

# The “Negative Side” of D. T. Suzuki’s Relationship to War

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## *Introduction*

I BEGIN by frankly admitting this article is not meant to be a “balanced” treatment of D. T. Suzuki’s attitude toward Japanese imperialism, militarism or warfare in general. Fortunately, a spirited defense of Suzuki’s alleged anti-war stance recently appeared in *The Eastern Buddhist* (vol. 39, no. 1, 2008) in an article written by Kemmyō Taira Satō entitled: “D. T. Suzuki and the Question of War.” Thus, with Satō’s article highlighting what might be termed the “positive side” of Suzuki’s relationship to the WWII (Asia-Pacific War, 1937–1945) era and before, I do not feel it unfair to focus almost solely on the “negative side” of that relationship given the limited space available. In doing this, I express the hope that interested readers will consider the points put forth in both articles (including Satō’s further response to this article) before reaching their own conclusions.

Next, let me express my sincere appreciation to the current editors of *The Eastern Buddhist*, a journal first edited by D. T. Suzuki, for providing this opportunity to share my latest research. I do not say this lightly, for not too long ago I was dropped from the 2006 documentary film *A Zen Life—D. T. Suzuki*. That is to say, the film’s director and producer, Michael Goldberg, to his credit, wanted to present a multifaceted version of Suzuki’s life and invited me to share my critique of Suzuki’s wartime record. I spent much of one day discussing my research in ever shorter sound bites in order that, as Goldberg put it, “your criticisms don’t end up on the cutting floor during the editing process.” Nevertheless, Goldberg later informed me that he was

dropping my interview because of his concern that my critical comments “would alienate other interviewees who were close to Suzuki.” Given this, the editorial board of *The Eastern Buddhist* is to be commended for their dedication to the presentation of conflicting viewpoints, even those critical of one of their founders.

Finally, let me express my appreciation to Satō for both his kind words about the importance of my overall research as well as challenging me, through his criticisms, to continue my investigation of Suzuki’s wartime record and beyond. Inasmuch as I am not a Suzuki specialist I readily admit that, thanks to Satō, I have learned things about Suzuki’s wartime record that I had not previously known. For this I am genuinely grateful.

### *Suzuki’s Early Writings*

One area in which Satō and I find ourselves in agreement is the need for a close examination of *Shin shūkyō ron* 新宗教論 (A New Theory of Religion), the first book D. T. Suzuki published in November 1896 at the age of twenty-six.<sup>1</sup> The November date is significant in that only one month later Suzuki claimed to have had his initial enlightenment experience, i.e., *kenshō* 見性 (lit. seeing one’s original nature), the authenticity of which was acknowledged by his master, Shaku Sōen 釈宗演 (1859–1919), abbot of the major Rinzai Zen monastery of Engakuji 円覺寺.

Before examining this work, however, I would like to introduce the following seminal insight into the relationship of religion and the modern state written in 1932 by the German-American Protestant theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr:

The nation is always endowed with an aura of the sacred which is one reason why religions which claim universality, are so easily captured and tamed by national sentiment, religion and patriotism merging in the process. . . . The best means of harmonizing the claim to universality with the unique and relative life of the nation, as revealed in moments of crisis, is to claim general and universally valid objectives for the nation. It is alleged to be fighting for civilization and for culture, and the whole enterprise of humanity is supposedly involved in its struggle.<sup>2</sup>

Niebuhr goes on to describe those “men of culture” who promote this agenda as follows:

<sup>1</sup> *Suzuki Daisetsu zenshū* (hereafter SDZ), vol. 23, pp. 1–147.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Victoria 2003, p. 229.

The religious or the rational nature to which they [men of culture] are devoted helps them to realize that moral values must be universal if they are to be real; and they cannot therefore give themselves to national aspirations, unless they clothe them in the attributes of universality. A few of them recognize the impossibility of such a procedure. Among most, the force of reason operates only to give the hysterias of war and the imbecilities of national politics more plausible excuses than an average man is capable of inventing. So they become the *worst liars of wartime*.<sup>3</sup>

Next, let us test Niebuhr's thesis in light of the content of the most contentious chapter in Suzuki's book: "The Relation of Religion and State." Does Suzuki claim "general and universally valid objectives for the nation" that is at war? And did he allege that Japan was "fighting for civilization and for culture, and the whole enterprise of humanity is supposedly involved in its struggle"? The answer to both questions is yes, as reflected in the following passages (using Satō's own translation): (1) Thus, if an aggressive country comes and obstructs one's commerce or violates one's rights, this would truly *interrupt the progress of all humanity*; (2) as long as the state takes care not to lose this moral sense, one can anticipate the step-by-step *advancement of humanity and the fulfillment of universal ideals*.<sup>4</sup>

True, Suzuki does condition the second statement above on the state not losing "this moral sense" which in this case refers to: "punish[ing] the people of the country representing injustice in order that justice might prevail."<sup>5</sup> And as Satō notes, Suzuki also placed the following conditions on the state: "*if every action and movement of the state takes on a religious character and if every word and action of religion takes on a state character, then whatever is done for the sake of the state is done for religion, and whatever is done for the sake of religion is done for the state. The two are one, and one is the two.*"

Yet in terms of *historical reality*, when and where has there ever been a state, past or present, in which "*every action and movement of the state takes on a religious character*"? Today, as in Suzuki's time, it is typically the rich and powerful, most especially corporate leaders, who wield enormous influence over state policies, especially regarding questions of war and peace, inasmuch as wars are nearly always related to the acquisition of still more

<sup>3</sup> Victoria 2003, p. 229 (italics mine).

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Satō 2008, p. 68.

<sup>5</sup> Satō 2008, p. 68.

wealth and power for a nation's ruling elites and corporate allies. Given this, how could anyone *realistically* believe that short of a radical reorganization of society and the state, the conditions Suzuki envisioned could ever exist? Either he was hopelessly naïve to assume this possibility or, as Niebuhr notes: "Among most [men of culture], the force of reason operates only to give the hysterias of war and the imbecilities of national politics more plausible excuses than an average man is capable of inventing."

No doubt Satō will fault me for asserting once again that Suzuki's focus was on Japan in this chapter. In response I note that inasmuch as Suzuki chose to write *in Japanese*, his audience would naturally have been almost exclusively Japanese (especially since he never translated this work into English). Still more important, however, is the following quotation that Suzuki included in this chapter describing the attitude of soldiers facing the possibility of death on the battlefield: "[they] regard their own lives 'as light as goose feathers and their duty as heavy as Mount Taishan.' Should they fall on the battlefield they have no regrets. This is what is called 'religion during the time of a [national] emergency.'"<sup>6</sup>

As his Japanese audience would have instantly recognized, the first quotation is taken directly from Emperor Meiji's 1882 "Imperial Rescript to Soldiers and Sailors." Every Japanese military man had to accept this credo *without question* through to the end of WWII (Asia-Pacific War). Clearly, this particular phrase was *not* universal in nature, for the leaders of Western imperialist nations dared not order their troops to regard their lives as being "as light as goose feathers"!

This denigration of the worth of human life linked to unquestioning loyalty to the state *unto death*, would characterize the Japanese fighting man (and eventually Japanese society as a whole) up through 1945. Suzuki's unique contribution was to provide a religious endorsement to this denigration through his nearly mystical, i.e., "non-dual," identification of religion and the state—"the two are one, and one is the two." While I cannot state with certainty that Suzuki was the first man of religion in modern Japan to articulate a theoretical framework for the unity of religion and the state, he was certainly a pioneer in this effort even though he would be far from being the last.

Hopefully, there should be no need here to explain just how deeply "un-Buddhist" if not "anti-Buddhist" Suzuki's acceptance of the denigration of human life was even though he was clearly not its author. While as Satō asserts, by 1943 (if not before) Suzuki may have grown critical of the utter

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Satō 2008, p. 68.

waste of human life resulting from this denigration, e.g., militarily meaningless “banzai charges,” etc., the fact remains that he had earlier adopted and promulgated this view to his fellow Japanese as his own. Even though Suzuki’s first book may have had relatively little influence on Japanese society as a whole, he still must answer, as a Buddhist layman, for his actions in light of the precepts of the Buddhist faith, first and foremost the precept against taking life.

In any event, my critique of Suzuki, either as a young man or later, has little or no connection to how much influence he actually exerted on Japanese society or its religious circles. I have never claimed that Suzuki was a major religious figure in the rise of Japanese militarism. What is of concern is that this “man of Zen” (as he is popularly known) could have so closely identified religion, including the Buddha-dharma, with the state that when the latter initiated warfare it could be applauded for promoting “the advancement of humanity and the fulfillment of universal ideals.”

*Shaku Sōen, Suzuki’s Rinzai Zen Master*

I note that Satō suggests that because Suzuki omitted references to the recently ended Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895 from his first book, this omission may be considered an indication of his opposition to this war—a war that Satō admits was “aggressive in nature.”<sup>7</sup> While I possess no definitive information to the contrary, silence is more typically a sign of assent or at least acquiescence to an action rather than opposition. Further, it should be noted that in the aftermath of this particular war, Buddhism had come under criticism within Japanese society for having failed to aid the Japanese war effort in any practical manner. This failure was contrasted unfavorably with the Christian church in Japan that despite its small numbers actively engaged in such war relief activities as visiting wounded soldiers in hospitals and extending aid to soldiers’ families.

Significantly, both of the Rinzai Zen abbots under whom Suzuki trained at Engakuji, initially Imakita Kōsen 今北洪川 (1816–1892) and then Shaku Sōen, were leaders of a pan-sectarian Buddhist reform movement known as *shin bukkō* 新仏教 (New Buddhism) dedicated, among other things, to enhancing institutional Buddhism’s contribution to society in general as well as the needs of the state, both in peace and war. Given this, I suggest Suzuki’s *Shin shūkyō ron* can best be understood as one early attempt to provide the theoretical rationale for this reform movement. Since Bud-

<sup>7</sup> Satō 2008, p. 73.

dhism, unlike Japanese Christianity, had failed to serve the needs of the state during the Sino-Japanese War, it is hardly surprising that Suzuki did not refer to this war in his work, for it would only have served to underscore institutional Buddhism's inadequacies. However, during Japan's next war, i.e., the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905, all of this changed, and it was no less than Suzuki's master, Shaku Sōen, who took the lead in exemplifying the wartime unity of religion and the state that Suzuki advocated.

Specifically, Sōen volunteered to serve the Imperial Army as a Buddhist chaplain attached to the First Army Division. He explained his motivation as follows: "I wished to have my faith tested by going through the greatest horror of life, but I also wished to inspire, if I could, our valiant soldiers with the ennobling thoughts of the Buddha, so as to enable them to die on the battlefield with the confidence that the task in which they were engaged is great and noble."<sup>8</sup>

And just what was this "great and noble" task that Japanese soldiers were involved in? Was Japan fighting a defensive war, repelling a Russian attack on its homeland? No, it was not, for it was once again fighting, this time with Tsarist Russia instead of China, for control of the Korean peninsula and, if possible, the Manchurian region of China. As the distinguished Japanese historian Ienaga Saburō notes: "Government leaders . . . had started the quest for glory by fighting China for hegemony in Korea. Domination of Korea became a goal shared by successive administrations and the public at large."<sup>9</sup>

The difference this time was that unlike militarily weak China, Russia was a relatively strong Western imperialist power at a time when Japan was still a minor one. Minor in the sense that Japan possessed only one overseas colony, i.e., the island of Taiwan. It had annexed Taiwan as a result of its victory in the Sino-Japanese War, something Satō conveniently fails to mention as, at least initially, he sought to portray Japan as solely the *victim* of Western imperialist designs. In any event, for Japan, Korea represented a much bigger prize. This clearly raises the question of whether Japan's ongoing imperialist expansion, this time at the expense of Korea's independence, ranks as a great and noble task.

