
Brian Daizen Victoria’s work, which follows his earlier more systematic work Zen at War (1997), narrates and evaluates a number of the personalities and events that exemplify Zen Buddhism’s support of and complicity with the totalitarian military regime of Imperial Japan. The author, himself trained as a Soto Zen priest, provides a series of somewhat chilling stories, translations from wartime texts, and interviews with unapologetic survivors. This ‘case material’ comes with an accompanying critical commentary. This provocative book will interest those concerned with the ideology and psychology of late Imperial Japan and the possible uses of Buddhism in justifying ‘holy war’, including political assassination, atrocities against civilians such as the Nanjing massacre, and suicide attacks. Zen War Stories should be greatly welcomed, since surprisingly little attention has been given to the political role of Zen Buddhists and lay Zen intellectuals such as D.T. Suzuki and the philosophers of the Kyoto school—before and during the Second World War. It sheds a different light on a pacifist religion by showing how it can be employed to justify uncontrolled violence.

The author argues that violence is incompatible with Buddhism’s message of peace and compassion and pursues the weighty evidence of Zen’s failure to live accordingly. Victoria documents the support given by Zen Buddhists to the military regime, including masters who would later bring Zen to the West. He also shows the uses that the military intentionally made of Zen, such as modeling military life upon Zen monastic practices (from the organization of units down to mess kits) and cultivating a philosophy which made Japanese indifferent to death and suffering—whether one’s own or others’. If a soldier did not care about his own life and was resigned to death, how much value could he see in the life of others?

These examples raise some significant questions: given Buddhism’s declared commitment to non-violence and compassion, how could Japanese Buddhists justify an aggressive and offensive holy war against the West and the colonization (in the name of liberation) of Japan’s Asian neighbors? Given that the majority of Zen masters and practitioners did not passively tolerate Japanese policy but actively sought to legitimate it through Buddhism, is Zen—if not Buddhism itself—totalitarian? How is it that Zen—which is often seen as individualistic, irreverent, ironic, undogmatic, and questioning—was used to mold and inspire soldiers and citizens for total war?

Victoria contends that Zen’s antinomianism and amoral attitude, since enlightenment transcends good and evil in the Zen tradition, allows it to develop nonattachment in an ethically indifferent manner. This hardness to life and death made Zen the preferred form of Buddhism for the medieval Samurai. Combat and war were not contradictory to enlightenment but could become avenues to it if done responsively without attachment, desire, or hatred. According to Victoria, this
image of the ideal warrior—popularized by D.T. Suzuki and later many martial arts films—played into the military’s program of ‘spiritual education’ which cultivated a fanatical military spirit indifferent to the individual’s fate.

Japanese scholars maintained that Japanese Zen was the perfection of Buddhism, one that overcame the pacifism and weakness of Asia. This created the strange practice of sending Zen missions to Buddhist countries. It also promoted the idea of Japanese superiority over and ‘responsibility’ for its Asian neighbors. The government sought to legitimize its exploitive occupation of East and Southeast Asia in part by appealing to Zen’s role in creating a ‘pan-Asian’ Buddhism capable of resisting Western colonialism.

Victoria also examines how Buddhists helped war criminals evade capture and Buddhism’s role as consolation for many of the war criminals hung by the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal. Since many of the figures and ideas remain the same, the legacy of wartime Zen—he argues—is still at work in the ‘corporate Zen’ of the postwar period.

Although a valuable contribution, this book fails to take account of the Buddhist tradition of just-war thinking which Imperial Japan appealed to and misused in order to legitimate offensive war and occupation. The author is often in danger of conflating the varieties of Buddhism in his attempt to question Buddhism as such through its Zen incarnation. To reduce Buddhism to the Japanese Zen of the wartime period—which is actually a Shinto-Zen synthesis—would be to repeat the very claim that Zen is the ‘essence’ of Buddhism. Recognizing the variety of Buddhist positions on war would indicate a more nuanced approach to the more ambiguous figures presented in this book, such as D.T. Suzuki and some of the Kyoto school. Being implicated in the Zeitgeist makes one to some degree responsible but it is not identical to active engagement for a totalitarian regime. The recognition of pluralism within Buddhism would be appropriate given the significant differences that exist between Japanese Zen and Chan in China, Korea, and Vietnam.

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The thesis that you should cultivate compassion, respect, and reverence for all life does not seem promising for justifying war. The argument that it is better to suffer than to do harm is even less encouraging. Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike thus often assume that there is no legitimate Buddhist justification of war much less a Buddhist tradition of just-war theory. To use violence is to betray the Buddha’s teachings.

