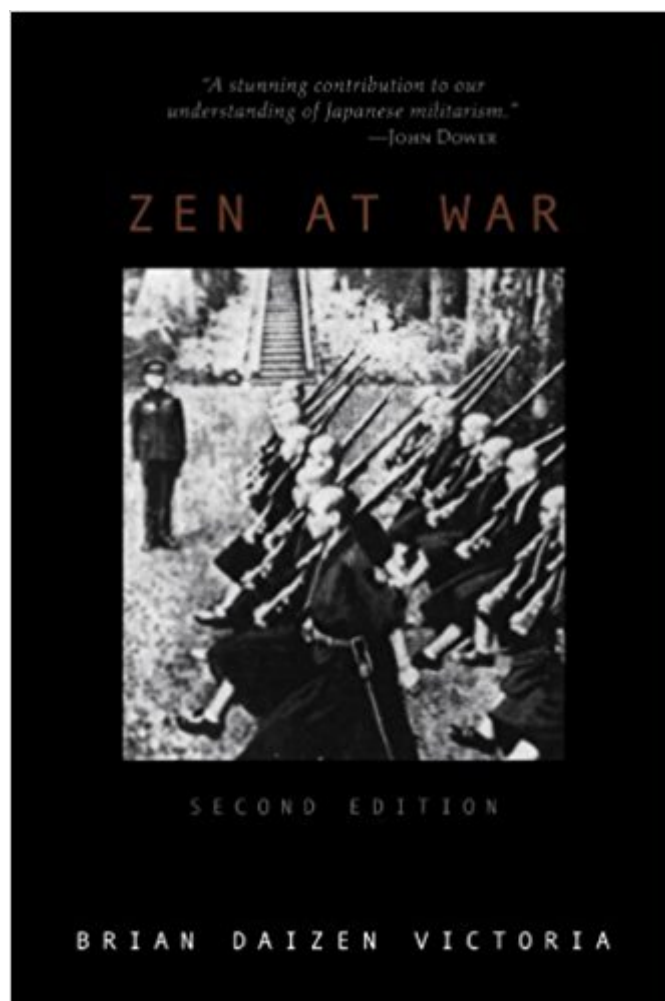


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# Zen At War (2nd Edition)



## 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

Praise for the first edition: Zen at War is a wake-up call for all Buddhists. Victoria has shown in a passionate and well documented way that Buddhism is not immune to the kind of distortions that have been used throughout human history by virtually all of the world's religions to justify so-called holy war.... (John Daido Looi, Roshi, Abbot of Zen Mountain Monastery; author of The Heart of Being: Moral and Ethical Teachings of Zen Buddhism) Praise for the first edition: In this carefully

documented study, Brian Victoria discloses the incredible intellectual dishonesty of Japanese Buddhists who perverted their religion into a jingoistic doctrine of support for the emperor and imperial expansion during the period 1868-1945. Good job! We must face this dark side of our heritage squarely.... (Robert Aitken, retired Roshi, Honolulu Diamond Sangha)

Zen at War is an incendiary book and an essential cautionary tale for anyone wanting to apply Buddhist teachings. Brian Victoria is a genuinely radical historian who asks followers of Zen "and by extension all Buddhists" to look beyond the pristine, other-worldly image the tradition has presented and understand the deep compromises that came from its relationship with power. Much more than an exposé, Zen at War challenges Buddhists to think through the ethical consequences of venerated doctrines and examine them in light of the Buddha's original teaching. Despite the efforts of some Zen apologists to minimize the significance of Brian Victoria's findings, the first edition lit a fire under Zen and the new edition adds fuel by extending the book's critique back into Buddhist history. It is an important contribution to western Buddhism. (Vishvapani, editor of Dharma Life magazine)

An important and well-written work . . . This new edition significantly expands the text . . . Especially important is Victoria's well-documented contention that Buddhist involvement with buttressing political establishments is not new but can be traced to the time of King Ashoka in ancient India. . . Finally the author calls all Buddhists to thoughtful consideration and repudiation of "Nation-Protecting Buddhism" as a betrayal of the essential teachings . . . Recommended. (CHOICE)

Victoria's extensive research- along with translations of lengthy quotations- substantially adds to our knowledge of the relationship between Buddhism and Japanese nationalism and imperialism....the content is often very interesting... (Journal of Asian Studies)

Praise for the first edition: Zen at War is a stunning contribution to our understanding of Japanese militarism and the broader issue of war responsibility as it continues to be addressed (and ignored) in contemporary Japan. Victoria's great sensitivity to the perversion and betrayal of Buddhism's teachings about compassion and nonviolence makes his indictment of the role played by Imperial War Buddhists in promoting ultranationalism and aggression all the more strikingâ•and all the more saddening. (John Dower, Massachusetts Institute of Technology; author of War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War)

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Zen At War is an amazing book. This book shows very clearly what you get when you let someone else run your spiritual life: You get Jonestown. I don't like what the Japanese Buddhists did during the war. I don't like what the Christians did either. Both religions have precepts/commandments that include : Do not kill! If you are prepared to kill if "necessary" then it's hypocritical to condemn the Japanese Buddhists for being willing to do so too. Personally, I am not prepared to kill another human being, although I waver sometimes when I think "would I kill someone to save my wife's/children's life?" What I don't like, is the way it is almost impossible to discuss this subject in the Zendo, and I've tried.