And even more importantly from a Buddhist perspective, is there any reference in the many teachings attributed to Buddha Śākyamuni where he urges his followers to become soldiers, let alone think of his "ennobling thoughts," so that they might die (*and kill*) on the battlefield with confidence?

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Victoria 1997, p. 26.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Victoria 2006, p. 19.

Still further, again like Suzuki, Sōen links the war, which Japan had started with a surprise attack, with universal moral values:

War is an evil and a great one indeed. But war against evils must be unflinchingly prosecuted till we attain the final aim. In the present hostilities, into which Japan has entered with great reluctance, she pursues *no egotistic purpose*, but seeks *the subjugation of evils hostile to civilization, peace, and enlightenment*. . . . This being the case, war is not necessarily horrible, provided that it is fought for a just and honorable cause, that it is fought for *the upholding of humanity and civilization*.<sup>10</sup>

Is there not an uncanny resemblance between Sōen's words and those of Suzuki? Perhaps this is not so surprising in that the two men were, after all, master and disciple. And as the English adage notes, "Like father, like son." And should Satō object that similarities in wording notwithstanding, it is unfair to infer anything about Suzuki's own thinking on the basis of his master's thoughts, it bears repeating that it was Suzuki himself who translated his master's words into English and arranged for their publication under the title: *Sermons of a Buddhist Abbot*. That is to say, it was Suzuki who, as translator, was responsible for including the word "sermon" in the title, clearly indicating that he believed the book contained an exposition of the Buddha-dharma.

As a result of Japan's victory in the Russo-Japanese War, Japan would not simply annex Korea in 1910, exploiting its natural resources and cheap labor as do all imperialist countries, but similar to the earlier U.S. treatment of Native Americans, it also attempted to commit cultural genocide against the Korean people by forcing them to adopt the personal and family names, language and religious faith of the colonizer, i.e., primarily Shinto but also "Japanese-style" Buddhism with its predominantly married clergy. According to Sōen, however, Japan had fought Russia for "no egotistic purpose" while seeking "the subjugation of evils hostile to civilization, peace, and enlightenment."

Returning to Suzuki, Satō failed to produce any public statement, or any statement at all, in which Suzuki criticizes Sōen for the bellicose statements he made as a military chaplain during the Russo-Japanese War or for having twisted or misrepresented the meaning of his (Suzuki's) earlier work let alone the words attributed to Buddha Śākyamuni. While by October 1904

<sup>10</sup> Victoria 2006, pp. 27–28 (italics mine).

Suzuki may have bemoaned the war's massive death toll, in what amounts to a serious and deeply misleading distortion of the historical record, Satō fails to inform his readers that when Japan first attacked Russian naval forces stationed in China on 10 February 1904, Suzuki, then resident in the U.S., commented: "The Chicago papers this morning published two naval battles fought at Port Arthur and Chemulpo, in both of which the Japanese seem to have won a complete victory. *This is a brilliant start & [sic] I hope that they would keep on this campaign in a similar manner till the end.*"<sup>11</sup> In the same year, Suzuki also wrote: "Let us then shuffle off this mortal coil whenever it becomes necessary, and not raise a grunting voice against the fates. . . . Resting in this conviction, Buddhists carry the banner of Dharma over the dead and dying until they gain final victory."<sup>12</sup>

In these comments we have a clear indication that Suzuki, even five years after his initial enlightenment experience, shared the triumphal nationalism, if not imperialism, of his contemporaries. Was an enlightenment experience of no help in allowing Suzuki (let alone Shaku Sōen et al.) to transcend the narrow and imperialistic nationalism of his day? Was Suzuki unaware of chapter 5, stanza 15 of the *Dhammapada* in which Buddha Śākyamuni is recorded as having said: "Victory breeds hatred. The defeated live in pain. Happily the peaceful live giving up victory and defeat"? Be that as it may, it was not until some months later, with "complete victory" in doubt, that Suzuki began to lament the war's horrific toll in human life.

Further, shortly after Japan's eventual but extremely costly victory in 1905, Suzuki wrote about what he saw as the unity of Zen and Bushido as embodied by Japan's modern soldiers. In a 1906 English-language article in the *Journal of the Pali Text Society* entitled "The Zen Sect of Buddhism," Suzuki also sought to defend the Zen-influenced soldier's willingness to die in battle from Western criticism:

The Lebensanschauung of Bushido is no more nor less than that of Zen. The calmness and even joyfulness of heart at the moment of death which is conspicuously observable in the Japanese, the intrepidity which is generally shown by the Japanese soldiers in the face of an overwhelming enemy; and the fairness of play to an opponent so strongly taught by Bushido—all these come from a spirit of the Zen training, and not from any such blind, fatalistic conception as is sometimes thought to be a trait peculiar to Orientals.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> SDZ, vol. 36, p. 247 (italics mine).

<sup>12</sup> Suzuki 1904.

<sup>13</sup> Suzuki 1906, p. 34.

Suzuki's assertion that "fairness of play to an opponent" comes from Zen is also noteworthy in that it suggests the more than 100,000 deaths on both sides during the Russo-Japanese War was something akin to a sporting match. That is to say, so long as both sides play by the rules, having an *equal*, i.e., "fair," opportunity to kill each other, Zen training has accomplished its purposes.

In addition, we catch a glimpse of Suzuki's attitude toward China, Zen's birthplace, in the same article when he wrote: "[Zen] as a living faith is as dead as everything else in that *old tottering country*."<sup>14</sup> Not a word of recognition here, let alone sympathy, that China might be "tottering" due, at least in part, to the imperialist encroachments of foreign countries, Japan included.

Be that as it may, Satō fails to demonstrate that Suzuki opposed the subsequent colonization of Korea in 1910 or the attempted cultural genocide perpetrated by the Japanese government against the Korean people for the next thirty-five years. In the absence of such statements, and given that it was Suzuki himself who enabled his master's bellicose statements to be presented to the English-speaking world as authentic expressions of the Buddha-dharma, it is reasonable to conclude that through *at least* the early years of the twentieth century Suzuki was sympathetic to Japanese imperialism if not an outright supporter. If he had a change of heart it would only come later.

Finally, since even Satō admits that Suzuki was a proponent of so-called "defensive war," it is worth noting that the Japanese government (similar to *all* modern governments) presented the Russo-Japanese War to the Japanese people as being just that—a purely defensive effort, for it was alleged that a Russian takeover of the Korean peninsula, let alone Manchuria, would constitute a mortal threat to Japan.

However, in the case of the Russo-Japanese War, the only truly mortal threat was that posed to the Korean people, for it was *their* independence and well-being that was doomed no matter which of the two imperialist empires emerged victorious. Sōen's portrayal (with the assistance of Suzuki's translation) of the struggle over which country would control Korea (and eventually Manchuria) as a "great and noble task," moreover a task fully in accord with the Buddha-dharma, must be considered as one of the great betrayals of that faith. This holds true whether or not one believes Buddhism to be strictly pacifist.

It is also noteworthy that Sōen was one of the first Zen abbots to be educated in a Western-style university. Further, having successfully completed his *kōan* 公案 training and received *inka shōmei* 印可証明 at the unusually

<sup>14</sup> Suzuki 1906, p. 17 (italics mine).

early age of twenty-five, he was considered, at least in the Rinzai Zen sect, to be fully enlightened. Thus, decades before the advent of the Asia-Pacific War something had gone wrong, very wrong, among Zen Buddhist leaders (and, as I reveal in *Zen at War*; among all of Japan's institutional Buddhist leaders who equally supported Japan's wars up through 1945). In this, Suzuki played at least a supporting role, most especially in promoting this understanding of Zen to the English-speaking world.

### *Suzuki as a Socialist*

As Satō properly acknowledges, socialism had a significant impact on Suzuki's thought. In fact, I would go so far as to identify the socialist influence on Suzuki as one of the most important factors in understanding his later attitude toward society in general and warfare in particular, even his understanding of Buddhism.

Suzuki first described his interest in socialism in a series of letters written to his close friend Yamamoto Ryōkichi 山本良吉 (1871–1942). On 6 January 1901 Suzuki wrote: “Recently I have had a desire to study socialism, for I am sympathetic to its views on social justice and equality of opportunity. Present-day society (including Japan, of course) *must be reformed from the ground up*. I'll share more of my thoughts in future letters.”<sup>15</sup>

True to his word, on 14 January 1901 Suzuki wrote Yamamoto:

In recent days I have become a socialist sympathizer *to an extreme degree*. However, my socialism is not based on economics but religion. This said, I am unable to publicly advocate this doctrine to the common people because they are so universally querulous and illiterate and therefore unprepared to listen to what I have to say. However, *basing myself on socialism*, I intend to gradually incline people to my way of thinking though I also believe I need to study some sociology.<sup>16</sup>

In a 27 February 1902 letter to Yamamoto, then the head teacher at the No. 2 Middle School in Kyoto, Suzuki urged the latter to teach socialist principles to his students:

Although from its inception opposition to self-seeking has been a principle of socialism, if that is something that cannot be put into practice all at once, at least you could teach the principle of justice and clarify the great responsibility (or duty) the wealthy and

<sup>15</sup> SDZ, vol. 36, p. 204 (italics mine).

<sup>16</sup> SDZ, vol. 36, p. 206 (italics mine).

aristocrats have for [the condition of] today's society. If you feel it is too dangerous to oppose the present [social] structure, then how about simply hinting at these truths?<sup>17</sup>

Aside from indicating Suzuki's strong interest in socialism, these passages also make it clear that even as early as 1902 Suzuki was aware of the danger facing those who taught socialist principles in a Japan that was already starting to crack down on what were labeled "dangerous thoughts" (*kiken shisō* 危険思想) imported from the West. This awareness is, I suggest, critically important in explaining why Suzuki never openly advocated socialism following his return to Japan in 1909 after a decade-long residence in the U.S. Yet this did not stop him from proclaiming his socialist sympathies to an *English-speaking audience* in his 1907 book entitled *Outlines of Mahayana Buddhism*:

As long as we live under the present state of things, it is impossible to escape the curse of social injustice and economic inequality. Some people must be born rich and noble and enjoying a superabundance of material wealth, while others must be groaning under the unbearable burden imposed upon them by cruel society. Unless we make a *radical change* in our present social organization, we cannot expect every one of us to enjoy an equal opportunity and a fair chance. Unless we have a *certain form of socialism* installed which is liberal and rational and systematic, there must be some who are economically more favored than others.<sup>18</sup>

It is, needless to say, surprising to find a political statement like this in a book claiming to be an introduction to the Mahayana school of Buddhism, not least of all because Suzuki calls for a "*radical change* in our present social organization." Yet, when placed in context, this passage is no more than an extension of his January 1901 letter to Yamamoto in which Suzuki called for society to be "reformed from the ground up" in accordance with socialist values. This raises the important question of whether Suzuki ever followed through on his commitment to radically reform Japan?

