



“ZEN AT WAR” BRIAN VICTORIA: THROWING BOMBS AT KODO

by Jundo Cohen

I – INTRODUCTION: TWO WRONGS DO NOT MAKE A RIGHT

Let me say up front: In the heat of wartime, **Kodo Sawaki frequently expressed views in support of his country, combining Buddhist and Zen Doctrines, soldiering, mercy and military duty, Kannon and the Emperor** in ways that may be criticized and shocking to people today.

Brian Victoria is right.

Yet if a scholar sets out on a worthwhile crusade, but engages in questionable methods all along the way, the worth of the crusade is tarnished. If he sets out to report facts which have some truth, but hides others, mixing in tales that are exaggerated, untrue, taken out of context or interpreted in some extreme way, then it becomes impossible to tell fact from fiction. If he criticizes someone for bad behavior, but does so in a black-and-white manner which fails to recognize subtlety and that life is not always neat, then the criticism becomes mixed with tarring. There is more to the story of what Sawaki said. **The picture of Kodo Sawaki, and the views he expressed, are much more subtle than Victoria lets on and wants to let us see.**

Brian Victoria is wrong.

“Zen At War” author Brian Victoria took on the worthwhile task of uncovering a dark period in Buddhist history, shining a light on ugly interpretations of Buddhist doctrine which encourage violence and war. In doing so, he has performed a true service. However, along the way Brian has cherry-picked data, exaggerated, imposed extreme interpretations, kept information from his readers and taken quotes so far out of context that their meanings are sometimes quite opposite. In doing so, Victoria deserves our attention and criticism as well. Further, he has blurred the lines between rabid militarism/aggressive nationalism and a citizen’s loyalty and support of his country and its soldiers in time of war.

Showing his “no grey area” pacifism, **Victoria recently stated, “Buddhism is a faith of absolute non-violence that admits no ‘just wars’ even in defense of one’s own country”** ([LINK](#)). From that standpoint, Victoria has criticized some people who truly deserve reproach and scorn for their views and acts. In doing this, he has done us all a great good. Yet, also from that standpoint, **Brian has painted with a broad brush, and tarred the reputations of other individuals who are open to criticism, but not deserving of the harsh image painted by Brian far worse and one-dimensional than the real story.** (Perhaps the clearest example is Victoria’s treatment of D.T. Suzuki as a “Nazi collaborator” in a recent series of essays, a subject I will take up another time. I include Sawaki as well.) Victoria has failed to recognize that people, including Buddhist priests, can be torn by complex feelings and incongruities about the realities of war and violence in our imperfect *Samsaric* world that simply do not fit neatly into Victoria’s “either-for-or-against” categorization. A Buddhist Priest can love and hope for peace, decry war, yet also love his country and see a particular war as a matter of national survival. Not everyone is a militarist and jingoist who sincerely salutes the flag, obeys and honors the country’s leader, and encourages soldiers in their service at a time of national crisis, recognizing their honorable and selfless sacrifice if compelled to serve. Kodo Sawaki’s words came from such a feeling.

In any event, nothing excuses mishandling and twisting data. Two wrongs do not make a right. **Yes, we might criticize Sawaki. But we should also criticize Brian Victoria for his methods of manipulation in telling the tale.**

In a previous article entitled **“Zen At War” AUTHOR BRIAN VICTORIA’S WAR ON ZEN** ([LINK](#)), I directed readers to strong criticisms of Victoria’s methods by scholars and writers, with particular focus on his cavalier treatment of facts regarding D.T. Suzuki and Soka Gakkai founder Tsunesaburo Makiguchi . Today we turn to Victoria’s assault on the late **“Homeless” Kodo Sawaki**, and find all the same questions regarding Victoria’s methods of scholarship coming to play.

The situation with Sawaki is complicated. On the one hand, there is no doubt that Sawaki was a patriotic Japanese who supported his country, its Emperor and its troops in battle during wartime and in no uncertain terms. He interpreted various Buddhist and Zen doctrines in order to do so in a way many of us (I am one) may find often wrong and shocking. **On the other hand, we have a man who – even during the height of World War II – spoke out against war itself, its futility, and underlined the need for soldiers compelled into battle to act with compassion, honor, selflessness and mercy to their opponents as the situation will allow.** Right or wrong, what was seen to the victors as a war of aggression, was felt by many Japanese of the time to be a war of national survival. Although some (many, in fact) Japanese were enthusiastic jingoists encouraging war for the glory of the Japanese empire, most Japanese, with access to limited outside information, thought of the war as a fight for their country's defense, if not an unavoidable evil (a subject I shall return to later). Thus, was the situation for Sawaki truly that much different from the dilemma of a Buddhist Priest today who, in the days following 9-11 or witnessing the atrocities of the slaughter of children and other civilians by the group "ISIS", might sadly and regretfully support military action to preserve life and peace in the long term, honor and respect her President or Prime Minister in doing so, thank the troops returning home for their hard service and selfless acts, honor the sacrifice of the war dead and wounded troops, speak with pride of the character of her nation, and gratefully rise for the playing of the National Anthem, all while simultaneously protesting other wars and opposing violence in general? Amid the tightly censored press of Japan in those years, how could Sawaki know of a "Nanjing Massacre" or "Bataan"? Is it only with 20-20 hindsight, and only by imposing on the people of the past the political and social values and ideals of a 21st century progressive, in his armchair far removed from any war zone or those terrible times, that we might come to ask how ordinary Japanese of the day ... even Buddhist Japanese ... could think in such terms?

Unfortunately, in his attempt to paint Kodo Sawaki black, Brian Victoria has confused loyalty to one's country with rabid militarism, and has failed to sufficiently emphasize the anti-war aspects of Sawaki's personality. Victoria has done this by neglecting or taking out of context quotes (to such a degree that one must sometimes consider the intentionality behind his doing so) which otherwise show that Sawaki had deep reservations about all war, including Japan's wars throughout history. Victoria has surgically removed quotes so as to omit material showing that, even in writings most supportive of his country and its troops in times of war, Sawaki was frequently and simultaneously a strong and outspoken critic. It is a shame that Victoria took such an approach, because there are many statements and actions by Sawaki which are open to criticism. Sawaki did frequently refer to Buddhist and Zen doctrines to express how soldiers could selflessly fight as a form of Zazen, in harmony with the universe and with no fear for their own death if dying in service. We can criticize Sawaki for expressing such views, especially from here in the safety of our relatively

comfortable lives in stable countries, far away from any battlefield and those times. **However, Sawaki also used Buddhist or Zen doctrines to counsel for the avoidance of war and, if there is to be a war nonetheless, the avoidance of excess and reckless violence. If Sawaki was supportive of Japan's effort during the war, it seems reluctantly (if sometimes too passionately) and with a sense that Japan was fighting a war for its own survival and defense..**

In Victoria's worldview, however, there is just little room for that subtlety or for the citizen supporting his or her country in what was seen (domestically by most Japanese at least) as a war for its very life, because (says Brian) one is either a rabid militarist and fomenter of killing or thoroughly and purely against all wars including wars believed for the survival of the nation. **What is more, Victoria is willing to twist words and hide evidence of ambiguity to prove his thesis.**

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One of the clearest and most blatant examples of Victoria's cherry-picking and strategic misuse of statements concerns now infamous words by Sawaki that ***"It is the precept forbidding killing that wields the sword. It is this precept that throws the bomb."*** Originally appearing in Victoria's book "Zen At War", the passage has been repeated through the years in lectures and writings by Victoria, including as recently as June of this year (2014) in an article set entitled "Zen Masters on the Battlefield" ([LINK](#)). In that, Victoria turns to this and other quotes (which, we will see, also **find Victoria repeatedly imposing the worst possible readings, removing context and inserting quotes and descriptions of completely unrelated individuals**) in order to present Sawaki in the worst possible light, **hiding the real meaning of the above quote and the strong anti-war statements in the essay which present a more complex and mixed picture.**

Thus, for his own reasons, **Mr. Victoria has never alerted his readers that the very same "wields the sword" essay by Sawaki criticizes war as futile, calls Hitler a "devil from hell" and speaks of the reasons for war as an "empty" delusion. Mr. Victoria never mentions that, in the passages immediately prior to the cited quote, Sawaki criticizes killing as leading to misery for the killer, questions the justification for killing life, speaks of killing a living being as killing Buddha, and states that love of the enemy as oneself is necessary for soldiers compelled to defend a country and its people.** While it is a historical fact that Sawaki supported his emperor and his nations troops in time of war, absent from that essay are any words of this supposed "unquestioning" advocate of emperor and state about the glory of Japan, the justifications

for conquering foreign territory, racial or national superiority, the grandeur of war, power and might or the like. Instead, we find Sawaki cautioning soldiers to treat even their enemy with mercy, to not plunder, pillage or employ reckless violence, and to fight with lament and only in defense of social order and the people. **It is only then, expresses Sawaki, when defensive war is undertaken in protection of people and society, that one might say “the Precept on Not Killing wields the sword ... throws the bomb” for the poor soldier finding himself thrown into such a fight.**

