

Protect the Dharma, Protect the Country: Buddhist War Responsibility and Social Ethics

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JAPANESE Buddhism finds itself in a challenging period of its history, and unfortunately this period has lasted for 150 years. As the tradition looks out across the 21st century, its path is rutted, for it is moving across terrain gouged by social, political, and economic forces since the mid-19th century. One of several current challenges is the lack of interest in mainline Buddhist sects on the part of young and middle-aged Japanese, most of whom see Buddhism as “the funeral business,” a collection of musty, antiquated rituals concerning death and memorialization of the dead, topics best left to priests, grandmothers, and other elderly folks with an interest in such things. In response to this apathy, and the concomitant shortage of priests for smaller, rural temples, some Buddhist leaders have advocated making the Dharma more socially relevant. Though atypical, a few priests have begun engaging in new forms of outreach and activism, and some have even stressed the need for a Buddhist social ethic that can speak to the contemporary situation of the Japanese.¹

A fruitful starting point for *systematic* formulation of Buddhist ethics, especially if one wishes to avoid abstract, idealized constructions of Buddhist ethics that are divorced from historical actuality, is Buddhist involvement in, if not responsibility for, the Fifteen-Year War (1931–45), as well as

¹ As part of their commitment to developing Buddhist social ethics in Japan, the editors of *The Eastern Buddhist* solicited this article, asking that I survey treatments of Zen war responsibility and offer ideas about how, in light of Buddhist involvement in the war, the formulation of Buddhist social ethics might proceed.

issues that have carried over into the postwar period, including the question of why Japanese Buddhists have been reluctant to look squarely at their wartime culpability.

Imperial-Way Buddhism

From the 1920s to the early 1940s Buddhist priests contributed actively to Japanese imperialism. They lent their social status and homiletical skills to propaganda campaigns (*kyōka undō* 教化運動) run by the state to cultivate obedient imperial subjects; organized and/or participated actively in patriotic groups; exhorted parishioners to “serve the public” (*hōkō* 奉公) by enlisting, practicing austerity on the home front, and buying war bonds; engaged in monthly “patriotic alms-begging” (*hōkoku takuhatsu gongyō* 報国托鉢勤行); donated temple funds for the construction of warplanes; ran officer-training programs; performed ceremonies and chanted sutras to promote Japanese victory; assisted the families of the war dead; served as chaplains for troops fighting overseas; and helped “pacify” (*senbu* 宣撫) occupied and colonized areas and mold colonized Asians into imperial subjects (*kōminka* 皇民化).² With regard to Buddhist contributions to Japanese colonialism on the heels of invasion, Ichikawa Hakugen writes, “In the major cities of Asian areas into which the ‘emperor’s army’ advanced, shrines were erected, and Buddhists, with the exception of a small number of resisters, cooperated destructively in the pacification of those areas as crusaders who [as the saying goes] obliterated the self and served the public (*messhi-hōkō* 滅私奉公) by disseminating the Imperial Way. . . . [And] under the banner of ‘the august virtue’ [of the emperor] they shouldered the burden of waging one front of the ‘thought war’ (*shisōsen* 思想戦) directed at turning Taiwanese, Koreans, Manchurians, and Mongolians into imperial subjects.”³

Buddhist priests also served state objectives through sermons, lectures, and writings, especially in Buddhist newsletters and journals. In their patriotic discourse they celebrated the imperial system, the Japanese state, and military operations, while philosophically aligning Buddhist teachings with constructs in the reigning imperial ideology. For example, they set forth arguments that 1) the war Japan was waging across Asia was a holy war; 2) Japanese actions in that war were expressions of compassion; 3) the deaths of brave, self-sacrificial soldiers embodied the Buddhist doctrine of no-self;

² See Kashiwahara 1990, Yoshida 1970, and Victoria 1997.

³ Ichikawa 1993, vol. 3, p. 10.

4) through this Buddhistic self-sacrifice Japanese could repay their debt (*on* 恩) to the emperor;⁴ 5) the Japanese military was attempting to establish a pure land here on earth, with the emperor equivalent to Amida.⁵

This historical record prompts a number of questions, not the least of which is how we might square wartime Zen Buddhism with popular—usually ahistorical and idealized—representations of Zen as a path of compassionate wisdom free from political cooptation or, in its most distorted portrayal, as the path of awakened eccentrics engaged in poetry and pranks in the mountains of East Asia. Given that scholars have already begun to address this question elsewhere,⁶ I will focus here on the question of how we might account for “Imperial-Way Buddhism” (*kōdō bukkyō* 皇道仏教), especially “Imperial-Way Zen” (*kōdō zen* 皇道禪).

Causes of Imperial-Way Zen

The two Zen scholars (and priests) most known for investigating “Imperial-Way Zen” are Brian Victoria (1939–) and Ichikawa Hakugen 市川白弦 (1902–86). In his controversial book, *Zen at War*, Victoria outlines the nationalistic and militaristic bent of prominent Zen figures in the first part of the Shōwa period (1926–1989). Though he does not work over his important data theoretically, in several places he does offer his own interpretations and assessments.

