

Book Review

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*A Critical Analysis of Brian Victoria's Perspectives on
Modern Japanese Buddhist History*

Reviewed by Daniel A. Metraux

Professor of Asian Studies

Chair of the Department of Foreign Languages,

Literatures and Cultures

Mary Baldwin College

dmetraux@mbc.edu

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Since the 1960s, increasing numbers of Buddhists have become involved in varying forms of social activism that have challenged the social or political status quo. Public figures participating in this "engaged" form of Buddhism have included the Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hanh and Aung San Suu Kyi. Scholars who have studied the phenomenon of "Engaged Buddhism" generally have painted a very positive portrait of the movement, commenting especially on the emphasis that these activists place on non-violence and respect for the dignity of life.

Buddhist scholar Brian Victoria, however, wants us to pause and reflect more deeply on this very positive image of Buddhist activism. He asks us to consider the possibility that during the twentieth century there were numerous cases where Buddhist activism was not at all conducive to the advancement of a peaceful and harmonious world order. His research has uncovered so many examples of leading Buddhists who have supported or even encouraged acts of violence and even barbarism that one must wonder if "Engaged Buddhism" deserves such a hallowed name today.

Victoria's published work, which includes two monographs, *Zen at War* (1997) and *Zen War Stories* (2003) as well as a 2001 article in the *Journal of Global Buddhism*, "[Engaged Buddhism: A Skeleton in the Closet](#)," focuses almost entirely on the behavior of Japanese Buddhist leaders. Victoria investigates the role that Japanese Buddhists have played in the

country's political and social life since the Meiji era (1868-1912), with a special focus on the 1930s and 1940s when Japan was making war first in China and later in the whole Asia-Pacific region.

Victoria is critical of those Buddhist scholars closely associated with socially engaged Buddhism who state that their doctrine offers solutions to the world's "multiple problems, most especially Western materialism, as well as the danger of nuclear holocaust and environmental degradation" (Victoria 2001, p. 73). Victoria wonders whether these Buddhist leaders can be believed. Could they, Victoria asks, "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?" (ibid.)

One potential problem with Victoria's work is that his focus is quite narrow. He provides convincing evidence to damn the cooperation between Japanese militarists and Zen and other Buddhist leaders in the 1930s and 1940s. He is on less satisfactory ground, however, when he criticizes the likes of Makiguchi Tsunesaburo, the prewar founder of the Soka Gakkai. Further, Victoria's overall work would be more credible if he were to examine the work of other non-Japanese Buddhists.

Victoria's *Zen at War* and *Zen War Stories*

Victoria's main contribution is the publication of two books, *Zen at War* and *Zen War Stories*, in which he explores the intimate relationship between Japanese institutional Buddhism and militarism in the 1930s and 1940s and demonstrates the critical role that most of Japan's Buddhist leaders had in preparing the ideology and indoctrination of the millions of Japanese troops who would later commit so many crimes against humanity in East and Southeast Asia.

Victoria's overarching theme is his admonition, found in the conclusion to *Zen War Stories*, concerning the culpability of the leaders of virtually all world religious leaders when their governments have gone to war.

Victoria suggests 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. He suggests that there is huge disparity between the ideals of peace and universal well being found in most major religions and the "historical reality of their consistent endorsement of governmental war policies" (Victoria 2003, p. 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... (Victoria 2003, p. 230).

Victoria uses the collaboration between Japan's Buddhist hierarchy and the militarist leaders of the 1930s and 1940s as a case study to illustrate this main point.

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 Nebraskan, 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. After several visits to Eihei-ji in Fukui Prefecture, he eventually embraced Zen and was ordained as a Soto Zen priest in 1964.

Victoria soon embarked on a personal quest to discover "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" (Victoria 1997, 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 (Victoria 1997, 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 period (1868-1912) and the end of World War II, the "unity of Zen and the sword," of Buddhism and the state, has deep roots in Japanese history (Victoria 1997, 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 (Victoria 1997, p. 184).

Victoria, currently a senior lecturer at the University of Adelaide in Australia, asserts in an interview published in *The New York Times* just prior to the publication of *Zen War Stories* in early 2003, 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 Japan's Buddhist leaders of the era approached that of today's murderously militant Islamists (Jalon, 2003).

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 (Victoria 1997, p. 184).

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 (*Sonnō Hōbutsu Daidōdan*). This organization "represented the organizational birth of a Japanese nationalism that was both exclusionist and aggressively anti-Christian in character" (Victoria 1997, p. 118). 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" (Victoria 1997, 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 gedō*) 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 (Victoria 1997, p. 25.)

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 1904-05. 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" (Victoria 1997, p. 122), a Zen-based ideology would unite the people behind the military's drive to make Japan the dominant power in Asia.

The emergence of "imperial way Buddhism" (*kōdō bukkyō*) 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 since Buddhism and the state were one, the emperor and Buddhism must also be one and the same (Victoria 1997, 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 wherein 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 (*Shinkō Bukkyō Seinen Dōmei*), 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 (Victoria 1997, p. 150) and could not resist trying to find positive aspects to 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, when he began his investigations 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's *Zen War Stories* picks up right where he ended *Zen at War*, six years earlier. Victoria in this work 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 in a state ideology that justified the obligation of every citizen to unquestioningly serve the state and support its murderous expansion across Asia.

Victoria quotes Lt. Colonel Sugimoto Goro, whose posthumous book *Great Duty (Taigi)* 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 (Victoria 2003, p.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, which 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" (Victoria 2003, p.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 (Victoria 2003, p.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 interviews and articles. 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 (Stephens 2003).

Brian Victoria's *Zen at War* and *Zen War Stories* are disturbing studies 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 carefully documented studies. 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 in-depth conclusions. 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 with Victoria's work is that a person who reads both of his 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*.

