

## Violence-enabling Mechanisms in Buddhism

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This article is premised on the claim that all of the world's major religions, Buddhism included, contain within them numerous malleable doctrines and associated practices that, under certain situations and circumstances, can be reconfigured or transformed into instruments that either actively or passively condone the use of violence against those identified as threats, and/or the death of those fighting against them. What makes these doctrines and practices, designated as "violence-enabling mechanisms," so difficult to identify is that on the surface these entities appear to have little or nothing to do with sanctioning violence. Accompanied by ample concrete historical examples, this article asserts that such enabling mechanisms are to be found in all of Buddhism's major traditions and schools, from the ancient past up thru the latest newspaper headlines. It offers a challenge to all who believe that Buddhism is solely a religion of peace.

### Introduction

The theoretical foundations for the present article are to be found in an earlier article in the online *Journal of Religion and Conflict* available [here](#).

Entitled, "Holy War: Toward a Holistic Understanding," the major finding of this earlier article is the gross insufficiency of seeking to understand a religious faith's involvement in warfare simply, as is typically the case, by studying or identifying those doctrines and praxis that are employed to justify the use of violence. Violence as used here means to inflict physical injury or death on another person. The earlier article also demonstrated that all of the world's major faiths share

characteristics in common that, when called upon to do so, enable the faith in question to engage in the sacralization of violence, i.e., “holy war.”

These common characteristics can only be understood within the context of the full range of human activity as manifested within a religious context. First and foremost of these characteristics is the tribal/ethnic character of religious violence typically hidden behind what purport to be universal religious truths applying equally to all human beings. Additionally, there are psychological needs such as a desire for stability and security in the midst of a confusing, chaotic or dangerous situation; sociological needs for group acceptance and a niche in a structured institutional hierarchy; and, not least of all, the economic and social benefits accruing to those religious institutions that affirm the state’s use of violence in wartime. These benefits come both from the state and its representatives as well as from the “patriotic” adherents of the faith.

That said, it is important to note that placing religious violence in this broader context, as critically important as it is, does not imply that a detailed examination of those violence-affirming doctrines and praxis *within* a particular faith are any less important. It only means that such an examination in and of itself is insufficient for an adequate understanding of the reasons underlying religious violence. In Islam, for example, even were a universally binding *fatwa* to be issued banning the practice of *jihād* against others, this would not guarantee that Islam’s involvement in religiously sanctioned violence would automatically disappear, for there are too many other factors simultaneously at work.

### Application to Buddhism

In applying the preceding theoretical construct to Buddhism it is readily apparent that exploring all of the facets constituting a Buddhist-endorsement of violence would require *at least* a book length treatment, an impossibility in an article of this nature. Yet, as the Chinese philosopher Laozi (c 604- c 531 BCE) states in Chapter 64 of the *Tao Te Ching*, “a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.” This article, then, is written in that spirit and therefore begins with a preliminary examination of those doctrines and praxis within Buddhism that have been, *and even now are being*, used over to provide a Buddhist endorsement of warfare.

**Note, however, the claim is *not* made that violence is an inherent or integral part of the Buddhist faith (or any faith for that matter). Rather, the claim is that down through the millennia, and extending to the present day, those calling**

**themselves Buddhists have employed certain Buddhist doctrines and praxis to justify violence and war.**

This claim, of course, raises the question of *why* such doctrines and praxis exist in a peaceful if not peace-loving religion like Buddhism? Isn't Buddhist-endorsed violence an oxymoron? For example, the famous Zen scholar D. T. Suzuki asserted: "Whatever form Buddhism takes in different countries where it flourishes, it is a religion of compassion, and in its varied history it has never been found engaged in warlike activities."<sup>1</sup>

In response to assertions of this nature, the Theravāda monk, Ven. S. Dhammika noted: "Even a cursory acquaintance with Asian history will show that this claim is baseless."<sup>2</sup> Dhammika then gave two examples in Buddhist history that clearly show an early connection between Buddhism and warfare. The first example described King Anawarhta (1044-77) the monarch who made the Theravāda school of Buddhism the state religion of Burma. Dhammika described how the king, following his conversion, acquired his first set of Pali-inscribed, Buddhist scriptures:

The nearest copy was in the neighboring kingdom of Thaton that was invaded, its capital sacked and the scriptures triumphantly brought to Pagan on the backs of a train of elephants. The king of Thaton and his family lived out their remaining days as slaves in a monastery. To get relics to enshrine in the numerous stupas he was building Anawarhta then invaded Prome, stripped its temples of their gold, broke open its stupas and carted everything off to Pagan again. The next victim was Arakhan that possessed the revered Mahamuni image that the king was determined to get to glorify his capital. This time the battles were inconclusive, and the king had to be content with some less sacred images and relics.

After this Anawrahta turned his pious and belligerent eyes to Nanchao where the Tooth Relic was enshrined. The king of Nanchao managed to avert disaster with an unexpectedly impressive show of arms and by buying off Anawrahta with a jade Buddha image that had come into contact with the Relic. All of Anawarhta's campaigns were

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<sup>1</sup>Suzuki, *Zen Buddhism and Its Influence on Japanese Culture*, p. 34.

<sup>2</sup>S. Dhammika, *The Broken Buddha: Critical Reflections on Theravāda and a Plea for a New Buddhism*. Available on the Web at: <http://www.buddhistische-gesellschaft-berlin.de/downloads/brokenbuddhanew.pdf> accessed October 3, 2013).

opposed militarily and must have resulted in a great deal of bloodshed although no figures are given in the ancient records. The clerics who recorded these events were only interested in the number of monks Anawarhta fed and the number of monasteries he built, not in how many people he slaughtered. However, what is clear is that these wars qualify to be called religious wars.<sup>3</sup>

The second example Dhammika cited is far better known. It concerns the story of Prince Duttagāmani as recounted in the *Mahāvamsa*, an early history of Theravāda Buddhism in Sri Lanka. In the second century BCE, a line of non-Buddhist Tamils had ruled Sri Lanka for some seventy-six years. However, in 101 BCE Prince Duttagāmani started a campaign to overthrow them and make himself king. From the very beginning Duttagāmani and his supporters saw their struggle as a crusade designed to “bring glory to the religion.” Monks accompanied the troops into battle because “the sight of the monks is both a blessing and a protection for us.” Monks were also encouraged to disrobe and join the fighting and thousands are recorded as having done so. To ensure victory, Duttagāmani attached a relic of the Buddha to his spear. He claimed that by doing so his was not a struggle for his own advantage but for the promotion of Buddhism.

However, following his victory it is said that Duttagāmani regretted the large number of enemy he had been killed. Although probably an exaggeration, the *Mahāvamsa* claims that as many as one million Tamils were slaughtered. Deeply disturbed, Duttagāmani was relieved when, as the following passage details, eight senior priests assured him that he had made very little bad *kamma* (Skt., *karma*) since nearly all his victims were non-Buddhists and, as such, were no more than animals.<sup>4</sup>

Only one and a half human beings have been slain here by thee, O lord of men. The one had come unto the (three) refuges, the other had taken unto himself the five precepts. Unbelievers and men of evil life were the rest, *not more to be esteemed than beasts*. But as for thee, thou wilt bring glory to the doctrine of the Buddha in manifold ways; therefore cast away care from the heart, O ruler of men.<sup>5</sup> (Italics mine)

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>As related in S. Dhammika, *The Broken Buddha: Critical Reflections on Theravāda and a Plea for a New Buddhism*.

<sup>5</sup>XXV, pp. 108-12.



It is historical examples like these that led Oxford University’s Alan Strathern to conclude:

However any religion starts out, sooner or later it enters into a Faustian pact with state power. Buddhist monks looked to kings, the ultimate wielders of violence, for the support, patronage and order that only they could provide. Kings looked to monks to provide the popular legitimacy that only such a high moral vision can confer.

The result can seem ironic. If you have a strong sense of the overriding moral superiority of your worldview, then the need to protect and advance it can seem the most important duty of all.

Christian crusaders, Islamist militants, or the leaders of “freedom-loving nations,” all justify what they see as necessary violence in the name of a higher good. Buddhist rulers and monks have been no exception.<sup>6</sup>

Stephan Bachelor reinforced Strathern’s viewpoint when he provided the following explanation in his book, *Buddhism without Beliefs*: “The power of organized religion [is] to provide sovereign states with a bulwark of moral legitimacy.”<sup>7</sup> That is to say, killing by the state is moral so long as Buddhist clerical leaders approve of it on the basis of the interpretations presented above as well as others.

The common theme in all of the preceding examples is that it is not Buddhism per se, or Buddhist leaders, who have been primarily responsible for Buddhism’s endorsement of violence. Instead, institutional Buddhist leaders have, with but few exceptions, always responded positively to the needs, or demands, of the rulers of the state, whether they be kings, feudal lords, generals, prime ministers, or, as we will see in the case of the US, president and “commander-in-chief.” In other words, Buddhism, like all of the world’s major faiths, has typically played an important, yet supportive, role in violence initiated not by itself but by the rulers of those areas in which it has been found.

### **Buddhist Violence-Enabling Mechanisms**

This article asserts that, as is the case in other world religions, Buddhism is comprised of a series of rationalizations that when called upon, typically by those

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<sup>6</sup>Strathern, “Why are Buddhist monks attacking Muslims,” BBC, 1 May 2013. Available on the web at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-22356306> (accessed on 11 August 2013).

<sup>7</sup>Bachelor, *Buddhism without Beliefs*, p. 16.

exercising political power, allow the faithful to rationalize if not justify the use of violence in the killing of their fellow human beings. These universal rationalizations are henceforth designated as “enabling mechanisms” inasmuch as they enable the overriding or supersession of the universal religious prohibition against the wanton taking of human life. In Buddhism’s case these enabling mechanisms override the very first of Buddhism’s precepts, universally binding for laity and clerics alike, that forbids the taking of life.