Victoria ascribes Zen collaboration with Japanese imperialism to connections between Zen and *bushidō* 武士道,⁷ encapsulated in the expression, *ken-zen-ichinyo* 劍禪一如, the “unity of Zen and the sword.” This connection, especially as interpreted by prewar and wartime Zen Buddhists, is “the key to understanding the eventual emergence of ‘imperial-state Zen’ (*kōkoku zen*

⁴ With this argument they linked the Confucian notion of the benevolent emperor with Buddhist formulations of *on*, the blessings one receives from others and the indebtedness one incurs because of those blessings. (In East Asian Buddhism, the four main *on* (*shion* 四恩) are the blessings one receives from 1) the Buddha, 2) the ruler, 3) one’s parents, and 4) all sentient beings.) In this way they plugged Buddhist doctrinal teaching into the crux of the imperial ideology: a benevolent emperor bestowing blessings on grateful and obedient subjects who, in turn, are willing to sacrifice themselves for the emperor in repayment of their debt to him. For further discussion of this meshing of Buddhist doctrine with imperial ideology, see Ives 1999.

⁵ Such arguments appear in Buddhist journals and newsletters throughout the early-Shōwa period (1926–1945), as Brian Victoria delineates in *Zen at War*.

⁶ For example, see Sharf 1995.

⁷ The “way of the warrior,” the warrior code or ethos.

皇国禪)。”⁸ In his book, however, Victoria provides little specific evidence to convince his readers that it was primarily the *Zen-bushidō* connection per se, not other factors, that gave rise to the nationalist bent of Zen leaders in the first half of the 20th century. True, Zen figures cloaked their nationalism in the rhetoric of *kenzen-ichinyo*, but is the Zen connection to *bushidō* the reason they were eagerly patriotic? One cannot help wondering whether there might not have been other, perhaps even more important, factors that generated nationalist Zen before and during the Fifteen-Year War.

Interestingly, Victoria himself points to other causal factors when he writes, “. . . what did post-Meiji Zen adherents find in the relationship between Zen and Bushido that justified their own fervent support of Japan’s war effort?”⁹ With this wording Victoria seems to construe the *Zen-bushidō* connection not so much as the *main cause* of Zen support for Japanese imperialism but as a construct readily available when Zen leaders sought an *ex post facto justification* for their support of imperialism. This wording betrays his recognition that factors other than the historical *Zen-bushidō* connection—many of which he points out in the book—may have been the main factors that led Zen to its imperialist posture and that when Zen figures wanted to valorize or embellish their support for Japanese imperialism and militarism they deployed rhetoric about the inherent congruity between the paths of monks and fighting men.

Victoria argues that the *Zen-bushidō* connection not only generated “Imperial-Way Zen” but also had a bearing on Japanese militarism in general. To support this claim he zeroes in on *Taigi* (大義 “Great Duty”), a book by Lieutenant Colonel Sugimoto Gorō: “The writings of one military officer . . . indicate the type of soldier this [Zen] training produced and are a powerful testimonial to the influence that Bushido, incorporating the unity of Zen and the sword, had on both imperial soldiers and the general public.”¹⁰ He later adds, “To the war’s bitter end, the Way of the Warrior played an important role in all aspects of Japanese society.”¹¹ And close to that bitter end, according to Victoria, “The unity of Zen and the sword advocated by such Zen leaders as [Yamazaki] Ekijū and [D.T.] Suzuki had come to this: draft-

⁸ Victoria 1997, p. 95.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 116.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 144.

ing young boys into special attack units to become infamous *kamikaze* (divine wind) pilots needed on a one-way trip to oblivion.”¹²

We might ask, however, whether there were factors other than Zen training that influenced Sugimoto. And even if it was Zen training that enabled Sugimoto to wage war without flinching and face death with selfless service to the emperor foremost in his mind, how typical was he? Did Zen training play much of a role in the will-power, martial effectiveness, and sacrificial death of other soldiers? (One might also inquire into the actual extent earlier soldiers, the samurai ostensibly shaped by *bushidō* and Zen, actually did sit zazen, meet with Zen masters, and thereby cultivate the mental states and insights claimed to be the fruits of Zen practice.) And even if we allow for the possibility that *bushidō* did in fact exert a large influence on military figures like Sugimoto, does that necessarily indicate a major *Zen* influence? Victoria highlights Buddhist facets of *bushidō* but devotes less ink to its overwhelmingly Confucian character.¹³

As indicated in his statement about Sugimoto, Victoria does maintain that Zen training exerted a major influence on this soldier, and he further writes, “The belief that the power resulting from Zen training could be converted into military power was to become an ever more important part of the Zen contribution to Japan’s war effort.”¹⁴ But how might one prove that the belief in some special power cultivated by Zen practice became an “ever more important part of the *Zen* contribution to the war effort,” or that the actual cultivation of that power in Zen training constituted the key formative moment in Sugimoto’s career? That is to say, how much influence did that belief really have on military figures and the war? And going beyond mere belief, how many military types actually practiced Zen, gained special power from that practice, and converted it into some sort of military power?

The challenge Victoria faces here, as with the issue of the exact role of *bushidō* in motivating actions by Zen figures and others, is that of empirical evidence. He acknowledges this difficulty: “Leading Zen figures made unsurpassed efforts to foster loyalty to the emperor and make spiritually strong soldiers. Did anyone notice? That is to say, was the imperial military

¹² Ibid., p. 129.

¹³ I would argue that the Zen-samurai connection had more to do with institutional symbiosis than with any Zen input to *bushidō* or any linkage between Zen and the way one wields a sword.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 99.

actually influenced by their words and actions?”¹⁵ He continues, “A quantitative answer to this question, it must be admitted, is almost certainly beyond the realm of historical research.”¹⁶

In terms of kamikaze pilots, though Victoria ascribes to the *Zen-bushidō* connection a causal role (“come to this”) in the creation of what the Japanese military referred to as “special attack” (*tokkō* 特攻) units, one can reasonably wonder whether the Zen-sword link really played *any* causal role, much less a significant one, in the formation of those units. Pointing out that Zen figures like Yamazaki Ekijū 山崎益洲 (1882–1961) and D.T. Suzuki (1870–1966) joined the rhetorical game of extolling the virtues of self-sacrifice and other apparently Zen facets of *bushidō* is one thing, but to construe the unity of Zen and the sword as playing a significant causal role in desperate tactical decisions made by military brass on the verge of defeat is an entirely different matter.

