperors! But the Allies never suggested he step down or accept any responsibility for his wartime actions, and in the end his role escaped scrutiny due to the political expediencies of the Cold War.

A postscript happily acknowledges that in September 2001 the Myōshinji Branch assembly of the Rinzaï Zen sect issued a proclamation finally acknowledging its past transgressions in not maintaining a resolute anti-war stance and instead cooperating with the war effort. (A follow-up statement by branch administrators acknowledged that *Zen at War* had been

a catalyst for this development.) Also, in spring 2001 Kubota Jiun of the Sanbō Kyōdan apologized for wartime “errant words and actions” of Yasutani Haku’un. Victoria concludes by hoping that his books will be catalysts for thoughtful adherents of all faiths to look critically at the relationship between their own faith and state-initiated warfare.

Reading Victoria’s new book in late 2003, as an American reflecting on recent and past U.S. policy in the Middle East, I cannot help wondering about the comparable role of Christianity in the West. In criticizing the nationalistic role of Zen, are we holding Japanese Buddhism to higher standards than we have upheld ourselves? To say that Buddhism was distorted by Japanese society: in the end, does that mean anything more than that Buddhism too is a religion practiced by human beings? One of Victoria’s epigraphs quotes Robert Bellah: “Every religion seeks to proclaim a truth which transcends the world, but is enmeshed in the very world it desires to transcend. Every religion seeks to remake the world in its own image, but it is always to some extent remade in the image of the world.” His epilogue quotes an equally prescient passage from Reinhold Niebuhr: “The nation is always endowed with an aura of the sacred, which is one reason why religions, which claim universality, are so easily captured and tamed by national sentiment, religion and patriotism merging in the process.... The best means of harmonizing the claim to universality with the unique and relative life of the nation, as revealed in moments of crisis, is to claim general and universally valid objectives for the nation” (229).

Such universalism is everywhere more often espoused than practiced, but Niebuhr does touch on what is unique about Japan, among the major players on the world stage today: it never had an Axial revolution, which means, among other things, that ethical universalism never really took hold. What is good and what is bad remained (and largely remains) relative to the perspective of one’s own group. The importation of Buddhism did not universalize Japanese ethics; on the contrary, Japanese culture tended to subordinate and “particularize” Buddhism. As a consequence, Buddhist selflessness came to be expressed as complete devotion to one’s superiors, and according to the director of the Institute of Zen Studies at Hanazono University, “Loyalty to one’s teacher and the tradition is more important than the Buddha and the Dharma” (91, quoting Toga Masataka)—something the Buddha himself never taught.

This also explains the emphasis of so many Buddhist teachers on the religious superiority of Japan, and its future role leading the world to a spiritual renaissance. Nichiren believed that “Japan was destined to become the wellspring of true faith for the entire world.” The Rinzai master Ean (1225-

77) declared that “To the end of the end of the last generation will this land of Ours surpass all other lands.” Even Hakuin shared this ethnocentrism: “though Our Land is situated out of the Way, everlasting is its Imperial Rule, noble are its people. Thus Our Land surpasses others by far..... This Land of Ours is pure and divine” (123). Countless other examples could be cited.

The lack of a transcendental Axial perspective also gets at what is so attractive about Japanese culture, including its religions: Japanese people seem to be nondual with their world in a way that is very attractive to alienated Westerners. Yet that does not escape the problem. Of course we want to hold Japanese Zen to a higher standard than Christianity, because many of us have given up our Christian or Jewish roots in favor of what we want to see as a superior religion. We have learned to look upon our Japanese teachers as superior spiritual beings, so we are shocked by the stories Victoria tells. Buddhist enlightenment involves a wisdom that overcomes delusion and ego, but Victoria rubs our noses in the collective delusions and group “wego” that Japanese Buddhism supported; living as an enlightened being involves manifesting compassion to all sentient beings, but Japanese Buddhism rationalized nationalistic aggression and the killing of many innocent people. Does this mean that our Japanese spiritual models were not really enlightened, after all? That is a painful thought, so we are tempted to kill the messenger—and Victoria’s sometimes emotive prose can make him an easy target.

It is possible that Victoria’s books have caused or will cause some Western Zen students to abandon their practice, but there is another alternative. He challenges us to mature in our appropriation of the tradition, especially our understanding what it means to be enlightened. The anti-intellectual emphasis of Japanese Zen—on an intuition that “transcends” good and evil—works to valorize the prevailing ideology, but is that emphasis more Japanese than Buddhist? It is easier to see the difference from outside, although American down-to-earth pragmatism shares a similar anti-intellectual bias against abstraction. Perhaps a genuine Buddhist awakening involves, not eliminating concepts, but liberating them? Thoughts too come from the mind. For enlightened wisdom to manifest most brightly in our benighted times, our meditation practices need to be supplemented with a deeper knowledge and understanding of the past as well as the present world situation. In remembering the sorry history that Victoria’s books reveal, there arises the possibility of a modern Buddhism that might avoid those mistakes in the future.