Another essay that Victoria has more recently cited, and which we will examine (1944's "Shōji o Akirameru Kata"), contains strong passages in which Sawaki speaks of soldiers doing their duty by following the orders of their superiors and the Emperor, and does employ Zen and Mahayana doctrines to speak of the oneness and selflessness of such service in ways I would personally ardently criticize. However, at the same time, Victoria has framed and edited other passages in the essay in order to give the impression of Sawaki bragging about his bravado and killing during war when **in actual fact (despite Brian's omitting the sentences) one finds Sawaki comparing his own war experience to the bravado of a drunk who falls off a roof (while trying to take a piss) or someone who commits suicide over a lost woman! Far from being a comment on the beauty of a soldier's bravado, the passages must strike readers then and now as describing the questionable and negative face of bravado in wartime. (Further, although Brian says that Sawaki is bragging about killing, and never alludes to the wrongfulness of killing people, it is not so).**

Why did Mr. Victoria just leave all those sentences out as if his readers had no right or need to hear and appraise them regarding Sawaki's intent? Why does Victoria edit and omit in order to disguise from his readers the more complex picture? **The question I publicly ask of Mr. Victoria is simple:**

**WHY DID YOU FAIL TO MENTION THESE OTHER STATEMENTS
IN SAWAKI'S ESSAYS, BRIAN?**

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II – “THE PRECEPT WIELDS THE SWORD” – The Quote's Real Meaning

The subject essay by Kodo Sawaki with the “**wield the sword ... throws the bomb**” lines, entitled “*The Precept of Not Killing Life*” (不殺生戒), is actually a 7 page portion of a serialized set of essays running over 230 pages, all by Sawaki, covering in some detail each of the Bodhisattva Precepts entitled “*On the True Meaning of the Zen*

Precepts” (禪戒本義を語る). The “Not Killing” section appeared in the January 1942 issue of *Daihorin* “Great Dharma Wheel” (大法輪) magazine, pp. 106-112, and was later reprinted in Volume 10 of the “*Collected Writings of Kodo Sawaki*” (澤木興道全集) published by Daihorinkaku in 1962. (I include a link to both Japanese language originals, although the content is the same: [LINK LINK](#)). From this massive collection of writings on the Precepts, Victoria extracted but a few sentences while ignoring everything else.

All translations from Japanese to English are by me (Jundo Cohen) in consultation with native Japanese, and anyone able to read Japanese is free to confirm them.

So, what are some of the perspectives on the quote that Victoria, by omitting the content of the rest of the original essay, has denied his readers?

A – VICTORIA’S ONE-SIDED PRESENTATION OF THE “ABSOLUTE” REALM OF NON-KILLING

In his writings, Victoria focuses repeatedly on pre-war and wartime Zen writings emphasizing the “absolute” viewpoint of non-separation by which, ultimately, there are no separate beings to kill or be killed. By pointing to the “no one to kill” viewpoint, Victoria attempts to show that certain Zen Masters of the time had a callous disregard of killing and death. And, yes, Sawaki is no exception in speaking sometimes from an “absolute” perspective in his writings by which there is no separate individual to suffer or die, no separate individual to do harm, and no harm possible when we cut through separation. **However, as would any teacher of the Mahayana worth his or her salt, Sawaki instantly and repeatedly moves back and forth between an “ultimate” view and a view speaking of the harm and tragedy of killing.** Sawaki’s words in “*The Precept of Not Killing Life*” essay do just that, a fact which Victoria fails to mention. (I **boldface** where the latter words are especially clear, although there appear others). The essay begins with these paragraphs which do not fail to mention the loss and suffering from killing (Pg 156 in the *Collected Works*):

It is stated in [Master Dogen’s Busso Shōden Bosatsukai Kyōju Kaimon] “By not killing life, the seeds of the Buddha are nurtured, and one is enabled to succeed to the Buddha’s life of wisdom. Do not kill life.” It is written in the 386th Roll of the Dai-Hannya [Great Perfection of Wisdom] Sutra, “You should further observe and make this clear. **By what Dharma that you call life do you wish to cut down this life? Further, by reason of what Karmic relation (縁) will you cut down his life?** As well in this way, all self-nature is empty, now it is called a life, it can also be

called the wisdom-life of Buddha. The Diamond-Treasure Precept, the Precept Scroll of the Eternal Life of the Buddha, and the Brahma-Net [Sutra] all have preached that this body cannot be killed. If you understand that the outward manifestation thereof cannot be opened even if cutting with a golden sword, the seeds of the Buddha are nurtured, and the fact that all people succeed to the Buddha's wisdom-life must not be doubted. **You should know that to kill, then to eat, is to kill the Buddha, is the same as to eat the Buddha.**

The Sutra of Cause and Effect states, to become a human being and have a long life happens from having a merciful heart, while to become a human being but live a short life happens from killing life. The Godo-Kyo Sutra states, to become a human being but not suffer maladies happens from having a merciful heart. Ananda asked the Buddha, "What is it to be merciful?" The Buddha responded, "First is to be merciful to all life, just the same as a mother loves her child, and second is to lament for the world."

The essay expresses an absolute viewpoint in which there is no killing possible, a realistic viewpoint recognizing that soldiers may have to kill in wartime for a nation's defense, and a great sorrow and criticism of killing as leading to maladies and misery. An intermixing of these "relative" and "absolute" viewpoints on killing continues throughout the rest of the essay by Sawaki, as seen in the following section as well.

B – OMITTED PARAGRAPHS (and the Mystery of the Missing "Therefore")

Sawaki's essay then quickly turns to the series of paragraphs leading up to the "wields the sword ... throws the bomb" lines. I boldface now portions clearly emphasizing a soldier's ethics when finding himself (likely male in that age) thrown by circumstances into war. I also highlight a mysterious missing "**therefore**" (だから) which Victoria cut out of his translation although found plainly in the Japanese original, a "therefore" which marks that the statement is based on what is said before. Sawaki writes, again combining both the "absolute" and "relative" views:

Regarding this Precept on Not Killing Life [the Lotus Sutra states] "Now this triple world, all therein is my existence; And living beings in it all are my children", and if we go past this discrimination of self and other, the Precept on Not

Killing Life manifests in reality (現成する). If we go past the discrimination of self and other, what immediately appears right there is the Precept on Not Killing Life. Namely, the truth of the true aspect of all phenomena (諸法実相の道理) appears, the Precept on Not Killing Life actually manifests. Heaven and earth are of the same root, the ten-thousand things are of one substance. Outside of me there is no “him”, Outside of him, there is no “me,” and thus it becomes that there is nobody to kill. Therefore, in this Light of the Buddha Precepts, he is the Light of the Buddha Precepts, I am the Light of the Buddha Precepts, and between this Light of the Buddha Precepts and that Light of the Buddha Precepts, there is no killing each other.

Because there is the utter darkness (真つ暗), there is killing each other. The act of killing each other is to kill what cannot be killed. Therefore, “Every form, every fragrance, is none other than the Middle Way, mountains, rivers, grasses and trees will all become Buddhas”, and if we look at it again from such point, all things all become Buddha. All things without exception are the gate to the True Aspect of the Middle Way (中道実相). In this Dharma Gate of the True Aspect of the Middle Way, the name “taking life” is gone beyond. In the Nirvana Sutra this is called the “Eternal Life of the Buddha”. There is nothing but Buddha Nature. At the absolute center of this Eternal Buddha Nature, the name “taking life” is gone beyond.

This so-called unkillable nature is not something that can be completely fathomed unless one completely fathoms what is called in Buddhism “non-self”. **If you take as a prior premise what we call the “self”, we will come necessarily to hate some others whom we may come to feel we must kill. The reason for this is understood if we come to fathom what is called the “true aspect of all phenomena” in the Lotus Sutra whereby, if we are thinking that the person standing in front of us is himself Buddha, we cannot then come to kill this person.** For this reason, if you really come to fathom this, it is also called “liberation from life and death”.

Soujou (僧肇), the master of Raju (羅什) said, “The Four Great Elements are Originally Empty, the Five Skandhas originally do not appear. Bearing forth the neck, facing the naked sword. Furthermore, to cut the spring wind is the same”, and this is the theory of “All Things are Ultimately Empty in Prajna” (般若畢竟皆空). Therefore, what must be learned here is that this “Precept on Not Killing Life” is not something to bear. If a human being one time is liberated from life and death, for the

first time the world of “heaven and earth are of the same root, the ten-thousand things are of one substance” is reached. **And then, should such a person enter into battle, love of the enemy is the same as an ally, and personal gain and the benefit of others are in accord. There is simply no such thing as simply killing an enemy soldier just recklessly. Further, plundering, pillaging and the like will not happen.**

Doing battle in such way, one puts oneself to stand with that land. One does the most one can to protect the people who reside in that land. Further, in regard to tactics and force, if one is seeking to protect the people of that land, then one should certainly try to win that battle. Further, to treat captives with importance, speaking even from the view of military tactics, is advantageous. The final victory is derived therefrom.