The *Mahāvamsa* provides one of the early examples of such an enabling mechanism in Buddhism. That is to say, the humanity of the Tamils, as non-Buddhists, was dismissed, and they were regarded as no more than animals who could be slaughtered with near karmic impunity. That said, it must be stressed that denying the humanity of one’s enemy is by no means limited to Buddhism. Derogatory terms such as “barbarians,” “infidels,” “bloodthirsty savages,” “Krauts,” “Japs,” “gooks,” and more recently, “sand niggers” and “camel jockeys” in Iraq and Afghanistan, are all meant to accomplish the same purpose and are found in all of the world’s religions and cultures for ages immemorial. Buddhism is no exception.

Yet, what, exactly, is an “enabling mechanism” and how does it function? The author defines it as follows: “Numerous malleable *religious* doctrines and associated praxis that, in certain situations and circumstances, can be reconfigured or transformed into instruments that at least countenance, if not actively condone, the use of violence. These reconfigured doctrines and praxis are typically activated in times of war by religious leaders *of all faiths* responding to the state’s call to legitimate the morality of the war being fought.”

Further, violence-enabling mechanisms can be broken down into two categories, i.e., “passive” and “active.” The need for these two additional categories is readily understandable when the fundamental nature of warfare is considered, i.e., the soldier on the battlefield is faced with the reality of “kill or be killed.” Consequently, there is a need, first of all, for *passive* enabling mechanisms that either offer protection from death or facilitate soldiers’ acceptance of their own deaths. At the same time, *active* mechanisms are necessary to justify if not encourage the killing of those designated as the “enemy.” While, like other world religions, Buddhism has both types of enabling mechanisms, as this article will demonstrate, passive mechanisms predominate.

It should come as no surprise to learn that the doctrines and praxis comprising these enabling mechanisms are not easy to identify. This is because, at least on the surface, these entities appear to have little or nothing to do with sanctioning

violence. To assert that this or that doctrine or praxis has what may be called a “dark side,” i.e., a side that condones violence, typically provokes a strong denial from those within the faith in question, that is, “defenders of the faith.” Defenders of the faith immediately point to the standard interpretation or bright side of the doctrine or praxis in question, asserting the standard interpretation has no connection to violence let alone condones its use. Moreover, defenders claim the standard interpretation is the *only* correct understanding.

### Christian Violence-Enabling Mechanisms

In order to understand Buddhist enabling mechanisms, it may be helpful to first examine similar mechanisms at work in Christianity, a faith that most English-speakers are already familiar with. For example, according to predominant Christian doctrine, a human being is endowed with an eternal soul and through sincere acceptance of Jesus Christ as one’s Lord and Savior, i.e., being ‘born again,’ one is saved and assured of entrance into an eternal heaven as a reward for having lived a pious life on earth. On the surface this teaching seems to have no connection whatsoever to religiously sanctioned violence. That is to say, how could this article of faith possibly become an enabling mechanism condoning the use of violence?

To give but a few examples of how this is done, let us first look at the inscription on the Scottish National War Memorial located in Scotland’s Edinburgh Castle: “The souls of the righteous are in the hand of God. There shall no evil happen to them. They are in peace.”<sup>8</sup>

These words were written to commemorate nearly 150,000 Scottish casualties in the First World War, 1914–1918, over 50,000 in the Second World War, 1939–1945 and the campaigns since 1945, including the Malayan Emergency, the Korean War, Northern Ireland, the Falklands War and the Gulf War.

A second example comes from an article in the July 17, 2004 edition of the *Cleveland [Ohio] Plain Dealer*. The article referred to a eulogy offered on behalf of a Cleveland native who had been killed in Iraq:

Sgt. Joseph Martin Garmback was killed last week in Samarra, Iraq. . . . “Joey loved being a soldier. He was so self-sacrificing,” said the Rev. James R. McGonegal. “This man knew something about living and dying, and giving his life for someone else.” Many dried their eyes

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<sup>8</sup> Available on the Internet at: <http://darcrowe.blogspot.jp/2011/06/edinburgh-castle-edinburgh-scotland.html> (accessed on 29 September 2013).

when McGonegal assured them Garmback was going to a better place, a safer place. “He is safe at home, at last, at peace,” McGonegal said.<sup>9</sup>

For the viewpoint of an actual Christian soldier let us turn to Richard Emery who obtained a bachelor’s degree in finance from evangelical Christian Liberty University and fought in Afghanistan with the Air Force. “I have no problem taking another person’s life,” Emery said, “if it would promote peace and liberty and the interest of the country we’re in. *I have no problem giving my life for it. I’d end up going to heaven, so it doesn’t really bother me.*”<sup>10</sup> (Italics mine)

As can be readily recognized, the preceding are examples of *passive* enabling mechanisms in that they allow not only soldiers themselves, but also their immediate families, and indeed their fellow citizens, to accept their deaths with equanimity despite the grief involved.

Yet, like other faiths, Christianity also has *active* enabling mechanisms. Not surprisingly, some of these active enabling mechanisms are best represented by Christian military chaplains, one of whose main missions is to sustain the *morale* of the soldiers to whom they minister. An August 29, 2004 article in the *Associated Press* provides the following description of the role and purpose of military chaplains in the U.S. Army:

Capt. Warren Haggray, a 48-year-old Baptist Army chaplain in Iraq said: “I teach them from the scripture, and in the scripture I can see many times where men were told ... to go out and defeat the enemy. This is real stuff. You’re out there and you gotta eliminate that guy, because if you don’t, he’s gonna eliminate you.” “I agree,” said Lt. Cmdr. Paul Shaughnessy, a Navy chaplain and Roman Catholic priest from Worcester, Mass.

As American troops cope with life—and death—on a faraway battlefield, military chaplains cope with them, offering prayers, comfort and spiritual advice to keep the American military machine running.... *Chaplains help grease the wheels of any soldier’s troubled conscience by arguing that killing combatants is justified.*<sup>11</sup> (Italics mine)

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<sup>9</sup>*The Cleveland Plain Dealer*, 17 July 2004.

<sup>10</sup>“Drones for Jesus,” in the online journal “Counterpunch.” Available on the Internet at: <http://www.counterpunch.org/2013/06/18/drones-for-jesus> (accessed June 18, 2013).

<sup>11</sup>*Associated Press*, August 29, 2004.

Needless to say, military chaplains are not alone in providing a religious justification for killing the enemy. When the US entered World War I in 1917, Christian triumphalism had reached its zenith. The Reverend Randolph H. McKim of Washington typified the thinking of that era when he opined:

This conflict is indeed a crusade. The greatest in history. The holiest. It is in the profoundest and truest sense a Holy War.... Yes, *it is Christ, the king of righteousness, who calls us up to grapple in deadly strife with this unholy and blasphemous power.*<sup>12</sup>

At the same time, the Rev. Henry B. Wright, director of the YMCA director and former professor of Divinity at Yale, informed American soldiers with qualms about killing that he could “see Jesus himself sighting down a gun-barrel and running a bayonet through an enemy’s body.”<sup>13</sup>

In all of these examples, whether the enabling mechanisms are active or passive, the unstated assumption is that *all* wars fought by one’s country are morally justified, i.e., just wars. Thus, it is entirely appropriate that the soldiers who die in a just war will, without question, be rewarded with eternal life in heaven. Equally, given the alleged evil nature of the enemy, there can be no doubt that it is one’s Christian duty to kill them.

### “Passive” Buddhist Violence-Enabling Mechanisms

Keeping these examples in mind, it is now time to examine Buddhist violence-enabling mechanisms in detail. Inasmuch, as mentioned above, the majority of such mechanisms in Buddhism are passive in nature, these will be examined first. Note, however, that the author’s own field of expertise is centered on the Mahāyāna school of Buddhism as found in Japan. Thus it is inevitable that many of the examples used to illuminate uniquely Buddhist enabling mechanisms are taken primarily from research on Buddhism in this country. As this article will demonstrate, however, similar mechanisms are to found in *all* schools of Buddhism and all nominally Buddhist countries.

That said, broader research in the field makes it clear that the connection of Buddhist doctrines like selflessness and karma to violence and warfare, in combination with praxis such as sutra recitation and meditation, are not the exclusive

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<sup>12</sup>Wittner, *Rebels Against War*, p. 5.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 36.

preserve of any one Buddhist school or nation. For this reason the author looks forward to fellow scholars of Buddhism (and *all* religions) addressing the relevance of the categories presented below to the geographical areas they are most familiar with. In doing this, pointing out differences is as valuable as noting similarities.

### Sutras as Enabling Mechanisms

Starting with praxis, the use of sutras, or to be more precise, the *recitation* of sutras is the first Buddhist enabling mechanism to be examined. Underlying this mechanism is the pan-Buddhist belief that reciting sutras creates “merit,” an almost tangible spiritual benefit that can be directed toward both the living and the dead. The following passage describes a special sutra recitation service held at Sōjiji, one of the two head monasteries of the Sōtō Zen sect located near Yokohama. The service was held in September 1944 at a time when Japan was losing battle after battle. This made the alleged merit generated by the sutra recitation service just that much more critical to the war effort.