### *Karma and Social (In)justice*

Suzuki's socialist sympathies could not help but impact on his understanding of one key Buddhist teaching—the doctrine of karma. For centuries karma had been invoked, particularly in East Asia, to explain if not justify

<sup>17</sup> SDZ, vol. 36, p. 220.

<sup>18</sup> Suzuki 1963, p. 191 (*italics mine*).

why some people were born “rich and noble” and others unbearably poor. Simply stated, the claim was made that the rich were rich due to the good karma they had acquired through their meritorious deeds in this and past lives. On the other hand, the poor (and those born with physical impairments) were being punished for the evil deeds of their past.

In *Outlines of Mahayana Buddhism*, Suzuki made a radical break with this traditional view, dismissing its advocates as no more than “pseudo-Buddhists.” Instead, he claimed:

No, the doctrine of karma certainly must not be understood to explain the cause of our social and economical imperfections. The region where the law of karma is made to work supreme is our moral world, and cannot be made to extend also over our economic field. Poverty is not necessarily the consequence of evil deeds, nor is plenitude that of good acts. Whether a person is affluent or needy is mostly determined by the principle of economy as far as our present social system is concerned.<sup>19</sup>

Needless to say, once the cause of poverty was assigned to “our present social system” (i.e., a class-based, capitalist society) it was but a short step, at least in that era, to view socialism as the means to escape what Suzuki called “the curse of social injustice and economic inequality.” Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that few if any of Japan’s institutional Buddhist leaders ever took that step, regardless of sectarian affiliation. On the contrary, Buddhist leaders condemned advocates of socialism for denying karma and promoting what they termed “evil equality.”

It was, in fact, none other than Suzuki’s own master, Shaku Sōen who clearly belonged to those Suzuki came to regard as no more than pseudo-Buddhists. This is shown by the following passage in an address entitled “The Law of Cause and Effect, As Taught by the Buddha,” written by Sōen (and translated by Suzuki), delivered at the World’s Parliament of Religions in September 1893:

We are here enjoying or suffering the effect of what we have done in our past lives. . . . We are born in a world of variety; some are poor and unfortunate, others are wealthy and happy. The state of variety will be repeated again and again in our future lives. But to whom shall we complain of our misery? To none but ourselves!<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Suzuki 1963, p. 189.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Yokoyama 1993, pp. 136–37.

Given that his own master held sentiments like these, it is little wonder that Suzuki failed to name those in Japan whom he considered to be no more than pseudo-Buddhists. To have publicly criticized his master was simply unthinkable in the deeply Confucian-influenced Japanese Buddhism of that day (and even now for that matter). Further, an interesting question arises as to whether Sōen, as no more than a “pseudo-Buddhist,” was qualified to authenticate Suzuki’s initial enlightenment experience as he did in December 1896, shortly before his disciple’s departure for the U.S.

Be that as it may, Suzuki’s comments reveal the major break he made with his Buddhist contemporaries, particularly his own master, a prominent and highly respected figure in the Buddhist establishment of his day. Furthermore, the fledgling anti-monarchist socialist ideology that Suzuki would have encountered in the U.S. had no place for an emperor, let alone one who would be worshipped as a Shinto “living god” (*arahito gami* 現人神). As Suzuki clearly recognized, from the Meiji Restoration of 1868 onwards the imperial system in Japan had been used to prop up an economically and socially unjust society and an increasingly corrupt and authoritarian state.

Suzuki revealed his thinking about the imperial system in a number of letters to Yamamoto beginning on 14 June 1898, the year following his arrival in the U.S. According to Suzuki, Japan’s progress as a nation was being hindered, among other things, by “the imperial household clinging as ever to its past dreams of transcendence and divinity.”<sup>21</sup> In a letter to Yamamoto written at an unknown date in 1903, Suzuki went so far as to deny the emperor’s divinity:

At any rate, the [Japanese] people lack a spirit of independence, the government claiming to be the representative of the monarch. Furthermore, the claim is made that the emperor is a godlike person superior to other humans, and loyalty is defined as following his orders. How ridiculous claims like these are!<sup>22</sup>

Ridiculous or not, the record reveals that Suzuki never *publicly* made comments like the above after returning to Japan in 1909. This is hardly surprising, for even in the early 1900s doing so was to invite imprisonment and even execution under the charge of *lèse majesté*. In fact, this was exactly what happened to Sōtō Zen priest Uchiyama Gudō 内山愚童 (1874–1911) who in 1909 wrote the following in a political pamphlet addressed to impoverished tenant farmers:

<sup>21</sup> Suzuki 1989, pp. 240–41.

<sup>22</sup> SDZ, vol. 36, p. 238.

There are three leeches who suck the people's blood: the emperor, the rich, and the big land owners. . . . The big boss of the present government, the emperor, is not the son of the gods as your primary school teachers and others would have you believe. The ancestors of the present emperor came forth from one corner of Kyushu, killing and robbing people as they went. They then destroyed their fellow thieves, Nagasune-hiko and others. . . . It should be readily obvious that the emperor is not a god if you but think about it for a moment.

When it is said that [the imperial dynasty] has continued for 2,500 years, it may seem as if [the present emperor] is divine, but down through the ages the emperors have been tormented by foreign opponents and, domestically, treated as puppets by their own vassals. . . . Although these are well-known facts, university professors and their students, weaklings that they are, refuse to either say or write anything about it. Instead, they attempt to deceive both others and themselves, knowing all along the whole thing is a pack of lies.<sup>23</sup>

While Suzuki certainly did not express himself as colorfully as Uchiyama, it is clear that, ideologically speaking, the two men shared much in common, not only in regard to the emperor system but the doctrine of karma as well. In the same political pamphlet, Uchiyama wrote:

Is this [your poverty] the result, as Buddhists maintain, of the retribution due you because of your evil deeds in the past? Listen, friends, if, having now entered the twentieth century, you were to be deceived by superstitions like this, you would still be [no better than] oxen or horses. Would this please you?<sup>24</sup>

Is it possible that Suzuki and Uchiyama also shared an understanding of Buddhism that led them to embrace socialism in the first place? Unfortunately, Suzuki appears to have left no record of the theoretical relationship he saw between Buddhism and socialism. Yet Suzuki had clearly considered this question, for the reader will recall that he informed Yamamoto that his interest in socialism was "not based on economics but religion." Uchiyama, on the other hand, did leave an explanation, albeit a brief one, written in

<sup>23</sup> Quoted in Victoria 1997, p. 44.

<sup>24</sup> Victoria 1997, p. 43.

1904. In the light of Suzuki's remarks as introduced above, it is, I suggest, not unreasonable to assume that the two men shared the spirit if not the exact wording of Uchiyama's explanation:

As a propagator of Buddhism I teach that "all sentient beings have the Buddha nature" and that "within the Dharma there is equality, with neither superior nor inferior." Furthermore, I teach that "all sentient beings are my children." Having taken these golden words as the basis of my faith, I discovered that they are in complete agreement with the principles of socialism. It was thus that I became a believer in socialism.<sup>25</sup>

Whether or not Suzuki agreed with these sentiments, there can be no question that the two men shared much in common, both in terms of their understanding of Buddhism and their political ideology.

Nevertheless, there was one *very major difference* between them—Uchiyama dared to openly criticize the emperor system, speak out against the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905 and actively work for socialist reform in Japan, including land redistribution, even though it would ultimately cost him his life. That is to say, Uchiyama, whose political pamphlet was condemned in court as "the most heinous book ever written since the beginning of Japanese history," was hung together with ten other left-wing activists on the morning of 24 January 1911.<sup>26</sup>

Suzuki, on the other hand, kept his socialist sympathies well hidden, eventually becoming a university professor in the years following his return to Japan not to mention a prolific writer on Buddhism and Zen in both Japanese and English. Never once did he dare *publicly* criticize a political system his private correspondence indicates he remained growingly critical of. For example, in a 19 April 1928 letter written in English to his American wife, Beatrice Lane Suzuki, Suzuki describes his reaction to the Japanese government's first expulsions of Marxist professors from the imperial universities in Kyoto, Tokyo, and Kyushu:

What do you think of these university professors being made to resign on account of their communistic bent of study? Before long Japan may experience something of Russia or Italy. The time is fast approaching. The present cabinet [of Prime Minister

<sup>25</sup> Victoria 1997, p. 41.

<sup>26</sup> For further details see "Uchiyama Gudō: Radical Sōtō Zen Priest" in Victoria 1997, pp. 38–48.

Tanaka Gi'ichi] ought to be put down and replaced by another. Their appeal to physical force is altogether too reactionary.<sup>27</sup>

In these comments we see a reflection of Suzuki, the “socialist sympathizer” of the early 1900s. In yet another letter written to Beatrice on 24 July 1932, Suzuki had this to say about Japan’s determination to establish the puppet regime of Manchukuo in northern China in the wake of the Manchurian Incident of September 1931: “A journey to Peking this summer may not be advisable. Trouble is brewing in that part of China, and before long war aeroplanes may be hovering around Peking. Japan seems to be determined to go on her own way in this matter of Manchuria. I wonder how things will end and when.”<sup>28</sup>

Statements like these, made privately to his wife, reinforce the view that Suzuki was very much aware of, and concerned about, Japan’s rapid descent into political repression at home and war abroad. Yet his failure to publicly voice his concerns, let alone his opposition, suggests that Suzuki was one of those professorial “weaklings” whom Uchiyama so strongly criticized for their failure to speak out.

#### *Further Considerations*

Given the total absence of further references to socialism, let alone criticism of the emperor system, in his later *public* writings, the argument could be made that Suzuki’s early interest in socialism was no more than a “youthful indiscretion,” one that he later abandoned. If this were the case, he would at least escape the charge of having lacked the courage of his convictions following his return to Japan, fearful of the negative impact on his career were it to become known that he was a “socialist sympathizer to an extreme degree.”

As Suzuki himself alluded to above, even in 1902 he was well aware of the dangers involved in openly espousing left-wing views in Japan—that is, even prior to the well-publicized imprisonment and execution of radical Zen priests like Uchiyama. Thus, as with so many intellectuals of his day, it is far more likely that Suzuki decided to keep his “dangerous thoughts” to himself, rather than risk losing his teaching position, imprisonment and possibly even his life.

Nor should it be forgotten that, having lost his father at age six, Suzuki was well acquainted with poverty, not to mention the fact that from 1911

<sup>27</sup> SDZ, vol. 36, pp. 488–89.

<sup>28</sup> SDZ, vol. 36, p. 583.

onwards Suzuki had a family to support, including not only his American wife, Beatrice (at least until her death in 1939), but also their adopted son, Alan Masaru Suzuki. Suzuki's saving grace, if it may be called that, lies in the fact that even though he abandoned his intention to promote radical socialist reform in Japan, his political convictions, coupled with his extended residence in the West, appear to have prevented him from becoming a fervent emperor-worshipping, xenophobic nationalist. At least in this limited respect, and as I think Satō and I both agree, Suzuki was unique among Buddhist, especially Zen, leaders up through Japan's defeat in 1945.