To cast away one’s own life as if something of little value, and **to take pity for the lives of others as if the same as oneself, this is to have transcended the border between other people and oneself, and for the first time is the Precept on Not Killing Life.** **Therefore,** the Lotus Sutra states that "the Three Worlds [of desire, form, and formlessness] are my being and all sentient beings therein are my children." From this point of view, **everything, friend and foe included, are my children.** Superior officers are my being as are my subordinates, **Japan is my being, the world is my being, and in such a world of my being it is a just battle to subjugate those who disturb the public order. In such circumstances,** whether one kills, or does not kill, [there is] the precept on not killing life. It is this precept on not killing life that wields the sword. It is this precept on not killing life that throws the bomb. It is for this reason that you must seek to study and practice this precept on not killing life.

In his book “Zen At War” and his many subsequent citations, Victoria repeats the above quote only from the words “the Lotus Sutra states” of the last paragraph, omitting intentionally the word “**Therefore**” although clear as a bell in the Japanese original (だから ...). Omitting the “Therefore” found plainly in Japanese thus removes any connection to what is said before regarding, for example, **taking “pity for the lives of others as if the same as oneself”**. Further, the earlier paragraphs speaking of not coming to hate, that “if we are thinking that the person standing in front of us is himself Buddha, we cannot then

come to kill this person”, speaking of “love of the enemy same as an ally” should one come into battle, that there is “no such thing as simply killing an enemy soldier just recklessly” and “plundering, pillaging and the like will not happen” **are all left out by Victoria although directly coloring what immediately follows.**

One might further ask why Victoria made several subtle changes and omissions to even the portion he quoted, thereby painting Sawaki’s words in seemingly a worse light. Victoria, for example, abbreviated and restructured the line “*Japan is my being, the world is my being, and in such a world of my being it is a just battle to subjugate those who disturb the public order*” and the preceding reference to one’s superiors and subordinates, removing a reference to “and in such a world of my being”. Instead, Victoria writes, “*Superior officers are my existence as are their subordinates. The same can be said of both Japan and the world*”, making the non-existent connection of a “superior” Japan and an “inferior” world [LINK]. Instead, was Sawaki merely speaking of troops ordered to fight with little choice in the matter? Was he expressing concern for the world beyond merely Japan? Did he not emphasize mercy and love of even the enemy? Whatever Brian wanted to say, **did not Victoria’s readers have a right to see Sawaki’s words without deletion and judge for themselves?**

C – SAWAKI ON THE FUTILITY OF WAR (and Hitler as a “Devil from Hell”)

Given that Sawaki’s essay was published in 1942, at the height of the war and government censorship, it is stunning that the essay might contain –any– language speaking of the futility of war and the “empty” nature of grounds for war. **Yet somehow Sawaki, the “war monger” that Victoria seeks to paint, managed to include in his essay clear comments on war’s futility, the futility of Japan’s wars through the ages, and, furthermore, a description of Japan’s main allies, Hitler and Mussolini, as “devils from hell”. Victoria fails to mention any of it.**

Sawaki’s comments recognize the accepted historical fact that the German people widely felt a sense of grievance at their treatment by the Allies following WWI leading up to the rise of Hitler (LINK). Modern historians generally agree that penalties and retributions by the victorious powers in the First World War, such as demands for payments of huge war reparations and seizures of German territory, created a sense of aggrievement among the German people, contributed to desperate economic conditions including runaway inflation, and thus were a key link in the rise of Hitler. But in telling the story, **Sawaki states in no uncertain terms that all such grievances are ultimately empty and fruitless.** Sawaki bases his comments on the traditional Buddhist tale of the “*Sai no Kawara*”, a land of Hades on the river banks between life and death, where the spirits of dead children mourn their missing parents and siblings. In their mourning, the dead children pile little stones of grief which, from time to time, devils come to knock over. In

addition to Sawaki's very clear statements that war is ultimately meaningless, most Japanese of the time, if Buddhist readers familiar with the "Sai no Kawara" story of the children and their ceaseless piling of stones, would understand the message of futility being conveyed in the endless piling of stones only to be knocked down (More on "Sai No Kawara" from Lafcadio Hearn [HERE](#)).

I **BOLDFACE** comments on the futility of war. Sawaki's comments read in full (Pages 163- 164 in the Collected Works) :

It is written in the 386th Roll of the Dai-Hannya [Great Perfection of Wisdom] Sutra, "You should further observe and make this clear. **By what Dharma that you call life do you wish to cut down this life?"** Just what is this thing we call "life"? What is it to be alive? [The Sutra then continues]: "**Further, by reason of what Karmic relation will you cut down his life?** As well in this way, all self-nature is empty," and this is to kill this thing called life. **Why do we kill? Why do we have to kill? Just what could the reason be that we end up having to kill?** And "life", just what is this "life"?

If we say that "life" is also empty, **then the reasons for having to kill are also empty. If we look over the length of human history, everything is just empty. At some time, some battle is won. Looking back from 1000 years later, the [famous war in Japanese history between] the Genji and Heike clans was just so. The battles of the Hogen and Heiji Disturbances [between rival partisans of the 12th Century] were also just like that. In these, "by reason of what Karmic relation did they cut down his life?" I have no idea what is their meaning.** If we try to probe the meaning, looking at it by grasping well the fact that "as well in this way, all self-nature is empty," it is a fact that in this world there exists a completely other world.

However, if we forget to remember their emptiness, and instead think that these things actually exist, we end up doing things all out for all our life and worth. Even the people of Western nations, everyone is just like this. For example, the laying out of the Maginot Line [fortifications in France], the holding of the peace conference, everyone was doing this thinking it actually was real.

In the past, a letter came from a man who had been to French Indonesia, when the Second War in Europe was just getting started. **“Once again a war has occurred among the European countries. It is just like the “Sai no Kawara” banks of hell (賽の河原)” ... The “Sai no Kawara banks of hell” is interesting. When I was a child, I recall an old grandmother who sang, with a tinkling bell and pitiful voice, of the “Sai no Kawara” [in a traditional song which says] “Piling up 10 [stones], we love our Father. Piling up 20, we love our mother. Piling up 30, our distant home village, siblings give for my sake ... ” And so, France and England did it, the peace conference and such they did, the military disarmaments they did, the Maginot Line they did, this year they said that only certain warships could be built, and a variety of things were said, and thereafter they took a huge amount of financial reparations, and poured on all types of sanctions. This could be thought of just like this piling up of stones at the banks of hell.**

“Piling up 10, we love our Father. Piling up 20, we love our mother. Piling up 30, our home village, ... “ England and France came and were doing this and that. And so, a great gust of wind suddenly blew. Devils from hell appeared, which was the coming of the red devil named Hitler and the green devil named Mussolini, and they extended their iron clubs called “swift and sudden military offensives”, saying, “now is our turn as you took advantage of us.” (お前はあまり虫が好過ぎるぞ)

And so it is. Reflecting on whatever battles have happened during any era of time in the history of this world, that is just the piling up of stones at the banks of hell. And so Shakyamuni and [the Buddhist] Prince Shotoku Taishi of Japan taught something really thorough that was a truth that was not “Sai no Kawara”. They did not teach something that was merely halfway baked. This is where the words of emptiness that “by reason of what Karmic relation will you cut down his life? As well in this way, all self-nature is empty” must be well studied.

So, says Sawaki, *“Reflecting on whatever battles have happened during any era of time in the history of this world, that is just the piling up of stones at the banks of hell.”* So futile. **He appears to imply that --all-- battles that have happened at any time in Japan’s history, including some of the most heralded of the past, are a fruitless piling of stones bound to be knocked down.** Are these the words of someone offering fervent, unquestioning, whole-hearted support for the war?

In fact, it is amazing that Sawaki was able to publish any words in any way, however much, speaking of the futility of war in 1942 Japan, in a land under the watchful eyes of censors and secret police bucking no dissent. Would not arrest await someone publishing anything even slightly doubtful of the war effort or casting some aspersion on Japan's allies as "devils" at such a sensitive time in the war? Others had been arrested for less (See books referenced below). Would not someone have to be brave to make –any– comment critical of the futility of war, of Japan's great wars of the past and of its allies, under such conditions?

I have been told by some very familiar with the period and Buddhist publishing of the time (1942) that Sawaki would have had to worry about censorship and arrest even for much more mild criticism, but that it is also likely that censors were so overwhelmed with more mainstream and widely read publications that a relatively small Buddhist journal like "Daihorin" would have garnered only secondary attention. By writing essays with a mixed content of support for soldiers with strong criticisms interwoven in, Sawaki was able to get away with his famous tendency to speak his mind. I have also been told that many in the Buddhist world (whom, of course, Victoria rarely notes in his black-and-white classification of imprisoned dissenters vs. avid war-proponents), including the Buddhist publishers at "Daihorin", just may in those days have been doing what religious and political dissenters have done in authoritarian countries from Communist China to the old Soviet Union to Franco's Spain: Namely, writing subtly and "between the lines" with messages which (as with the Buddhist crowd familiar with the significance of the Buddhist tale of the "Sai no Kawara" stones) would come across clearly to knowledgeable readers all while escaping particular notice by the censors. To do more would be to find oneself unable to write at all, perhaps totally silenced within a prison cell (Of course, Victoria seems to believe that this is exactly where all Buddhist priests of the time should have been). Even so, some of Sawaki's blunt comments in the essay (such as those pointing to the futility of several of the great wars of Japan's past and commenting on Japan's own modern allies) seem as if the old fellow (then in his early 60's) was not trying to hide so very much. In fact, as contrast to Victoria's efforts to tar him as supportive of the government's war policies (as opposed to being supportive of the troops and his country), some significant personal risk was involved to his own safety merely for making any such statements at the height of Japan's war effort in 1942.