The national crisis on the war front is unprecedented. There has never been a fall as severe as this one, nor has there ever been a greater need for all one hundred million imperial subjects to rouse themselves.... We were deeply moved by the unprecedented honor to have copies [of the *Heart Sutra*] bestowed on us by members of the imperial family. For seven days beginning from September 1, [1944] the Great Prayer Service was solemnly held at the great monastery of Sōjiji. Reverently we recited the sutras for the health of His Majesty, the well-being of the Imperial lands, and the *surrender of the enemy countries*.<sup>14</sup> (Italics mine)

The same nearly magical power derived from the recitation of the *Heart Sutra* can also be seen in the following exchange between Rinzaï Zen Master Yamazaki Ekijū and his lay disciple, Lt. Col. Sugimoto Gorō, shortly prior to the latter’s departure for the warfront in 1937. Yamazaki told Sugimoto:

You are strong, and your unit is strong. Thus I think you will not fear a strong enemy.... You should recite the *Heart Sutra* once every

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 141.

day. This will ensure *good fortune* on the battlefield for the Imperial military.”<sup>15</sup> (Italics mine)

### Karma as an Enabling Mechanism

If sutra recitation can serve as an enabling mechanism it is not surprising that one of the key doctrines of Buddhism can be employed in a similar manner. In fact, karma has long been used in East Asian Buddhism to justify discriminating against persons with physical impairments. This discrimination was based on the *Lotus Sutra*, perhaps the most influential sutra in all of East Asian Buddhism. In Chapter 28 we learn that physical impairments come as a result, or karmic recompense, for slandering or ridiculing those who uphold this sutra:

Universal Worthy, if in the later age, there is a person who can receive, uphold, read, or recite this Sutra, he will never again be greedy for clothing, bedding, food and drink, or any necessities of life. His vows will not be in vain and in his present life he shall obtain the reward of blessings.

If one ridicules and slanders this person, saying, “You’re insane! What you are doing is useless and will never amount to anything” his retribution will be such that *in life after life he will have no eyes.*

If a person makes offerings and gives praise, then in his present life he will obtain the fruits of his reward.

If, again, one sees a person receiving and upholding this Sutra and then speaks of his faults or evils, be they true or untrue, *in his present life he will contract leprosy.*

If one ridicules him and laughs, then *in life after life his teeth will be sparse and missing, his lips ugly, his nose flat, his hands and feet contorted, his eyes pointed and askew, his body stinking and filthy. He will be covered with hideous sores, pus and blood. His belly will be full of water or he will be short of breath. He will be plagued with all manner of nasty and grave illnesses.*<sup>16</sup> (Italics mine)

In addition, in a second sutra entitled, “Ten Fates Preached by the Buddha” (J. *Bussetsu Jūrai*) we learn the following fates await those who act as follows:

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 125.

<sup>16</sup>Chapter 28 of the *Lotus Sutra*, available on the Web at: [http://cttbusa.org/lotus/lotus28\\_1.asp](http://cttbusa.org/lotus/lotus28_1.asp) (accessed 2 August 2013)

Short life spans resulting from butchering animals. Ugliness and sickness resulting from ritual impurities. Poverty and desperation resulting from miserly thoughts. Being crippled and blind as coming from violating the Buddhist precepts.<sup>17</sup>

With this scriptural justification for karmic recompense accruing to alleged evil doers, it was but a small step for karma to become the backdrop for a series of war-related pronouncements, beginning as early as 1890 in Japan. It was then that Imperial Army Lt. General Torio Tokuan, founder of the Zen-affiliated lay organization Yuima-kai, wrote:

The adoption of the [Western] principles of liberty and equality in Japan would vitiate the good and peaceful customs of our country, render the general disposition of the people harsh and unfeeling, and prove finally a source of calamity to the masses.... Though at first sight Occidental civilization presents an attractive appearance adapted as it is to the gratification of selfish desires, yet, since its basis is the hypothesis that men's wishes constitute natural laws, it must ultimately end in disappointment and demoralization.... Perpetual disturbance is their doom. Peaceful equality can never be attained until built up among the ruins of annihilated Western States and the ashes of extinct Western peoples.<sup>18</sup>

Karmic thinking is used here to demonstrate cause and effect, i.e., the cause of gratifying selfish desires necessarily leads to the effect of annihilating Western states and peoples. It is claimed that only then can “peaceful equality” exist.

Yet, this was not karma's only use, for it could also be used as a form of solace for the families of those who lost loved ones on the battlefield. In 1902 True Pure Land Buddhist military chaplain Satō Gan'ei wrote:

Everything depends on karma. There are those who,  
victorious in battle,  
return home strong and fit only to die soon afterwards.  
On the other hand,  
there are those who are scheduled to enter the military yet die before

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<sup>17</sup>Quoted in Victoria, *Zen at War*, p. 222.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 237, n. 34.



they do so. If it is their karmic destiny, bullets will not strike them,  
 and  
 they will not die. Conversely, should it be their karmic destiny,  
 even if  
 they are not in the military, they may still die from gunfire. Therefore  
 there is definitely no point in worrying about this. Or expressed  
 differently, even if you do worry about it, nothing will change.<sup>19</sup>

A further advantage of this understanding of karma was that there could be no question of a soldier's death occurring due to the decisions made by military or political leaders, most especially the emperor in Japan's case. Thus, a soldier's death is due exclusively to the past karma of that particular soldier. In other words, he got what he deserved or had coming as a result of his past actions if not in this life then in past lives.

Again, should any reader think this understanding is unique to only Japan and/or Mahāyāna Buddhism, the author had the following conversation at the December 1997 conference of the International Association of Buddhist Studies held in Bangkok, Thailand. Deeply concerned about the exploitation of girls as young as 12 or 13 years of age in the Thai sex industry, the author asked a senior monk why Thai *Sangha* leaders did not forcefully address this issue. He replied, "Oh, you must understand, these young girls are in that position because of the bad things they did in their previous lives. It is their karma to be prostitutes though there is always the possibility of a better rebirth in the future."

### Rebirth as an Enabling Mechanism

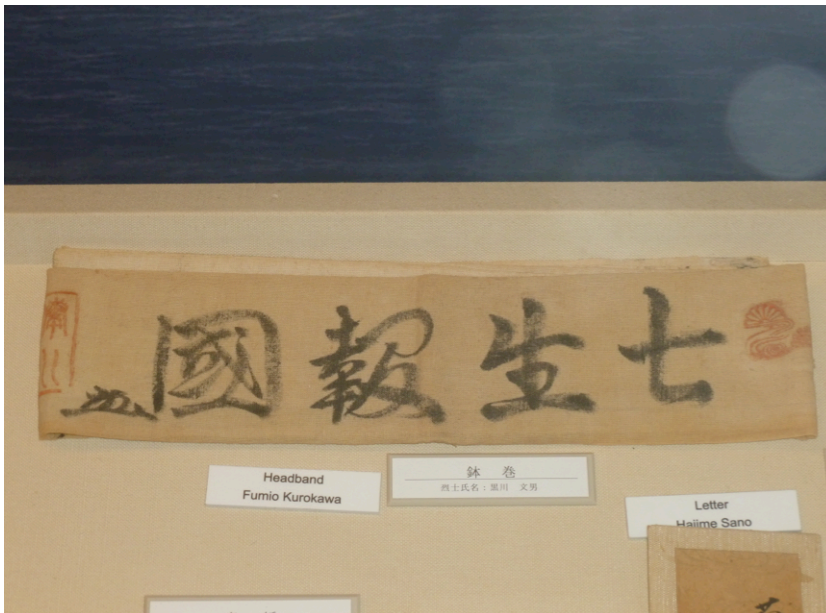
Rebirth in Buddhism is the doctrine that the ever-changing stream of consciousness upon death becomes a contributing cause to the arising of a new form of existence. Although the consciousness of this new existence is neither identical to, nor entirely different from, the consciousness of the deceased, the two nevertheless form a causal continuum. Further, rebirth can lead to a number of states of being including the human, any kind of animal (as punishment) or supernatural being (as reward). Rebirth is conditioned by the actions of body, speech and mind in previous lives, i.e., good actions lead to a happier rebirth, while bad actions lead to an unhappy state.

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<sup>19</sup>Quoted in Victoria, *Zen War Stories*, p. 153.

In 14th century Japan, Kusunoki Masashige was a loyalist military leader during the period of conflict between contending emperors in the Northern and Southern courts. Even today he is highly regarded as the very embodiment of the samurai ideal of loyalty, for although his forces were greatly outnumbered, Kusunoki remained loyal to Emperor Go-Daigo to the bitter end. Facing defeat, Kusunoki took what was then considered to be the honorable course of action, i.e., he committed suicide so as not to be dishonored by allowing the enemy to kill him. However, just prior to committing suicide, he is famously said to have vowed to be reborn seven times over in order to annihilate the enemies of the emperor.

Unsurprisingly, at the time of the Asia-Pacific War Kusunoki became an inspiration to *kamikaze* pilots and other soldiers who regarded themselves as his spiritual heirs given their willingness to sacrifice their lives on behalf of the emperor. This belief in future lives is dramatically depicted in the calligraphy left behind by the junior naval officers who commanded the equally suicidal, manned torpedoes known as *kaiten* (lit. heaven-changing). The calligraphy, below, in the form of a headband, repeats Kusunoki's vow: "[May I be] reborn seven times to repay the dept of gratitude owed [my] country." (J. *nanashō hōkoku*).



Inasmuch as these manned torpedoes are not as well known as their *kamikaze* cousins, a photo of one of the last remaining examples is included below. Note that two of these manned torpedoes were carried into battle attached to the front deck of a mother submarine from which they were launched while still submerged. At least in theory, no matter how hard the enemy ship attempted to evade the incoming torpedo, the *kaiten* navigator would be able to adjust the torpedo's trajectory accordingly. Needless to say, the navigator died upon impact.



Further, by combining the doctrine of karma with rebirth, wartime Buddhist priests were able to assuage the grief of family members at the death of a loved one and even include an element of hope. For example, Sōtō Zen scholar-priest Yamada Reirin wrote:

The true form of the heroic spirits [of the dead] is the good karmic power that has resulted from their loyalty, bravery, and nobility of character. This cannot disappear.... The body and mind produced by this karmic power cannot be other than what has existed up to the present.... The loyal, brave, noble, and heroic spirits of those

officers and men who have died shouting, “May the emperor live for ten thousand years!” will *be reborn right here in this country*.<sup>20</sup> (Italics mine)

Yamada did not suggest, however, that the grieving family would ever recognize the newly reborn form of their loved one in Japan. One could easily imagine the societal mayhem that would have resulted had he done so.

