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Research Article

Engaged Buddhism: A Skeleton in the Closet?

By Brian Daizen Victoria



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Engaged Buddhism: A Skeleton in the Closet?

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past few years, numerous books have been published on the Engaged Buddhism movement.¹ As shown by the 1996 *Engaged Buddhist Reader: Ten Years of Engaged Buddhist Publishing (EBW)*, this movement has matured to the point of having its own “retrospective.” Widely recognized leaders of this movement are now found in both the Northern and Southern schools of Buddhism, the exoteric and esoteric traditions, Asia and the West.

To be sure, there are still those Buddhist leaders, predominantly in Asia, who believe that Buddhists, especially clerics, should not take part in any form of social activism, most especially that which challenges either the political or social status quo. As one leading Japanese Zen master informed this writer some years ago, “Zen priests don’t get involved in politics!” (Victoria 1997: ix).

Despite comments like these, I personally am a strong supporter of this movement. The enlarged German edition of my book *Zen at War* contained the following:

Happily, there are today a number of socially active Buddhist movements in the world that may, in general, be loosely identified by the term “Engaged Buddhism.” Having literally once been the “lotus in the sea of fire” during the Vietnam War, Vietnamese monks like Thich Tri Quang, Thich Nhat Hanh and others, both in the East and West, have taken the lead in describing *and living* this movement, a movement that continues to be actively involved in bringing Buddhist insight and non-violence to the building of a just society and world (Victoria 1999: 351).

If this is an accurate description, what is the problem? Or, phrased differently, what skeleton(s) could possibly be hidden in the closet of a movement generally regarded as dating back no earlier than the Vietnam War era of the early 1960s?

If the authors of recent books on Engaged Buddhism are to be believed, there are no skeletons. The diverse Buddhist leaders, not to mention Western scholars and scholar-practitioners, who contributed to these books are certain that the values and practices

associated with socially engaged Buddhism offer solutions to the world's multiple problems, most especially Western materialism, as well as the danger of nuclear holocaust and environmental degradation.

Nevertheless, the question must be asked, can these Buddhist leaders be believed? As Martin E. Marty of the University of Chicago biting notes, "Positive thinkers and public relations officers for the faiths . . . want religion to be nothing but *godspel*, good news. Apologists for the faiths usually minimize the distress that can come with religion or that religion can produce" (Marty 1996:14). Is it possible that Marty's remarks apply to proponents of the Engaged Buddhism movement as well? That is to say, could they, through either "wishful thinking" or simple ignorance, be guilty of ignoring or minimizing the distress that the Buddhist tradition (or at least its leaders) has produced, especially in the modern period?

NICHIDATSU FUJII

Of course, any movement, religious or otherwise, is composed of both theory and practice, not to mention the practitioner who embodies or actualizes both. In a religious movement, it is typically the practitioner, as a "hero of the faith," who takes center stage. Such practitioners, especially founders, are presented as role models to be emulated by the faithful while their exemplary lives are testaments to the value (and truth) of the movement's theory and practice.

In light of this background, it is not surprising that many of the recent books on Engaged Buddhism devote considerable space to introducing such heroes of the faith. For example, in an essay entitled "Walking for Peace: Nipponzan Myōhōji" in *EBW*, Paula Green expounds at length on the lifelong "unwavering commitment to nonviolence and peace" of the founder of this order, the Venerable Nichidatsu Fujii (p. 128). According to Green, even in prewar years Fujii "recognized the evils of dominance and colonial exploitation by his own government, and criticized Japanese ambitions for war against China. Walking and beating the prayer drum while chanting *Na Mu Myō Hō Ren Ge Kyō* throughout Japan, he warned of the dangers of the growing militancy of Japanese thinking. . . . [and] increased his denunciation of the Japanese authorities and their military ambitions" (pp. 135-136).

We also learn that Fujii's commitment to peace led him to travel to India and meet Mahatma Gandhi at his *ashram* in Wardha where "a deep recognition transpired between

these two spiritual seekers who were so nourished by their Hindu or Buddhist faiths” (p. 136). In fact, Gandhi was so taken with Fujii that he bestowed the latter with the title of *Guruji* (spiritual teacher) and then “actively took up the practice of the chant and drum as part of his daily prayer” (p. 136). Nevertheless, Fujii could not escape his desire to prevent the outbreak of war, and Green describes what happened next as follows:

Deeply concerned during his India years about Japan’s expansion of military power, Guruji [Fujii] returned from India in 1938. He presented the defense ministers with ashes of the Buddha, which he had received in Sri Lanka, and proposed the adoption of peaceful national and international policies. Guruji suffered as he watched the false gods of militarism dominate the Japanese people. During the war years of 1939-1945, Guruji and his followers moved actively within and beyond Japan, chanting and beating the prayer drum, crying out for the early termination of war and the establishment of righteousness (p. 137).

The above, if true, would be one of the most amazing Buddhist-related stories to come out of the Asia-Pacific War. Here we have a Nichiren Buddhist leader “denouncing” Japanese authorities for their militant policies and colonial exploitation even before the outbreak of war and then going on to “cry out for the early termination of war” once it began and up through its bitter end. This latter period, of course, includes the very years when Sōka Gakkai, founder Tsunesaburō Makiguchi, and his chief disciple, Jōsei Toda, were imprisoned for their own alleged opposition to the war. Yet, according to Green, Fujii and his followers “moved actively within and beyond Japan.” How can this be?