There are noticeable exceptions to the standard interpretation of the Buddha’s first precept demanding non-violence/non-harm (*ahimsa*). Theravada monks and
laity have been implicated in persecution and violence in the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict and civil war between a series of democratically elected governments, supported by the mostly Buddhist Sinhalese, and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) terrorist organization based in the mostly non-Buddhist Tamil minority.

Bartholomeusz’s provocative book explores the arguments for and against the justice of war in the Buddhist tradition of Sri Lanka. She comprehensively investigates the possible legitimation of violence in the Pali Canon (the foundational texts of Theravada Buddhism), in postcanonical narratives such as the *Mahavamsa* (which describe the Buddha’s legendary Sri Lankan visits and the victories of Buddhist warrior kings), and in contemporary discussions. This interdisciplinary work analyzes Buddhist ideas in relation to western just war and ethical theory. She contends that Buddhism not only has a rigorous tradition of nonviolence and loving kindness but also a long history of thinking about war from which the assertion of the possible justice or the unfortunate necessity of war can emerge. Her thesis is that although Buddhism privileges non-violence, it can be used to justify war if certain conditions are met.

Emphasizing the diversity within Sri Lankan Buddhism, she examines three approaches to the question of war. First, she depicts a position which she calls Buddhist fundamentalism. This extreme view maintains that the war must conclude with the defeat of the LTTE and the restoration of a unified Sinhalese Buddhist Sri Lanka. The argument for a holy race war generally follows a three-step legitimation of anti-Tamil violence: (1) Sinhala and Buddhist identity constitute a unity that is radically distinct from the Dravidian Hindu Tamil interlopers from South India; (2) Sri Lanka is the island of dharma (*dhammadwipa*) ordained by the Buddha himself (by his three apocryphal visits) for Buddhism such that the whole island is the Buddha’s sacred relic and the loss of its unity would destroy this legacy; (3) the justice of a defensive war for dharma justifies the preservation of Sri Lanka in its unity as a majority Sinhalese Buddhist nation through military action against the Tamils, identified with the invading *damila* of the medieval epics, thus associating the present situation with past threats.

The second view argues for the justice of undertaking defensive military action against insurgencies, even if the insurgents have some legitimate grievances. The war is interpreted as the defense of the territorial integrity and peace of the nation, as a proper function of the modern secular state, and/or the defense of the nation’s endangered Buddhist identity. Appeals have been made to international law and its account of the justice and limits of war and to Buddhist principles.

There are a number of strategies used by Sri Lankans to answer the question of how Buddhism can justify war. Some stress the unfortunate necessity of military action despite its negative karmic consequences. Others, perhaps motivated by the need for a more inspirational message, suggest that righteous war (one with a morally legitimate goal and fought in an honorable fashion) has meritorious karmic consequences. The author argues that both strategies presuppose that the precept of nonviolence is a *prima facie* rather than an absolute duty. This means that nonviolence is one’s first duty but that it can be overridden under certain circumstances as a last resort.

Theravadin ethics is sometimes seen as placing absolute value on compassion and avoiding harm. Yet, in practice, Sri Lankan Buddhists reason with a plurality of
context-sensitive *prima facie* duties. The precept against violence is not absolute but can be overridden by more pressing obligations such as defense of one’s parents or the dharma itself. The Buddha’s account of skillful means suggests, according to this reading, the use of practical judgement or a sense of appropriateness in applying moral principles to any situation. Although the Buddha’s precepts are unconditional, conflicts between precepts require contextual reasoning that employs utilitarian (maximizing compassion and minimizing suffering) and virtue ethical (the effects actions have on one’s condition) considerations. Thus, Buddhist ethical reasoning is used to justify violence for the sake of nonviolence and the government’s ‘war for peace’. The justification of war accordingly requires the fulfilment of certain conditions which Bartholomeusz compares in detail with Christian and western just war criteria.

Finally, some Buddhists reject all violence as an impediment to *nibbana* and promote the peace process. They argue for the deontological status of Buddhist precepts and the emotional and karmic consequences of all action: violence no matter how righteous always produces more violence and warriors no matter how virtuous suffer the consequences of war. ‘Conquest begets enmity; the conquered live in misery; the peaceful live happily having renounced conquest and defeat’ (*Dhammapada*, verse 201).

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