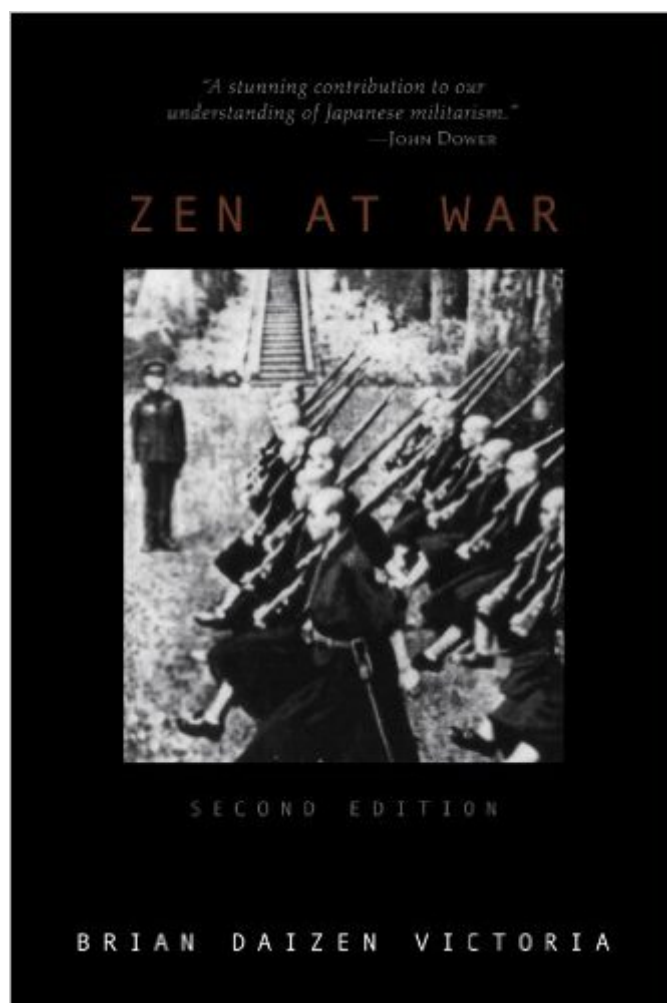


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Zen At War (2nd Edition)



Synopsis

A compelling history of the contradictory, often militaristic, role of Zen Buddhism, this book meticulously documents the close and previously unknown support of a supposedly peaceful religion for Japanese militarism throughout World War II. Drawing on the writings and speeches of leading Zen masters and scholars, Brian Victoria shows that Zen served as a powerful foundation for the fanatical and suicidal spirit displayed by the imperial Japanese military. At the same time, the author recounts the dramatic and tragic stories of the handful of Buddhist organizations and individuals that dared to oppose Japan's march to war. He follows this history up through recent apologies by several Zen sects for their support of the war and the way support for militarism was transformed into 'corporate Zen' in postwar Japan. The second edition includes a substantive new chapter on the roots of Zen militarism and an epilogue that explores the potentially volatile mix of religion and war. With the increasing interest in Buddhism in the West, this book is as timely as it is certain to be controversial.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I was born a decade after the Japanese surrender to the Allies. About ten years ago, when I was deep in the romantic period that every beginning Zen student goes through, I excitedly told my 96-year-old grandmother about my new-found religion. As I was gushing about the Japanese words and customs I was learning, Grandma interrupted, "If I saw a Jap, I'd shoot him!" I quickly changed the subject. I could not understand how my grandmother could be so poorly informed about the

Japanese. "Japan is a Buddhist country," I assured myself. "Its culture has been heavily influenced by Zen itself. How could Grandma have acquired such bitterness about a people with whom she had had no real contact?" In 1995, I became transfixed by the 50th anniversary of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. "How could we possibly have incinerated 200,000 innocent Japanese civilians?" I asked myself. "What could my parents' generation have been thinking?" A few months ago, I saw an advertisement in Tricycle magazine for the forthcoming publication of "Zen at War." On the cover of the book was an old photograph showing rows of black-robed Zen priests, marching in formation in front of their temple, rifles at their shoulders. As it turned out, the book would not be published for several months. Somehow, however, simply seeing the cover of "Zen at War" served as a warning that it was time for me to face the truth about my Japanese cultural/religious heritage. I read "The Rape of Nanking," Ienaga's "The Pacific War," "Unit 731," and several other books about the conduct of the Japanese military and government during the 1930's and 40's. The effect was shattering. Although I still did not share it, I now understood my Grandmother's visceral response to the mere mention of the Japanese. "Zen at War" is the saddest news of all. No Zen student can help but be devastated by learning that our childhood heroes -- Shaku Soen, D.T. Suzuki, Sawaki Kodo, Harada Daiun Sogaku, Yasutani Hakuun, Omori Sogen, Yamada Mumon, and many others -- were enthusiastic supporters of Japanese imperialism. Far from calling for peace, far even from serving as a moderating influence, Japanese Buddhist leaders vocally endorsed the killing of Chinese, Korean, American, or any other people who lacked the supposedly superior understanding of the Japanese people. The pseudo-dharma jibberish that these "enlightened masters" put in print to condone murder and cultural exploitation is agonizing to read. What the hell went wrong? The author, Daizen Victoria, does not take us very far in understanding this tragedy. In that respect, the book seems achingly incomplete. Although Victoria does not claim to be in a position to provide the answers, leaving that work to future scholars, one wonders whether it might have been better for him to have waited until he could provide more perspective on what he has discovered. For what he has unearthed, on its face at least, seems to render almost everything we thought about our Japanese ancestors a bitter lie. If my revered Dharma ancestor, Harada Roshi, really meant what he wrote, he would not have hesitated to shoot my father dead. Who were these men, really? What was in their heart of hearts? Was their enlightenment worth anything, if they could become advocates for genocide? If they dissembled in order to preserve the Buddhist establishment, what kind of choice was that? Curse you, Daizen Victoria, for destroying my innocence. Nine bows to you, Daizen Victoria, for having the courage to open first your own eyes, and then mine.