In short, Victoria has not adequately made his case for the *Zen-bushidō* connection as the main cause of Imperial-Way Zen, the martial tenacity of military figures other than Sugimoto, or kamikaze attacks. Nor has he sufficiently supported his claim that *bushidō*, regardless of the degree to which Zen is constitutive of it, played a major causal role in Japanese militarism and expansionist imperialism overall. Nevertheless, scholars and practicing Buddhists are indebted to Victoria for bringing to greater light the ideology and actions of Zen figures during the Fifteen-Year War.

So what might be causal factors behind Imperial-Way Zen besides the *Zen-bushidō* connection? Ichikawa Hakugen turns his critical gaze toward Zen epistemology and metaphysics. He argues that in their attempt to attain “peace of mind” (*anjin* 安心) by extricating themselves from discriminating thought, “becoming one with things” (*narikiru*), and “accepting and according with circumstances” (*nin'nun* 任運), Zen Buddhists have never laid an epistemological groundwork on which to criticize or resist political actuality and, in fact, have usually accommodated if not actively supported it.¹⁷ In *Buddhists' War Responsibility* (*Bukkyō-sha no sensō-sekinin* 仏教者の戦争責任, 1970), Ichikawa expands the scope of his discussion beyond Zen and notes that Buddhists in general deploy the metaphor of the mirror as that which reflects all things “just as they are,” and “the fundamental spirit and

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 114.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ichikawa 1993b, p. 124.

character of Buddhism is tolerance, harmony, and non-resistance.”¹⁸ Moreover, Japanese have celebrated harmony as a salient cultural characteristic of Japan, as seen in the imperial ideology promulgated in the Ministry of Education’s 1937 text, *Kokutai no hongii* (国体の本義 Fundamental Principles of the National Polity), which mobilized the social ethic of “Great Harmony” (*daiwa* 大和) from such early sources as the *Seventeen-Article Constitution* (604 CE). “This ethic strengthened the trajectory of inferiors obeying the wishes of their superiors in the system of ‘one sovereign and many subjects.’ . . . This amounted to the fanaticism of a ‘harmonization’ (*wagō* 和合) that was completely intolerant of and hysterically combative toward ‘Reds’ and ‘traitors’ (*hikokumin* 非国民).”¹⁹

Ichikawa lifts up other facets of Japanese Mahayanist philosophy that predisposed Zen Buddhists to float on the collective drift into Japanese imperialism. In his writings he repeatedly critiques elements of Zen epistemology and metaphysics that are based on Huayan (華嚴 Jp. Kegon) Buddhism. Rather than unpacking the political implications of the “unobstructed interpretation of thing and thing” (*jiji-muge* 事事無碍), Zen has chosen to focus on “seeing the universal principle in the particular thing” (*ji no naka ni ri o miru* 事の中に理を見る). This stance has led Zen to valorize actuality or certain particulars therein, such as the emperor or the imperial household, and obfuscate distinctions between the “is” and the “ought.”

Ichikawa further criticizes the Mahayana logic of “differences [or discriminations] are none other than equality” (*shabetsu-soku-byōdō* 差別即平等) for having “functioned as a logic supportive and protective of the [war-time] system.”²⁰ Specifically, Japanese Buddhists often denounced leftist thought as an evil egalitarianism that ran contrary to this Buddhist logic, “even though . . . the common goal of various types of communist thought is the construction of a society that takes into account differences in terms of people contributing in accordance with their ability and receiving in accordance with their need. Moreover, we [Japanese] did not denounce decisively as evil differentiation and evil equality the movement to turn Taiwanese, Koreans, Manchurians, and Mongolians [equally] into imperial subjects, which was based on extremely discriminatory concepts and policies.”²¹

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 6.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 10.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 11.

²¹ Ibid., pp. 10–11.

When coupled with the doctrine of “cause and effect over the three worlds [of past, present, and future]” (*sanze-inga* 三世因果), this logic has also served to justify class differences and social discrimination in Japan.²²

Ichikawa further criticizes what D.T. Suzuki termed the “logic of *sokuhi* (即非)” and his friend Nishida Kitarō called the “the identity of absolute contradictories.” These philosophical constructs, “in which non-freedom is none other than freedom, in which ‘to become servant of every situation’ (to obliterate the self and serve the public in the holy war) is to ‘become master of every situation’ (as in Mahayana Zen), played the same social and political role [of supporting and protecting the imperial system].”²³ In other words, the logic of identity in negation and contradiction, and of the affirmation that emerges from negation, can further subvert distinctions between “is” and “ought”; and the type of freedom cultivated by Zen, however liberating existentially, may actually cause acquiescence and political bondage.

Though many scholars would challenge Ichikawa’s representation of Zen experience,²⁴ if we grant for the sake of the argument that prominent Zen figures did experience things in ways that undermined critical distance and predisposed them to accord with their actuality, and that this epistemology has been grounded in a metaphysics that valorizes actuality and obfuscates distinctions between fact and value, we are still left with the question of the extent to which these epistemological and metaphysical factors account for “Imperial-Way Zen.” That is to say, though these factors might help explain why Zen figures did not resist, they do not fully account for the active and eager collaboration Ichikawa, Victoria, and others have documented.