Yet another factor inhibiting Suzuki's ability to speak out was his first employment upon return to Japan in 1909 as an English lecturer at the aristocratic and ultra-conservative Gakushūin 学習院 (Peers School), where he taught until 1921, and, concurrently, at Tokyo Imperial University 東京帝国大学, where he taught until 1914. Note, too, that Suzuki later resigned his position at Gakushūin in frustration at incessant criticism from his colleagues regarding his marriage to a Westerner, i.e., Beatrice Lane. It was not until 1921 that he was able to devote himself to teaching Buddhist thought at Kyoto's Shin sect-affiliated Otani University 大谷大学, where he and his wife helped found the journal *The Eastern Buddhist*.

Even here, however, the historical record is not as straightforward as it appears to Suzuki admirers like Satō. That is to say, included in the first letter written in English to Beatrice referred to above, we catch a glimpse of what might be called Suzuki's "engagement" with the imperial household:

My going to Tokyo is postponed, and I shall go on Monday, and therefore my return to Kyoto will be delayed about two days. I will take the Tuesday night train and be in Kyoto on Wednesday morning. They are trying to have me see the vice-minister of the imperial household, and I do not know if we succeeded this time—for I cannot stay much longer in this neighborhood of Tokyo.<sup>29</sup>

The following day, on 15 January 1928, Suzuki informed his wife: "My book will be presented to Emperor [*sic*] and so forth through the Household Department. This may lead to further developments or may not. As my friends are trying hard to get Zen well known among the imperial family, I am just letting them go on with their plans."<sup>30</sup>

<sup>29</sup> SDZ, vol. 36, pp. 478–79.

<sup>30</sup> SDZ, vol. 36, p. 479.

There is, of course, something of a mixed message in these comments. On the one hand, Suzuki wrote as if he had little personal involvement in approaching the throne, leaving this to persons he referred to only as “they” and “my friends.” Nevertheless, in his first reference Suzuki also stated that he did not know if “*we succeeded this time.*” Thus, whether these efforts were made at Suzuki’s behest or merely with his passive acquiescence remains unclear, perhaps reflecting once again his lingering ambivalence to the imperial system. This said, two tantalizing questions remain to be addressed. Firstly, did this approach to the throne actually lead to anything? And secondly, why were Suzuki’s friends “trying hard to get Zen well known among the imperial family”?

In answering the first question, Suzuki’s ongoing correspondence with his wife reveals that by 11 August, 1931 Suzuki was no longer meeting with the vice-minister of the imperial household but was a dinner guest of the minister’s superior, Count Makino Nobuaki 牧野伸顯 (1861–1949), Lord Keeper of the Privy Seal and the most important political advisor to Emperor Hirohito 裕仁. Suzuki tells Beatrice how much he enjoyed his vegetarian dinner because “Count Makino had some fine tales to tell about some of the great figures of the [Meiji] Restoration period. His own father was one of the principal actors of those days.”<sup>31</sup>

Further, on 10 April 1933 Suzuki informed Beatrice that Count Makino not only supported the idea of his proposed visit to China but “the Foreign Office may help to a certain extent—I mean financially.”<sup>32</sup> Just how much financial assistance Suzuki received from the Foreign Office is unknown, but during his visit to Hangchow in May 1934, Suzuki wrote that it was the local Japanese consul who made arrangements for him and his party to meet “eminent Buddhists” in the area. At the very least, this suggests Foreign Office involvement.<sup>33</sup>

While none of this is particularly sinister, it indicates nevertheless that in the 1930s Suzuki enjoyed the support of officials at the highest levels of the Japanese government, something utterly unthinkable had he been under the least suspicion of being anti-war, unpatriotic, or left-wing, let alone critical of the emperor system. Thus, from at least 1931 it can be said that whatever *private* misgivings he may have had, Suzuki was well connected to Japan’s ruling elite and used these connections to his personal advantage.

<sup>31</sup> SDZ, vol. 36, p. 569.

<sup>32</sup> SDZ, vol. 36, p. 597.

<sup>33</sup> SDZ, vol. 36, p. 610.

*Zen and the Emperor*

The historical evidence relating to why Suzuki's friends were trying to get Zen well known among the imperial family is much less clear. A further complication is that we do not even know the identity of the friends he referred to. Having said this, it is also true that this was a period when the Bushido code, based on the alleged unity of Zen and the sword (*zenken ichinyo* 禪劍一如), was receiving ever-increasing interest in a society more and more dominated by the military and war.

In particular, there was heightened interest in Zen practice among Imperial Army officers, an elite force who looked to Zen for the same reason as their traditional samurai ancestors had done—to enhance martial prowess on the battlefield including the promotion of fearlessness in the face of death and absolute and unquestioning loyalty (albeit to the emperor rather than one's feudal lord). In particular, Lt. Col. Sugimoto Gorō 杉本五郎 (1900–1937), a long-time Zen practitioner and lay disciple of Rinzai Zen Master Yamazaki Ekijū 山崎益州 (1882–1961), became one of Japan's most celebrated war heroes following his early death on the battlefield in northern China in September 1937. As a result he was warmly endorsed by Japan's leading generals when he made the following claim in his book, *Taigi* 大義 (Great Duty), published posthumously in 1938:

The Zen that I do is not the Zen of the Zen sect. It is soldier Zen (*gunjin Zen* [軍人禪]). The reason that Zen is important to soldiers is that all Japanese, especially soldiers, must live in the spirit of the unity of sovereign and subjects, eliminating their ego and getting rid of their self. It is exactly the awakening to the nothingness (*mu* [無]) 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 ego. In facilitating the accomplishment of this, Zen becomes, as it is, the true spirit of the imperial military.*<sup>34</sup>

Sugimoto went on to explain why the Zen spirit was so important in the training of soldiers under one's command:

Within the military, officers must use this [Zen] spirit in the training of their troops. In the training of troops mere talk is not

<sup>34</sup> Quoted in Victoria 1997, p. 124 (italics mine). Note that some 1,300,000 copies of Sugimoto's *Taigi* were printed and distributed throughout Japan, especially to middle schools where they were studied in order to inspire the youth facing conscription into the Imperial military service.

enough. If you don't set the example or put it into practice yourself, your training is a lie. . . . What one hasn't seen for oneself cannot be taught to one's troops. As the senior, one must first be pure oneself. Otherwise, *one cannot serve the state through extinguishing and discarding the ego*.<sup>35</sup>

And what did Sugimoto's master, Yamazaki, think of his distinguished disciple's words, especially his understanding of Zen:

As far as the power of his practice of the Way is concerned, I believe he [Sugimoto] reached the point where there was no difference between him and the chief abbot of this or that branch [of Zen]. I think that when a person esteems practice, respects the Way, and thoroughly penetrates the self as he did, he is qualified to be the teacher of other Zen practitioners. That is how accomplished he was. In my opinion his practice was complete.<sup>36</sup>

In other words, Yamazaki recognized his late disciple as having been fully enlightened.

It should also be noted that Sugimoto was not content with using his practice of Zen merely to rid himself of his ego. As a corollary, he further strived to embrace the state of egolessness (*muga* 無我). Sugimoto asserted, "The essence of the unity of the sovereign and the people is egolessness. Egolessness and self-extinction are most definitely not separate states. On the contrary, one comes to realize that they are identical."<sup>37</sup>

Here the question must be asked, is *muga* (so beloved by Suzuki and the entire Zen school) Buddhist? At first glance, the answer appears self-evident, for the doctrine of *anātman* was one of Buddha Śākyamuni's core teachings. Yet the question must be asked as to whether *muga* in Japanese, or the typical English translations, "no-self" or "non-self," is an accurate translation of this Sanskrit term.

Controversially to be sure, I suggest that *both* the Japanese and English translations are fundamentally flawed, for *ātman* does not simply mean "self" but an *eternal, unchanging self or soul*. Buddha Śākyamuni sought to deny the belief that the self was eternal, not that you and I, as temporary psychophysical personalities, don't exist in the conventional sense. As the well-known Buddhist scholar-priest Rahula Walpola noted:

<sup>35</sup> Victoria 1997, p. 124 (italics mine).

<sup>36</sup> Victoria 1997, p. 123.

<sup>37</sup> Victoria 1997, p. 123.

According to the Buddha's teaching, it is as wrong to hold the opinion "I have no self" (which is the annihilationist theory) as to hold the opinion "I have a self." Why? What we call "I," or "being" is only a combination of physical and mental aggregates, which are working together interdependently in a flux of momentary change within the law of cause and effect. . . . there is nothing permanent, everlasting, unchanging and eternal in the whole of existence.<sup>38</sup>

If the above comments seem obvious to even beginning students of Buddhism, they were, sadly, not obvious to proponents of samurai-Zen like the famous Rinzai Zen master Takuan 沢庵 (1573–1645). Suzuki quotes Takuan as addressing his patron, the highly accomplished swordsman Yagyū Tajima no Kami Munenori 柳生但馬守宗矩 (1571–1646) as follows:

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. None of them are possessed of a mind that has any substantiality. As each of them is of emptiness and has no "mind" [*kokoro*], the striking man is not a man, the sword in his hands is not a sword, and the "I" who is about to be struck down is like the splitting of the spring breeze in a flash of lightning.<sup>39</sup>

In Takuan, we have a priest, who even today epitomizes Zen "enlightenment" in Japan, telling us that the killing of a human being is of no more consequence than "the splitting of the spring breeze in a flash of lightning." And Suzuki, for his part, relates Takuan's words without the slightest hint of disapproval. Compare these words with yet another teaching of Buddha Śākyamuni in the *Dhammapada*, a work dating back to the oldest stratum of the Buddhist sutras: "All men tremble at punishment, all men fear death; remembering that thou are like unto them, do not strike or slay. All men tremble at punishment, all men love life; remembering that thou are like unto them, *do not strike or slay.*"<sup>40</sup>

In comparing these two quotations, one by the faith's founder and the other by a disciple allegedly sharing the founder's identical enlightenment, it is difficult to accept that both could be members of the same faith. I assert

<sup>38</sup> Walpola 1974, p. 66.

<sup>39</sup> Quoted in Suzuki 1959, p. 114.

<sup>40</sup> Babbitt 1965, p. 22 (*italics mine*).

that they are not, for if ever there were a case when a teaching ought to be unequivocally rejected as antithetical to the Buddha-dharma it is that of Takuan. And needless to say, as early as his 1938 *Zen and Japanese Culture*, let alone later writings, Suzuki repeatedly introduced Takuan's martial-related quotations without the slightest hint of criticism.