Interestingly, Robert Kisala also deals at length with Fujii in his 1999 book *Prophets of Peace (PP)*. Kisala, however, presents a drastically different picture of this man, especially in his prewar and wartime years. To begin with, he writes that while Fujii did return to India in October 1933, he was allowed no more than “two audiences with Gandhi, which lasted only twenty and five minutes respectively” (p. 49).

And what did the two men discuss? According to Kisala, in his second audience Fujii handed a letter to Gandhi describing the purpose of his mission in India. Included in it was a strong defense of Japan’s military activities in Manchuria in northern China. “Fujii acknowledges that Japan has been forced into a position of isolation because of its actions in China, but states that even if it should face the threat of armed coercion from the whole world Japan should not sway from the course that it believes is just” (p. 50).

Kisala further notes that the contents of Fujii’s letter “clearly reflect the acceptance of some of the beliefs pertaining to Japanese ethnic and cultural superiority” (p. 50). Not only that, Kisala records that the monks of Nipponzan Myōhōji have been criticized for

having assisted in Japan's invasion of China by acting in ways similar to army chaplains. "Specifically, there are reports that Myōhōji monks accompanied Japanese troops in their conquest of Nanking in 1937. Fujii does not deny the fact of their presence, and even boasts that it was the monks and their *daimoku* standard that were first to enter the city at the fall of Nanking" (p. 51).

The Fujii that Kisala describes admits to having made repeated trips to China during the war years to meet Japan's top military leaders. Fujii claims he did so in order to hand over relics of the Buddha to these men so that "Buddhism might tie the two people [Japanese and Chinese] together" (p. 51). Nevertheless, Fujii admits in his autobiography that the purpose of these meetings was not always for religious purposes. For example, he was invited to Tokyo to meet with members of the military general staff prior to the Japanese invasion of Burma. "According to Fujii's account, the purpose of the meeting was clear from the time of the invitation: to provide information on the situation in India that might be helpful to the military planners" (p. 51).

In light of Fujii's wartime activities, it is not surprising that Kisala comes to the following conclusion: "The evidence then does not support Fujii's postwar claims to have been a pacifist throughout the war years" (p. 51). And, needless to say, it is only when Kisala's well-documented assertions are taken into account that it becomes possible to understand why the Japanese government and military allowed Fujii and his followers to, as Green claims, "move actively within and beyond Japan."

Green, it should be noted, is described as having a "close affiliation with the Nipponzan Myōhōji community in Leverett, MA" (p. 526). If this serves to explain, at least in part, her one-sided portrayal of Fujii, it is equally important to point out that she is by no means alone among advocates of the Engaged Buddhism movement to have written in a similar vein. In an article entitled "New Voices in Engaged Buddhist Studies" in *EBW*, Kenneth Kraft also claims, "The influential Japanese monk Nichidatsu Fujii (1885-1985) made absolute pacifism the touchstone of his thinking and acting" (p. 491).

TSUNESABURŌ MAKIGUCHI

In both *EBW* and David Chappell's *Buddhist Peacework (BP)*, Tsunesaburō Makiguchi is presented as another foundational exemplar of Engaged Buddhism. Makiguchi's Buddhist faith, it is claimed, impelled him not only to advocate a humane and peaceful world but to sacrifice his very life in resisting Japanese militarism.

In an article in *EBW* entitled "The Angulimala Lineage: Buddhist Prison Ministries,"

Virginia Cohn Parkum and J. Anthony Stultz describe Makiguchi (and his disciple, Jōsei Toda) as having “experienced incarceration in Japan during World War II for resisting the war effort and refusing to follow state Shinto worship” (p. 360). A second article in the same book, “Racial Diversity in the Sōka Gakkai” by David Chappell, states that “when Makiguchi refused to support government thinking during the war, he was arrested in 1943 and died in prison on November 18, 1944 at the age of seventy-three” (p. 216).

Though somewhat more ambivalent, Peter Harvey adds his voice to the chorus in *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics (IBE)* where he writes, “In the Second World War, most Buddhist schools agreed to support the nation in its efforts. Seemingly the one exception was the Sōka Gakkai, which refused to take part in this unified front” (p. 270). Nevertheless, none of these voices can compare with that of Daisaku Ikeda, president of Sōka Gakkai International, who has the strongest words of praise for Makiguchi. In an essay included in *BP* entitled “The SGI’s Peace Movement,” Ikeda writes:

Early in the twentieth century (1903), President Makiguchi published *The Geography of Human Life (Jinsei Chirigaku)*, which strongly advocated a shift to humanitarian competition at a time when imperialism and colonialism were still the prevailing modes of international relations. He analyzed competition among nations as consisting of the phases of: military competition, political competition, economic competition, and humanitarian competition. He stressed that humanity’s aim should be humanitarian competition (p. 136).

Robert Kisala, however, once again presents us with an alternative view. He begins by noting that the central focus of Makiguchi’s first book, *Jinsei Chirigaku*, was on “drawing connections between geography and everyday life and advocating the study of geography through field trips and other hands-on experiences” (p. 75). As for Makiguchi’s alleged war resistance, Kisala explains that the crux of the matter was Makiguchi’s refusal to venerate a talisman of Amaterasu, the Sun Goddess, issued by the central Shinto shrine at Ise. It was this refusal, he claims, not war resistance, that led Makiguchi and some twenty other leaders of what was then known as Sōka Kyōiku Gakkai (Academic Society for Value-Creating Education) to be arrested on charges of *lese majesté* and the violation of the Peace Preservation Law on July 6, 1943.

