

Zen at War

By Brian Victoria

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228 PAGES

PHOTOGRAPHS AND ILLUSTRATIONS,
INDEX AND FOOTNOTES



This well-researched, detailed volume charts the mutual effects of Japanese militarism and Zen Buddhism in Japan throughout the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The connection between Zen and warfare has been discussed unsystematically whenever a discussion of *budō* (inaccurately translated as “martial arts”) has arisen. Victoria’s volume is to be commended for showing the almost inevitable (and often ignored, particularly by those enamored of the romance of *budō*) extension of

this relationship to the realms of Japanese militarism, jingoism, and chauvinism.

Part one of the book, “The Meiji Restoration of 1868 and Buddhism,” deals with the effects of the rise of Meiji nationalism on Buddhism. In four chapters the author shows how Buddhism’s association with the ruling *bakufu* in Edo-period Japan, combined with the resurgent nationalism of the new *Kokka-Shintō*, brought about a perceived need by Buddhist clergy and lay people alike to align themselves with the new political line. As a result, after a period of confusion during the *shinbutsu-bunri* (the separation of Buddhism and Shintō), Buddhist associations and temples attempted to become as nationalist as possible, supporting government policies in peace as well as war. Though there are some counter examples, such as Uchiyama Gudō, on the whole, the picture is of enthusiastic support by Zen figures of temporal and material nationalist activities.

In part two, “Japanese Militarism and Buddhism,” Victoria charts the absorption of Buddhism, Zen included, into the Japanese imperialist war machine. Again, counter examples notwithstanding, this is a depressing story of a cozy, even enthusiastic collaboration with the imperialistic forces and spirit of the times. Whether dealing with the collective imperatives of Imperial Way Buddhism, or the individual imperatives of the admixture of Zen and Bushidō, the author shows how Japanese intellectuals—Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike—engaged in intellectual gymnastics to heartily support the activities of the Japanese military.

In part three, “Postwar Trends,” the author shows how the trends started before the war persisted even after Japan’s defeat. Most of the Zen figures he cites presented a change of view, largely to non-Japanese audiences, but most of them felt no remorse for the

activities of Japan, or for their personal support of the militaristic system before and during the war. This extends itself into the realm of business and corporate training, where corporate *sarariman* are equated with samurai, and the corporate entity with the *han* and ultimately the Emperor. Zen is made subservient to business and the business ethic, as Zen masters and Zen temples go about forging ‘spirit’ in the best traditions of the Imperial Army.

Throughout the book, the author does provide examples of glimmers of anti-military feelings and expressions within the Zen sect. The numbers are small, and their effect on the outcome doubtful, but through a century and more of Zen official involvement in the militarism of pre- and postwar modern Japan, some of what has made Zen so attractive to many people—compassion, personalization, emotive feeling—does shine through.

The author provides a wealth of detailed information on the activities of various Zen figures in support of Japanese militarism before and during the war, and of their continuing support for authoritarianism and lack of remorse for Zen-inspired Japanese thinking during the war. This, however, points to a serious weakness: nowhere does the author give us his own ideas about *why* this phenomenon was so pervasive. True, it is shocking, perhaps largely because the Western pop-view of Zen equates it with the pacifistic elements of Buddhist thought, but that does not excuse Dr. Victoria from giving us a hint as to why Zen militarism was so pervasive. He does make a start in that direction in his reporting of Hakugen’s critique of the association of Zen with nationalism, but reporting is not the same as analysis.

While I enjoyed the book immensely and learned a great deal from it, it is not truly suitable as a textbook for learning about Japan or Asia, except in narrow contexts. Sections could be used as contextual or analytical pieces in courses dealing with the Japanese side of World War II, or with an advanced course on Japanese religion, since the issue is hardly addressed in detail elsewhere. But the volume is too focused to be of use for broader or introductory courses. ■



Cover of Seki Seisetsu’s book *The Promotion of Budō*, showing Roosevelt and Churchill as demons being subjugated by the Japanese fairy-tale hero Momotarō.

Image and caption from the photography section of *Zen at War*.

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