A further variation of the doctrine of rebirth was found in the Pure Land school of Buddhism. In the case of Japan, the Pure Land school refers first of all to the original Pure Land sect, i.e., *Jōdo-shū*, founded by Hōnen (1133-1212) in the twelfth century. Additionally, Shinran (1173-1263), one of Hōnen’s disciples, subsequently established what later became known as the True Pure Land sect, i.e., *Jōdo Shin-shū*. This school’s teachings were based on the writings of the Chinese Buddhist priest, Shan-tao, who taught the possibility of rebirth in a “Pure Land” (aka Western Paradise), presided over by Amida (Skt. Amitābha) Buddha, through recitation of that Buddha’s name (J. *nembutsu*).

Moreover, this form of rebirth was readily available to both lay and clerical believers alike, and it was a simple matter to employ it as a violence-enabling mechanism. For example, the Nishi-honganji branch of the True Pure Land sect issued the following declaration in July 1894, i.e., just prior to the beginning of the first Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95:

Believing deeply in the saving power of Amida Buddha’s vow, and *certain of rebirth in his Western Paradise*, we will remain calm no matter what emergency we may encounter, for there is nothing to fear. . . . We must value loyalty [to the sovereign] and filial piety, and, confronted with this emergency, share in the trials and tribulations of the nation.<sup>21</sup> (Italics mine)

Not long thereafter, in April 1905, Ōsuga Shūdō, a noted True Pure Land scholar, addressed sectarian soldier-adherents as follows:

Reciting the name of Amida Buddha makes it possible to march onto the battlefield firm in the belief that death will bring rebirth in paradise. Being prepared for death, one can fight strenuously knowing that it is a just fight, a fight employing the compassionate mind of

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 132.

<sup>21</sup>Quoted in Victoria, *Zen at War*, pp. 19-20.

the Buddha, the fight of a loyal subject. Truly, what could be more fortunate than knowing that, should you die, a welcome awaits in the Pure Land [of Amida Buddha].<sup>22</sup>

General Hayashi Senjurō, a deputy brigade commander at the time of the Russo-Japanese War (1904-05) attested to the impact this doctrine had on soldier-adherents as follows:

At the time of the Russo-Japanese War, the Ninth Division formed the center of General Nogi's lines as we advanced on Port Arthur. During the initial attack the division was almost totally destroyed, losing some four out of six thousand soldiers. Furthermore, due to the enemy's fierce bombardment, we were unable to rescue the hundreds of casualties left on the battlefield for some seven days. Many of these casualties left on the battlefield were severely wounded and in great pain, but not a single one cried out for help. Instead, they recited the name of Amida Buddha in chorus, even as they died. I was deeply moved by the power of the Buddhist faith as revealed in these soldiers' actions.<sup>23</sup>

In reading the preceding quotations it is difficult not to be reminded of evangelical Christian Richard Emery, introduced above, who said, "I have no problem taking another person's life if it would promote peace and liberty and the interest of the country we're in. *I have no problem giving my life for it. I'd end up going to heaven, so it doesn't really bother me.*"

Needless to say, Islam offers a similar promise to those martyred in its name.

### "Skillful Means" as an Enabling Mechanism

The Mahāyāna *Upaya-kaushalya Sutra* (Skillful Means Sutra) includes a story about Buddha Shākyamuni in a former life, i.e., when he was yet a *bodhisattva* on his way to Buddhahood. As a ship's captain, Shākyamuni discovered that there was a robber onboard whose intent was to rob and kill all of the passengers. Although reluctant to take life, Shākyamuni ultimately decided to kill the robber. He did so, however, not simply for the passengers' sake but to save the robber himself from the karmic consequences of his horrendous act. While the negative karma from

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 34-35.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

killing the robber should have accrued to Shākyamuni, as he explained: “Good man, because I used ingenuity [skillful means] out of great compassion at that time, I was able to avoid the suffering of one hundred thousand *kalpas* of *sam-sāra* [the ordinary world of form and desire] and that wicked man was reborn in heaven, a good plane of existence, after death.”<sup>24</sup>

On the one hand, one can see in a sutra like this, the importance Buddhist ethics, particularly in the Mahāyāna school, places on both the *intention* and *goal* of the actor in judging the karmic merit (or demerit) of a particular act. Yet, at the same time, the purity or selflessness of such acts functions, if not magically, then, karmically speaking, as a “get out of jail free” card, for those who break the Buddhist precept forbidding the taking of life.

### The Dalai Lama’s Use of Skillful Means

In the contemporary era, a good example of violence as an expression of skillful means concerns the struggle of Tibetan guerillas against the Chinese in the 1950s and 60s. The American CIA became involved in 1956 when the Dalai Lama’s elder brother, Gyalo Thondup, then living in exile in India, requested CIA assistance for Khamba tribesmen in eastern Tibet who had risen in armed revolt against the Chinese. In response, the CIA initiated an operation, code-named “ST Circus,” that saw the US secretly fund, train and arm thousands of Tibetans as anti-Communist guerillas.

In a 1998 BBC television documentary entitled “The Shadow Circus: The CIA in Tibet,” the Dalai Lama justified this operation as follows:

Fundamentally, there is basically a Buddhist belief that if the motivation is good and the goal is good, then [any] method, even apparently of a violent kind, is permissible, is possible. But then, in our situation, in our case, is it practical or not, that, I think, is a big question.<sup>25</sup>

In stressing the importance of having both a good intention and goal, the Dalai Lama’s statement is clearly in accord with the preceding sutra. Further, his statement is similar to claims made by Japanese Buddhist leaders during the Asia-Pacific War. In 1937, for example, two Sōtō Zen Buddhist scholars at Komazawa University, Hayashiya Tomojirō and Shimakage Chikai, wrote the following:

<sup>24</sup>Quoted in Chang, ed., *A Treasury of Mahāyāna Sutras*, pp. 456-57.

<sup>25</sup>The Dalai Lama’s interview was contained in a BBC documentary entitled “The Shadow Circus: The CIA in Tibet,” 1998.

The reason that Buddhism hasn't determined war to be either good or bad is that it doesn't look at the question of war itself but rather to the question of the war's purpose. Thus, if the war has a good purpose it is good, while if it has a bad purpose it is bad. Buddhism doesn't merely approve of wars that are in accord with its values; it vigorously supports such wars to the point of being a war enthusiast.<sup>26</sup>

Whether the Dalai Lama can be described as having been a "war enthusiast" is, needless to say, a contentious point. Nevertheless, on October 2, 1998, the *New York Times* reported: "The Dalai Lama's administration acknowledged today that it received \$1.7 million a year in the 1960's from the Central Intelligence Agency."<sup>27</sup> The same article also noted that while the Dalai Lama had personally received \$180,000 annually he claimed to have used the money to establish offices in Geneva and New York and on international lobbying efforts.

As for the Tibetan guerillas themselves, there can be no doubt about their strong commitment to the struggle. One Tibetan fighter, Ratu Ngawang, described his motivation in fighting the Chinese as follows:

My father would tell us the Communist Chinese were the enemies of our religion so we never felt it was a sin to kill them. In fact, we'd try to kill as many as we could. When we killed an animal, a prayer would come to our lips; but when we killed a Chinese, no prayer came to our lips.<sup>28</sup>

At least for Ratu Ngawang and his father there was nothing wrong or un-Buddhist about killing Chinese since they weren't even at the level of an animal for whom prayers were said upon death. In this respect we see a divergence in thinking with Duttagāmani and the monks who surrounded him. That is say, for Duttagāmani killing the Tamil enemy was moral because the enemy army consisted of mostly non-Buddhists who were no better than animals. Viewed from the standpoint of the enemy dead, however, this slight discrepancy in thinking might well be regarded as "academic" at best.

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<sup>26</sup>Quoted in Victoria, *Zen War Stories*, p. 88.

<sup>27</sup>"Dalai Lama Group Says It Got Money From C.I.A.," World News Briefs, *New York Times*, October 2, 1998.

<sup>28</sup>Ratu Ngawang's interview was contained in a BBC documentary entitled "The Shadow Circus: The CIA in Tibet," 1998.

Furthermore, not only did their Buddhist faith motivate the Tibetans to fight the Chinese, but it prepared them to die as well. Bapa Legshay, one of 259 Tibetan guerillas trained by the CIA in Colorado's Rocky Mountains, explained how he felt at the time he and his fellows parachuted back into Tibet: "Thanks to Buddha, even if we were to die, our spirits were high. The CIA had given each of us a cyanide capsule to take in case of capture."<sup>29</sup>

And what was the CIA's motivation in helping the Tibetans? Ostensibly the CIA told Tibetan recruits that they wanted to help restore Tibet's independence. In fact, as Sam Halpern, former CIA Executive Assistant, admitted many years later, the CIA never saw this operation as anything more than "keeping the Chinese occupied, annoyed, and disturbed, i.e., nothing more than a nuisance operation."<sup>30</sup> From the CIA's point of view it was a near perfect operation, for it cost relatively little and the Tibetans (and Chinese) did all the dying.

Initially, the CIA-supported Tibetan resistance had more than 5,000 fighters at bases in southern Tibet. It was in fact the presence of these fighters that made it possible for the Dalai Lama to flee Lhasa, dressed as a soldier, in March 1959. And it was the CIA that made the necessary arrangements for the Dalai Lama and his followers to be accorded safe haven in India.