The shock value is not so great, as I've been aware of the basic contents for sometime. Japan is an island and the Japanese are an insular people. The emphasis in their culture is group conformity. Zen is not the transformer of personality as it was once marketed, and it should not surprise us to learn that Zen leaders in Japan followed the lead of the Japanese government and Army into

widespread war.

I think most of us have an image of Zen Buddhism as gentle, kind, non-violent. And maybe it is in its teachings. But this study shows that followers of Zen Buddhism in Japan prior to WWII were as subject to the human condition as the rest of us. Big surprise. The war mongering and violence these people perpetrated is no better or worse than what the rest of us who profess to follow a religious path come to. Think of "Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition." We do what we would not do. I think it is typical, too, that when we read about the philosophies or religions of another culture, we tend to see the best and forget to put it in a human context. All over the world, there are wonderful Christians, wonderful Muslims, wonderful Jews, wonderful Zen Buddhists, wonderful Tibetan Buddhists, wonderful Hindus, etc, etc. But it is also just as equally true that you can find serial murderers in each group, mean spirited people, violent people, hateful people, and bigoted people. It is just the way reality cuts through the heart of things. So, I truly enjoyed this book. What I especially liked was the painstaking research that still produced a very readable work. And it is always enlightening to see the way spiritual words can be twisted to serve this world. I highly recommend this book.

Well written, cruelly honest and it shattered my notion of Buddhist behavior. I am sad that the facts happened and thankful to have read about them. As a Buddhist, it was a reminder that we must be ever looking at our own practice. Do read this book.

A good survey of the Buddhist establishment in Japan and how it dealt with militarism - largely by accommodating it. The author, a Buddhist, takes a critical stance towards Japanese militarism.

This book gives an excellent perspective on the role of Zen in modern Japanese political philosophy. It has always played a critical role in Japanese military theory and the martial arts. In modern times it became an integral part of the political theories that set Japan on a course for military expansion in Asia. The book is well-researched and documents how top Zen leaders actively supported Japan's dreams of empire.

Many readers interested in zen have heard of, or have read about, Brian Victoria. This is the guy who had the courage, audacity, and honesty to pull back the cover on Japanese zen's dark side, much to the chagrin of not only mainline Japanese zen organizations, but also to the chagrin of

Western zen students, many if not most who naively worshipped famous Japanese zen teachers as "enlightened" masters. In general, Victoria's expose', in his articles and two books ("Zen at War" and "Zen War Stories"), thoroughly ripped open a painful underbelly of Japanese far-right political/military brainwashing and brutality, especially- but not only- during the 2nd World War. As someone involved in Japanese culture myself for many years and pretty familiar with the Japanese psyche (for a gaijin, anyway), I've always wanted to comment on Mr. Victoria's heroic efforts at some point, so now I do so. Victoria's books are an object-lesson to anyone interested in buddhism. Not just folks interested in zen, but all schools of buddhism. Object-lesson for what, you ask...? For one thing, they are certainly a wake-up-call to quit being so naive about one's chosen authority figures. Yes, even famous ones who are supposedly "enlightened"...as Victoria reveals time and time again, Japan's most famous zen masters (and other thinkers) supported the war effort and perverted the buddhist message of compassion into a brutal militaristic form of brainwashing, twisting the traditional doctrine of "no-self" (mushin) into a exhortation to kill without reflective thinking or remorse. Certainly many Asian countries involved in the War (China, Korea, Philippines, etc.) can testify the brainwashing was highly effective on Japanese soldiers, and Japan has yet to fully acknowledge it's guilt in all the resulting brutality. Indeed, national apologies are painful to admit. Japan has come some way in acknowledging some of this inhumanity, but as Victoria reveals, and as other countries are well-aware, the efforts have come decades too late and the apologies have been feeble...Why did all this support for militaristic brutality occur, and what happened to turn highly-regarded religious figures into war-mongers? The answer lies in the peculiar culture of Japan itself. In essence, the cult of the sword goes back to the very origins of the nation. I see several traditional influences at work here, although Mr. Victoria doesn't go into heavy sociological analysis of Japan's warrior past. One factor is, in indigenous Shinto, the early animistic religion of the island, the sword was regarded as a sacred symbol. One can easily see how easily an early belief in the divinity of the sword could play into Japan's militaristic history...and in fact did. As for Japan's long "warrior" tradition, readers need no reminding how huge the samurai image has been throughout Japan's history...it pretty much defines Japanese culture even up to today. Heck, comic books today are full of legends of swordsmen heroes that continue to inspire Japanese youth...Another factor in shaping the W.W. II Japanese mentality was a revival of Emperor worship, which the author shows was linked with many right-wing ideologies. Japan's right wing had long been distrustful of the Meiji Period's collaboration with the West, and with what they saw as a weakening concession to Western powers. To right-wingers, Japan's entrance into the modern Western technological age heralded a loss of the nation's "spiritual" essence. As a result, these