As is well known, the Zen sect has been deeply influenced by the Mādhyamika school of Mahayana Buddhism, with its teaching of two levels of truth, Absolute and relative. However, by placing an exclusive emphasis on absolute truth (Skt. *paramārthasatya*), Takuan and his like devalued and delegitimized relative truth to the point that taking human life was no more than "the splitting of the spring breeze in a flash of lightning." Purposely or not, such Zen exponents failed to recognize that, as Buddhist scholar Bernard Faure has noted, the Middle Way advocated by the Mādhyamika school insists on "the 'simultaneous vision of the two truths,' wherein each extreme keeps its distinct status. It does *not* always try to collapse them into one undifferentiated reality."<sup>41</sup>

Nor was Faure the first to point this out, for as Daigan and Alicia Matsunaga write, the Tendai (Ch. Tiantai 天台) school in China, founded by Zhiyi 智顓 (538–597) in the sixth century, had already shared this concern:

One of the key concepts in Tendai thought was the establishment of a threefold category of truth. This was an endeavor to transcend the dichotomy of the traditional Mahāyāna twofold truth (absolute and relative) with its *inherent dangers of elevating one at the expense of the other*, and to set forth a synthesis in the form of the middle way. . . . In other words, *śūnyatā* [emptiness] is equated with *Pratītya-samutpāda* [dependent origination] and this is declared to be the middle path (*madhyamā pratipad*) or a temporary name for the expression of truth.<sup>42</sup>

In other words, while it can be said that the self is ultimately "empty" in that it is, like all phenomena, impermanent, this neither negates nor dismisses the pain and suffering each one of us experiences in the relative world. True Buddhist compassion can never be blind to addressing that pain, let alone serving to increase it.

Nevertheless, Zen leaders in Japan, Suzuki included, have effectively collapsed these two truths into one undifferentiated reality, thereby providing Bushido with a corrupted metaphysical foundation. This foundation not

<sup>41</sup> Faure 1991, p. 57 (italics mine).

<sup>42</sup> Matsunaga and Matsunaga 1974, p. 154 (italics mine).

only sanctioned killing, it also valorized the Zen-trained warrior/soldier's willingness to die—in the process of taking life in loyal service to his feudal lord (and later the emperor)—as the antinomian expression of full enlightenment. And should there be any doubt that Takuan's teachings were subsequently incorporated into Zen support for Japanese militarism, we need look no further than wartime Sōtō Zen leader Ishihara Toshiaki 石原俊明, who said in March 1937:

Zen master Takuan taught . . . that in essence Zen and Bushido were one. . . . I believe that if one is called upon to die, one should not be the least bit agitated. On the contrary, one should be in a realm where something called “oneself” does not intrude even slightly. Such a realm is no different from that derived from the practice of Zen.<sup>43</sup>

Imperial Army Major Ōkubo Kōichi 大久保弘一 responded in enthusiastic agreement with Ishihara's comments:

[The soldier] must become one with his superior. He must actually become his superior. Similarly, he must become the order he receives. That is to say, his self must disappear. In so doing, when he eventually goes onto the battlefield, he will advance when told to advance. . . . On the other hand, should he believe that he is going to die and act accordingly, he will be unable to fight well. What is necessary, then, is that he be able to act freely and without [mental] hindrance.<sup>44</sup>

Even prior to the Asia-Pacific War, Japanese soldiers of all ranks were indoctrinated with a military program of Bushido-promoting “spiritual education” (*seishin kyōiku* 精神教育). This spiritual education was based on the metaphysical foundation of the unities of Zen and the sword, life and death. Once trained, Japanese soldiers were dispatched to the battlefield where nearly three million of them died “selflessly” even as they killed many more millions of Chinese and other “selfless” enemies in the process.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Quoted in Victoria 1997, p. 103. Note that Ishihara was the editor-in-chief of the pan-Buddhist magazine *Daihōrin* 大法輪 (Great Dharma Wheel) and therefore exerted influence well beyond the Sōtō Zen sect with which he was affiliated.

<sup>44</sup> Victoria 1997, p. 103.

<sup>45</sup> There are a variety of calculations regarding the number of deaths in the Asia-Pacific War. In particular, there is a wide range of views regarding the number of Chinese who were killed. Respected historian John Dower estimates that at least ten million Chinese perished. Chinese historians typically put the figure at twenty million or more.

The fact that, even today (both in Japan and the West), this corrupted Zen understanding of “no-self,” i.e., selflessness, has remained largely unchallenged cannot but be regarded as one of the world’s most successful religious deceptions. Although omitting the specifics, the Buddhist scholar and translator Thomas Cleary noted: “[M]ilitarism has distorted Zen along with the rest of Japanese culture. . . . Japanese people today are just as susceptible to being deceived by deviant Zen as are Westerners, with the result that the various conflicting elements in modern Zen are generally not analyzed for what they really are.”<sup>46</sup>

Suzuki apologists like Satō will no doubt find it extremely unfair to link Suzuki to the emperor-worshipping militarist if not fanatic Zen advocated by Sugimoto and his master, Yamazaki Ekijū, let alone those many other wartime Zen leaders who thought and acted similarly. Yet, even though Suzuki clearly did not extol the connection between Zen and the emperor, the question remains—where in his many books and articles does Suzuki openly criticize, let alone oppose, this militarist understanding of Zen? On the contrary, I find Suzuki even surpassed Sugimoto’s claims for “egolessness” when in the 1959 edition of *Zen and Japanese Culture* he provided the following antinomian rationalization for taking life: “Without the sense of an ego, *there is no moral responsibility*, but the divine transcends morality.”<sup>47</sup>

Further, according to Suzuki those compelled to take up the sword (as Japan claimed was the case at the time of its full-scale invasion of China in 1937) have “no desire to harm anybody, but *the enemy appears and makes himself a victim*. It is as though the sword performs automatically its function of justice, which is the function of mercy.”<sup>48</sup> Still further, in what must surely rank as one of the most questionable rationalizations of a warrior-killer and his sword, Suzuki proclaimed, “[the sword] is no more a weapon of self-defense or an instrument of killing, and the swordsman turns into an artist of the first grade, engaged in producing a work of genuine originality.”<sup>49</sup> Although Suzuki published these words in the postwar era, just how inane they are can be seen when applied to an infamous incident that occurred during the “Rape of Nanking” in December 1937. In front-page news in Japan at the time, two Imperial Army officers engaged in a contest to see who would be first to cut off the heads of one hundred defenseless Chinese prisoners of war with their swords. Did each of these POWs “make himself a victim”?

<sup>46</sup> Cleary 1991, p. 119.

<sup>47</sup> Suzuki 1959, p. 144 (*italics mine*).

<sup>48</sup> Suzuki 1959, p. 145 (*italics mine*).

<sup>49</sup> Suzuki 1959, p. 145.

At this point I am certain that Satō would take great exception, if not umbrage, at the preceding quotations, pointing out that Suzuki often mentioned Zen has a moral standard by which to judge the appropriateness of martial acts. That is to say, the art of swordsmanship contains *two* types of sword, i.e., “the sword that kills” and “the sword that gives life.” Accordingly, the “unity of Zen and the sword” which Suzuki so fervently embraced is connected *solely* to the latter “defensive” type. Commentators like myself, Satō would claim, do a great injustice to Suzuki (and reveal their own ignorance/prejudice) when they claim otherwise.

*In theory*, I would be the first to admit that the sword that gives life appears to be a moral, even spiritual, concept. In particular, it absolves Zen of responsibility for aggressive warfare that is by definition self-seeking in nature and therefore clearly associated with the sword that kills. Yet, *in practice*, when did any Japanese Zen leader, Suzuki included, ever *publicly* state that any, or even one, of the many wars Japan fought from the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895 up through to the defeat in August 1945 was, in fact, associated with the sword that kills? Can Satō provide us with a single, solitary example of Suzuki or any other Zen leader, lay or cleric, who clearly and *publicly* spoke out in this way prior to Japan’s defeat in 1945?

If not, was it a case that they were all too afraid to do so despite the “iron will” that Suzuki claimed Zen could provide practitioners when necessary? Or, with the exception of Suzuki’s *private* opposition to the war with the U.S. and Great Britain, did Japanese Zen leaders believe, enlightened as they claimed to be, that Japan was actually wielding the sword that gives life in the numerous imperialist wars Japan fought during this period?

If Zen leaders had wished to clearly differentiate between the two types of sword in terms of Japan’s wartime foreign policy, there was no better opportunity than in September 1940 at the signing of the Tripartite Pact between Japan, Germany and Italy. Celebrating this military alliance, the Japanese ambassador to Germany, Kurusu Saburō 来栖三郎 (1886–1954) spoke as follows: “The pillar of the Spirit of Japan is to be found in Bushido. Although Bushido employs the sword, its essence is not to kill people, but rather to use the sword that gives life to people. Using the spirit of this sword, we wish to contribute to world peace.”<sup>50</sup>

By 1940 Japan’s desire to “contribute to world peace” was on display for the entire world to see in that it was in the fourth year of its full-scale invasion of China in anything but a defensive war. Yet, did Suzuki or any other Zen leader publicly criticize Ambassador Kurusu for his patently false

<sup>50</sup> Quoted in Victoria 2006, p. 112.

assertion that Japan was joining a military pact with Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy solely to employ the sword that gives life? Needless to say, none of them voiced such criticism. In fact, as far as Suzuki is concerned, how would it have been possible for him to make such a criticism when in 1938 he had written that Zen was so “extremely flexible” that it could be attached to fascism (or any other “ism”). Specifically, Suzuki wrote:

Zen has no special doctrine or philosophy, no set of concepts or intellectual formulas except that it tries to release one from the bondage of birth and death, by means of certain intuitive modes of understanding peculiar to itself. It is therefore extremely flexible in adjusting itself to almost any philosophy and moral doctrine so long as its intuitive teaching is not interfered with. It may be found wedded to anarchism or fascism, communism or democracy, atheism or idealism, or *any* political or economic dogmatism.<sup>51</sup>

According to Satō, Suzuki did not really mean what he appeared to mean here. That is, in the first instance Satō claims that Suzuki liked to write “a bit on the provocative side.”<sup>52</sup> More importantly, in the above quote, Suzuki was not referring to the Zen school or tradition as such but solely to the act of “meditation,” the original meaning of the word “zen” 禪 (Ch. *chan*, Skt. *dhyāna*). Interestingly, is this not what Lt. Col. Sugimoto meant when he claimed above that the Zen he practiced was *not* the Zen of the Zen sect, but, rather, it was Zen, i.e., meditation, that enabled him to rid himself of his ego so as to fully become one with the emperor and loyally follow his orders? I ask, where in Suzuki’s voluminous prewar or wartime *public* writings, in either English or Japanese, do we read a criticism of this use of Zen-induced “egolessness” to inculcate total loyalty to the state and the emperor?

Satō goes on to claim that the reason Zen, as simply meditation, can be linked to fascism or any other “ism” is because it is “value-neutral” and as such, “it can be employed *equally* for either good or evil.”<sup>53</sup> This assertion raises the critically important question—is *Buddhist* meditation (as compared to other meditative traditions) *really* value-neutral? Is Suzuki therefore correct in asserting that “Zen” can be linked to any credo or “ism” whatsoever?

<sup>51</sup> Suzuki 1959, p. 63 (italics mine).

<sup>52</sup> Satō 2008, p. 98.

<sup>53</sup> Satō 2008, p. 99 (italics mine).

*The Nature of Buddhist Meditation*

Controversially to be sure, I assert that while Satō (and Suzuki) are quite correct about the value-neutral nature of Zen meditation, this is actually the crux of the problem. That is to say, when Zen meditation is regarded as *completely* value-neutral (as it typically has been in Zen history) it is *NOT* Buddhist meditation!