In return, the CIA acquired some of the most important intelligence documents to have ever come out of China. This occurred as a result of Tibetan attacks on Chinese truck convoys plying the Xinjiang-Tibet Highway. These attacks took place at the time of the Great Leap Forward campaign in China and the official documents found on the trucks detailed the internal problems China faced as a consequence of that campaign both in Tibet and throughout the country.

Eventually the Chinese army succeeded in driving the Tibetan guerillas out of Tibet proper, and the remnants were forced to withdraw into northern Nepal. There the US provided support for the creation of a clandestine military camp code-named "Mustang." The CIA expected the remaining 2,000 Tibetans to conduct cross-border raids with a focus on intelligence gathering operations. However, to the consternation of their American handlers the Tibetans were more interested in killing Chinese than in intelligence and did so whenever they had the chance.

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<sup>29</sup>Ibid.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid.



In early 1969 the CIA abruptly terminated funding for the Mustang base because US foreign policy toward China was about to change. That is to say, America now wanted diplomatic relations with the Peoples Republic, and China made it clear that this could not happen without the complete cessation of US support for Tibetan guerilla activities. As far as the US was concerned, the Tibetans’ “nuisance value” had come to an end. And so, too, had America’s brief fling with the sponsorship of Buddhist-inspired holy war.

Thanks to some parting monies from the CIA, the Tibetans were able to continue their cross-border raids until 1974. It was then that the Nepalese government, pressured by the Chinese, threatened to send its troops against Mustang base. The Dalai Lama, fearing a fruitless bloodbath, sent the following personal message to his followers, urging them to lay down their arms:

For many years you have risked your lives and struggled for our cause. I know the present situation will cause you much disappointment. However, we must try to achieve our objectives through peaceful means.<sup>31</sup>

In the BBC documentary, Tenzin Tsultrim stated that when Tibetans first went to the US for training, they thought that the US might even give them atomic bombs to fight with. Now, many thousands of Tibetan and Chinese lives later, they were left abandoned. The Dalai Lama, however, was reborn as a champion of world peace based on the putative non-violence of his Buddhist faith. Although the record, not to mention his own words, told a different story, the world appeared not to care, for in 1989 he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

### Compassion as an Enabling Mechanism

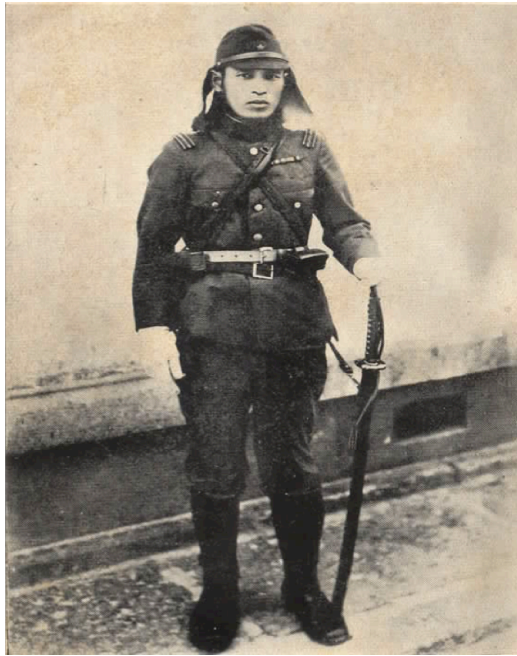
The reader will recall that according to the *Upaya-kaushalya Sutra*, the Buddha killed the robber “out of great compassion” for him. Similarly, the Sanskrit *Mahā-parinirvāna Sutra* reveals how Buddha Shākyamuni killed several high-caste Brahmins in a previous life to prevent them from slandering the Dharma. The compassion here is said to have originated out of Shākyamuni’s desire to also save the Brahmins from the karmic consequences of their slanderous acts.

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

Given this scriptural justification, it should once again come as no surprise that during the Asia-Pacific War, Zen-trained Lt. Col. Sugimoto Gorō could claim:

The wars of the empire are sacred wars. They are holy wars. They are the practice of *great compassion* (J. *daijishin*). Therefore the Imperial military must consist of holy officers and holy soldiers.<sup>32</sup> (Italics mine)



*A Photograph of Lt. Col. Sugimoto Gorō*

Further, the two Sōtō Zen scholars quoted above, i.e., Hayashiya Tomojirō and Shimakage Chikai, made the same point:

Were the level of wisdom of the world's people to increase, the causes of war would disappear and war cease. However, in an age when the situation is such that it is impossible for humanity to stop wars, there

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<sup>32</sup>Quoted in Victoria, *Zen at War*, p. 119.

is no choice but to wage *compassionate* wars which give life to both oneself and one's enemy. Through a *compassionate* war, the warring nations are able to improve themselves, and war is able to exterminate itself.<sup>33</sup> (Italics mine)

### “No-Self” as an Enabling Mechanism

The fact that even Buddhist compassion can be employed as an enabling mechanism raises the question whether there is *any* Buddhist doctrine immune to this fate? In seeking to understand how the doctrine of “no-self” can be similarly utilized, we must first recall the core Buddhist teaching of *anātman*. Composed of the negative prefix *an* (no) plus *ātman*, this Sanskrit term denies the existence of an eternal or abiding self or soul. It is typically translated into English as “no-self” and is the corollary of *anitya* (nothing permanent) at a personal level. In the Mahāyāna school it leads to the understanding that all things are ultimately “empty” (Skt., *śūnyatā*).

To find an early example of the way in which “no-self” (J., *muga*) was wedded to killing we need look no further than Nāgārjuna, the great 2nd century CE, philosopher of the Mahāyāna school. In his commentary on the Larger Sutra on the Perfection of Wisdom (Ch., *Dazhidulun*), Nāgārjuna wrote:

Therefore, living beings in fact are non-existence.  
There will be no sin of killing if there is non-existence of living beings; no one can be said to observe precept if there is no sin of killing. . . Just like that there will be no sin if one commits killing in a dream or kills the image in a mirror, so is one who kills the empty form of the five aggregates [of a living being].<sup>34</sup>

The five aggregates referred to here consist of physical form, sensations, perceptions, thoughts and consciousness. When united together they form the constituent parts of an individual, but since each of the five is constantly changing there is nothing that can be identified as a permanent self or soul. Thus, according to Nāgārjuna, if a person is killed, nothing has been destroyed other than these five continuously changing aggregates.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., p. 91.

<sup>34</sup>Quoted in Xue Yu. *Buddhism, War, and Nationalism*, p. 6.

### “No-self” in Medieval Japan

In 17th century Japan, the great Rinzai Zen Master Takuan clearly mirrored Nāgārjuna when he wrote the following to his warrior patron:

The uplifted sword has no will of its own, it is all of emptiness. It is like a flash of lightning. The man who is about to be struck down is also of emptiness, and so is the one who wields the sword. None of them are possessed of a mind that has any substantiality. As each of them is of emptiness and has no mind, the striking man is not a man, the sword in his hands is not a sword, and the ‘I’ who is about to be struck down is like the splitting of the spring breeze in a flash of lightning.”<sup>35</sup>

Takuan and his warrior disciples considered taking the life of a fellow human to be no more than “the splitting of the spring breeze in a flash of lightning.”

### “No-self” in Modern Japan

In light of the moral if not metaphysical “license to kill” that medieval Zen masters provided their warrior patrons, it is not surprising that Takuan’s words would be invoked in support of Japan’s modern wars. In a March 1937 interview, Sōtō Zen leader Ishihara Shummyō said:

Zen master Takuan taught that in essence Zen and Bushidō were one.... I believe that if one is called upon to die, one should not be the least bit agitated. On the contrary, one should be in a realm where something called ‘oneself’ does not intrude even slightly. Such a realm is no different from that derived from the practice of Zen.<sup>36</sup>

Imperial Army Major Ōkubo Kōichi responded, saying:

The soldier must become one with his superior. He must actually become his superior. Similarly, he must become the order he receives. That is to say, *his self must disappear*. Then he will advance when told to advance.... On the other hand, should he believe that he is going to die and act accordingly; he will be unable to fight well. What is

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<sup>35</sup>Quoted in Victoria, *Zen War Stories*, p. 26.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., p. 103.

necessary is that he be able to act freely and without [mental] hindrance.<sup>37</sup>

For his part, Lt. Col. Sugimoto Gorō, introduced above, wrote:

The reason that Zen is important for soldiers is that all Japanese, especially soldiers, must live in the spirit of the unity of sovereign and subjects, eliminating their ego and getting rid of their self.... Through my practice of Zen I am able *to get rid of my ego*. In facilitating the accomplishment of this, Zen becomes, as it is, *the true spirit of the imperial military*.<sup>38</sup> (Italics mine)

Further, 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.... That is to say, all the particulars [of the Spirit of Japan] are taught by Japanese Buddhism, *including the great way of “no-self” that consists of the fundamental duty of “extinguishing the self in order to serve the public [good]” (J. messhi hōkō)*; the determination to transcend life and death in order to reverently sacrifice oneself for one's sovereign; the belief in unlimited life as represented in the oath to die seven times over to repay [the debt of gratitude owed] one's country; reverently assisting in the holy enterprise of bringing the eight corners of the world under one roof; and the valiant and devoted power required for the construction of the Pure Land on this earth.<sup>39</sup> (Italics mine)

### “No-self” Commits Suicide

As the preceding quotes make clear not only did the doctrine of “no-self” serve as a license to kill others but, equally important, it also served to deny, at least metaphysically, one's own death. That is to say, if the enemy doesn't really exist then neither do I.

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<sup>37</sup>Ibid., p. 103.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., p. 124.

<sup>39</sup>Quoted in Victoria, *Zen War Stories*, p. 70.