right-wing groups reacted against Westernization by insisting that the Emperor's (symbolic) ruling powers actually be restored ("tenno-syugi"). In short, a "cult of the Emperor" was seen as an antidote to foreign influences. This should NOT be seen, however, as any particular affection or devotion for the emperor; many right-wingers actually despised the empty shell the emperor role had become. While old Shinto ideas on the "divinity" of the emperor were promoted, these images were deliberately used by ultra-nationalist thinkers to foster national unity and a sense of cultural identity. Religion, after all, is a great tool for "group-think"- send the people to the shrines, and make them all think the same way...Add to all these influences a widespread racial superiority complex, still held today by some right-wing Japanese in important positions in government and industry, and you have a recipe for potential problems. Well, in W.W.II, all these factors merged together and produced an ugly mentality- a huge nationalistic pride, a conviction Japan was destined for greatness, and a perception that other Asians (not to mention gaijin, i.e., foreigners) were inferior and could be conquered by the "Japanese spirit". Alas, Japanese leaders made fatal errors in judging the ability of Western nations to win the war, despite the West's obvious advantage in technological and industrial might. The defeat of Japan was a crushing national psychological blow to this myth of Japanese spiritual superiority, needless to say. But enough about W.W. II, veterans and history buffs need no reminding about the infamous Japanese military psyche. For our purposes here, what is instructive is how supposedly "enlightened" buddhist teachers in Japan were sucked into the nationalistic spiel and themselves encouraged and contributed to military brainwashing of soldiers, resulting in a brutal inhuman treatment of other nations. It is not only a dark period of Japanese religious history, the situation speaks in general of the failure of so-called "enlightenment" experiences ("satori" or "kensho") to transform a buddhist authority figure into the bodhisattva ideal they are supposed to become...in fact, tellingly, it made no difference. Ah, well, somebody might say, that all happened in the past- of what relevance is that today? The answer is not completely comforting because, unfortunately, the same elements are still in place in Japan, lurking somewhat below the surface in the right-wing ideologies held by powerful factions in business and industry. And unfortunately, the buddhism in Japan is always susceptible to these influences. (Interested readers of Victoria's books will also find instructive an expansion of the theme of zen and Japanese nationalism in articles by buddhist scholar Robert Sharf). In saying this, one should not associate these militaristic right-wing feelings with the typical Japanese citizen, who might well be horrified at these inhuman events if they thought about it much, but of course young (and old) Japanese are reluctant to revisit a painful past. So why should buddhists in general be humbled by all these war revelations? Apart from demonstrating that claims of "enlightenment" are

no guarantee that famous teachers have transformed lives, another observation is that we see a great deal of gullibility on the part of zen students everywhere. This, in a religion supposedly teaching students how to see things clearly... Those who are familiar with numerous scandals in the United States, for instance, concerning certain teachers (American and Asian) in both the Tibetan and Zen traditions, not to mention scandals of corruption in Japan, etc., should realize buddhism hardly fares better than other religions in tales of human frailty. It is human nature to attach to one's teacher and be uncritical when the latter's behavior gets questionable, but since we now have documented proof "enlightened" masters are no better than others, one begins to wonder when buddhist devotees, particularly Western students, will learn from past mistakes about putting esteemed teachers (Asian or otherwise) on a pedestal. It was truly a shock that these Japanese heroes held in such high esteem turned out to be such brutal human beings... The entire master/student relationship as defined in traditional Asian culture, with all of the problems this cultural expectation entails when brought into Western culture, needs to be discussed regarding these naive tendencies of students. It is a fascinating topic in itself, but we don't have space here. Wait just a minute, Christians and other religions, you're not off the hook either...there is always a tendency to venerate one's authority figure and be (sometimes willingly) blind toward the latter's faults and failings or abuses, but this gullibility needs to be addressed. There certainly seems to be something in the typical religious mentality that venerates authority figures beyond what common sense should allow, an observation that skeptics of religion see very clearly. Alas, the true believers tend not to see the problems here...just witness the blind eye believers have toward the material excesses of your typical TV evangelical preachers. Not a desirable situation by any means. Gullibility on the part of believers; deception and greed on the part of leaders. Of course this picture does not describe everybody, but if it weren't a continuing pattern, nobody would need to bring it up. To sum up, Mr. Victoria deserves all the acclaim and praise his books have generated; his work in uncovering the realities of the situation in Japan is a monumental effort and one many would not liked to have tackled. I'm sure he didn't like it. But honesty and integrity are obviously very important to him. What else can I say? I'm grateful. We all should be.

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