Victoria's Flawed Portrayal of Makiguchi Tsunesaburo

Victoria carries on his themes in the ["Engaged Buddhism: A Skeleton in the Closet"](#) article wherein he argues that three other prominent Japanese Buddhists, Makiguchi Tsunesaburo, Fuji Nichidatsu, and Yasutani Haku'un, supported Japanese militarism and its agenda of conquest throughout Asia, before and during the Pacific War. I am not qualified to discuss the assertions against Fuji and Yasutani, but having studied the Soka Gakkai for nearly four decades, it is possible to make a few observations on Victoria's appraisal of Makiguchi.

Victoria strongly asserts that Makiguchi (1871-1944), a career educator, was an avid supporter of Japanese militarism and that his perception of the role of education was the creation of loyal subjects to the state who would support the Emperor and the government in its militarist agenda. These accusations run contrary to the Soka Gakkai's perception of Makiguchi as a pacifist and sincere follower of Nichiren Buddhism, who was imprisoned along with the Soka Gakkai's first postwar leader Toda Josei (1900-1958) because of his avid opposition to the government's war activities.

Makiguchi, who died in prison in 1944, has become the martyr for the Soka Gakkai movement, which today touts its peace and antiwar themes

in all of its writings and teachings, and which stresses the suffering of its founders as evidence of the movement's long and sincere record of pacifism. If Makiguchi is guilty as Victoria charges, much of the historical *raison d'être* of the Soka Gakkai would be severely undercut.

Two other scholars, Dayle M. Bethel and Koichi Miyata (Bethel 2003, Miyata 2002), have already published articles attacking Victoria's conclusions. They correctly note that Victoria has quoted Makiguchi out of context and through their own examination of the texts that Victoria uses to draw his conclusions, they have skillfully provided longer versions of Makiguchi's quotes which when seen in context tend to negate Victoria's assertions.

Bethel concludes his brief article by noting that:

[I]t is clear, if one reads Makiguchi's work in its entirety, that in his passionate commitment to education and educational change and transformation his aim was to prepare children and young people for living fully and productively, and as socially responsible participants, in a Japanese state committed to a "more humanitarian way" which would assure the "well-being and protection of all people." To suggest, as Dr. Victoria does, that Makiguchi's sole aim in education was to create fodder for the Japanese militarists' suicidal battles is a gross misinterpretation of what Makiguchi wrote and stood for (Bethel 2003, p. 208).

Makiguchi and Toda began the Soka Gakkai (then known as the Soka Kyoiku Gakkai or Value-Creation Education Society) in 1930 to study, discuss, and publicize the educational theories of Makiguchi. Makiguchi, an educational philosopher and writer, devoted his entire career to teaching, educational administration, and the development of a philosophy of education. The latter was based on the premise that the goal of human life is the attainment of happiness and that man can only become happy if

he becomes a value-creator. Value consists of three related ingredients: Goodness, Beauty, and Benefit or Gain. A happy person is defined as one who maximizes his potential in his chosen sphere of life and who helps others maximize theirs. In essence, in the 1930s Makiguchi's group was very much an educational reform society, concentrating on the need to make the creation of value a primary aim of education.

Makiguchi held that the goal of education must be that of helping the student become an independent and creative thinker. He denounced the educational system of 1930s Japan as being too rigid. Rote memorization of facts, noted Makiguchi, stifled a child's creativity and natural curiosity. He wanted teachers to give students more personal attention, to encourage independent learning activities, and to have the schools teach the children more about their community. Nowhere does Makiguchi focus, as Victoria charges, on training children to serve the State. Quite the contrary, Makiguchi wanted to liberate children from the power of the state.

It is clear from my interviews with older Soka Gakkai members with connections to that era, that Makiguchi and Toda, who had formally converted to the Nichiren Sho sect of Buddhism, grew attached to their new found religion. Makiguchi became increasingly convinced that people could find deeper and more enduring value through the strict teachings of Nichiren Shoshu, which endeavored to adhere exactly to the teachings and practices of Nichiren (1222-82), the founder of Japan's Nichiren school of Buddhism.

The start of Japan's Pacific War at Pearl Harbor brought on a spiritual crisis for Makiguchi and Toda. The Japanese government demanded the amalgamation of all the Nichiren sects into one body and that all priests and followers participate in Shinto worship. Nichiren had strongly advocated the purity and independence of his faith from any outside teaching or cooperation with any other religious school or sect. While some Nichiren Shoshu priests adhered to government orders for reasons of survival, Makiguchi and Toda refused because it would represent a breach of the fundamental doctrines of Nichiren Buddhism.

Thus, Makiguchi and Toda defied the government and went to prison not necessarily for anti-war beliefs, which the Soka Gakkai preaches today, but because it was against their deeply felt religious principles to adopt Shinto practices or to merge with another religious sect, even if it had Nichiren connections. While Makiguchi may have indeed made the pro-Emperor statements that Victoria alleges, his overall thinking and demeanor was certainly not pro-militarist. The evidence simply does not support Victoria's argument.

Concluding Notes

Victoria has made a valuable scholarly contribution through his research on the activities of many Japanese Buddhist leaders in the early and mid-twentieth century. The fact that there has been no overt challenge to the totality of his assertions gives general credence to his central thesis. The activities of many Japanese Buddhist leaders during the militarist era were abysmal and need to be brought to light. We also need to remember that not every engaged Buddhist has had an exemplary record. It is also possible that Victoria has erred in some of his research findings.

Victoria is probably right in asserting that Makiguchi was not exactly the anti-war zealot described by the Soka Gakkai today, but Victoria misreads and misinterprets Makiguchi's writing in his mistaken portrait of him as a pro-militarist figure.

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