In particular, Zen training, with its long connection to the warrior class in Japan, could be a very valuable method for overcoming the fear of death. D.T. Suzuki was well aware of this when he wrote: “Death now loses its sting altogether, and this is where the samurai training joins hands with Zen.”<sup>40</sup> Further, in June 1941 Suzuki addressed Imperial Army officers as follows: “In any event, it isn’t easy to acquire the mental state in which one is prepared to die. I think the best shortcut to acquire this frame of mind is none other than Zen, for Zen is the fundamental ideal of religion.”<sup>41</sup>

In fact, Suzuki had long promoted Zen as “the best shortcut” to becoming prepared for death. As early as 1906, i.e., in the immediate aftermath of the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05, Suzuki wrote:

The *Lebensanschauung* of *Bushidō* is no more nor less than that of Zen. The calmness and even joyfulness of heart at the moment of death which is conspicuously observable in the Japanese, the intrepidity which is generally shown by the Japanese soldiers in the face of an overwhelming enemy; and the fairness of play to an opponent, so strongly taught by *Bushidō* – all of these come from the spirit of the Zen training, and not from any such blind, fatalistic conception as is sometimes thought to be a trait peculiar to Orientals.<sup>42</sup>

When one considers such alleged traits of Japanese soldiery as “calmness,” “intrepidity” and especially “joyfulness of heart at the moment of death,” it is difficult, if only in hindsight, not to be reminded of the many thousands of young Japanese men who sacrificed themselves in suicidal attacks whether on land, air or sea. This is not to claim that Suzuki approved of *kamikaze* pilots or *kaiten* manned torpedoes, nor that all of the young men who undertook these missions did so either “calmly” let alone “joyfully.” That said, the question must be asked, if the self is but an illusion to be discarded, what basis would Suzuki or any other wartime Zen leader have had for opposing such suicidal attacks?

Be that as it may, there can be no doubt that at least some, if not many, of these suicidal youth were motivated by doctrines like ‘no-self’ in their suicidal actions. This is vividly demonstrated in those Japanese war museums that even

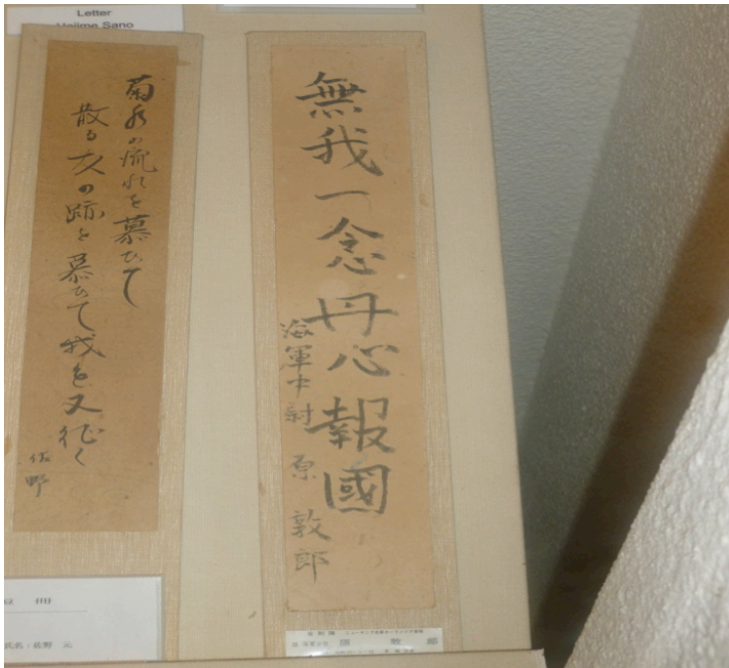
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<sup>40</sup>Suzuki, *Zen Buddhism And Its Influence on Japanese Culture*, p. 46.

<sup>41</sup>Quoted in Victoria, “Zen as a Cult of Death in the Wartime Writings of D.T. Suzuki,” 2013. Available on the web at: <http://japanfocus.org/-Brian-Victoria/3973> (accessed August 19, 2013).

<sup>42</sup>Suzuki, “The Zen Sect of Buddhism,” *Journal of the Pali Text Society*, 1906, p. 34.

now display the calligraphy these youth left behind. For example, the following calligraphy, written by Imperial Navy Lieutenant Junior Grade Hara Atsurō, literally states: “No-self” - ardently - sincerely - repays the debt of gratitude owed the nation.” At least from the point of view of ordinary mortals, “no-self” committed suicide over and over again in wartime Japan.



## “Active” Buddhist Violence Enabling Mechanisms

### Buddhist Statuary as an Enabling Mechanism

As the following photos dramatically reveal, Buddhist statuary can also serve as enabling mechanisms, *active* enabling mechanisms. For example, there is the fierce-looking *Fudō Myō-ō* (Skt. *Acala* or Immovable Wisdom King). *Fudō Myō-ō* is said to be a powerful esoteric, guardian deity who protects all sentient beings by burning away their impediments and defilements, thus aiding them towards enlightenment. He employs both a sword and a lasso in the accomplishment of his duties.



A second example, seen below, is *Monju* (Skt., *Mañjuśrī*), the *Bodhisattva* of Supreme Wisdom. In Japan, *Monju* is often depicted holding the sword of wisdom in his right hand (to cut through illusion and shed light on the unenlightened mind) and a sutra in his left hand. He sits atop a roaring lion, symbolizing the voice of the Buddha Dharma and the power of Buddhism to overcome all obstacles. In Zen temples, a statue of *Monju* is typically the chief object of veneration in the meditation hall.





For someone to charge that the swords in the hands of these statues are signs of Buddhism's active endorsement of violence would typically be met with strong if not vehement denials from both clerics and laity alike, both within Japan and without. In their eyes, the instruments of violence associated with these statues have no more than metaphorical meaning and significance.

Yet, on September 15, 1934 the highly ranked Rinzai Zen Master Yamamoto Gempō testified in defense of an accused terrorist leader, Inoue Nisshō, as follows:

Although all Buddhist statuary manifests the spirit of Buddha, there are no Buddhist statues, other than those of Buddha Shākyamuni and Amida, who do not grasp the sword. Even the guardian Bodhisattva

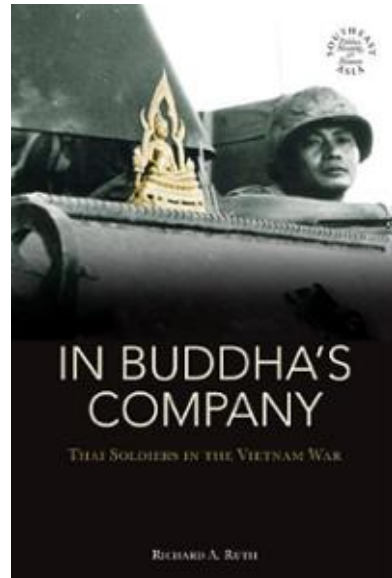
Ksitigarbha holds, in his manifestation as a victor in war, a spear in his hand. Thus *Buddhism, which has as its foundation the true perfection of humanity, has no choice but to cut down even good people in the event they seek to destroy social harmony.*<sup>43</sup> (Italics mine)

This is clearly a case in which, literally in the blink of an eye, the metaphorical meaning of Buddhist statuary could be transformed into a legitimating mechanism in support of domestic terrorism. During the Asia-Pacific War that followed, this same weapon-wielding Buddhist statuary would be called upon to ensure victory on the battlefield.

Nor is this simply a question of a recent distorted understanding of the significance of Buddhist statuary. The great medieval Rinzai Zen master, Takuan Sōhō (1573-1645), for example, described *Fudō Myō-ō* as follows:

*Fudō Myō-ō* holds a sword in the right hand and a rope in his left. His lips are rolled back revealing his teeth, and his eyes are full of anger. *He thrusts violently at all evil demons that interfere with the Buddha Dharma, forcing them to surrender.* He is universally present as a figure that protects the Buddha Dharma.<sup>44</sup> (Italics mine)

Further, this (mis)use of Buddhist statuary is neither unique to Japan nor the Mahāyāna school. The next book cover, consisting of a photograph of a Thai soldier in an armored personal carrier during the Vietnam War, offers visual proof of the pan-Buddhist pervasiveness of this phenomenon. That said, it should be noted that in Thailand, miniature statues of Shākyamuni Buddha have long played the role of *protective* amulets when placed on chains and worn round the neck. Thus, the Thai soldier's placement of a statue of the Shākyamuni Buddha on the front of his armored personnel carrier was most likely a *passive* enabling mechanism, meant to ensure his protection in battle.



<sup>43</sup> Quoted in Victoria, *Zen War Stories*, pp. 216-17.

<sup>44</sup> Quoted in Victoria, *Zen at War*, p. 217.

### *Samādhi* Power as an Enabling Mechanism

In Buddhism, *samādhi* refers to the concentrated state of mind, that is, the mental “one pointedness,” achieved through the practice of meditation. Prior to and during the Asia-Pacific War, Japanese Zen leaders, D. T. Suzuki included, often wrote about this meditation-derived power, emphasizing the effectiveness of *samādhi*-power (J., *jōriki*) *in battle*. They all agreed that the Zen practice of seated, cross-legged meditation (J., *zazen*), was the fountainhead of this power, a power that was as available to modern Japanese soldiers as it had once been to samurai warriors.