But, again, Victoria did not let his readers hear about this part of the essay to judge for themselves. Could it be because doing so would interfere with Victoria's monotone depiction of Sawaki as (to quote Victoria) a "*fervent supporter of Japan's wartime effort, constantly employing his understanding of Zen to promote "selfless" and unquestioning allegiance to the emperor and the state*"?

References:

Kasza, Gregory J. (1988). *THE STATE AND THE MASS MEDIA IN JAPAN, 1918-1945*. Univ. of California Press.

Mitchell, Richard H. (1983). *CENSORSHIP IN IMPERIAL JAPAN*. Princeton University Press.

III – IN DEFENSE OF “DEFENSE” and Protecting One’s Nation

Let us be clear: **At no place anywhere in the book “Zen At War” does Victoria do less than leave his readers with the impression that Sawaki among others (like D.T. Suzuki, whom Victoria has recently come to referring to as a “Nazi Collaborator”) was anything but (to quote Victoria) a “fervent supporter of Japan’s wartime effort” who was “gorging himself on killing people”, proud of “chasing enemies into a hole” then “picking them off very efficiently”, an “unquestioning” nationalist fanning aggression and devoted to the Japanese race and emperor.** Here, for example, the reader can see how the infamous “*wields the sword ... throws the bomb*” quote was presented in “Zen At War”, surrounded by other misleading quotes (we will address those in a moment), all as followed by the words of unrelated military generals subtly implying to the reader that Sawaki shared the generals` views.

[ZEN AT WAR \(LINK\)](#)

At no time did Victoria give his readers a hint that Sawaki might even possibly have couched his views on war in the ways described above, let alone that Sawaki expressed any criticism of war in the “wields the sword” essay. What seems most likely from the overall tone of that essay is that Sawaki was speaking, not of his support for the war itself or government policy (given that **he seemingly describes –all– wars, including those through Japan’s history, as fruitless**, an amazing statement to make as early as 1942, just shortly after Pearl Harbor when fervor for the war was still at its patriotic height in Japan), but more in a tone **in support of his country and in support of the troops, many of whom are little more than children themselves**. In fact, would such an attitude be surprising for so many of us in modern times who, even if thoroughly disgusted and opposed to American government war policy in Vietnam or Iraq, would wish the best for our country even as we are also critical or aspects of its society and policies, salute the

sacrifice of the troops themselves, respect that they were serving their best as ordered, and offer a “thank you for your service” (and assurance that they are not evil people due what they are called to do) if meeting a man or woman in uniform returning home, plus honor to war dead for their loss for their country on a tragic battlefield? Was not Sawaki, who has served on a frontline decades before, merely conveying that he understood and empathized with their plight, and that Buddha is present even in the living hell of World War 2 where the current soldiers he was addressing now found themselves?

A personal note: Having lived in Japan for nearly 25 years, I have spoken to many individuals alive during those days about their experiences of the war and their feelings, including close relatives (For purposes of disclosure, I have relatives in my Japanese wife’s family who experienced WW2 as both civilians and draftees into military service, relatives in my own family who did likewise on the American side, and other more distant relatives who died in the concentration camps of Nazi Germany, not to mention the fact that I consider myself generally anti-war when it comes to US adventures in places like Vietnam and Iraq). **Although most now realize painfully how tragic and foolish was the fever which overtook Japan prior to and during the war, nonetheless most ordinary Japanese at the time truly believed that their nation was engaged in a war of self-protection and for its survival that had been forced upon it unwillingly. (Again, I am not speaking about historical realities which are open to debate, but what the average Japanese was being told and believed at the time).**

The typical Japanese of the time, including Buddhist priests, were being told that their nation had been forced onto foreign fronts unwillingly as a result of the Western powers denying to a resource poor island nation the natural resources including oil that those Western powers themselves were hoarding via their own colonies in Dutch Indonesia, French Indochina, the American Philippines, in China and elsewhere. The average Japanese (rightly or wrongly, and without regard to whether they were being fed a bill of goods by their government) actually believed that Japan’s war in Asia was in part to lead fellow Asians to liberation from Western colonial powers. Given the controlled press at the time, the average Japanese had little information about the real conditions and events of the war or foreign affairs, never heard phrases like “Nanjing Massacre” or “Death March” or “POW Camp” until decades later, and did not particularly think that Japan was engaged in a war of aggression (from their perspective at the time and with the information they had). Nonetheless, time and again Victoria makes blanket statements such as (from his “Zen Masters on the Battlefield (Part 1) essay) “*Sawaki saw no conflict between devotion to the Buddha Dharma and defense of one’s country, even when, as in this case, that “defense” meant the unprovoked, full-scale invasion of a neighboring country.*” Yes, perhaps, to the former, but **where is any evidence that Sawaki would have advocated what he honestly believed to be an “unprovoked” attack? Where is there any proof that Sawaki was privy to some information about the war that millions of his fellow citizens were equally blinded to?**

Here is the point: Whether right or wrong, naïve or foolish, the typical Japanese citizen of the time, subject to government controlled newspapers and other media, was being taught daily that there was an aspect of unwelcome compulsion to protect their homeland as cause for Japan's military campaigns, not much different from how the average Westerner came to feel about fighting Hitler's tyranny in that very same war or on the day after 9-11 decades later. Only looking with 20-20 hindsight, and imposing 21st Century values on events of nearly a century ago via the judgments of a self-righteous Westerner sitting in the comforts of his office far away from any war zone (Victoria's stock in trade) can we say that the Japanese should have known better. What is more, **even if thinking (apparently as did Sawaki) that all war is fruitless and tragic, most ordinary Japanese easily separated government policy and responsibility from the poor soldiers called to fight that tragic war.** Decry the war, perhaps, but support the nation and the troops.

However, Victoria bucks no middle ground between those who are virulent militants and everyone else. Victoria wrote just a few days ago of :

Śākyamuni Buddha's role as a peacekeeper, i.e., his unwillingness to employ violence, either on his own, or on the part of his many followers, to physically defend his homeland. Had the Buddha done so he would have violated the very first precept that all Buddhists, lay and cleric, pledge themselves to abide by, i.e., not to take life. Even in the case of what was clearly a war in defense of his own people, the Buddha, albeit a member of the warrior caste by birth, refused to break his vows.

This raises a couple of points:

- (1) People can be passionately against all war or a specific war, even while recognizing that war exists. All Buddhists I know (even many identified in Victoria's writings as deserving criticism) have shared the dream of a world free of war and violence. But all of us are helpless to make the ideal world we wish amid the realities of *Samsara* - though we should never stop striving. Yes, the Buddha avoided and opposed all war and violence but, nonetheless, there were wars and armies in Buddha's time just as now. The Buddha recognized this fact and, moreover, realized that he and his Sangha had to live as loyal and supportive citizens in the states and kingdoms where they resided. We cannot know exactly the events of the Buddha's time, but it seems clear that the Buddha associated with and accepted donations and other support from kings and generals despite awareness that, logically, the food and money for the offered meal or robe came from the power of the sword and captured lands and treasure. In a

famous old story, after seeking to stop a war and impending slaughter three times, the Buddha finally quit trying and walked away, saying of the soon to be killed, “*no one will escape the law of karma.*” ([LINK](#)) Did the Buddha ever tell a king directly to give up his army or all wars, or did he simply counsel each to avoid war and to be as gentle as possible in one’s rulership? Did the Buddha (if the Vinaya represents his will) not forbid the ordination of active soldiers into the Sangha primarily in order to avoid tensions with kings concerned about depletion of their army? ([LINK](#)) Did not the Buddha, like all of us, wish the realities of this often violent world were otherwise?

Perhaps the Buddha, like all of us, could have done better.

- (2) Victoria is perfectly justified to hold the personal value that all wars of any kind are ‘unjust’, even those seen as in defense of people or the nation. However, his view does not mean that all Buddhist clergy agree with him, and many will recognize that there are cases where the use of military power in situations of defense of society and its people may actually be a tragic necessity and a form of violence necessary to preserve life through the taking of life (much as a Buddhist policeman or soldier may need to use violence to stop an act of greater violence from happening). I very much doubt that the vast majority of Brian’s readers personally reject some use of the police or military when necessary to preserve innocent life or the safety of their country, yet do not see themselves as “militarists” and “war mongers” in accordance with Brian’s definition. (Personally, I myself see all wars as ‘unjust’ too, even as I also see some as unavoidable and necessary).

But even if we were to grant Victoria that he is correct about (1) and (2) above , the problem is not that Victoria, in “Zen At War” and elsewhere, condemns Sawaki and others merely because, in his belief, Buddhist clergy are flat wrong to believe that war of any kind (including in defense of the nation and a society) is a tragic but sometimes unavoidable evil. Rather, the problem is that, despite looking hard, one will not find any obvious point in “Zen At War” at which Brian makes such a viewpoint clear, but instead, one finds page after page in which he paints Japanese Buddhist figures as rightist nationalists fanning aggression and devoted to the Japanese race and emperor with no middle ground. I do not agree with everything that Sawaki may have stated in the past (quite the opposite), **but Victoria has been manipulating quotes and descriptions of individuals like Sawaki to leave his readers with the impression that they (including some others like D.T. Suzuki) were more monotone and aggressively pro-war figures than they were.** The problem is Victoria’s repeated manipulation of quotes to tar people with images they do not deserve.