Arguably a better direction in which to seek the causes Imperial-Way Zen is institutional history, which Victoria and Ichikawa both discuss but generally subordinate to their arguments about *bushidō* and Zen epistemology.²⁵

²² Ichikawa’s argument has been echoed recently by “Critical Buddhism” (*hihan bukkyō* 批判仏教).

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

²⁴ Scholars in Zen Studies have begun to argue both that the role of special “experience” is less central to Zen than D.T. Suzuki and others have made it out to be, and that the construct of ineffable, pure, unmediated experience beyond the duality of subject and object is largely unintelligible.

²⁵ Victoria mentions “the overall relationship between institutional Buddhism and the Japanese state” (Victoria 1997, p. 95) and the phenomenon of “nation-protecting Buddhism” (*gokoku Bukkyō* 護国仏教) as one part of “the question of the doctrinal and historical relationship between Buddhism and the state” (Victoria 1997, p. 157).

Since Buddhism first arrived in Japan as a gift from a Korean king in the sixth century, Japanese Buddhist leaders and institutions have, as a rule,²⁶ functioned in a symbiotic relationship with other individuals and institutions exercising political power.²⁷ As Ichikawa, Yoshida Kyūichi, Nakano Kyōtoku, James Ketelaar, Sheldon Garon, Brian Victoria, and other scholars have pointed out, this pattern continued from the Meiji Restoration through the end of the Fifteen-Year War, and in some respects with greater urgency than in the past. From the 1860s institutional Buddhism confronted a series of crises: the loss of property and revenues during and after the brief repression of Buddhism (*haibutsu-kishaku* 廃仏毀釈) at the beginning of the Meiji period; erosion of the parishioner system (*danka seido* 檀家制度) and the derivative wealth and power of Tokugawa Buddhism as the Meiji government eliminated temple registration (*shūmon-aratame* 宗門改め) and ordered all Japanese to register at Shinto shrines (*ujiko-aratame* 氏子改め); the loss of followers as industrialization and urbanization led parishioners away from rural family temples and in many cases toward “new religions” (*shinkō shukyō* 新興宗教) that proselytized to disenfranchised and disenchanting urban workers; government restrictions on Buddhism in the 1930s; doctrinal struggles and internal criticisms by sectarian reformers; and external criticism by Marxists and Shinto ideologues in the late 1920s and early 1930s.

In crisis, mainline Buddhist sects by the 1920s had come to share with government officials an adversarial relationship with both new religious movements and Japanese who were leveling Marxist criticisms of religion and the state, organizing or joining unions, participating in communist and socialist political parties, or directing their allegiance to the Comintern.²⁸ New religious movements and leftist institutions were luring away parishioners, thus catching the attention of sectarian Buddhist leaders; they were also lifting up objects of allegiance transcendent of the emperor and forming

²⁶ Exceptions to this are seen, for example, in the history of True Pure Land and Nichiren Buddhism in pre-modern Japan.

²⁷ Given the ways in which Buddhism has been part of the configuration of political power, as seen in what historian Kuroda Toshio terms the *kenmon-taisei* 権門体制 or influential-parties system in the Kamakura and Muromachi periods, one cannot easily analyze the situation in terms of the relationship between Buddhism and the government, for such wording implies a separation that does not necessarily obtain through most of Japanese history.

²⁸ See Garon 1997, ch. 2.

mass movements seemingly beyond governmental control, thus worrying the state.²⁹

This state of affairs provided an opportunity for Buddhist institutions to align with the state in the face of common adversaries and thereby reclaim some of the patronage and status lost at the beginning of the Meiji period. Seizing this opportunity, Buddhist priests readily agreed to participate in propaganda campaigns orchestrated by the Home Ministry and the Ministry of Education to eradicate “dangerous thought.” And in the 1930s and early 1940s, while tightly regulated by the state, Buddhist leaders bolstered their social and political position further by cooperating with the war effort.³⁰ (This is not to say that Buddhist leaders were narrowly self-interested, crass opportunists, for surely mixed in with this opportunism was patriotism, cultivated by the Ministry of Education and other institutions since the 19th century.)

What we see in the early-Shōwa period is a modern instance of “Buddhism for the protection of the realm” (*gokoku bukkyō* 護国仏教), or what has been termed “protecting the Dharma, protecting the realm” (*gohō-gokoku* 護法護国). These expressions have traditionally been read as indicating that certain Buddhist rituals and sutras can serve to protect the country, making it safe and stable, and hence Buddhism ought to be protected and promulgated by the government. In early-Shōwa Buddhism, Zen included, we see this logic at work, especially in the sense of “protecting the Dharma *by* protecting the country,” that is, protecting Buddhist institutional interests by supporting the Japanese state.

War Responsibility and Postwar Buddhist Ethics

In light of this historical record, hovering over Zen and other sects of Japanese Buddhism is the question of the extent to which Buddhist leaders and institutions should bear responsibility for Japan’s expansionist militarism—for the Fifteen-Year War—and perhaps more importantly, the question of what Buddhists have said or done since 1945 about that responsibility.

In wartime Japan, political action ranged across a spectrum: acts that helped cause or guide (*shidō* 指導) Japanese belligerence; eager collaboration

²⁹ Garon 1997, pp. 83–84.