For example, when Lt. Col Sugimoto died on the battlefield in 1937, his Rinzai Zen Master, Yamazaki Ekijū, offered the following eulogy:

A grenade fragment hit him in the left shoulder. He seemed to have fallen down but then got up again. Although he was standing, one could not hear his commands. He was no longer able to issue commands with that husky voice of his.... Yet he was still standing, holding his sword in one hand as a prop. Both legs were slightly bent, and he was facing in an easterly direction [toward the imperial palace]. It appeared that he had saluted though his hand was now lowered to about the level of his mouth. The blood flowing from his mouth covered his watch.... From long ago, the true sign of a Zen priest had been his ability to pass away while doing *zazen*. Those who were completely and thoroughly enlightened, however, . . . could die calmly in a standing position.... This was possible was due to *samādhi power*.<sup>45</sup> (Italics mine)

Significantly, *samādhi* power was equally available to Buddhist terrorists in 1930s Japan. For example, Onuma Shō assassinated Japan’s former finance minister, Inoue Junnosuke, in February 1932. At his trial Onuma stated:

After starting my practice of *zazen* I entered a state of *samādhi* the likes of which I had never experienced before. I felt my spirit become unified, really unified, and when I opened my eyes from the half-closed meditative position I noticed the smoke from the incense curling up and touching the ceiling. At this point it suddenly came

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<sup>45</sup>Quoted in Victoria, *Zen at War*, pp. 125-26.

to me — *I would be able to carry out [the assassination] that night.*<sup>46</sup>  
(Italics mine)

Experienced meditators know that *samādhi* power is real. However, as with any “power,” there is no guarantee whatsoever as to how it will be used.

### Defense of the Dharma as an Enabling Mechanism

Of all the many forms of doctrine and praxis invoked in support of Buddhist violence, perhaps the most universal is violence employed in the name of defending the Dharma. Yet, it is equally true that the use of violence in defense of one’s faith is the most universal reason cited for violence in *all* of the world’s major faiths. At least at the macro level, it recognizes no sectarian or national boundaries, or limitations, of any kind. And within Buddhism it is equally present in both the Mahāyāna and Theravāda schools.

In the Mahāyāna school, the *Jen-wang-ching* (Sutra on Benevolent Kings) states that one can escape the karmic consequences arising from such acts as killing others by simply reciting the sutra. More specifically, Section V of this sutra is entitled: “Section on the Protection of the State.” This section claims to give Buddha Shākyamuni’s detailed instructions to kings in order that they might ensure the protection of their kingdoms from both internal and external enemies. Armies, if needed, could be assembled and used with the assurance that the soldiers involved in the killing could later be totally absolved of the karmic consequences of their acts.

While the preceding sutra provides a somewhat passive justification for Buddhist participation in warfare, this is not the case with the Sanskrit *Mahāparinirvāna Sutra*. In this sutra, Buddha Shākyamuni tells how he killed several Brahmins in a previous life in order to prevent them from slandering the Dharma. Once again, this is said to have been done out of compassion for the slain Brahmins, i.e. to save them from the karmic consequences of their slander.

However, in a more aggressive vein, Chapter 5 of the same sutra admonishes Mahāyāna followers to protect the Dharma and monks at all costs, even if this means using weapons to do so and breaking the prohibition against taking life. This injunction is similar to that found in the *Gandavyūha Sutra*. Here an Indian

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<sup>46</sup>Quoted in Victoria, *Zen War Stories*, p. 214.

king by the name of Anala is singled out for praise because he is “said to have made killing into a divine service in order to reform people through punishment.”<sup>47</sup>

Given this background in the Mahāyāna school, it is unsurprising to learn that something similar is found in a Theravāda country as well. Specifically, in connection with Sri Lanka’s recently concluded bitter, and lengthy, civil war with its non-Buddhist Tamil minority, BBC correspondent Priyath Liyanage noted: “To committed Sinhala Buddhist ideologues violence can be justified to counter the threat posed... to the unity of land, race and religion.”<sup>48</sup>

Further, in a 2005 sermon to Sri Lankan soldiers, Ven. Vimaladhajja included the following poem:

Duttagāmani, the lord of men, fought a great war [against the Tamils].  
He killed people *in order to save the [Buddhist] religion*. He united  
the *pure* Sri Lanka and received comfort from that in the end [of *sam-*  
*sāra*].<sup>49</sup> (Italics mine)

As the reader will recall, Duttagāmani was the hero king of the *Mahāvamsa*, compiled in the 5th century CE. Thus the Sinhala Buddhist leaders who supported their government’s recent military actions against the Tamils had no difficulty in finding not only Buddhist doctrinal support for their militant stance but strong historical precedent as well. As the distinguished Sinhalese Buddhist scholar-priest Walpola Rahula wrote:

From this time [of the *Mahāvamsa*] the patriotism and the religion of the Sinhalese became inseparably linked. The religio-patriotism at that time assumed such overpowering proportions that both *bhikkhus* [monks] and laymen considered that even killing people in order to liberate the religion and the country was not a heinous crime.<sup>50</sup>

In her recent study, entitled *In Defense of Dharma*, Tessa Bartholomeusz notes that Sri Lankan Buddhist leaders use a variety of both canonical and post-canonical

<sup>47</sup> Quoted in Williams, *Mahayana Buddhism*, p. 161.

<sup>48</sup> Priyath Liyanage, “Popular Buddhism, Politics and the Ethnic Problem,” 1998. Available on the web at: <http://www.c-r.org/accord-article/popular-buddhism-politics-and-ethnic-problem> (accessed August 16, 2013)

<sup>49</sup> Quoted in Jerryson, *Buddhist Warfare*, p. 169.

<sup>50</sup> Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, p. 66.

stories to support their violence-endorsing views. Chief of the post-canonical stories is, of course, the *Mahāvamsa*. However, reference is also made to the *Cakkavatti Sihanada Sutta* that depicts a righteous king, committed to the Dharma, who nevertheless surrounds himself with a four-fold army. Based on this, the inference is made that the presence of an army demonstrates that even a righteous king may be forced to fight a defensive war in order to defend Buddhism.

Bartholomeusz notes that in Theravāda-based Buddhist ethics, *context* is one important factor. “In other words, the duty of non-violence can be overridden – though the justification to do so is extremely weighty – if certain criteria are met.... it can reasonably be concluded that their thinking, like the Buddhist stories they embody, reflects a type of ethical particularism rather than an ethical system of absolutes.”<sup>51</sup> In effect, the universal Buddhist precept forbidding the taking of life is subject to modification, i.e., “The taking of life is proscribed *except [when defending the Buddha Dharma against Tamils, Muslims, etc.]*.”

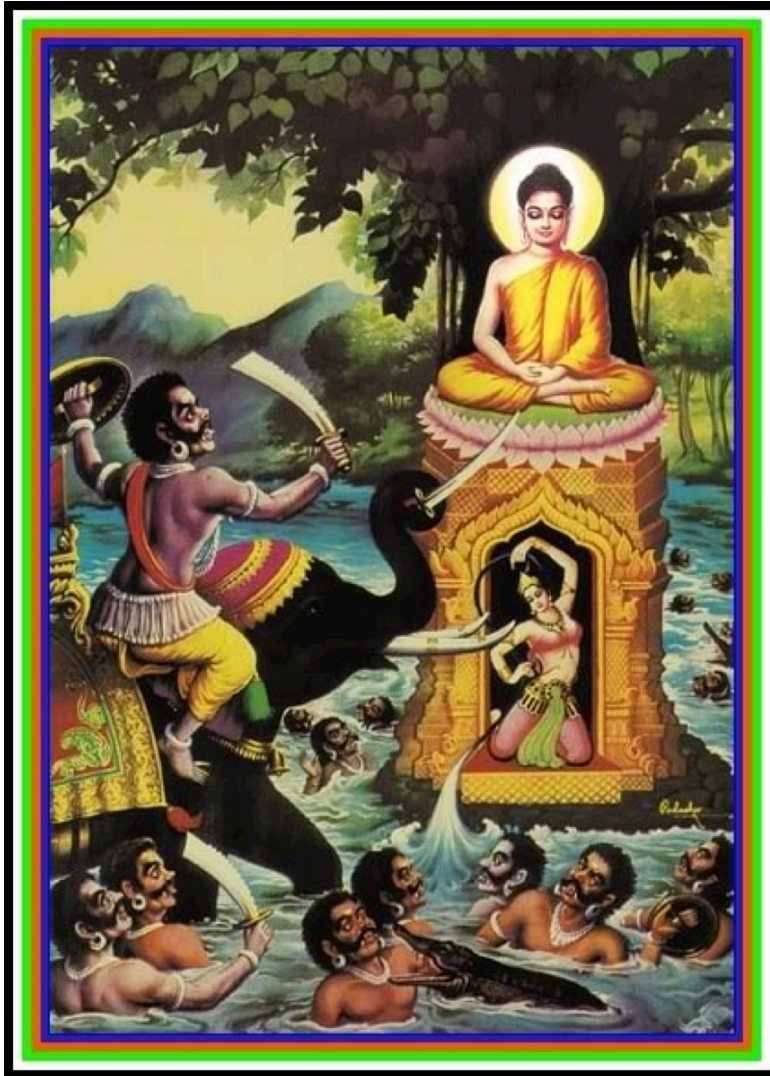
### **Māra as an Enabling Mechanism**

A second violence-enabling mechanism in the Theravāda school concerns Māra. Māra is the demon that, it is claimed, assaulted Gautama Buddha while he meditated beneath the *bodhi* tree, using threats of violence, the promise of sensory pleasures and mockery in an attempt to prevent the Buddha-to-be from attaining enlightenment. Māra has thereafter been portrayed as a tempter, distracting humans from practicing the Buddha Dharma.

Throughout their history, Buddhists have embraced *both* a literal and “psychological” interpretation of Māra. That is to say, Māra can be interpreted either as a real external demon or as internal desires that must be overcome in order to proceed on the path to enlightenment. From the psychological perspective, Māra is a manifestation of one’s own mind, and no external demon exists since it emerges from one’s own deluded thoughts. Yet, when Māra is interpreted as an external demon, he is the very personification of evil, similar to the Devil in Christianity, and, like the latter, must be destroyed by any means possible.

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<sup>51</sup> Bartholomeusz, “In defense of the Dharma: just war ideology in Buddhist Sri Lanka,” pp. 151-54.