Kisala concludes his study of Makiguchi by pointing out that while “Sōka Gakkai literature often claims that this persecution was the result of an anti-military stance taken by Makiguchi. . . . my reading of the situation indicates that Makiguchi’s opposition was more narrowly focused on the religious policy of the government” (p. 90).

This writer’s research on Makiguchi shows that not only is Kisala’s conclusion

correct but that he revealed only a small part of the story. That is to say, while Makiguchi may, as Ikeda claims, have looked forward to the coming of a *future* world based on “humanitarian competition,” that world did not yet exist. In *Jinsei Chirigaku*, Makiguchi described the actual world he inhabited as follows:

It is my view that the sole cause of the present danger to world peace is Russia’s promotion of its own viability. That is to say, in the present age of economic struggle for existence, Russia seeks to exploit weaknesses among the international powers in order to acquire what it must have: access to the oceans. Thus it is in the process of expanding in three directions, from the Dardanelle Straits in eastern Europe to the Persian Gulf in western Asia and the Yellow Sea in the Far East (Makiguchi 1903:950-951).

In identifying Russia as being *solely* responsible for endangering world peace, Makiguchi adopted a stance identical with that of the Japanese government of his day. Japan used this alleged threat to justify its surprise attack on Russia the following year, ostensibly to protect Korea’s independence and prevent further Russian encroachments on Chinese territory, most especially Manchuria. The reality, however, was that following its victory over Russia in 1905, Japan moved to take control of Korea for itself, turning it into a full-fledged colony in 1910. As for Manchuria, Japan steadily increased its control of this area of China until it established the puppet state of Manchukuo in February 1932.

Significantly, neither Ikeda nor Kisala mention a second seminal book Makiguchi first published in November 1912. Entitled *Kyōdoka Kenkyū* (*Study of Folk Culture*), this volume was an extension of the ideas contained in *Jinsei Chirigaku*, with special emphasis on their relevance to the life and structures of local communities. Makiguchi wanted rural educators (rather than the central government’s bureaucrats) to take the lead in developing educational initiatives attuned to local communities. But toward what end? The book’s concluding chapter explained Makiguchi’s ultimate goal for education as follows:

Regardless of social class, everyone should be conscious of the nation’s destiny, harmonizing their lives with that destiny and, at all times, prepared to share that destiny. It is for this reason that the work of national education is to prepare ourselves to do exactly this, omitting nothing in the process. . . . However, in order to do this, and prior to placing ourselves in service to the state, we should first contribute to the local area that has nurtured us and with which we share common interests (Makiguchi 1933:460-461).

It should be noted that Makiguchi wrote the above specifically for an enlarged 1933 edition of this book (see Makiguchi 1933:6). Despite championing rural education under local control, by 1933 both he and his publisher, none other than Sōka Kyōiku Gakkai, shared a vision of education that was as “state-centered” as any of his contemporaries.

Only a few years later, millions of young Japanese would be called on to sacrifice their lives, and those of their victims, in the process of “placing [them]selves in service to the state.” Thus, Makiguchi’s quarrel with the central government’s bureaucrats over the control of local education was not about whether or not service to the state should be promoted, but simply how best to attain that goal.

If, as the preceding quote demonstrates, Makiguchi believed the ultimate goal of education was to serve the state, what was the emperor’s role in fostering this? Was Makiguchi in any way opposed or critical of either the emperor or the imperial system? Though critical of patriotism based on “superficial reasons,” Makiguchi wrote,

His Majesty, the Emperor, on whom is centered the exercise of Imperial authority, does so through his military and civilian officials. The reason he exercises this authority is definitely not for his own benefit. Rather, as leader and head of the entire nation, he graciously exerts himself on behalf of all the people. It is for this reason that in our country, the state and the emperor, as head of state, should be thought of as completely one and indivisible. We must make our children thoroughly understand that loyal service to their sovereign is synonymous with love of country. . . . I believe it is only in so doing that we can clarify the true meaning of the phrase “loyalty to one’s sovereign and love of country” [*chūkun aikoku*] (Makiguchi 1933:411-412).

In urging his fellow educators to make the nation’s children “thoroughly understand that loyal service to their sovereign is synonymous with love of country” we once again find Makiguchi situated squarely in the mainstream of the nationalistic fervor that increasingly came to characterize the 1930s. No matter how Makiguchi’s position toward the emperor may have changed later on, in 1933 Makiguchi advocated the widely held proposition that love of country was synonymous with loyal service to the emperor. It was exactly this educational ideology that provided the foundation for the Japanese military’s demand of absolute and unquestioning obedience from its soldiers, claiming that “the orders of one’s superiors are the orders of the emperor.”

Makiguchi also touched on Japan’s colonization of Korea, claiming that Korea, prior to being formally annexed by Japan in August 1910, had been in such a state of anarchy that it was unable either to defend itself or protect its citizens. Not only that, the Chinese people presently found themselves in exactly the same situation (see Makiguchi 1933:413). The clear implication of the latter claim was that China, like Korea before it, would greatly benefit from Japanese control. This was of course a sentiment shared by the Japanese government, as seen, for example, in the Amau Statement of April 1934 issued by its Foreign Office. China, the statement declared, was not to avail itself of the assistance of

any country other than Japan.