³⁰ I offer a more detailed analysis of this in a forthcoming article, “Buddhism and the ‘Spiritual Mobilization’ of Japan, 1912–1945.”

in response to causal actions by others (*yokusan* 翼賛); acquiescence or ideological conversion (*tenkō* 転向) and consequent collaboration; inadvertent co-optation; the maintenance of a neutral stance;³¹ resistance through non-cooperation; resistance through active steps to reject or change the state of affairs. War responsibility (*sensō-sekinin* 戦争責任) concerns actions in war, or in support of war, that entail moral or legal accountability.³² For this discussion, war responsibility concerns not only specific actions by Buddhists that served the objectives of Japanese imperialism (sins of commission), but also the acts Buddhists could and should have done as expressions of Buddhist ethical values (sins of omission).

In general, as Aristotle and others have argued, responsibility is intelligible in a moral sense as opposed to a natural-causative sense (as in “The bright sun was responsible for my sunburn”) when a person has the ability to choose and act without excessive outside coercion, is aware of the possible result of actions, and, without diminished capacity, intentionally and voluntarily chooses and commits a particular action.³³ In *Responsibility*, Jonathan Glover writes that thinkers usually assume that “responsibility is an identifiable factor that may at any particular time be present or absent, or even ‘diminished.’ To be responsible for one’s actions is thought of as equivalent to being in a certain mental state. English law sometimes speaks in terms of the presence of a ‘guilty mind’ (*mens rea*). . . .”³⁴

Most ethicists agree that we cannot be held morally responsible for actions we were forced to do or could not avoid doing. Some Japanese have argued that indeed they really had no choice, given the coercive power invested in the thought police of the Home Ministry and the military police (*kenpeitai* 憲兵隊), and the threat of incarceration, torture, economic ruin, and social ostracization. In response to this argument, Victoria applies a strictly calibrated yardstick:

³¹ Of course, a theoretical, not actual, possibility.

³² Jonathan Glover writes, “In legal context, to say that someone is responsible for an action may be to say that he is liable to the normal legal consequences of it. To say that someone is morally responsible for what he does may be to say that he can legitimately be praised or blamed if either of these responses is appropriate to the action in question.” Glover 1970, p. 19.

³³ This opens up the difficult questions of whether Buddhism allows for free will and whether we can talk intelligibly about responsibility in the absence of a doctrine of free will.

³⁴ Glover 1970, p. 3.

Large-scale resistance, of course, never occurred, but those few Buddhists who did oppose Japan's war policies demonstrated that resistance was possible if one were prepared to pay the price. Each and every Japanese Buddhist did have a choice to make.³⁵

While resistance was certainly an option at that time, there was, as Victoria rightly points out, a price to pay, a very high price. When Buddhist leaders did speak out or actively resist, they risked losing their priestly status (i.e., their livelihood, no small loss for married priests with wives and children to support) and being imprisoned. And when political prisoners resisted demands for recantation (*tenkō* 転向), they could expect to be tortured until they caved in and recanted. In other words, there was plenty of room for Japanese Dietrich Bonhoeffers, but the high price may have silenced Buddhists of conscience who might otherwise have spoken up. The ethical question that emerges from this, then, is how, in the midst of complex historical actualities, to weigh and evaluate ethical choices vis-à-vis Buddhist ideals, especially the pervasive sutra discourse on bodhisattvas that portrays awakened and compassionate Buddhists as willing to pay the highest price.³⁶

So what is the nature of Japanese Buddhists' war responsibility, and do the narrowed range of options in the early-Shōwa and high stakes of certain of those options reduce culpability? Most importantly, how have Japanese Buddhists themselves addressed this question?

Ichikawa complicates things from the start when he claims that Zen's non-attached, aesthetic way of being (*fūryū no kyōgai* 風流の境涯) allows little room for responsibility.³⁷ "Inheriting the spirit of the Seventeen-Article Constitution, the ethics of action in Japanese Buddhism provides no place for the realization of responsibility."³⁸ To Ichikawa, the way of being of Japanese Zen finds expression in Dōgen's statements, "To study the self is to forget the self" and "without thinking of good or evil, without handling affir-

³⁵ Victoria 1997, p.78.

³⁶ This line of inquiry could lead, among several possibilities, to a type of "Buddhist realism" akin to the "Christian realism" Reinhold Niebuhr sets forth in *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. A potentially fruitful point of reference for Buddhist ethical reflection on the nature and proper place of compassion and nonviolence is Niebuhr's provocative argument that Jesus's love ethic is an ideal that ought to be striven for but ought not to be taken as the main guiding principle when responding to international conflicts that may call for what Niebuhr claims is the ethically permissible and legitimate use of violence.

³⁷ Ichikawa 1993a, p. 164.

³⁸ Ichikawa 1993c, p. 371.

mation or negation,” and hence when Zen is “practiced in union with ‘the [Shinto] Way of according with the kami and not putting things into words’ (*kannagara kotoage senu michi* 神ながら言挙げせぬ道), an ethic of responsibility cannot be established.”³⁹ For this reason, from Ichikawa’s perspective it was no surprise that up until the 1960s when he was making these statements about responsibility, Zen institutions had not yet seriously raised the issue of their war responsibility.⁴⁰