To understand why I say this I ask readers, particularly those who are themselves in the Zen tradition, to be open to an insight from the Theravada school of Buddhism. In the *Gopaka Moggallāna-sutta* (Moggallāna the Guardsman), Ānanda, one of Buddha Śākyamuni's chief disciples, points out to Vassakara (the chief minister of the country of Magadha), that Śākyamuni did *not* praise every form of meditation:

What kind of meditation, Brahman, did the Lord [Śākyamuni] not praise? . . . He [who] dwells with his thought obsessed by *ill-will*, and does not comprehend as it really is the escape from the ill-will that has arisen; he, having made ill-will the main thing, meditates on it, meditates absorbed, meditates more absorbed, meditates quite absorbed. . . . The Lord does not praise this kind of meditation, Brahman.<sup>54</sup>

Meditating “obsessed by ill-will” is not, of course, the only misuse to which meditation can be put. Śākyamuni also criticized meditation obsessed with “sensual passion,” “sloth and drowsiness,” “restlessness and anxiety,” and “skeptical doubt,” collectively known as the “five hindrances” (Pāli, *pañca nīvara ṇāni*). Further, it should be noted that the word translated as “meditation” above is *samādhi* (in both Pāli and Sanskrit). *Samādhi*, of course, refers to the state of mental one-pointedness or concentration most readily, though not exclusively, achieved through the practice of meditation in the seated, cross-legged position, i.e., *zazen*.

Significantly, the Pāli word for these five mistaken types of *samādhi*, i.e., *micchā-samādhi*, seems to have no Mahayana equivalent. It appears not only the Zen school but Mahayana Buddhism as a whole have refused, purposely or not, to recognize that *samādhi* can be misused. Note, too, that the promise of employing the mental power arising out of *samādhi*, i.e., *zenjōriki* 禪定力, in warfare first made Zen attractive to the warrior class in feudal Japan and later, the modern Japanese military, most especially its officer corps.

<sup>54</sup> Walshe 1987, pp. 63–64 (italics mine).

The argument can be made, of course, that neither during Japan's medieval period nor its subsequent militarist epoch did Zen masters urge their warrior/military followers to practice *zazen* "obsessed with ill-will." Yet, one of the distinguishing features of Buddhist ethics is its stress on "intentionality." That is to say, to determine whether an action is wholesome/skillful (Pāli *kusala*, Skt. *kuśala*) one must look at its impelling cause or motive. An act is considered unwholesome if it is rooted in one or more of the three poisons, i.e., greed, hatred and delusion, while it is wholesome if rooted in non-greed (i.e., generosity), non-hatred (loving kindness or compassion), and non-delusion (wisdom).

In the case of Zen masters like Takuan under feudalism or Yamazaki Ekijū under militarism, their instructions and writings leave no doubt they were well aware of their disciples' intention to use the concentrated mental state arising out of meditation as the basis for enhancing their martial prowess on the battlefield even while fully prepared to die themselves. Nevertheless, there is no record that any of these masters opposed or even questioned their disciples' lethal intent. On the contrary, Yamazaki repeatedly lauded his military disciple's use of *samādhi*-power on the battlefield. Similarly, D. T. Suzuki never publicly questioned or opposed the battlefield use of *samādhi*-power up through to Japan's defeat in August 1945.

In short, if one accepts the prescriptions elucidated in the *Gopaka Moggallāna-sutta* as normative for *Buddhist* meditation, then "value-neutral" Zen meditation, in which *any form* of *samādhi* is acceptable regardless of intent, is clearly *not Buddhist*. And make no mistake, the use of *samādhi*-power in battle has only one purpose in mind, the destruction of one's opponent.

My research leads me to conclude that the Zen school failed many centuries ago to recognize that *Buddhist* meditation is *not* "value-neutral" in the sense that Buddha Śākyamuni did not recognize every form of meditation as an expression of the Buddha-dharma. The very essence of *Buddhist* meditation is to promote, or better said, to *realize* the identity of self and others, *all* "others." How then, could one, having genuinely had that recognition/experience, either engage in or promote warfare that seeks to destroy others? To be unaware of this truth is a singular and *manifestly dangerous* misunderstanding of the Buddha-dharma. Fortunately, this danger is recognized in the Theravada tradition and is furthermore entirely consistent with Buddha Śākyamuni's fundamental teachings of compassion and nonviolence. The question is whether Mahayana adherents, most especially in the Zen school, will admit their error and embrace this teaching?

*Chan/Zen, the State and War*

Viewed in terms of its historical development, it can be argued that Zen was the victim of something akin to a hijacking. However, this particular hijacking occurred over such an extended period of time that the victims were seldom conscious of being “taken for a ride,” let alone taken against their will. One example of this occurred a full millennium prior to the advent of the “soldier-Zen” promoted by Sugimoto and his Rinzai master. As early as the eighth century, a famous Chinese writer by the name of Liang Su 梁肅 (753–793) criticized Chan’s lack of ethical standards as follows:

Nowadays, few men have true faith. Those who travel the path of Ch’an go so far as to teach the people that there is neither Buddha nor Dharma, and that *neither good nor evil has any significance*. When they preach these doctrines to the average man, or men below average, they are believed by all those who live their lives of worldly desires. Such ideas are accepted as great truths that sound so pleasing to the ear. And the people are attracted to them just as moths in the night are drawn to their burning death by the candlelight.<sup>55</sup>

In reading this, one is tempted to believe that Liang was also a prophet, able to foresee that, over a thousand years later, millions of young Japanese men would be drawn to their own burning deaths by the Zen-influenced “light” of Bushido. When we add the many more millions of innocent men, women, and children who burned with (or because of) them, we truly understand what Liang meant when he concluded the preceding quote with these words: “Such doctrines are as injurious and dangerous as the devil (i.e., Māra) and the ancient heretics.”

Even more to the point, the French scholar Paul Demiéville notes that, according to the seventh-century Chan text “Treatise on Absolute Contemplation,” killing is evil only in the event the killer fails to recognize his victim as empty and dream-like. On the contrary, if one no longer sees his opponent as a living being separate from emptiness, then he is free to kill him at will.<sup>56</sup> This early antinomian license to kill with moral impunity reveals that soldier-Zen was not some medieval invention of the Zen school in Japan by priests like Takuan (let alone Suzuki). Nor was it a recent or momentary aberration resulting from the advent of Japanese militarism in

<sup>55</sup> Quoted in Chen 1964, p. 357 (italics mine).

<sup>56</sup> Demiéville 1973, p. 296.

the 1930s. Instead, its roots can be traced back to the very emergence of Chan in China.

Further proof of this is supplied by events connected to the life of Huineng 慧能 (638–713), traditionally seen as the pivotal sixth patriarch of the Southern School of Chan. On the one hand, the *Caoxi dashi biezhuan* 曹溪大師別傳 (Special Transmission of the Great Master from Caoxi) presents this master as being so unconcerned with worldly fame that he refused an invitation from the emperor to visit the imperial court. Despite this, the emperor nevertheless presented him with gifts, one of which was, significantly, a new name for his former residence, i.e., Guoensi 国恩寺 (Temple to *Repay the Debt of Gratitude owed the State*).

More to the point, Huineng's disciple Shenhui 神会 (684–758) maintained a much closer, if sometimes strained, relationship with the imperial court. In 720 Shenhui took up residence in Nanyang 南陽, not far south of the imperial capital of Luoyang 洛陽, *in obedience to an imperial decree*. In 745 Shenhui moved to a temple in Luoyang where large crowds were drawn to hear his exposition of Chan teachings. His success, however, led to charges, perhaps incited by rivals in the so-called Northern Chan School, that he was fomenting social unrest, resulting in his banishment from the capital for three years (753–756).

In the meantime, in 755, a major rebellion broke out in the northeastern part of the country, and, remembering his popularity, the government recalled Shenhui to the capital, this time as a *fundraiser for the imperial military*. By offering contributors exemption from both monetary taxation and the requirement to participate in yearly, government-sponsored labor battalions, Shenhui proved an exemplary fundraiser and the rebellion was suppressed. The emperor gratefully showered Shenhui with honors ensuring that his last days were spent “basking in the graces of the powers that be.”<sup>57</sup>

In light of this and similar episodes, it can be said that early Chan leaders also willingly served the state's needs, in war as well as in peace. In fact, it can be argued that when both the Sōtō and Rinzai sects raised funds to buy fighters and other aircraft for the Japanese military in the 1930s and 1940s, they were merely following a Chan/Zen precedent with a history of nearly 1200 years!

By the Sung dynasty (960–1279) Chan monasteries had not only maintained friendly relations with the imperial court but had also become involved in political affairs. Emperors granted noted Chan masters purple robes and honorific titles such as “Chan Master of the Buddha Fruit” (Foguo

<sup>57</sup> Dumoulin 1988, p. 114.

chanshih 仏果禪師) or “Chan Master of Full Enlightenment” (Yuanwu chanshih 円悟禪師). In return, Chan temples operating under imperial patronage were expected to pray for the emperor and the prosperity of the state. In describing this system, Yanagida Seizan, one of Japan’s most distinguished Zen scholars, writes:

Given the danger of foreign invasion from the north, Buddhism was used to promote the idea of the state and its people among the general populace. . . . Inevitably, the Chan priests residing in these government temples in accordance with imperial decree gradually *linked the content of their teaching to the goals of the state*. This is not unconnected to the fact that Zen temples [in Japan] in the Kamakura and Tokugawa periods had . . . *a nationalistic character in line with the traditional consciousness of the Chinese Chan school that advocated the spread of Chan in order to protect the nation*.<sup>58</sup>

In Japan, with the establishment of the Kamakura Shogunate (military government) in 1192, real political power came to be exercised by the leaders of the warrior class. It was at this time that Zen as an independent school of Buddhism was introduced to Japan, and it was to this class that the straightforward, rigorous, and austere doctrines and practice of Zen appealed. In addition, Zen had the advantage of being a direct import from China, thereby offering the new government the opportunity to escape the embrace of the large, nobility-dominated earlier Buddhist monastic institutions in the Nara and Kyoto areas.

On the one hand, the Zen school made undeniable contributions to Japanese culture, especially the arts, as well as the economy and even diplomacy with China. At the same time, it also made an even more “practical” contribution to the warrior class by placing the spiritual power emanating from the practice of Zen meditation at the disposal of the warrior class for use in battle. In *Zen and Japanese Culture*, Suzuki describes the way in which Shōgun Hōjō Tokimune 北条時宗 (1251–1284) sought strength from Zen to deal with the threat of a second Mongol invasion. Tokimune, a long-time Zen practitioner, went for guidance to his spiritual mentor, Chinese Zen Master Zuyuan 祖元 (1226–1286), shortly before the expected invasion in 1281.