This said, it is equally clear that Makiguchi's chief concern in writing favorably about Japan's expansion onto the Asian continent was, as ever, directed toward the manner in which Japan's children were to be educated. Makiguchi saw, in a discussion of Korea's recent past and China's present, a golden opportunity to demonstrate to Japanese children just how fortunate they were to be living in Japan. Makiguchi continued,

It is when we look at these concrete examples [of Korea and China] that thoughts about our own country emerge. . . . The result is that we cannot help but feel grateful and want to repay the debt of gratitude we owe [the state].

The practical application of the study of folk culture is to provide the fundamental basis for an understanding of the state by having [our children] look at situations like these that are right before their very eyes. I feel very deeply that we must vigorously seek to create persons of character who will in the future lead a state-centered life, having first acquired the germ of the idea of serving the state at the town and village levels (Makiguchi 1933:413).

Makiguchi demonstrates yet again that his ultimate concern was implanting in Japan's children a willingness to serve the state. Makiguchi simply believed he knew how to do this in a more effective way than the central government's bureaucrats who showed such little concern or understanding of local conditions.

While it is true that Makiguchi was arrested in July 1943 for refusing to worship a talisman of the Sun Goddess Amaterasu issued by the Ise shrine, this had nothing to do with being disloyal to the emperor. As he informed his police interrogators, "I think it is, for we Japanese, the Way of the Subject to be loyal. This is what I have realized from my study of the truth of the *Lotus Sutra*" (Akashi & Matsūra, eds. 1975:172). Further, as contradictory as it may seem, Makiguchi's refusal to worship a talisman of the Sun Goddess did not even signify a lack of respect for this alleged progenitress of the Imperial family. Makiguchi made this clear when he told the police,

The Sun Goddess is the venerable ancestress of our Imperial Family, her divine virtue having been transmitted to each successive emperor who ascended the throne up to and including the present emperor. Thus has her virtue been transformed into the August Virtue of His Majesty which, shining down on the people, brings them happiness. It is for this reason that Article III of the Constitution states: "The person of the Emperor is sacred and inviolable."

Just as we [association members] recognize the fundamental unity of filial piety and loyalty, so it is our conviction that it is proper to reverently venerate His Majesty based on the monistic view that "His Majesty, the Emperor is One and Indivisible" [*Tennō Ichigen-ron*], thus making it unnecessary to pay homage at the Grand Shrine at Ise. . . .

In light of this, who is there, apart from His Majesty, the Emperor himself, to whom we should reverently pray? (Akashi & Matsūra, eds. 1975:174-175).

In fact, nowhere in Makiguchi's writings, either before or during the war, either in prison or out, do we find any statements critical of Japan's wartime policies. On the contrary, not only did Makiguchi justify Japan's colonial takeover of Korea (and earlier war with Russia), but he devoted his entire life as an educator to devising more effective ways of instilling "service to the state" in Japanese children. He further advocated that these same children "thoroughly understand that loyal service to their sovereign is synonymous with love of country." Even after imprisonment, he affirmed that loyalty to the emperor was but a natural part of the "Way of the Subject" based on his understanding of the *Lotus Sutra*. And, as we have seen, as far as the emperor was concerned, Makiguchi asked, "Who is there, apart from His Majesty, the Emperor himself, to whom we should reverently pray?"

For apologists to now claim that, his imprisonment and death notwithstanding, Makiguchi resisted or opposed Japan's war effort is an attempt to turn night into day.² Like Paula Green's earlier one-sided description of Nichidatsu Fujii, it is yet another attempt to "minimize the distress that can come with religion or that religion can produce."

HAKU'UN YASUTANI

Minimizing the distress produced by religion is by no means the exclusive preserve of those associated with the Nichiren tradition. Past and present members of the *Dharma* lineage associated with one of Engaged Buddhism's best-known Western proponents have been equally adept at accomplishing this feat. I refer here to Zen master Robert Aitken, one of the foremost contemporary representatives of the Harada-Yasutani line. Writings by or about Aitken feature prominently in *BP*, *EBW*, and Arnold Kotler's *Engaged Buddhist Reader*.

Aitken, now retired, is widely known and respected for his long and passionate opposition to warfare, especially nuclear weapons, coupled with his concern for protecting the environment. Furthermore, Aitken is personally acquainted with Japanese militarism in that, while working as a civilian construction worker on the island of Guam, he was captured by the Japanese in 1941 and held for three years in an internment camp near Kobe. Ironically, it was as a prisoner of war that Aitken first came into contact with Zen.

In light of his background, it is only natural that Aitken would have something to say about the relationship of (Zen) Buddhism to violence and war. In an essay entitled "Net of

Vows” included in *BP*, he admits that over the two thousand years of Mahāyāna history “we find only the rare monk who might be involved, say, in a peasant revolt, for until modern times Buddhist clerics have been either aloof from, or part and parcel of, their political system” (p. 96). Yet despite this less than exemplary history of clerical social engagement, Aitken goes on to assert, “Today, however, the old vows must mean what they say. Now or never, *swaraj* [self-government] must be our watchword” (p. 96).

If Aitken offers a caustic critique of past Buddhist clerics, his comments on nominally Buddhist rulers and their allies are no less damning: “Buddhist teaching places responsibility upon human beings for maintaining harmony and enhancing maturity, but rulers who have professed the Buddha’s Way have governed oppressively down through the ages, and Buddhist teachers have neglected their vows and played political games. Governments in South and Southeast Asia to this day can include the five main Buddhist precepts in their respective constitutions, yet violate them outrageously” (p. 95).