One might retort here that Japanese Buddhists did feel responsibility at the end of the war. Soon after the surrender, many Japanese engaged in mass repentance (*ichioku sōzange* 一億総懺悔) at the request of Prime Minister Higashikuni 東久邇 (Naruhiko 稔彦, 1887–1990),⁴¹ and Buddhist priests signed on to this show of repentance, as did Buddhist philosophers like Tanabe Hajime 田辺元 (1885–1962), who in April of 1946 published *Zangedō to shite no tetsugaku* 懺悔道としての哲学.⁴² Ichikawa argues, however, “Insofar as the war started with an imperial decision (*seidan* 聖断) and ended with an imperial decision, no consciousness of responsibility arose. The only responsibility was vis-à-vis the emperor for the defeat.”⁴³ That is to say, the repentance was directed toward the emperor—repentance for not having won the war—rather than toward any acts the Japanese committed in that war or toward the war as a whole. Higashikuni’s approach “absolved the emperor of any responsibility for the war, spread responsibility for the defeat equally among the Japanese without any distinctions, and, needless to say, indicated the non-existence of any consciousness of responsibility toward the peoples of Asia.”⁴⁴ Ichikawa refers to this as “vertical responsibility,”⁴⁵ a type of responsibility that provides no basis for “horizontal” responsibility toward other ordinary people, especially non-Japanese. Renowned political

³⁹ Ibid., pp. 371–72.

⁴⁰ Ichikawa 1993a, p. 164. Since then, Sōtō Zen has rectified this void by issuing a declaration of repentance (*sanshabun* 懺謝文) in 1992. See Victoria 1997, pp. 153–57, for a discussion of this Sōtō declaration and three other statements by Japanese Buddhist sects since 1945.

⁴¹ On August 28, 1945, as American troops arrived at Atsugi Air Force Base, Higashikuni told Japanese reporters that what was needed most was the “collective repentance of the hundred million” (*ichioku sōzange*). See Dower 1999, p. 496.

⁴² Literally, “philosophy as the Way of repentance.” The book was translated into English by Takeuchi Yoshinori (with Valdo Viglielmo and James W. Heisig) as *Philosophy as Metanoetics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

⁴³ Ichikawa 1997, vol. 4, p. 371.

⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 382.

⁴⁵ He notes how even the emperor apologized vertically to the imperial ancestors.

scientist Maruyama Masao wrote that the call to collective repentance functioned like a squid's ink to obfuscate true responsibility and allow those who should have shouldered responsibility to elude danger.⁴⁶

In short, to Ichikawa, the collective repentance of the hundred million (*ichioku sōzange*), like its wartime derivation, the sacrificial death of the hundred million (*ichioku gyokusai* 一億玉碎), is void of any rigorous moral sense of responsibility and lacks what he terms an “ethics of character” (*jinkaku rinri* 人格倫理).

But separate from the question of the type of responsibility they and other Japanese should have taken for the war, Zen Buddhists may have learned from their mistakes and started taking less of an acritical, accomodationist, and easily co-optable stance, especially when freed in August of 1945 from oppressive state institutions. Judging from the following statement by Zen master Sugiwaru Jiho, however, while “Imperial-Way Zen” may have stopped in 1945, Zen accomodationism did not:

Without being biased, we should think of ourselves as a boat and proceed without contending against the drift of the times. Religionists and ordinary people out to think carefully about this. . . . If we were to go against the drift we could not move forward, and for this reason we should accommodate and acquiesce (*junnō* 順応), or, more bluntly put, we have no other path but to listen and do what America says.⁴⁷

Ichikawa comments that in this statement “the kind of self that has autonomous character (*jinkaku* 人格) and criticizes and resists the drift of the times does not exist. And insofar as individual character does not exist, there is no place in which responsibility can be established. An ‘ethic of emotions’ (*shinjō no rinri* 心情の倫理) may emerge but an ‘ethic of responsibility’ (*sekinin no rinri* 責任の倫理) cannot.”⁴⁸ As a corrective, Ichikawa calls for postwar Buddhists to cultivate a “modern,” “autonomous” character and critical intellectuality (*chisei* 知性).

In his attempt to cultivate this critical autonomy in himself and thereby come to terms with his own—and Zen’s—wartime culpability, Ichikawa

⁴⁶ Maruyama Masao, “*Shisō no kotoba*,” *Shisō*, 381 (March 1956), p. 322; cited by Dower 1999, p. 496.

⁴⁷ Sugawara Jiho 菅原時保, *Nihon Shūhō* 日本週報 (February 1947); quoted by Ichikawa (without page number) 1993a, p. 163.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

expands the construct of war responsibility: “Fundamentally, responsibility for war is responsibility for peace. War responsibility is not something that first emerges upon the outbreak of fighting. [Before then,] in the midst of peace, it exists as a responsibility for peace. We did not correctly or effectively transcend the desirable image of a human being (*kitai sareru ningenzō* 期待される人間像)⁴⁹ promoted by Great Imperial Japan.”⁵⁰ Ichikawa notes that from the 19th century, amongst Japanese Buddhists “there were almost no critics of the Imperial Constitution [1889] and the Imperial Rescript on Education [1890] . . . or activists engaging in ‘destroying the false and revealing the true’ (*haja-kenshō* 破邪顯正) relative to State Shinto and the system of the unity of rites and rule (*saisei-itchi* 祭政一致).”⁵¹ Eventually, the culpability for failing to promote peace and freedom in the prewar period devolved into war responsibility. This constitutes the kind of “pious dereliction” that Ichikawa together with Bonhoeffer have discerned “in the ‘virtue’ of religious people who sit as spectators to historical evil in the world while maintaining their personal purity.”⁵² Ichikawa tells his Japanese readers, “Our culpability extends through the prewar, wartime, and postwar [periods],”⁵³ and hence it is not sufficiently constructive to reflect simply in terms of *war* responsibility. Had Japanese taken active responsibility for peace and freedom in the prewar period, Ichikawa argues, the war might not have occurred, and even if it had, responsibility would not have been such a lingering postwar issue for most Japanese.⁵⁴ Ichikawa adds provocatively, “In this sense, the Japanese Communist Party cannot evade responsibility for the war either.”⁵⁵

⁴⁹ Ichikawa appears to be pulling this expression from the Central Education Council’s Nineteenth Special Committee, chaired by Kyoto School philosopher Kōsaka Masaaki, which in 1965 issued its “Desirable Image of a [Japanese] Human Being,” inclusive of the statement, “To revere and love the mother country of Japan is identical with revering and loving the emperor.” Ichikawa 1993a, pp. 153-54.