Given this, it was possible in 1976 for the Thai monk Kitti Wuttho to claim: “[Killing communists is not killing persons] because whoever destroys the nation, the religion, or the monarchy, such bestial types are not complete persons. Thus we must intend not to kill people but to kill Māra; this is the duty of all Thai.”<sup>52</sup>

<sup>52</sup> *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism Southeast Asia, and the World*, p. 167.

In addition to using Māra as a justification for killing, Kitti Wuttho also invokes the belief advocated in the *Mahāvamsa* that those opposed to the Thai monarchy are “bestial types” who all Thai have a duty to kill. In modern Sri Lanka we also hear descriptions of the recently ended civil war with the non-Buddhist Tamils as a struggle against Māra. An unnamed Sri Lankan admiral said:

The Buddha waged a successful war against “Māra” to emerge victorious. How did he achieve this? It is by the strength of the mind. The Buddha at all times addressed the mind. If the mind is invincible nothing is impossible.... When speaking of the enemy, the Buddha spoke of Māra – personified by cravings, anger and ignorance. Applied to the situation I am faced with; Māra is terrorism – personified by Prabhakaran of the LTTE [Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam].<sup>53</sup>

And, of course, recourse to Māra as a justification for violence is by no means confined to the Theravāda school, for, when needed, Māra plays a similar role in the Mahāyāna school as well. As early as the sixth century, there were Chinese Buddhists who described their anti-government rebellions as a struggle between Buddha and Māra. Between 509 and 515 monks led four such rebellions against the Northern Wei Dynasty. The largest of these took place in 515 CE under the leadership of the monk Faqing who bestowed the name “Demon Pacifying General” (Ch., *Pingmo Junsi*) on an early follower and unsuccessfully led a total of 50,000 followers against government troops, depicting the struggle as a cosmic battle against Māra.

In this instance, some readers might wish to point out that in these relatively limited incidents Buddhism was *not* used as a tool to support the state. On the contrary, it is possible to argue that Buddhist doctrine manifested a certain “revolutionary” potential. Yet, whether pro-or anti-government, the unchanging factor was the willingness of Buddhist leaders to employ their faith as a justification for taking the lives of others.

A more recent example took place during the Russo-Japanese War (1904-05). Rinzai Zen Master Shaku Sōen, then a Buddhist chaplain, published his diary in 1904 with the title of *Diary of Subjugating Demons* (J. *Gōma Nisshi*). Micah Auerback describes a section of its content as follows:

In our world, Sōen dilated, the demon king Māra is personified by none other than Imperial Russia, seeking to swallow up the entire

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<sup>53</sup>This unnamed Sri Lankan admiral is quoted in *The Island Online*.



globe and to plunge it into darkness. Thus, he contended, “we must call [this conflict, i.e., the Russo-Japanese War] not just a great just war in this world, but rather a full-fledged great battle to subjugate demons throughout the [entire] cosmos.”<sup>54</sup>

Finally, it can be said that Māra has now crossed the wide Pacific Ocean and found a receptive home within U.S. Buddhism, once again providing a justification for destroying evil. For example, we find Lt. Jeanette Yuinen Shin, the first Buddhist chaplain in the U.S. military, invoking Māra in support of American Buddhist soldiers and the country’s wars. On Friday, May 28, 2010 Lt. Shin issued the following proclamation in commemoration of America’s Memorial Day:

This year’s Vesak observance, i.e., the remembrance of Lord Buddha’s Birth, Enlightenment, and Parinirvana, occurs closely to our Memorial Day observance. On both occasions, this is a time for the remembrance of deeds that provided for our Emancipation from suffering. *The Buddha’s final victory over Māra*, and our military veterans who gave the “last full measure” so that we may have freedom today... American Buddhists have fought in the wars of this nation, and Buddhist families have lost sons and daughters in our wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. They have also given the “last full measure,” no different from any other citizen of this Nation.<sup>55</sup> (Italics mine)

Nor should readers imagine that Lt. Shin is alone in justifying killing in the name of Buddhism in the U.S. military. Additionally, we have the testimony of U.S. Army Buddhist chaplain, 2nd Lt. Somya Malasri, a former Thai monk who voluntarily disrobed to enter the military. Lt. Malasri states:

“A lot of people ask if a Buddhist can be a Soldier because the first precept is no killing,” said Malasri. “The answer is yes. You can protect yourself or sacrifice yourself to do the righteous thing. You can sacrifice yourself to protect your country because *if there’s no country, there’s no freedom and you cannot practice your religion*. In Bud-

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<sup>54</sup>Auerback, “A Closer Look at Zen at War,” in Vladimir Tikhonov and Torkel Brekke, eds., *Buddhist and Violence*, p. 158.

<sup>55</sup>Lt. Shin’s proclamation is posted on her website, the “Buddhist Military Sangha.” Available on the Web at: [http://buddhistmilitarysangha.blogspot.jp/2010\\_05\\_01\\_archive.html](http://buddhistmilitarysangha.blogspot.jp/2010_05_01_archive.html) (accessed August 17, 2013).

dhism, if you go to war and kill others, it's your duty, not your intention to kill other people. If a person dies of your intention, and you have anger, that is wrong in Buddhism. *When Soldiers go to war, they don't have any intention to kill others and they don't have hatred in their minds.*"<sup>56</sup>

In Lt. Malasri's emphasis on "intention" we hear an echo of the Dalai Lama's similar position. That said, the common thread that unites all of the quotations related to killing in defense of the Dharma is that Buddhism and the state form one indivisible whole, therefore defending, killing or dying for one is the same as for the other. If fighting for "God and country" has a long and inglorious history in Christianity, among other Abrahamic faiths, it is clearly present in Buddhism as well.

## Conclusion

As revealed above, Buddhism clearly has a long historical connection to violence despite the non-violent teachings of its founder. Further, this connection, as noted below, continues to the present day. Nevertheless, it cannot be stressed too strongly that similar "violence enabling mechanisms" are found in all of the world's major faiths albeit with different names. In the case of Buddhism, both praxis such as *samādhi* power or sutra recitation and doctrines like karma, rebirth, compassion, selflessness and defense of the Dharma have long been used to justify Buddhist involvement in violence and warfare, many passively and some actively. And the list presented in this article is far from exhaustive.

As noted above, this article has relied heavily on examples from wartime Japan to illustrate violence-enabling mechanisms in Buddhism. One obvious reason, as previously alluded to, is the author's expertise in the field of Japanese Buddhism. However, inspiration to look closely at Buddhism in wartime Japan also came from William James in his book, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*:

We learn more about a thing when we view it under a microscope, as it were, or in its most exaggerated form. This is as true of religious phenomena as of any other kind of fact. The only cases likely to be profitable enough to repay our attention will therefore be cases where the religious spirit is unmistakable and extreme.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup>Ibid. (Italics mine)

<sup>57</sup>James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 48.

In light of the material presented above, the author is confident that most readers would agree that “the religious spirit is unmistakable and extreme” in the wartime pronouncements of Japanese Buddhist leaders. Nevertheless, Buddhism in wartime Japan is but one example of a much broader phenomenon. This is demonstrated, among other things, by the role played by the leaders of the Sri Lankan *sangha* in supporting the Sinhalese military during the course of the recently concluded civil war, invoking the pan-Buddhist pretext of defending the Buddha Dharma. This is not to mention the contemporary involvement of some Sri Lankan monks in the postwar and ongoing suppression of the Muslim minority in that country.

And, of course, there is the far stronger, sometimes lethal, oppression of the Muslim minority now taking place in Myanmar, including the direct involvement of Burmese monks. When the monk Wirathu was asked how he reconciles the peaceful teachings of his faith with the anti-Muslim violence spreading across Myanmar, he replied: “In Buddhism, we are not allowed to go on the offensive, but we have every right to protect and defend our community.”<sup>58</sup> Further, during his Dharma talks to the laity, he typically requests his audience to repeat after him, “I will sacrifice myself for my Bamar race.”<sup>59</sup>

For monks like Wirathu, faith, race, and nation are one indissoluble whole in which defending the “community,” i.e., the Bamar racial majority, is paramount.



<sup>58</sup>Beech, “The Buddhist Face of Terror,” *Time Magazine*, July 1, 2013.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid.

In concluding this article, the author can easily imagine that there are many readers who identify with Buddhism that may wish to either deny or somehow explain away the examples that have been presented in this article. There may even be those who wish to, figuratively at least, “shoot the messenger” for presenting a message they did not wish to hear or acknowledge. Sadly, neither ignorance nor neglect of this problem will lead to the disappearance of violence by those calling themselves Buddhists. That said, it is the author’s deepest wish that those who identify themselves as Buddhists will speak out in opposition to the abuse of Buddhist doctrines and praxis that facilitate the existence of violence-enabling mechanisms.

Equally, it is the author’s hope that the faithful of all of the world’s major religions will similarly oppose those violence-enabling mechanisms that exist in their own faith. The Jesuit peace activist Daniel Berrigan noted what happens when religious adherents fail to speak out:

Everybody has always killed the bad guys. Nobody kills the good guys. The [Roman Catholic] Church is tainted in this way as well. The Church plays the same cards; it likes the taste of imperial power too. This is the most profound kind of betrayal I can think of. Terrible! Jews and Christians and Buddhists and all kinds of people who come from a good place, who come from revolutionary beginnings and are descended from heroes and saints. This can all be lost, you know. We can give it all up. And we do. Religion becomes another resource for the same old death-game.<sup>60</sup>

Applied to Buddhism, Berrigan’s words suggest that until, *and unless*, the dark side of Buddhism is both admitted and directly addressed, Buddhism will remain, like the world’s other major faiths, yet “another resource for the same old death-game.”

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<sup>60</sup>Quoted in Daniel Berrigan and Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Raft is not the Shore*, p. 34.

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