In seeking to identify the root cause of the failure of both Buddhist rulers and clerics to implement the tenets of their faith, Aitken identifies what he calls the dangerous fallacy of egocentrism in the individual and the group. “Here rises nationalism; here rises corporate arrogance and exploitation; here rises structural and systemic violence, racism, sexism, and caste systems; here rises the ruthless despoliation of oceans, forests, wetlands, and family farms; here rises acute danger to the Earth itself” (p. 95).

Aitken finds the solutions to these ills in the teachings of one of his former teachers, Zen Master Haku’un Yasutani. Aitken quotes a critique of nationalism and group-centered views that Yasutani made in 1967:

Unenlightened people have this karmic illness of considering whatever they attach themselves to to have a self. If they make a group, they consider the group to have a self. If they attach themselves to the nation, they consider the nation to have a self (p. 95).

What is particularly interesting about Aitken’s comments is that he admits that Yasutani was not always the staunch critic of the state he appears to be in the above quote. In fact, Aitken writes that Yasutani “is currently under fire for his nationalist pronouncements during World War II” (p. 95). Nevertheless, Aitken claims Yasutani’s postwar change of heart represents an “apparent shift in views from subservience to governmental dominion to a social and political application of perennial truths” (p. 95). Further, Yasutani’s newly acquired understanding represents nothing less than “a small prototype of the extended axial shift that Buddhism and Buddhists have been undergoing gradually since the rise of Mahayana 2,000 years ago” (pp. 95-96).

But the question must be asked, did Yasutani really undergo a change of heart? If he did, how does one account for the following remarks Yasutani made *four years after* the critique Aitken cites above, in the March 1971 issue of his organization's publication *Awakening Gong* [*Gyōshō*]:

Those organizations which are labeled as right-wing at present are the true Japanese nationalists. Their goal is the preservation of the true character of Japan. There are, on the other hand, some malcontents who ignore the Imperial Household, despise tradition, forget the national structure, forget the true character of Japan, and get caught up in the schemes and enticements of Red China and the Soviets. It is resentment against such malcontents that on occasion leads to the actions of young [assassin] Ojiya Yamaguchi or the speech and behaviour of [right-wing novelist] Yukio Mishima (quoted in Victoria 1997:168).

Should there be any doubt of his ongoing nationalist sentiments, in January 1972 (only a year before his death), Yasutani revealed his equal distaste for both Japan's labor movement and universities in a second article in the *Awakening Gong*:

It goes without saying the leaders of the Japan Teachers' Union are at the forefront of the feeble-minded [in this country]. . . . They, together with the four Opposition political parties, the General Council of Trade Unions, the Government and Public Workers Union, the Association of Young Jurists, the Citizen's League for Peace in Vietnam, etc. have taken it upon themselves to become traitors to the nation. . . .

The universities we presently have must be smashed one and all. If that can't be done under the present Constitution, then it should be declared null and void just as soon as possible, for it is an un-Japanese constitution ruining the nation, a sham constitution born as the bastard child of the Allied Occupation Forces (quoted in Victoria 1997:168).

Whether Aitken wishes to acknowledge it or not, these quotes demonstrate that Yasutani never underwent a significant change of heart in the postwar period, at least as far as his right-wing and nationalist comments directed toward *Japanese followers* were concerned. As Rinzai Zen scholar-priest Hakugen Ichikawa notes, Yasutani was "no less a fanatical militarist and anti-communist than his master Sōgaku Harada" (quoted in Victoria 1997:167).

WARFARE

As unrelated as it may seem, I suggest that Ichikawa's insight into the Harada-Yasutani lineage helps explain yet another anomaly, this one pointed out in an article in *EBW* by Kenneth Kraft, entitled "New Voices in Engaged Buddhist Studies." Kraft notes that not

all participants in the Engaged Buddhism movement have adopted a pacifist stance toward warfare. Specifically, with regard to NATO's intervention in the 1999 crisis in Kosovo, Kraft questions whether a commitment to Engaged Buddhism yields ready-made answers in times of crisis. "Apparently not," he answers (p. 492).

To illustrate his point, Kraft introduces Bodhin Kjolhede, abbot of the Rochester Zen Center, as one of those who supported NATO intervention. Kjolhede justified his position as follows: "We have a responsibility to respond. That's what responsibility means in Zen: responsiveness. If there is such a thing as a justifiable war, then this would appear to be it. . . . I am willing to come out and say that we needed to intervene militarily" (p. 492).

Kraft goes on to suggest that the question of pacifism versus what he regards as Kjolhede's Buddhist variation of Christian just-war theory "deserves more attention than it has yet received" (p. 493). This writer suggests that Kjolhede's position cannot be understood without looking at the teachings of his own Zen master, Philip Kapleau, yet another disciple of Haku'un Yasutani.

Like Aitken, Kapleau was well acquainted with the nature of Japanese militarism by virtue of his service as a court reporter for the International Military Tribunal for the Far East (or Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal) held in Tokyo from 1946-1948. Kapleau literally sat face to face, day after day, with Japan's "A Class" war criminals, including wartime prime minister, General Hideki Tōjō.

One might easily imagine that Kapleau would have come away from this tribunal harboring bitter feelings, even anger, toward Japan's wartime leaders for having caused such massive destruction and loss of life, and toward those many Japanese soldiers who carried out the orders of their superiors without question, no matter how brutal and inhumane. This was not the case, however, for Kapleau quickly found an admirable quality in the Japanese people, something he favorably contrasted with the "self-pitying despair" of the Germans in the immediate postwar period. What impressed Kapleau was that "the Japanese on the whole had accepted the war's aftermath with remarkable restraint and composure" (Kapleau 1980:263).