⁵⁰ Ichikawa 1993b, p. 8.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁵⁴ Obviously, the complexity of the ongoing postwar debate (or, in some quarters, the lack of debate) about war responsibility derives from an array of complicating factors, including the cover MacArthur and court officials provided Hirohito after the war, the orthodox focusing of blame and responsibility on wartime military leaders, conservative portrayals of the war as one of liberation from western imperialism, and the dearth of coverage of the war in Japanese schools.

⁵⁵ Ichikawa 1993b, pp. 8–9.

Ichikawa elaborates on this responsibility for peace and freedom, claiming that a key issue for postwar Buddhists to consider is their responsibility for ignorance. In terms of the Eightfold Path, this is culpability for lacking Right Understanding and Right Thought (albeit as interpreted by Ichikawa).

Specifically, it is responsibility for our being rendered stupid and fanatical by national education (*kokumin-kyōiku* 国民教育) in a broad sense.⁵⁶ This ignorance and fanaticism was expanded and strengthened through our lack of discerning courage, which derived from our negligence, selfishness, and cowardice, that is, our crafty actuality-ism (*genjitsu-shugi* 現実主義)⁵⁷ and attitude of peace-at-any-price (*kotonakare-shugi* 事なかれ主義). This is evident, for example, in our becoming ‘voluntary’ objects of the systematic manipulation of information by the authorities.⁵⁸

The failure to embody Right Understanding and Right Thought, and by extension the Dharma as the ultimate foundation of the self, constitutes “culpability relative to the self and to truth. . . . This is self-deception by humans who might otherwise have been expected to seek truth and peace.”⁵⁹

Looking to overcome postwar ignorance, Ichikawa points out that during the war “Japanese shouldered the great duty (*taigi* 大義) of bringing about

⁵⁶ Ichikawa’s analysis parallels that of David H. Jones, who in *Moral Responsibility in the Holocaust* critiques the claim that “people who have been socialized [or educated] in a bad political culture cannot justifiably be held responsible, or at least not fully responsible, for some of their immoral or evil conduct.” (Jones 1999, p. 99) Jones defines political culture as “certain values, attitudes, knowledge, and beliefs shared by members of a political community,” and it “provides the specific attitudes and orientations that members of the community have toward the political system, its processes, and their role in it.” (Ibid., p. 104). Jones is drawing from Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes in Five Nations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963, pp. 13–15), and he construes “bad political culture” as lacking such characteristics as respect for the rule of law; support for cornerstones of constitutional democracy like “equality of citizenship, an independent judiciary, protection of civil liberties, and electoral accountability of the government”; participation by citizens; “solidarity, trust, and tolerance”; and political parties committed to the common good (Ibid., p. 104). Buddhist analysis of the political culture in Japan before, during, and after the war could constitute another valuable step in the formulation of a rigorous Buddhist social ethic.

⁵⁷ The aforementioned tendency to accept and valorize actuality.

⁵⁸ Ichikawa 1993b, p. 9.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

‘eternal peace in East Asia’ through a ‘holy war’ (*seisen* 聖戦) waged by the nation as the descendents of the Sun Goddess and grounded in the ‘sacred spirit of the imperial ancestors’ (*kōso-kōsō no shinrei* 皇祖皇宗の神霊).⁶⁰ For this reason, Ichikawa claims, “we must not grasp the experience of the war merely as such; rather, we must grasp and reflect on it thoroughly as the ‘experience of holy war,’ which is a combination of the experience of war and the experience of the imperial system. If either criticism of the imperial system or self-criticism of our internalized imperial ethos is lacking, our efforts will not be exhaustive.”⁶¹ In other words, Japanese Buddhists must not treat the war simply Buddhistically as a matter of violence (Skt. *himsā*) or the product of psychological entanglements (Skt. *kleśas*) and karma, but recognize that the war was waged (and applauded by Buddhists) in conjunction with the Japanese imperial system, whose dominance in early-Shōwa Japan led Buddhist leaders and others to portray Japanese imperialist aggression as a “holy war.” Not to take into account this historical specificity is for Buddhist thinkers to run the risk of obfuscating if not evading personal and institutional accountability by addressing the war in universal, abstract Buddhist terms—as something apart from themselves and their sects—and taking the ostensibly moral high ground of a quick-and-easy “pacifist” stance in postwar Japan.

Central to the endeavor to grasp the war in all of its historical particularity is the crucial need for clear recognition of the past—in a sense, the fostering of authentic memory—as the basis for accepting accountability and avoiding the repetition of past mistakes. At this point in Japanese postwar history, Buddhist thinkers can join other Japanese in grappling with the highly contested memory of Japanese imperialism and the attempts by some voices to establish an official, sanitized memory of the war.⁶²

As a further means of grappling with the experience of the “holy war” and establishing a new Buddhist social ethic, Ichikawa urges his fellow Japanese Buddhists to examine not only the war but also at the range of issues

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid., pp. 9–10.