When Tokimune said, “The greatest event of my life is here at last,” the master asked, “How will you face it?” Tokimune replied by merely shouting

<sup>58</sup> Yanagida 1967, pp. 96–97 (italics mine).

the exclamatory word: “*Katsu!*” as though he were frightening all of his enemies into submission. Pleased with this show of courage, Zuyuan indicated his approval of Tokimune’s answer by saying, “Truly, a lion’s child roars like a lion.”<sup>59</sup> Though somewhat lesser known, a similar incident is recorded as early as the first Mongol invasion in 1274. This one involved a second Chinese Zen master by the name of Daxiu Zhengnian 大休正念 (1214–1289). At the time, Daxiu Zhengnian directed Tokimune to solve the famous *kōan* concerning Zhaozhou Congshen 趙州從諗 (778–897) on whether or not a dog has the Buddha nature. Zhaozhou’s answer was simply “*mu*” (lit. nil/naught). Tokimune is said to have solved this *kōan*, “thereby releasing his mind to deal calmly with the grave issues of war and peace.”<sup>60</sup>

Collectively, these two incidents appear to be the earliest indications of the unity of Zen and the sword in Japan, though it is noteworthy that neither of them involved Japanese Zen masters. Rather, it was Chinese Zen masters who first introduced the idea of applying a “value-neutral” form of Zen meditation to warfare, or at least in developing the right mental attitude for it. In one sense, this is hardly surprising since Chinese Buddhism, just as in Japan, had long ago accepted that one of its primary purposes was to “protect the state” (Jp. *gokoku-bukkyō* 護国仏教) employing magico-ritualistic means to do so. The Chan/Zen innovation was to accomplish similar goals by offering the spiritual power emanating from meditation to Japan’s warrior rulers for use in warfare.

Furthermore, by the time Zen was introduced into Japan, Confucian values had effectively replaced the original equalitarian nature of Buddhist social ethics. This is seen, for example, in the person of Gidō Shūshin 義堂周信 (1325–1388), Rinzai Zen abbot first of Engakuji in Kamakura and later of Nanzenji in Kyoto. Gidō confidently taught Shōgun Ashikaga Yoshimitsu 足利義満 (1358–1408) that, while it was impossible for Confucian teachings to contain Buddhism, it was quite possible for Buddhism to contain Confucianism. In claiming this, Gidō failed to recognize that the price of “containing Confucianism” would, over the long term, be the wholesale incorporation into Zen of the hierarchically-based Confucian ethical system. This system focused on the creation of “social harmony” through inculcating subordinates with feelings of absolute and unquestioning loyalty toward their superiors, be they feudal lord, military superior, or emperor (or, today, the corporate leaders who collectively constitute “Japan, Inc.”).

<sup>59</sup> Quoted in Suzuki 1959, p. 66.

<sup>60</sup> Quoted in Sansom 1978, p. 431.

During the Tokugawa period (1600–1868), Rinzai Zen Master Takuan, whom Suzuki so often quotes admiringly, clearly revealed what “value-neutral” (or perhaps better said “value-neutered”) Zen meditation had to offer the samurai swordsman. In the following letter Takuan addresses his warrior patron Yagyū Tajima no Kami Munenori and explains to him how the mind that first transcended discriminating thought in meditation, technically known in Zen as “no-mind” (*mushin* 無心), can be employed to enhance martial prowess, particularly the use of the sword:

‘No-mind’ applies to all activities we may perform, such as dancing, *as it does to swordplay*. The dancer takes up the fan and begins to stamp his feet. If he has any idea at all of displaying his art well, he ceases to be a good dancer, for his mind ‘stops’ with every movement he goes through. In all things, it is important to forget your ‘mind’ and become one with the work at hand.

When we tie a cat, being afraid of its catching a bird, it keeps on struggling for freedom. But train the cat so that it would not mind the presence of a bird. The animal is now free and can go anywhere it likes. In a similar way, when the mind is tied up, it feels inhibited in every move it makes, and nothing will be accomplished with any sense of spontaneity. Not only that, the work itself will be of poor quality, or it may not be finished at all. Therefore, do not get your mind ‘stopped’ with the sword you raise; forget what you are doing, *and strike the enemy*.<sup>61</sup>

The Zen advocated by Takuan and his fellow Zen masters was not only able to enhance the warrior’s prowess on the battlefield, equally if not more important was its ability to promote the supreme Confucian value of absolute loyalty. In his work, *Fudōchi shinmyō roku* 不動智神妙録 (The Mysteries of Immovable Wisdom), Takuan wrote:

To be totally loyal means first of all to rectify your mind, discipline your body, and be without the least duplicity toward your lord. You must not hate or criticize others, nor fail to perform your daily duties. . . . If the spirit in which the military arts are practiced is correct, you will enjoy freedom of movement, and though thousands of the enemy appear, you will be able to *force them to submit with only one sword*. *This is [the meaning of] great loyalty*.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>61</sup> Quoted in Suzuki 1962, p. 458 (italics mine).

<sup>62</sup> Quoted in Ichikawa 1982, pp. 89–90 (italics mine).

Hopefully the above at least hints at the possibility that the Chan/Zen connection to violence, let alone its *subservience to the state*, is long-standing, dating back almost to the time of its emergence in China and continuing (if not becoming stronger) following its introduction to Japan. It is clear that this could not have been done without first converting Buddhist meditation into its value-neutral Zen equivalent. The cost, however, was that when under pressure from above, e.g., feudal warrior patrons and most especially the modern state, Zen became “unhinged,” thereby losing its *internal* moral compass and its Buddhist identity, with only the outer shell remaining.

In claiming this, I am most emphatically *not* asserting that *all* Zen meditation, past or present, is necessarily un-Buddhist in nature. For example, when Sōtō Zen priest and ardent Zen practitioner Uchiyama Gudō was mounting the scaffold steps about to be hung, the True Pure Land (*Shin*) Buddhist prison chaplain in attendance later related that he was so moved by the equanimity Uchiyama radiated that he could not stop himself from bowing deeply as Uchiyama passed by. That is to say, the man whose job it was to comfort the condemned was himself comforted.<sup>63</sup> While not necessarily meant as an affirmation of Uchiyama’s political ideology per se, his unyielding, nonviolent resistance to Japan’s imperialist aggression abroad and social injustice at home nevertheless demonstrates the internalization of the Buddhist understanding that, to use his words (and those of the *Lotus Sutra*), “*all sentient beings are my children.*”

Understood in this light the fundamental problem is that a “value-neutral” understanding of Zen meditation readily lends itself to abandonment of its Buddhist character when called upon (or pressured) to do so by the state and its rulers. No doubt Satō would assert that Zen *already has* mechanisms available to prevent itself from being co-opted by the state, e.g., the distinction between a positive or moral life-giving sword and a negative or immoral life-taking sword, not to mention such concepts as compassion, benevolence, and magnanimity. But as we have already seen above, let alone the many similar examples I present in *Zen at War*, it was exactly words like these that were used to justify Japan’s aggression against its neighbors, most especially China.

The Chinese were being killed, Japan’s Zen leaders claimed, out of “compassion” for them, i.e., to “correct” their evil ways. Rinzai Zen scholar-priest Hitane Jōzan went so far as to say: “We will help the Chinese live as true Orientals. It would therefore not be unreasonable to call this a sacred

<sup>63</sup> For more background on Uchiyama, see Victoria 2006, pp. 38–48.

war incorporating the great practice of a bodhisattva.”<sup>64</sup> This is certainly one instance in which the insightfulness (and *need*) of the Zen insistence on “no reliance on words and letters” (Jp. *furyū monji* 不立文字) could not be clearer.

It is exactly because words can be twisted to mean *anything* their speaker wishes that internalizing (i.e., becoming one with) the values/insights taught by Buddhism, including practicing “loving kindness” even toward one’s alleged enemies, are the sine qua non of any form of meditation that is truly Buddhist in nature. It is only after the true meaning of these concepts has been successfully internalized that they can be manifested in the life of the practitioner *come what may*. In other words, they must be transformed from mental constructs into the *living reality* of the practitioner.

When properly understood, what has been introduced above will go a long way in answering a question that Satō raised, but failed to answer, i.e., how was it possible that so many (if not all) of Japan’s leading wartime Zen masters nevertheless became such fervent, even fanatical, supporters of Japanese militarism? By now the answer should be clear—while these masters may indeed have been enlightened in terms of a “value-neutral” form of Zen meditation, they were *not* enlightened in terms of Buddhist meditation, i.e., the type of meditation that Buddha Śākyamuni actually advocated. I invite those who disagree to put forth their arguments to the contrary.

### *Conclusion*

My research leads me to the conclusion that it was *not* Suzuki or his fellow wartime Zen leaders who were responsible for having turned Zen into a war-affirming if not fanatical creed, but rather, they honestly reflected what the Zen school, with its value-neutral meditation yoked to hierarchical Confucian social ethics, had long ago become—a “selfless” servant of the state and its leaders in which absolute loyalty was promoted as the highest good. Suzuki and his fellow Zen leaders were neither the creators of these Zen characteristics, any more than they “distorted” the nature of value-neutral, and thereby *violence-enabling*, Zen meditation, coupled as it was to metaphysical presuppositions based on a false understanding of the absolute and relative worlds. That is to say, they conflated these two worlds with the relative disappearing into the absolute never to be considered, *or valued*, again. Instead, these Zen leaders faithfully proclaimed and promoted these

<sup>64</sup> Quoted in Victoria 2006, p. 134.

long-standing characteristics of Zen to the people of wartime Japan and, in Suzuki's case, to the people of the English-speaking world as well.

Although I lump Suzuki together with other more extreme wartime Zen leaders, this does *not* mean that I regard them as identical. That is to say, within the Zen community of his day Suzuki was truly "one of a kind." Unlike his Zen contemporaries, Suzuki clearly did not engage in the promotion of emperor-worship nor identify the Asia-Pacific War as a "holy" undertaking fought against the demonic Americans and British (*kichiku beiei* 鬼畜米英). (After all, Suzuki had numerous friends in both countries.) This is to Suzuki's credit and places him in a unique category vis-à-vis the other fervent Zen supporters of Japanese militarism.

Nevertheless, Suzuki was an active participant in the events of his day. Notwithstanding Satō's protestations to the contrary, while yet a young man Suzuki published a book, *A New Theory of Religion*, that was not only extremely nationalistic but established the theoretical groundwork for religion in modern Japan to serve as a loyal servant of the state in times of peace *and* war. In so doing, Suzuki revealed his complete ignorance of an insight described by engaged Buddhist scholar David Loy as "wego" (as opposed to "ego"), a term he applied to the state (among other entities) that in reality is: "a collective identity created by discriminating one's own group from another. As in the personal ego, the 'inside' is opposed to the other 'outside,' and *this makes conflict inevitable*, not just because of competition with other groups, but because the socially constructed nature of group identity means that one's own group can never feel secure *enough*."<sup>65</sup>

Thus, conflict between nations, fundamentally based on the *collective* greed of each "wego" state, is integral to the very structure of *all* states as they exist today. So-called "defensive wars," that states inevitably claim to be fighting, are no more than convenient, if effective, facades to disguise the pursuit of national aggrandizement, euphemistically known as the "national interest."

Furthermore, when, inevitably, the "wego"-constituted nation enters into war, Suzuki was an advocate for the utter subservience of religion to the massive slaughter accompanying modern warfare, incorporating the denigration of the worth of the individual soldier and, by extension, the worth of all Japanese during wartime. Whatever moral requirements Suzuki may have placed on the state *in theory* had no real meaning *in practice*, something he himself demonstrated all too clearly by the joy he expressed

<sup>65</sup> Loy 2009.

upon hearing of the initial Japanese naval victories at the beginning of the Russo-Japanese War, a war between two rival imperialisms over the right to control Korea and, secondarily, Manchuria.