Upon investigation, Kapleau discovered the source of this attitude to be in the "law of karmic retribution" as taught by Buddhism. He quoted one Japanese acquaintance as telling him, "Because we Japanese have inflicted so much pain on others, we are now reaping the painful harvest" (Kapleau 1980:263). With his curiosity aroused, and thanks to a helping hand from D. T. Suzuki among others, Kapleau set out on what would become a lifelong quest to personally experience and then transmit Zen as a living practice

to the West.

Once again, one might think that somewhere along the way Kapleau would have asked what his own Zen teachers, Sōgaku Harada and Haku'un Yasutani, said and did during the war years, especially since these masters, as Buddhists, would have been well acquainted with the law of karmic retribution. That is to say, he might have asked, "Have my allegedly enlightened masters contributed anything to the 'painful harvest' experienced by Japan and especially the countries she victimized?"

It appears that Kapleau never asked these questions. Perhaps he felt no need to do so, since he was convinced that "no religious war has ever been fought in the name of Buddhism" (Kapleau 1980:250). Thus, during his training at various Japanese Zen temples he simply accepted at face value "the deep serenity that seemed to radiate from the giant cryptomeria trees, the temple buildings, the faces of the monks and laymen, from the very earth itself" (Kapleau 1980:264). Nevertheless, when Kapleau later instructed his Western disciples on the meaning of the Buddhist precept forbidding killing, he did not hesitate to state,

Yet the right to life is not absolute, and individual life may unavoidably have to be sacrificed to preserve the health and welfare of society. . . . Whether painful karma would accrue to one depriving an animate being of its life, even when the killing was motivated by concern for the common welfare, would depend foremost on one's mind state. If the act [of killing] were done no-mindedly, beyond *self-conscious* awareness of one taking life and a life being taken, no painful karma would be incurred, for in the profoundest sense there would be no killer and nothing killed. Let me hasten to add that only a highly developed individual could act in this way (Kapleau 1980:246-247).

Lest it be thought that Kapleau might have created this antinomian stance on his own, that highly developed individuals may kill with karmic impunity, in IBE Peter Harvey demonstrates that there are ample precedents in both the Japanese and Chinese Zen traditions. For example, Harvey quotes the great seventeenth century Rinzai Zen master Takuan (1573-1645), who included the following passage in a letter written to his warrior patron, Yagyū Tajima no kami Munenori:

The uplifted sword has no will of its own, it is all of emptiness. It is like a flash of lightning. The man who is about to be struck down is also of emptiness, and so is the one who wields the sword. . . . Do not get your mind stopped with the sword you raise, forget about what you are doing, and strike the enemy. Do not keep your mind on the person before you. They are all of emptiness, but beware of your mind being caught in emptiness (p. 268).

Although Harvey notes that the ideas in this passage "sound morally dangerous," he

defends Takuan by pointing out that he “was adapting teachings to those who were already committed by birth to fighting, and he also emphasized the virtues of sympathy and human-heartedness” (p. 268).

Significantly, Harvey does not place the responsibility for the close relationship between Zen and the sword on Japanese Zen masters alone. Instead, he introduces a discussion by the late French Buddhist Paul Demiéville on a seventh-century Chinese Ch’an text entitled “Treatise on Absolute Contemplation.” This treatise claims that “as long as one sees a ‘person’ or ‘living being’ standing out from emptiness, one should not kill even an ant. One who overcomes these perceptions can kill, though; in a way similar to natural events like a storm or collapsing cliff bringing death” (p. 267).

Harvey caustically comments that “to claim that one who truly knows emptiness can kill might well be seen as implausible: such people should also know that they themselves and their ‘side’ are empty too!” (p. 267). Yet, it is unclear from these remarks whether Harvey intends to deny the antinomian thought underlying this treatise altogether.

Nevertheless, when Harvey encounters endorsements for killing on the part of Japanese Zen masters in the Asia-Pacific War, his attitude is much clearer. Specifically, he identifies as “an amazing distortion of Buddhist values” comments made in 1939 by Sōtō Zen master Sōgaku Harada to the effect that “a soldier should become ‘completely at one with’ his work, doing whatever he is ordered to do, whether march or shoot, this being ‘the clear statement of the highest Bodhi-wisdom, the unity of Zen and war’” (p. 270). Yasutani was, of course, Harada’s disciple and received his master’s “seal of enlightenment” (*inka*) in April 1943.

It was in the same year that his complete enlightenment was confirmed, 1943, that Yasutani addressed the following comments to Japanese soldiers and civilians alike:

What should the attitude of disciples of the Buddha, as Mahāyāna Bodhisattvas, be toward the first precept that forbids the taking of life? For example, what should be done in the case in which, in order to remove various evil influences and benefit society, it becomes necessary to deprive birds, insects, fish, etc. of their lives, or, on a larger scale, to sentence extremely evil and brutal persons to death, or for the nation to engage in total war?

Those who understand the spirit of the Mahāyāna precepts should be able to answer this question immediately. That is to say, of course one should kill, killing as many as possible. One should, fighting hard, kill everyone in the enemy army. . . . Failing to kill an evil man who ought to be killed, or destroying an enemy army that ought to be destroyed, would be to betray compassion and filial obedience, to break the precept forbidding the taking of life. This is a special characteristic of the Mahāyāna precepts.