Every Zen student, scholar, and especially every Zen teacher should read this sobering, stimulating, excellent book. "Do not put any heads above your own." "A disciple of the Buddha does not kill," two Buddhist fundamentals, violated deeply by well-known, well-respected teachers in the Zen school in pre-1945 Japan. This book is an incentive to the reader to re-examine one's own life and daily actions and decisions. The incredible ability of the human mind to rationalize away behavior that is immoral, and to intellectually contort Buddhist teachings in the same service, is vividly brought forth in this book. I want to keep this book always visible on my desk or altar as a reminder to never forget about living with integrity, true courageous integrity.

The problem with this fascinating book isn't that it had any quarrel with Zen, but that it tries to point, from the spirit of Zen, at one application of that very Zen spirit that, in today's common understanding, is false and evil. The topic are the more or less hidden underpinnings between (not only Zen) Buddhism and Japanese militarism, but, too, the resistance against that unholy alliance. The author is a professor at Auckland University, and for 30 years an engaged priest of the Soto school of Zen. So his interest surely is more than just casual and distant, and one cannot shrug it off as some 'clearing up the dark sides of Zen' business. It is essential that not only the historical facts are listed, but that one may have a look at their causal nexus - so it's possible to perceive how a number of rather prominent representatives of the Zen sect with subjectively good conscience came not only to defend, but to call things good and just which aren't compatible with the tenets of Buddhism, or those of any general humanity for that. And that they aren't viewed as bloodthirsty monsters, but as people also stricken with a (only??) Japan-immanent mechanism. When reading, again and again the atmosphere reminded me of the first book I ever read about Japan, and on the deep mutual understanding between Germans and Japanese - from Nazi times. There's one figure very central in the book - the 'Zen-missionary' so eminent in the West, D. T. Suzuki, and his changes of viewpoint, depending on time and audience - whether before, during, or after the war, and speaking to Japanese or to Americans - his stock of upaya seems to have been inexhaustible. And it seems he couldn't imagine a western oriented mind might be annoyed there and take that as insincerity - as also it didn't burden him that he not only contradicted others, but himself as well. But that's an attitude one meets rather often with masters (or would-be's) nowadays - "Why should I bother with that nonsense I've told you ! the other day!". On the other hand, a lot of his insights and oversights would be most interesting and, maybe, guiding. Especially I remember his saying "With satori alone, it is impossible [for Zen priests] to shoulder their responsibilities as leaders of society. Not only is it impossible, but it is conceited of them to imagine they could do so." (Zenkai Sasshin)

There's a second question of course - do Zen priests really want to take the responsibility of being leaders of society, and if so, with what kind of a title? The - quantitatively minor - resistance against the pocketing of Buddhism and, especially, Zen through 'Imperial Way Buddhism' is appreciated justly - that both sides are quoted in rather harsh tones, only contributes to the realism of description. Most interesting are the passages of those who first were active as hangers-on and flag-wavers, and later learned to critically reconsider and relativize their attitudes of wartime. The last part of the book deals with the working-up (or rather, not-working-up) of the facts inside and outside Japan after the end of WWII. These descriptions made me prick up my ears, and partly bewildered me. The league of invincibles isn't unknown in Germany, too, but mostly they aren't found among the intellectual and spiritual elite... When 35 years after the war a high-ranking Zen master openly emphasizes that 'Japan destroyed itself in order to grandly give the countries of Asia their independence. I think this is truly an accomplishment worthy the name 'holy war'... I think the various peoples of Asia who achieved their independence will ceaselessly praise their accomplishments for all eternity' (Mumon Yamada), then it might be Suzuki's opinion isn't completely mistaken, that enlightenment attained is not necessarily sufficient to make unerringly correct statements in any given situation. There maybe the expectations of western Zen students play a role, as described in Stuart Lachs' essay 'Coming down from the Zen ! Clouds': "Unlike psychologically-based movements for personal transformation, whose leaders appeared as seekers themselves, Zen Buddhism promised, in the person of the teacher, a master who had actually realized the Buddhist goal of Enlightenment and manifested its qualities continuously in his daily life. American Zen students have tended to hold these teachers in awe, to the point of regarding their every action as pure and selfless. This tendency to idealize the teacher comes in part from the students' inexperience, but is strongly encouraged by the Zen organization and the teacher himself". The last chapter picks up the thread and ties it to the 'Corporate Zen' of present, which isn't explicitly militaristic but is an offspring of the same spirit - 'Zen is obedience unreflected - reflecting neither the contents of instructions nor the person giving it.' Or, as a contemporary Japanese master says, "Sincerity [in carrying out orders] means having feelings and actions of absolute service, giving one's all [to the task at hand]. In doing this there can be no personal loss or gain... By carrying out our assigned tasks, we become part of the life of the entire universe; we realize our original True Self... This is the most noble thing human beings can do." (Sakai Tokugen) Brian Victoria it seems has valued his book quite realistically - not as a compendium of answers, but a collection of unsolved - or possibly unsolvable - questions; and not as a conclusion, but an initiative to some examination of the corruptability of spiritual ways.

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