IV – VICTORIA’S MISUSE OF THE “GORGING” PASSAGE

(but not because of the translation!)

Kodo Sawaki is recorded as saying late in life (P. 51, Zen ni kike. Daihorinkaku, 1987; [LINK](#)):

Everyone is talking about loyalty, loyalty. The question is simply where this loyalty will take us. I too was completely convinced when I went to war against the Russians, but after our defeat, I realized that we had done something that we shouldn't have. In any case, it's better not to make war in the first place.

Readers of the above linked pages of “Zen At War” will notice the other main quote attributed to Kodo Sawaki there, in which he seems to brag about “gorging” himself on “killing people”, chasing “enemies into a hole” to “pick them off very efficiently.” Although at first glance the quotes seem very different, was Sawaki really saying much the same thing?

The “gorging” quote recounts Sawaki’s experience as a much younger man while serving in the Russian-Japanese war. “Zen At War” contains a short version that, Victoria and others now admit, may not actually be a quote written by Sawaki himself, but rather something written by a student of Sawaki. However, all agree that there is a second quote written by Sawaki, although some disagreement exists about wording. I will use Victoria’s own translation here, which actually I consider quite reasonable and very accurate:

My comrades (nado) and I participated in the Russo-Japanese War and gorged ourselves on killing people. If we had done this under normal conditions (heijō) there would have been a big fuss (taihen na hanashi). These days, newspapers often talk about exterminating the enemy here and there or raking them with machinegun fire. It sounds just like they're describing some kind of cleaning.

Newspapers talk about such things as mowing down the remaining enemy using a machinegun to spray them with. If this were done to fellows relaxing in the heart of [Tokyo's] Ginza area, i.e., strafing them as if they were animals or something, it would be a big deal. Looking back at it now, wars in the past were, to a considerable degree, an elegant (fūryū) affair. You just shot one bullet at a time, bang, bang. There

were no machineguns spraying bullets about or big guys you had to take down with a bang. Nor was there poison gas that took care of everything. There wasn't anything rough and tumble about it like that.

While at [the battle of] Baolisi temple I, too, chased the enemy into a hole and killed them, but I was not punished. Moreover, I received a pension. For that reason just because you kill someone doesn't mean that you will always be punished. Whether you are punished or not depends on [society's] rules, rules created by human beings.

There has been some minor debate over wording, such as whether "gorged" is the best translation (or "fed up" or "had our fill") in the first sentence, but I believe "gorged" to be quite reasonable. Further, as Victoria points out, between the substance of the long and short versions, the central story is not so different, although the second is much more detailed. In fact, I do not think that any of that is the problem.

The problem is not the translation. **Rather, the problem is how Victoria consistently presents these quotes (especially easy to do with the very short version found in "Zen At War") with surrounding language and descriptions which make the reader think that Sawaki is *celebrating* his youth, fondly recalling the joy of killing enemies after running them into a hole.** It makes the passage sound as if it is bragging with pride at the efficiency of the killing. **Instead, as should be clear to the reader, the tone is thoroughly that of an older man looking back with disgust at the actions of his youth decades earlier, disgust that such actions were rewarded with praise and a pension, disgust at machine-like slaughter, and disgust that killing human beings is treated like some kind of cleaning. Victoria again removes the statement from context, and imposes the worst possible tone and meaning such that a statement in regret and criticism is presented as a statement of nostalgia and near celebration.**

Victoria does just this when he writes (bolstering his interpretation of the above with the "wields the sword ... throws the bomb" quote that we have now seen means more than meets the eye):

That said, the question remains why I selected the more emotive word "gorge" over the less emotive words, "fill" or "enough"? The answer is simple - context. As the reader will recall from the relevant passage in the main text, Sawaki's comrades on the battlefield were so impressed with his martial prowess that Sawaki stated: "I also

thought I was something special. Looking back at it, I was very conceited (ii ki na mono de atta).”

Was Sawaki boasting about his having killed many Russians? Yes, at least in the words Sakai attributed to him the context reveals that at the time he clearly was. Thus the more emotive word “gorged” better fits in the tenor of the passage, certainly in Sakai’s version. It can be argued that even in the second version this is the case since “gorge” serves to strengthen the contrast Sawaki was making between killing in wartime and peacetime.

Be that as it may, if we were to judge Sawaki’s wartime record solely on the basis of either the first or second versions of his battlefield recollections as presented here, it would be impossible to claim they reflect the words of someone who invoked his Buddhist faith in fervent support of Japanese militarism. Yet, as repeatedly demonstrated in the main text, these are far from the only war-related statements Sawaki made. In particular, Sawaki’s subsequent written assertions that “It is the precept forbidding killing that wields the sword. It is this precept that throws the bomb” are literally some of his most explosive if not damning of his wartime statements. (from *Zen Masters On The Battlefield (Part 1)*)

V – ON THE BATTLEFIELD

In a recent online article entitled “**Zen Masters on the Battlefield (Part 1)**” (herein, **ZMB**; [LINK](#)), Victoria continued his focus on Sawaki, repeating several of the out of context quotes already discussed above, but with several new quotes and claims.

Among these are statements by Sawaki extremely supportive of emperor and country, and of Japan’s troops in battle. Sawaki does use Zen and Mahayana concepts in expressing that support, all of which are open to legitimate criticism. However, at the same time, Victoria edits and discounts several other statements by Sawaki which reveal his critical side even amid his support for his country at war.

Among the most impassioned statements of loyalty to king and country by Sawaki was the following, written in early 1944 as the situation at home was becoming dire and suffering was great. The passage strikes me as, in hindsight, a great misuse of the Teachings of Dogen Zenji (although, given that the source of the quote was himself living in a time of great warfare in 13th Century Japan, with a government in the hands of the Shogun and loyalty to Lord & Emperor a cherished Japanese value even in his day, I entertain that Dogen might actually have agreed with Sawaki!) But while easy to criticize now, it is a statement of loyalty that may be appropriate to someone (even a Buddhist someone) at a time when, as a citizen of a country (even a Buddhist citizen), war appears to be a matter of the very survival or total destruction of one's society at the hands of a foreign army. Furthermore, as we shall discuss in a moment, **under the much tighter censorship rules in place in 1944 Japan, any publication would have been expected to contain such strong, "over the top" patriotic statements, such as the following contained in the second half of the essay. But could this have been the only way to weave in the statements seemingly more critical of war found in the first half of the essay?** (It comes from Sawaki's essay "Shōji o Akirameru Kata" (The Method of Clarifying Life and Death) in the May, 1944 Daihōrin). ([LINK](#))

Master Dogen said that, therefore, we should cast off the self. It was also said "Just forget the self and practice quietly". It was said in this way in the Shobogenzo Shoji (Life and Death) fascicle. It says, "When we just let go of our own body and our own mind and throw them into the house of buddha, they are set into action from the side of buddha; then when we continue to obey this, without exerting any force and without expending any mind, we get free from life and death and become buddha."

If we try to say this in other words, if we just have no question about our body and our mind, and are complying with the order of a superior [Translator: Victoria adds "obeyed regardless of content", which I cannot find in the original] , at the time of acting in such compliance, we immediately become a complete soldier as the right hand man of the Emperor, and if we die, we will be enshrined at Yasukuni Jinja [Translator: Shinto Shrine for the spirits of the Japanese war dead]. So it is said, "The sage has no self, yet there is nothing that is not himself." Heaven and earth are one root, the 10,000 things are one body. If we well realize this fact, then this 5 foot tall body is transcended, and bearing this 5 foot body we pierce the truth of Heaven and earth are one root, the 10,000 things are one body. In other words, with this 5 foot

body, we pierce the truth of the universe, and with this 5 foot body we become one with the gods and buddhas. Therefore, in the Nirvana Sutra it is called “whole being is Buddha Nature”, and in the Agama Sutra it is called “no self.” In the Kannon Sutra it is called “to concentrate on the power of Kannon”. Major Sugimoto [Translator: a famous Japanese war hero and Zen practitioner killed during the war] called this “to concentrate on the power of the Emperor”. If we think of the said power of the Emperor, we separate from life and death, and we enter battle transcending happiness and unhappiness.

He continues:

If we apply this to the Japanese military, under the military flag even water and fire do not hate each other. And it is said that under this military flag even our life is insignificant.

On the other hand, like the 1942 essay, the very same 1944 essay contains statements with a very different message, seemingly critical of war. Victoria translates only a portion, stringing together several separate sections spaced even whole paragraphs apart using “. . . .”, and thus skipping over several of the more critical passages.