And then Yasutani added the antinomian kicker: “In killing [the enemy] one should swallow one’s tears, bearing in mind the truth of killing yet not killing” (Yasutani 1943:245-246).³

With *Dharma* ancestors like Harada, Yasutani, and Kapleau, it should not be surprising to find a *Dharma* descendant like Kjolhede “willing to come out and say that we needed to intervene militarily” or that Zen Buddhists have a “responsibility to respond” by killing their fellow human beings. What Kjolhede fails to mention is that Zen’s responsibility to respond is never so great as when the “national interest” is said to be at stake.

The historical record reveals that Ch’an/Zen has been responding *to the demands of political and military rulers* dating back at least to the time of the Seventh Patriarch Shen-hui (670-762). Heinrich Dumoulin informs us that Shen-hui “spent his old age basking in the graces of the powers that be” (Dumoulin 1988:114). What Dumoulin conveniently omits, however, was that this was Shen-hui’s reward for having served as a *fundraiser for China’s Imperial forces* at the time of the An Lu-shan Rebellion of 756.⁴

As at least certain members of the Harada-Yasutani lineage demonstrate, the traditional “unity of Zen and the sword” (*Zenken ichinyo*) is as alive in the West as it always has been in East Asia. Thus, if the Engaged Buddhism movement encompasses the killing that has historically accompanied the unity of Zen and the sword, something Yasutani identified as a “special characteristic of the Mahayana precepts,” this movement might more aptly be called “Engaged *in Combat* Buddhism”!

CONCLUSION

By now if not before, some readers may have concluded, perhaps angrily, that I have an “axe to grind” with regard to the individuals introduced above. In reply, I must admit that if setting the historical record straight is “axe-grinding,” then I am indeed “guilty as charged.” Yet personally I find the crux of the problem to be far more profound than the past actions of this or that exemplar of Engaged Buddhism.

The deeper problem lies in the historical reality that it was Japanese Buddhists who, dating from the early years of the Meiji period (1868-1912), first endeavored to make the Buddha *Dharma* relevant to a modern, industrialized society. They did this at a time when they themselves were under severe attack by Shinto-affiliated forces who sought to eliminate Buddhism altogether. If only to protect itself, the Buddhist response was to embrace the nationalistic fervor of the day as its own. Thus, in 1889, Buddhist leaders

from all of Japan's major sects joined to create the "United Movement for Revering the Emperor and Worshipping the Buddha" (*Sonno Hōbutsu Daidōdan*). The organization's prospectus described its purpose as follows:

The goal of this organization is to preserve the prosperity of the Imperial Household and increase the power of Buddhism. The result will be the perfection of the well-being of the Great Empire of Japan. . . . The time-honored spiritual foundation of our empire is the Imperial Household and Buddhism. The independence and stability of our empire cannot be maintained if so much as the slightest injury is inflicted upon it. How can true patriots not be inspired and aroused to defend against such injury? (quoted in Victoria, 1997:18).

Japan's Buddhist leaders also established Buddhist "missions" in China, some as early as 1876. The Japanese government supported these efforts; for, as a pan-Asian religion, Buddhism was seen as a useful tool in promoting the unity of East Asian peoples under Japanese hegemony. In addition, Japan's Buddhist leaders maintained that Buddhism in China and the rest of Asia was backward, passive, and indifferent to social needs while Japanese Mahāyāna Buddhism was activist, socially engaged, and scientific, in short, the world's only "true" Buddhism. Thus it was their duty to bring Japan's true Buddhism to the benighted peoples of Asia and even the West, whether the latter wanted it or not.

Seen in this light, it should be clear that the "skeleton in the closet" of today's Engaged Buddhism movement is simply this: nationalism. And Engaged Buddhism's ongoing challenge is how to deal with nationalism in the context of the teachings of the Buddha *Dharma*. As seen above, all of the alleged Japanese exemplars of Engaged Buddhism examined in this article were themselves heavily involved in the promotion of Japanese aggression, thereby contributing to the deaths of millions. Do today's Engaged Buddhists seek to contribute to yet another round of bloodletting?

The answer to this question is obviously no. Yet today's Engaged Buddhists may nevertheless end up contributing *indirectly* to bloodletting by not actively campaigning for a Buddhist morality that firmly opposes it, instead basing their moral stance on teachings going back, in the case of Zen, no further than *Dharma* ancestors deeply indebted to their military, samurai or imperial patrons. This also leads Western disciples of nationalistic Japanese Buddhist leaders to either ignore, minimize, or otherwise "explain away" the wartime involvement of their particular hero of the faith. For example, when faced with Yasutani's militarist and anti-Semitic pronouncements, Robert Aitken claimed that it was possible to "link the anger [Yasutani] manifested in his political and sectarian pronouncements with the fact that his mother gave him up for adoption to a Buddhist priest when he was

only five years old and that he grew up to be an angry youth and adult” (Aitken, 1999:68).

No doubt there is an element of truth to Aitken’s claim, for Buddhist temples throughout Asia have long been used as dumping grounds for the children of the poor. It would therefore hardly be surprising if some of those who were dumped became embittered by their experience, especially in light of the harshness of temple life from a child’s perspective. Yet Yasutani succeeded in becoming an elementary school teacher as an adult and was under no obligation to remain in the priesthood. Unless one accepts a form of rigid determinism, Yasutani was a free agent and ought to be held accountable for the moral consequences of his acts, not least of all because he claimed, from at least 1943 onwards, to be “promulgating and exalting the true Buddha Dharma” (Yasutani, 1943:2).