⁶² Here and there in his writings Ichikawa advocates expanding the doctrine of wisdom (Skt. *prajñā*) to include historical discernment. Though he does not elaborate on what exactly this would entail, one might consider the ways in which the Buddhist insight into the psychodynamics of the clinging and defensiveness of the individual ego could be expanded into a discernment of the clinging and defensiveness of collective egos, whether the Japanese during the war or other societies.

surrounding the postwar imperial system, the military-industrial complexes of dominant countries, and the roles U.S. bases in Japan have played in the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the containment of China, and, by extension, “the causing of unhappiness across Asia.”⁶³

Here a devil’s advocate might chime in that even though Buddhist sects may not have readily issued public declarations of war responsibility, they have learned from their past mistakes, so much so that they are no longer doomed to repeat them (even if Sugiwarara and others showed little evidence of this right after the war), and they are now firmly committed to peace. But if that degree of change has indeed been wrought in Buddhist priests and institutions, one might have expected them to have spoken out more about postwar issues related to the “holy war” and the wartime imperial system, whether U.S. bases as Ichikawa urged them to do, or Yasukuni Shrine, textbooks that obfuscate Japanese aggression, rightist attacks on those who have raised the issue of the Emperor Hirohito’s war responsibility,⁶⁴ or such threats to the democratic bulwark against a resurgence of belligerent imperialism as the lack of a rigorously independent judiciary and the social and political positioning—close to those in power—of ultra-nationalist groups in Japan. Ichikawa argues that if Zen indeed did have a viable postwar ethic, it would not ignore these domestic problems.⁶⁵ The task for Zen, then, is to answer the question, “How can Zen close the gap between its religious character of ‘eternal revolution’ and traditional [Japanese] Buddhist ethics characterized by conservatism and a reactionary character in which customs and authority hold sway?”⁶⁶ To Ichikawa’s way of thinking, “Zen ethics begins in the freedom to criticize the imperial system,”⁶⁷ especially insofar as “killing the Buddha” is a core part of Zen. Without that criticism, no rigorous Zen social ethic can be established.⁶⁸ One might add here that a rigorous Zen ethic must move beyond mere criticism or the formulation of new

⁶³ Ichikawa 1993b, p. 13. Ichikawa refers to the U.S. bases as the karmic fruit of Japan’s having waged its “holy war.”

⁶⁴ Such as the attack on Nagasaki mayor Motoshima Hitoshi after his 1989 comments about then-dying Hirohito’s war responsibility.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

Buddhist theories of ethics and proceed to praxis, to active, public responses to problems.⁶⁹

The moral accounting of what Zen Buddhists said and did during the war can perhaps best be done internally, that is, in terms of Buddhist values, not with an external touchstone like Western liberal values. The key question is not what Buddhist actions during the war were “anti-democratic,” “co-opted,” or “fascist”—adjectives implying extra-Buddhist criteria—but what actions stood in tension with core Buddhist values like non-harming (Skt. *ahiṃsā*),⁷⁰ wisdom, and compassion.⁷¹ Needless to say, for a tradition steeped in Confucianism, the doctrine of debt (*on* 恩), and historical symbiosis between the Buddha’s law (*buppō* 仏法, or the Dharma) and the ruler’s law (*ōbō* 王法, or the laws of the land), the prolegomenon here might be the question of *which* Zen Buddhist values to use as one’s touchstone. This question points to what may be a more crucial issue—more even than war responsibility—for possible Zen ethicists in Japan: while Zen has been colored by Confucianism for centuries as one of its constitutive elements, to what extent do Confucian values stand in tension with overall Mahayana Buddhist ethics? For centuries Confucian thinkers have addressed this incommensurability—often in polemical tracts—but little has transpired on the Zen side.

There is, however, an arguably more important question: how have Zen’s Confucian leanings, central focus on meeting the ritual needs of parishioners (many of whom do not expect or want their priests to be activists), symbiotic relationship with those in power, and, by extension, overall historical support of the social, political, and economic status quo, made Zen a highly embedded religion in Japan, positioned well historically to maintain institutional security and provide useful service to Japanese society, yet unable and unwilling to take critical (prophetic) stances toward political leaders, the state, or government policies? Indeed, as a thoroughly embedded *Japanese* religion, Zen generally failed before and during the war to tap the *universal* resources in the Mahayana tradition of which it is part.⁷² One way Zen might

⁶⁹ Such a consideration of both responsibility and responding could benefit from H. Richard Niebuhr’s notion of “the responsible self” as a responsive being, whose actions are “responses, answers, to actions upon us.” (Niebuhr 1963, p. 56).

⁷⁰ In a sense, the Buddhist version of what David Jones highlights as a core ethical construct, the “prima facie duty not to harm others” (Jones 1999, pp. 6–7).

⁷¹ Obviously, the Japanese in the early-Shōwa period were not the only Buddhists in history to have fallen short of Buddhist ideals.

⁷² Historically, while in its monasteries Zen may have continually spoken truth to

prepare for future ethical challenges is to assess the moral and political costs of its historical embeddedness and consider ways to cultivate a type of “response ability” that is informed by the more universal if not transcendent elements of Buddhism.

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ignorance, in Japanese society it has rarely spoken truth to power. And though Zen ethicists may not choose to go the route of liberation theologian Gustavo Gutierrez’s “option for the poor,” if he were alive today Ichikawa would probably urge them to at least criticize what one might term Zen’s traditional “option for the elite” and “option for the status quo.”