Following the end of the fighting I had the opportunity to quietly reflect on my own conduct. I realized then that while as a daredevil I had been second to none, this was nothing more than the greatness of Mori no Ishimatsu, Kunisada Chūji, and other outlaws and champions of the underdog. However, as a disciple of Zen Master Dōgen, I still didn't measure up. . . . I had been like those who in the act of laying down their lives sought something in return. . . . That is to say, I had been like those who so wanted to become famous, or awarded a posthumous military decoration, that they were ready to lay down their very life to get one. Such an attitude has nothing to do with [Buddhist] liberation from life and death.

Victoria concludes that Sawaki seems regretful, not of killing people, but merely of being too conceited about it:

While at the beginning of the above quote it may appear that Sawaki is criticizing his participation in the Russo-Japanese war, a closer reading reveals that this is not the case. That is to say, Sawaki's regret is not for having killed large numbers of the enemy, but, instead, he criticizes himself for having sought "honor and fame" in the process, proof that he remained trapped in the world of desire, i.e., in an unenlightened state. Thus, it was not the killing of his fellow human beings that bothered him, but his failure to kill the enemy (and die himself if need be) with a totally selfless spirit.

Victoria may be correct in this regard, given the themes of the rest of the essay. However, what is troubling is that Victoria again leaves out mention of sections with powerful imagery pointing to the violent wastefulness of war. Being written under the harsh conditions of censorship existing in 1944, it is interesting that the tone of the article seems to change so radically from the very gritty and down to earth style of the first two pages (seemingly critical of war, and reflective of Sawaki's usual writing style) and the rather "over the top" style of the flag waving last two pages. In fact, under harsher censorship rules in place in Japan in 1944, late in the war, it would have been expected that any publication include such florid statements in order to reach publication. **When the missing parts are added back, far from Sawaki's bragging about his bravado during the war or telling listeners that one should kill with a "selfless spirit", we find Sawaki comparing his charging selflessly into battle to the bravado of a drunk who falls off a roof (while trying to take a piss) or to someone who dies in a meaningless bar fight! Far from being a comment on the need for selfless bravado, the passage is about the meaninglessness of wartime bravado.**

Was Sawaki again of two minds, or could it be that there are two messages in the article to the discerning reader? Or, do the earlier sections mean, as Victoria claims, that Sawaki is merely "*criticizing himself for having sought 'honor and fame' in the process*" of killing large numbers, and that "*it was not the killing of his fellow human beings that bothered him, but his failure to kill the enemy (and die himself if need be) with a totally selfless spirit*" as Victoria declares? If so, comparing war to a drunk falling off a roof and a bar fight seems a less than clear way to do so. In the following, I **BOLDFACE** the parts which Victoria left out. It all follows the opening paragraphs of the essay, in which Sawaki

recounts the famous Zen Koan “*Alive or Dead? I won’t say, I won’t say*”. Sawaki was already a young monk when he was called up to service in the Russian-Japanese War following an earlier period of enlistment.

So, we find that there are people who begin to think that we can die relaxedly if we come to practice Zen. Well, there are many ways to die relaxedly. There are guys who die drinking sake and going to take a piss from the third floor. They can die more relaxedly than you think. We went to the war too when we were young.

Well, you see, I was a poor child, and I had no education, nothing. Life was really a simple thing, and it was somewhat like, “Yeah, let’s die! If we are going to die anyway, we might as well die in the war and get paid something.” If a bullet hits you, you just fall over dead. At the time of the Russian-Japanese War, we were saying “Let’s get those guys, let’s kill those Bastards, If we die we just lose our life, WHHAAA!!!!” Saying stuff like that, we just charged forward. Because I too was a guy who hung in there so much, putting his life on the line, people felt admiration, saying: “Who the hell is that guy?” ”That’s a Zen priest.” “No wonder, the power of Zazen ... ”

However, following the end of the fighting I had the opportunity to quietly reflect on myself, I realized that maybe I was doing the same as putting one’s life on the line like some Robin Hood (侠客) or bandit (ならず者) like Kunisada Chūji or Mori no Ishimatsu [Translator: Both Yakuza of the Edo Period who came to have a “Robin Hood” like image: [LINK](#)] and that lot, and felt that as a disciple of Zen Master Dogen, I still didn’t measure up.

Therefore, they speak of just to die, but there are many many ways to die. There are guys who, tying themselves up with a belt with some broad (evil woman = スベタ), toss themselves into the sea, or guys who get roaring angry and get killed in a brawl. However, the [book] Hagakure Way of the Samurai says “The Way of the Samurai is to find the way to die”, but “to die” is not just to throw away this body that one has received from one’s parents, and I think there must be a more profound way to die. Just to throw away your body is nothing. It is not anything that is high and noble.

This is a pretty amazing statement to make in 1944 Japan in the face of a government asking its young men to charge into enemy lines just in the manner Sawaki calls neither “high nor noble”. The parts which Victoria omitted from his quote may change the emphasis considerably to point out people who in their passion, like a lover’s suicide or the fellow in the brawl and soldiers charging enemy lines, fall headlong into death.

In ZMB, Victoria states about this passage: “*Sawaki’s regret is not for having killed large numbers of the enemy, but, instead, he criticizes himself for having sought “honor and fame” in the process.*” I must disagree. Anyone who writes critically of the fever of charging into a battle shouting “*Let’s get those guys, let’s kill those Bastards, If we die we just lose our life, WHHAAA!!!!*” seems to be criticizing the bloodlust of wanting to “kill those Bastards”. The only mention of anything even resembling “honor and fame” in this section is Sawaki’s statement that, as a poor boy, he first joined the army to get paid and escape his hard life.

Later in the essay, Sawaki does begin to speak of the wrong of fighting for “honor and fame” although, surprisingly, he includes as wrongful someone’s wishing to receive the nation’s military honors. (勲功) This is then followed by a quote from Dogen in *Gakudo Yojinshu*, “*If it were valuable to grind our bones to powder, the many who have endured such austerities since ancient time would have attained Gautama Buddha’s teachings, but few people really have attained the teachings,*” also a quote that seems to speak against bone crushing efforts. Soon, Sawaki mentions Kusunoki Masashige, a historical Samurai famed for his loyalty to the Emperor, but whose loyalty is also well known for having led to ruin (Despite having advised the Emperor otherwise, Masashige obediently accepted a command from the Emperor he knew would lead to the certain destruction of his army, loss of the war and his own death, a situation, it should be noted, echoing the desperate situation in 1944 Japan where loyalty to the Emperor was leading to destruction of the nation as the essay was written ([LINK](#))). The talk of charging into war like a drunk falling off a building, the allusions to not making effort and not seeking military honors, and the mention of a historical character who fell into military disaster due to loyalty to the emperor, all seem to pack a very different message compared to the over-the-top second half.

In any event, Victoria should have included the missing sections to let readers judge.

VI – THE REST OF WHAT WAS SAID TO STUDENTS

Several other quotes used in ZMB do not include immediately surrounding material from their cited sources which provide important or very different context. Victoria writes this:

Although Sawaki never fought again, his support for the unity of Zen and war continued unabated. This is attested to by any number of his words and deeds during and prior to the Asia-Pacific War. For example, in early 1937 Sawaki was a professor of Buddhist Studies at Sōtō Zen sect-affiliated Komazawa University in Tokyo. Although Japan would not begin its full-scale invasion of China until July of that year, students were becoming worried about their futures as they sensed full-scale war approaching. At this juncture Sawaki addressed an assembly of Komazawa students preparing for the Sōtō Zen priesthood as follows:

There is at present no need for you students to be perplexed by questions concerning the relationship of religion to the state. Instead you should continue to practice zazen and devote yourself wholeheartedly to the Buddha Dharma. Should you fail to do this, and, instead, start to waver in your practice, when it comes time to defend your country in the future you are unlikely to be able to do so zealously.

As this quotation makes clear, Sawaki saw no conflict between devotion to the Buddha Dharma and defense of one's country, even when, as in this case, that "defense" meant the unprovoked, full-scale invasion of a neighboring country. In fact, it appears that Sawaki regarded dedication to Zen training as the basis for a similar dedication to military service.

Although Victoria cites the source of the quote (Tanaka, *Sawaki Kōdō– Kono Koshin no Hito*, v. 2, p. 462), a biography of Sawaki by a long time student, the book quotes Sawaki describing very different circumstances with many additional words on events, all omitted by Victoria [shown in **BOLDFACE**]:

[Sawaki said,] "School Head Omori was speaking to the students graduating from the [religion] department, giving just some talk emphasizing loyalty to the ruler and patriotism (忠君愛国), so I made the statement in order to correct (訂正) that." ...

“Even without worrying about loyalty to the ruler and patriotism, if you just sit Zazen wholeheartedly, this is a way to fundamentally help not only the people of the nation, but all the ordinary people of the human race. People who just pay lip service to patriotism are sometimes just doing it for their own material success, advancement, and name. That is as if these folks are selling loyalty and patriotism like a business.

Zen priests, let’s do Zazen. Leave talking about patriotism to the soldiers in the army. The soldiers are the ones who are getting paid for that.