Another member of the Harada-Yasutani lineage, Zen Master Bernie Glassman, who is himself of Jewish background, claims that Yasutani may have written his words “without believing in them, simply because he needed to placate the powers that be” (Glassman, 1999:74). Again, even if this were true regarding his wartime writings, it would still not explain Yasutani’s ongoing right-wing crusade in postwar years. Nevertheless, Glassman offers what might be termed the “ultimate defense” of Yasutani through redefining the very nature of enlightenment:

If your definition of enlightenment is that there’s no nationalism, or militarism, or bigotry in the state of enlightenment, you better change your definition of enlightenment. For the state of enlightenment is maha, the circle with no inside and no outside, not even a circle, just pulsating of life everywhere (Glassman, 1999: 74).

Commenting on Glassman’s definition of enlightenment in the Winter 2000 issue of *Dharma Life*, Vishvapani, the magazine’s editor, writes,

To some, such sentiments will seem profound. I think they are transcendental platitudes, confusion raised to the level of metaphysics. Glassman’s way of seeing the mundane in terms of the absolute flattens distinctions and erodes values. What is missing is ethics, and Glassman’s inclusivity seems to me to culminate in a moral failure (Vishvapani 2000:36).

Martin Marty would no doubt have wanted Glassman to recognize that the infinite circle he referred to was, historically speaking, “pulsating of life *and death* everywhere.” I say this because Marty added the following to his earlier statement on the distress that religion can produce:

You will not read about the destructive element in religious impulses in the advertisements for the church of your choice. Yet, if the pursuit of truth is still to be cherished as a foundational theme in the academy, one must note the feature of religion that keeps it on the front page and on prime time: it

kills. Or, if, as the gun lobbies say of weapons—that they do not kill; people do—one must say of religion that if it does not kill, many of its forms and expressions motivate people to kill (Marty 1996:14).

If there is a redeeming feature to this article, it is my attempt to have those who believe in the *potential* of the Engaged Buddhism movement recognize the need for practitioners, scholar-practitioners, and scholars alike to open their eyes to the shortcomings of those who are all too often uncritically promoted as this movement's exemplars. It was, after all, Śākyamuni Buddha who in the *Dhammapada* is recorded as having said, "There never was, there never will be, nor is there now, a man who is always blamed, or a man who is always praised" (Babbitt 1965:36).

Likewise, if there is an element of truth in the old maxim "Physician heal thyself," then those who today champion the Engaged Buddhism movement must be conspicuous in their willingness to fully and honestly confront any and all skeletons in its closet, most especially those that have contributed to the deaths of millions. Only in so doing can Engaged Buddhism realize its true potential to benefit *all* sentient beings.

Ironically for leaders of a religion that teaches the non-existence of self, the question boils down to this: Will the personal and organizational "egos" of today's proponents of Engaged Buddhism allow them to honestly recognize and learn from the "dark side" of their faith? For example, will Sōka Gakkai's leadership ever be able to publicly admit that, despite Makiguchi's unwillingness to worship the Sun Goddess, he nonetheless embraced the state-centered and imperialist goals of his contemporaries?

In the absence of such admissions, Engaged Buddhism cannot expect to be taken seriously when it claims to be a movement dedicated to constructive and liberating change for both individual and society. Without evidence to the contrary, who but the naive will believe that Engaged Buddhism is the sole exception to the ongoing reality that national *self-interest* readily turns religions, *all* religions, into its willing and obedient servants, ever ready to condone state-sanctioned killing when called upon to do so?

NOTES

1. Representative of these books, arranged chronologically, are the following:
Kotler, Arnold ed. *Engaged Buddhist Reader: Ten Years of Engaged Buddhist Publishing*. Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1996, 262 pages, ISBN 0-938077-98-8 (paperback), US \$18.00.
Chappell, David W. ed. *Buddhist Peacework: Creating Cultures of Peace*. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1999, 253 pages, ISBN 0-86171-167-X (paperback), US \$14.95.
Kisala, Robert. *Prophets of Peace: Pacifism and Cultural Identity in Japan's New Religions*.

- Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999, viii + 242 pages, ISBN 0-8248-2267-6 (paperback), US \$21.95.
- Kraft, Kenneth. *The Wheel of Engaged Buddhism: A New Map of the Path*. New York: Weatherhill, 1999, 101 pages, ISBN 0-8348-0463-8 (paperback), US \$12.95.
- Harvey, Peter. *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, xx + 478 pages, ISBN 0-521-55640-6 (paperback), AUS \$38.40; ISBN 0-521-55394-6 (hardback), AUS \$108.70.
- Queen, Christopher S. ed. *Engaged Buddhism in the West*. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000, xi + 554 pages, ISBN 0-86171-159-9 (paperback), US \$24.95.
2. For a more detailed discussion of Yasutani's wartime writings, see Victoria, *Zen War Stories*, Chapter Five: "Zen Master Dōgen Goes to War—The Militarist and Anti-Semitic Writings of Yasutani Haku'un" (forthcoming from Curzon Press).
 3. For a more detailed explication of this incident see pp. 284-287 of the enlarged German edition of *Zen at War*, i.e., *Zen, Nationalismus und Krieg—Eine unheimliche Allianz*. For further discussion of Ch'an/Zen's "service to the state" see pp. 283-294 and 297-318 in the same volume.

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