And as far as Zen is concerned, as early as 1906 we find Suzuki touting Zen's influence on Bushido and "*the inspiration* the combination of these two provided Japan's victorious soldiers" to the English-speaking world. This was written only two years after Suzuki had praised the "brilliant start" of the war. Nor should it be forgotten that the Bushido code, lit. "Way of the Warrior," was, Suzuki's idealized portrait notwithstanding, a brutal code to be adhered to in the process of loyally vanquishing, i.e., nearly always *kill-ing*, the designated enemies of one's feudal lord (including the women and children of entire families if need be). A process, moreover, in which one's own life counted for nothing (which Zen claimed it ultimately was), i.e., of no more worth symbolically than "goose feathers."

Suzuki continued to tout the intimate connection between Zen and Bushido in English in his 1938 book *Zen Buddhism and Its Influence on Japanese Culture* (reprinted in the postwar era as *Zen and Japanese Culture*). Significantly, the Japanese edition of this book was met with domestic acclaim in 1940, and, as even Satō admits, Suzuki continued to write uncritically about Zen's relationship to Bushido until the early 1940s, i.e., long after Japan had begun its full-scale invasion of China on 7 July 1937. Though not yet at war with the U.S., Japan very much needed to maintain, if not enhance, the fighting spirit (and willingness to die) of both Japanese soldiers and civilians alike.

It is true that, as Satō noted, Suzuki did not embrace the extreme form of racist nationalism associated with the alleged superiority of the Japanese people as a divine "race," headed by a divine emperor ruling over a divine nation, a notion encapsulated in the terms "Yamato spirit" (*Yamato-damashii* 大和魂) and a peerless *kokutai* 国体 (national polity). Yet, this was not because Suzuki had a deeper understanding of Buddhism than his war-mongering Zen contemporaries, nor because his own enlightenment experience was more authentic than theirs.

In the first instance we find Suzuki parting way with his peers, even his own Zen Master Shaku Sōen, over his opposition to the socially reactionary understanding of karma then prevalent in Japan. However, this was not due to Suzuki's deeper understanding of Buddhism but to his newly-found affinity to socialism acquired during his residence in the U.S. An affinity so profound that Suzuki became determined to reform Japan's oppressive social structure "from the ground up." Yet, even as he made this pledge in private

letters to a Japanese friend while still in the U.S., he was already aware of the dangers involved, dangers that would only increase with the passage of time. Hence, following Suzuki's return to Japan in 1909 we never again hear of his plans for socialist reform.

Instead, by the 1930s we learn that Suzuki's "friends" were seeking to bring his writings to the attention of none other than the emperor himself. While it is not clear whether they were successful, Suzuki was nevertheless able to meet and dine with Count Makino Nobuaki, Lord Keeper of the Privy Seal and Emperor Hirohito's most important political advisor, thereby garnering financial support for Suzuki's 1934 trip to China, a country he had once dismissed as "old and tottering." Would the Japanese government have helped pay for a trip to China of someone they suspected of being in the least opposed to Japan's ever increasing encroachments on China, most especially the creation of a puppet state in Manchuria in 1932?

This episode reveals that Suzuki, his socialist sympathies notwithstanding, was quite willing to approach the pinnacle of power in Japan for personal advantage. There is nothing particularly sinister in this, inasmuch as most if not all of us seek to "get ahead" in society, but it is nevertheless somewhat unseemly to see this "man of Zen" as he is known, this socialist sympathizer, seeking to ingratiate himself with aristocrats and an emperor, not least of all when compared with Huineng, the sixth Chan patriarch in China, who, it is claimed, staunchly refused to have anything to do with China's emperor.

Further, when placed in the context of his times, Suzuki's presentation of the history and values of Bushido in medieval Japan played directly into the hands of imperial military leaders who openly recognized, even celebrated, Zen's historical influence on the formation of Bushido. These military leaders especially esteemed Zen for providing the spiritual foundation for Bushido's "selfless" martial values that they regarded as a critical factor, if not *the* critical factor, in assuring victory over the "self-centered" and "materialistic" soldiers of Western nations who wanted nothing so much as to return home alive. By comparison, it was the Japanese soldiers' willingness, even eagerness, to die, these leaders believed, that made the Japanese military invincible in the aggregate.

To the extent that Suzuki's writings promoted this willingness to die, they were a most welcome addition to the military's morale-boosting efforts. Suzuki's writings on Bushido were so highly valued that his article entitled "Zen and Bushido," though first published in the intellectual journal *Gen-dai* 現代 a few months earlier, was selected for inclusion in the military-

dominated book, *Bushidō no shinzui* 武士道の神髄 (The Essence of Bushido), published less than one month prior to Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, i.e., on 10 November 1941. Other contributors to this volume included Imperial Army General Araki Sadao 荒木貞夫 (1877–1966) and Imperial Navy Captain Hirose Yutaka 廣瀬豊 (n.d.–1960). Then Prime Minister Konoe Fumimaro 近衛文麿 (1891–1945) contributed the introductory essay.

Suzuki's article included such repeated statements as: "When it comes time to act, the best thing is simply to act. You can decide later on whether it was right or wrong. This is where the life of Zen lies. The life of Zen must become, just as it is, the life of the warrior."<sup>66</sup> And further, "The spirit of the warrior is truly to abandon this life, neither bragging of one's achievements, nor complaining when one's talents go unrecognized. It is simply a question of rushing forward toward one's ideal."<sup>67</sup>

Satō maintains that references to abandoning life and death were not meant in any way to demonstrate Suzuki's support for Japan's full-scale war with China but, instead, parallel "the constant enjoinders heard in Zen training to resolve the central problem of samsara."<sup>68</sup> Even if this were true, the question must be asked how would Japanese readers, civilian or military, of a vehemently pro-war book like *Bushidō no shinzui*, have understood what Suzuki wrote?

This question is even more relevant because, contrary to Satō's claims, later in the same article Suzuki clearly alluded to Japan's war with China. Specifically, after discussing the successful defense of Japan mounted by Zen-trained Shōgun Hōjō Tokimune against thirteenth-century Mongol invaders, Suzuki wrote: "in reality the struggle against the Mongols didn't last for only three or even five years but continued for more than ten years. There is, I believe, no comparison with what we are experiencing today [in the war with China] and the tense feelings of that time."<sup>69</sup>

By comparing Japan's then four-year long, full-scale invasion of China with the more than decade-long resistance to the Mongols what was Suzuki's intent? Was it not to *encourage* his Japanese readers to continue striving for victory, just as Hōjō had done, no matter how long it might take or whatever adversity they might encounter? And given that Japan's thirteenth-century war with the Mongols was truly defensive in nature, was not Suzuki also making the claim, at least by analogy, that the war against China was defen-

<sup>66</sup> Quoted in Suzuki 1941, p. 69.

<sup>67</sup> Quoted in Suzuki 1941, p. 75.

<sup>68</sup> Satō 2008, p. 93.

<sup>69</sup> Suzuki 1941, pp. 76–77.

sive too? Far more importantly, it is noteworthy that Suzuki's article contained not so much as a single word acknowledging the immense suffering inflicted on the Chinese people by Japan's ongoing aggression.

Contrary to my own research, Satō claims that when Suzuki's wartime writings are placed in their proper context they reveal that Suzuki never endorsed Japan's militarism. Yet, by failing to address the *crucial* question of how Suzuki's wartime readers would almost certainly have understood statements like the above, it is actually Satō who distorts the historical record, turning night into day. Furthermore, in a nation long engaged in full-scale warfare, it is inconceivable that Suzuki was unaware of how his writings on Zen and Bushido would be understood or used by the military.

If by 1941 Suzuki were opposed to Japan's war effort it must be said that he was eminently successful in hiding his opposition while, at the same time, garnering praise (and no doubt income) for his writings on Bushido, the imperial military's most important morale-building tool. While Suzuki may not have played a major role in the war effort (and I have never suggested otherwise), his writings, beginning with his very first book, nevertheless played *some* role, especially when placed in the context of their *overall effect* on his readership. That said, the full extent of his role has yet to be determined.

In Suzuki we find a man who appears, on the one hand, to have been tormented by his *private* if not secret opposition to Japan's war effort sometime prior to, and still more following, Japan's attack on the U.S. and Great Britain. Suzuki had, of course, lived in both countries and knew how strong, both militarily and industrially, these countries were (thereby recognizing the likelihood of Japan's defeat). Nevertheless, Suzuki was unwilling to sacrifice his career, let alone place himself and his family at risk, by publicly opposing the war effort in his writings apart from some minor ambiguous comments that could typically be taken in several ways.

At a purely human level, Suzuki's fear of speaking out is quite understandable. In similar circumstances, how many of us would act differently? How many of us could, like Uchiyama Gudō, climb the scaffold steps radiating equanimity? Yet, Suzuki was no ordinary person, for he claimed initial enlightenment as his own, even while promoting the idea that Zen, when necessary, could supply an "iron will" to its practitioners so as to make them fearless in the face of death. Yet, when faced with the prospect of imprisonment or worse if he dared speak out, where were Suzuki's own iron will, let alone his fearlessness, to be found?

Thus, based on the available evidence, the only reasonable conclusion is that in order to save himself and his family, if not advance his career, Suzuki, like so many wartime intellectuals in both Japan and Germany who inwardly “knew better,” *collaborated*, however reluctantly, with Japan’s militarists, including the imperial household, even while *privately* opposing the war effort, at least later on. And most importantly from the standpoint of this article, neither Suzuki’s public collaboration nor private opposition stemmed from his Zen practice. They were, in the end, the actions of a clever yet, in terms of ensuring his own survival, a very “ordinary” man. Nevertheless, Suzuki was a man who even after the war helped convince both Japanese and non-Japanese alike that the unity of Zen and the sword was genuinely Buddhist in nature. Herein lies the true tragedy of the man and his era.

Yet, if there is one thing to thank Suzuki for, it is exactly this. In the end, his idealized, sanitized and “bloodless” version of the murderous Bushido code, in which loyalty unto death trumps any other virtue, serves to reveal that the unity of Zen and the sword, together with the amoral and antinomian ethics on which it is based, cannot possibly be an authentic expression of the Buddha-dharma. Instead it represents nothing less than a betrayal, a betrayal made necessary by the Zen school’s need to accommodate itself to the needs of the “powers that be,” in the case of Japan, to the needs of its first patrons, the warrior class.

Similarly, we can now understand how readily Zen’s long-standing promotion of a “value-neutral” meditation practice becomes, when needed, yet another *enabling mechanism* for violence. A mechanism that is the very antithesis of the genuinely compassionate teachings of Buddha Śākyamuni, based, as they are, on an experiential *internalization*, through meditation, of the identity of the self with *all* “other.” In alerting us, however unintentionally, of the need to reform a foundational aspect of the Zen school in Japan we owe Suzuki, and his loyal disciple Satō, a deep debt of gratitude.

#### ABBREVIATION

- SDZ     *Suzuki Daisetsu zenshū* 鈴木大拙全集. New enlarged edition, 40 vols., ed. Hisamatsu Shin’ichi 久松真一, Yamaguchi Susumu 山口益 and Furuta Shōkin 古田紹欽. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1999–2003.

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