There is no need to voice words about patriotism. Zazen is the real way to help the people of the nation. Let’s just keep quiet and just do that. It is said, “This is the real way to say it silently, Be prudent and do not forget”. (Page 171 [LINK](#))

Later, the book’s author adds:

The war was drawing close, and the day when the students would be drafted for service was drawing ever nearer. School Head Omori Zenkai stood in front of the students from Komazawa’s [religion] department and gave them guidance with some cut and dried point “At this vital time for the country, you must have resolve to rise up in defense of the nation.” Kodo was thinking that the effect of those clichés would be to send the students off in a bad direction, so he couldn’t stay quiet, and got up on the podium to correct the school head’s pronouncements, just as was said earlier (on page 171 of this book). The reason I am raising the story again now is that he wished to separate Buddhist Practice from the determination to be worried about the nation, and to settle the concerns of the students who were standing confused between those two poles.

Kodo gave this guidance, “There is at present no need for you students to be perplexed by questions concerning the relationship of religion to the state. Instead you should continue to practice zazen and devote yourself wholeheartedly to the Buddha Dharma. Should you fail to do this, and, instead, start to waver in your practice, when it comes time to defend your country in the future you are unlikely to be able to do so fully. “...

“Saying [popular patriotic slogans like] “loyalty to the ruler and patriotism” and saying “eight corners under one sky” (八紘一宇), “work selflessly for the nation” (減私奉公) for the fellows here is to fully devote yourself to Buddhism, and to concentrate on your Practice alone. Please have trust that doing that alone just like that is a true power to manifest patriotism” (Page 462 [LINK](#))

And so, Victoria twists Kodo’s words to mean, “As this quotation makes clear, Sawaki saw no conflict between devotion to the Buddha Dharma and defense of one’s country,” rather different from what was actually being said. Further, where in such statements is any hint that Sawaki was advocating in any way or saw no conflict between the Buddha Dharma and what he realized was an “*unprovoked, full-scale invasion*” as Victoria claims? Thus, Victoria did not quote the additional and surrounding lines from the book. Would doing so have weakened his point?

VII – MORE PROBLEMS ON VICTORIA’S BATTLEFIELD

“Zen Masters on the Battlefield (Part 1)” also contains some other strange quotes and descriptions. Victoria makes Sawaki’s service on a committee to promote martial arts like Judo and Kendo among school children as somehow nefarious, confusing perhaps the literal meaning of the word “martial” with “war”. Without any obvious source for the claim, he implies that Sawaki did so as part of “Sawaki’s contribution to the war effort”, encouraging the children “as part of their preparation for military service”. He offers no citation for this claim. Further, he implies something evil in Sawaki’s statement that the unity of body and mind found in Zen resembles that found in martial arts such as Kendo, a statement of what is still a standard belief among many modern martial artists today.

In another section, referencing the shock said to have been felt about Sawaki’s writings by Soto Zen scholar Hakamaya Noriaki, Victoria says the following:

In this connection, it is noteworthy that one of the today’s leading Sōtō Zen sect scholars, Hakamaya Noriaki, also directed his attention to Sawaki’s claim:

When one becomes aware of Sawaki Kōdō's [wartime] call to "Invoke the power of the emperor; invoke the power of the military banner," it is enough to send shivers down your spine. . . . Not only was Sawaki not a Buddhist, but he also took up arms against [Sōtō Zen Master] Dōgen himself.

This is very strong criticism coming from a Sōtō Zen scholar in that even today this sect continues, on the whole, to regard Sawaki as one of its greatest "scholar-priests" (gakusō) of the 20th century. While Hakamaya clearly has his own normative perspective on this issue, at least he cannot easily be accused of being unable to understand exactly what Sawaki's war-related statements meant.

What Victoria fails to mention directly is that this "leading" Soto Zen scholar is not exactly a moderate or mainstream figure in Buddhist scholarship, but is a very controversial and radical critic within the Soto school, one of the founders of the so-called "Critical Buddhism" movement that gathered attention at one time, and (like Victoria) very much a gadfly. ([LINK](#)) Victoria fails to mention, for the benefit of unfamiliar readers, exactly whom he is referring to, nor that finding a critical quote from Hakamaya on such a topic would not be much more difficult than finding a critical quote by Noam Chomsky on American foreign policy! Further, there is no evidence from the Hakamaya quote that he was privileged to enjoy access to special information about Sawaki beyond anything we are discussing here, and the remainder is simply his own judgment and nothing more.

In another section of ZMB, Victoria discusses trips made to Manchuria by Sawaki.

Significantly, Sawaki's war support was not limited to Japan alone. On three separate occasions in 1941 and 1942 he traveled to the Japanese puppet state of Manchukuo (Manchuria) in northern China to promote the morale of Japanese military and civilian personnel stationed there. Sawaki's dedication led him, in May 1942, to board a truck bound for a remote rural area of Manchukuo to deliver a lecture to some three thousand armed Japanese colonists undergoing their annual military training.

While no detailed records remain of Sawaki's talks in Manchukuo, their tone if not their content can readily be inferred from the following 1942 article that appeared in the Buddhist magazine Daihōrin. Entitled "On the True Meaning of the Zen

Precepts,” Sawaki wrote: ... It is the precept forbidding killing that wields the sword. It is this precept that throws the bomb.

First, Victoria somehow drags in the “wields the sword ... throws the bomb” quote previously discussed, although stating that he really does not know what Sawaki spoke about. Next, the book which Victoria appears to cite for the story offers a rather different take:

At such point in time [immediately following the start of the war with America], Kodo lectured on the Dharma single mindedly as a Buddhist follower, engaging in activities as a Buddhist follower, and he did not offer flattery to the government and army even a little bit, and he did not cooperate/go along with them in those days too. As to invitations to offer lectures and classes from the police and various cultural institutions and the like, he did accept such invitations as a good opportunity to expound on Buddhism. The tour of Manchuria as well was nothing more than his going around to practice Buddhism with all the people. (Page 338 [LINK](#))

While in Manchuria, he accepted invitations to give unplanned speeches, and among these, there was an invitation from the Director of the Manchuria Ministry of Colonial Affairs. Getting on a truck, he went deep into the country, finally arriving at the suburbs of Harbin in what is now Heironjiang in today’s China. Some 3000 colonists bearing arms were receiving lectures and training. Until the end of May of each year, they were unable to engage in the agricultural work. Using that open time, they received military training with the idea of their being able to defend the northern section of Manchuria. (Page 341 [LINK](#))

Although this is the source of information which Victoria cites in his footnote, there is no mention here of Victoria’s statement that Sawaki’s purpose was “to promote the morale of Japanese military ... personnel” besides civilians, and only a statement about avoidance of contact with the military, such that the phrase appears to be something Victoria added to the material on his own. If Victoria has an additional source for this information, it would be good of him to disclose it.

VIII – THE MOST MYSTERIOUS CLAIM OF ALL?

Next, “Zen Masters on the Battlefield (Part 1)” contains a very strong claim, about which I have twice asked Brian to provide his source (one in a private email, once publicly in the

comments section of SweepingZen). He has not replied to either. Nor does he provide any footnote or other description of the source of this statement.

The training center at Daichūji continued in operation until the fall of 1944 when it closed in order to accommodate children being evacuated from the cities due to Allied bombing. In spite of the danger, Sawaki returned to live in Tokyo at a Komazawa university-affiliated student dormitory. However, due to the worsening war situation, this dormitory was closed in March 1945. Sawaki then accepted an invitation to live at the home of the former Superintendent-General of the Metropolitan Police, Maruyama Tsurukichi.

Maruyama extended this invitation because of Sawaki's longtime cooperation with Japanese police officials, part of whose wartime job was to apprehend and imprison anyone suspected of being opposed to the government and its war effort. From 1938 onwards Sawaki found time to give talks to those "thought offenders" (shisō-han) who had been freed from prison following disavowal of their previous anti-war views but were still under police supervision. He also went into prisons holding such offenders in order to convince them to cooperate with the prosecution of the war.

Sawaki was viewed as being particularly good at this kind of work not least because his own poverty-stricken childhood had contributed to a down-to-earth attitude and an ability to identify with offenders. For example, he typically began his talks with a description of his own one-month imprisonment at age eighteen when he had been mistakenly arrested as a pickpocket. Furthermore, in describing his military service Sawaki downplayed his heroism by saying: "Although I was decorated with the 'Order of the Golden Kite' for my meritorious deeds during the Russo-Japanese War, it was just a question of being in the right place at the right time - a time when a lot of killing was going on. I was lucky - that's all."¹²

The citation at the end, footnote 12, seems to point to page 172 of the already mentioned book by Kodo's student, Tadeo Tanaka, entitled "*Sawaki Kōdō – Kono Koshin no Hito, v. 2*",

The book describes a connection to Superintendent Maruyama, but through one of his daughters. The 65 year old Sawaki had been released from hospital for an ulcer with

few places to go under war conditions. That daughter had been a long time student of Sawaki, and I do not see mention of further relationship with Maruyama. (Page 368 [LINK](#)).

More troubling is what seems to be the description of Sawaki's activities "*to convince [thought offenders] to cooperate with the prosecution of the war.*" It would be good of Victoria to disclose the source of this statement. Instead, pages 172 contains only the following information:

In 1940, right after this author [Tanaka] moved to Tokyo, [I] was under watch under the Thought Criminals' Protection and Supervision Law, and I got a chance to talk about their personal feelings with 40 or 50 so-called "renunciants" [転向者; people who had been forced to renounce their previous beliefs] who were in the Tokyo area being prosecuted under the same law. The place was Sojiji Monastery in Tsurumi [near Yokohama].

When I went to the meeting room, Roshi was in the middle of a lecture in front of the group of so-called renunciants. With inexpressible feelings, I lent an ear. He was saying, "When I was in the Russian-Japanese War, I received the Golden Kite Medal for my service. But it was only because the time and place for killing people happened to be right. Just what was that, just some fluke." It was the nostalgic big old voice that I was so used to listening to. Some senior official monks who were there seemed to be feeling nervous.

When the lecture was over, the Roshi was sitting formally together with the listeners. I went to the Roshi's side and apologized for being out of touch for so long, and that in truth for one year I had been in jail (留置所) on a wrongful suspicion of being one member of the Popular Front [Movement], and I told him that I had been thrown into detention prison for a year. Roshi said only one thing then, "thank you for your hard labors" (ご苦労さん). After that came the time for my lecture. With Roshi in front of me, gathering my courage, I spoke of myself. I expressed that my having been able to first meet Kodo Sawaki Roshi was what Zen folks call one great bit of Karma. (Page 172-3 [LINK](#))

Another section of the book, after describing Sawaki's visit to Manchuria, states:

Roshi also went to hospitals to see patients suffering from leprosy, to see prisoners in prison and the like, and went to places where people were so poor that they didn't even have clothes to wear to help them. (Page 339 [LINK](#))

Victoria cites page 172 as his source, so it is not clear at all where he could come up with statements such as that Sawaki engaged in “longtime cooperation with police officials”, let alone with any connection to their work to “apprehend and imprison anyone suspected of being opposed to the government and its war effort”. As Victoria claims, Sawaki seems to have given talks to “thought offenders” (shisō-han) who had been freed from prison following disavowal of their previous anti-war views but were still under police supervision, and he went into prisons. **But where is the source of Victoria’s implication that Sawaki went “in order to convince them to cooperate with the prosecution of the war”? My only supposition is that Victoria has cleverly or accidentally worded the sentences, which actually mean “Sawaki found time to give talks to those “thought offenders” (shisō-han) who had been freed from prison following disavowal of their previous anti-war views but were still under police supervision. He also went into prisons [which prisons, without anything to do with Sawaki] were holding some such prisoners in order to convince them to cooperate with the prosecution of the war.” However, Victoria’s wording implies that Sawaki was doing the convincing. That “convincing” seems rather peculiar given the content of the conversations reported above.**

Victoria also phrases one included statement by Sawaki in an interesting way: “*it was just a question of being in the right place at the right time - a time when a lot of killing was going on. I was lucky - that’s all.*” By this phrasing, it sounds as if Sawaki is celebrating his good luck and pleasure to have been able to kill people, rather than merely saying he received a medal for the fluke of being someplace where he had to kill people.

If Brian will contact me and, as I have previously requested, provide the sources for his additional statements and claims for these quotes, I will be happy to amend this essay.

IX – FINGER WAGGING AT SOME MINOR TRICKS

Before closing, I would like to briefly point out some other, more subtle tricks seemingly used by Brian when presenting his essays as well as in various published past

responses to criticism. These will each be examined in greater detail in a follow-up article I hope to write on recent essays by him attempting to portray D.T. Suzuki as a rather enthusiastic “Nazi Collaborator”.

The first is his penchant for filling discussions about people with ugly quotes from other people, usually people with whom there is no or little connection, thereby tarring the first person with the image of whatever the second person said. Many fine examples exist, such as this from the “Zen Masters On The Battlefield (Part 1)” essay:

This said, it would be mistaken to view Sawaki as more extreme in his support of the Asia-Pacific War than his Zen contemporaries. The equally distinguished Sōtō Zen master, Harada Sōgaku (1871-1961), for example, wrote the following in November 1939:

[If ordered to] march: tramp, tramp, or shoot: bang, bang. This is the manifestation of the highest wisdom [of Enlightenment]. The unity of Zen and war of which I speak extends to the farthest reaches of the holy war [now underway]. Verse: I bow my head to the floor to those whose nobility is without equal.¹⁸

Similarly when we now read with great skepticism, if not disbelief, Sawaki’s assertion that “it is this precept [forbidding killing] that throws the bomb,” let us not forget that other wartime Zen masters, e.g., Yasutani Haku’un (1885–1973), also twisted the basic Buddhist precept of not killing into a war-affirming creed.

Victoria also likes to hint at a kind of guilt by association among people met casually or in a limited way, through some social connection or official function, imposing responsibilities for the actions of one on the other. An example, from the same essay:

As Sōtō Zen master Yasutani Haku’un explained: “In the event one wishes to exalt the Spirit of Japan, it is imperative to utilize Japanese Buddhism. The reason for this is that as far as a nutrient for cultivation of the Spirit of Japan is concerned, I believe there is absolutely nothing superior to Japanese Buddhism.”

For his part, Sawaki, together with his disciples, responded to the Japanese government’s call by creating a lay-oriented Zen training center attached to the Sōtō Zen temple of Daichūji in Tochigi prefecture. Just how closely associated this effort

was with the government is demonstrated by the fact that one of the major financial contributors to the center's establishment was Prince Konoe Fumimārō (1891-1945), the prime minister who had authorized the full-scale invasion of China in July 1937. Konoe made a contribution of 1,000 yen to the training center, a substantial amount of money in prewar days.

Here, Sawaki is simultaneously tarred with the words of the unrelated Yasutani, and also somehow depicted as having some connection to the full-scale invasion of China for having accepted a contribution from a politician. (Point of personal disclosure: I once accepted a scholarship from Richard Nixon to study in China as a younger man. Does that imply some responsibility on my part for Watergate and the secret bombing of Cambodia?)

Victoria also likes to place responsibility on people for events that they had no connection to and, more importantly, no obvious knowledge of at the time. In ZMB, he writes:

As this quotation [on monks wholeheartedly devoting themselves to Zazen] makes clear, Sawaki saw no conflict between devotion to the Buddha Dharma and defense of one's country, even when, as in this case, that "defense" meant the unprovoked, full-scale invasion of a neighboring country.

The above implies that Sawaki knowingly thought that "Zazen" or "defense" means the "unprovoked, full-scale invasion" of a country (such as China), or that Sawaki was even thinking at the time, without the hindsight of history and given the limited access to news and opinion in the highly censored climate of Japan, that events were "unprovoked". At the time, things looked very different to most average Japanese citizens, and we must tread carefully in assuming what they should or should not have known and judged at the time. But in any case, there is no evidence that Sawaki was drawing any connection like this at all.

Next is the question of Victoria's use of photos: If a picture paints 1000 words, Victoria certainly paints quite a picture by placing portraits of his targets surrounded in close proximity by NAZIs in SS uniforms, beheadings at the Nanjing Massacre and the like. There is a certain art to leaving an impression with images that trumps substance, especially for people who will not read an internet article besides glancing at the appearance. This is a subject I will turn to again at a future time in a follow-up article on

Victoria's "D.T. Suzuki and the Nazi" series, in which Brian has Suzuki sharing page space with nearby portraits of Heinrich Himmler, Hitler Youth and Kamikazes.

And finally is **something I fully expect to see in Brian's response to this article: His tendency to respond with long, off-the-point essays focusing on issues unrelated to the central points under discussion, filled with inflammatory quotes from unrelated people to the person under discussion (e.g., when the subject is Sawaki, linking him to what the unrelated Yasutani said), focusing perhaps on a few more debatable points made in a critique while simply ignoring and not answering any of the major criticisms and charges leveled against him. Watch and you shall see. Let's hope he will instead address all the central questions here.**

* * * * *

X – CONCLUSION

Someone asked me why many of the points raised in this essay regarding Brian Victoria and the actual content of Kodo Sawaki's writings have not been raised before or as loudly. I believe there are several reasons. First, there have been challenges to Victoria's methods and writing style, but mostly by scholars and practitioners interested in his writings on D.T. Suzuki and Soka Gakkai founder Tsunesaburo Makiguchi ([LINK](#)). Nobody connected to Sawaki had really looked at Victoria and Sawaki until now. Next, there are few Japanese scholars who are particularly concerned about these issues outside Japan, and also relatively few Westerners with both the Japanese language skills, time and connection to or interest in Sawaki really needed to look into these issues. Such people are few, to say the least. Furthermore, until recently (and even now) people have been rather intimidated by the whole subject, and by Victoria's rather aggressive pursuit, as if any criticism of Victoria and his methods = support for Buddhist scandals and their cover-up! There have been some challenges to Victoria by current Antaiji Abbot Muho

Noelke ([LINK](#)), but with all love and respect for my friend Muho, he is a rather soft spoken individual and rather reticent.

As someone said to me this week, it took a loud-mouth like me (with the needed language skills and sense of umbrage at what has happened) to talk back to a personality like Brian. I believe this is true.

Brian Victoria has done a real service in uncovering a time in Buddhist history deserving close attention, reflection, criticism and regret. Yet Brian Victoria's methods in doing so also deserve close scrutiny and criticism. One wrong does not excuse another, especially when the reputations of people are at stake.

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September 25, 2014

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