

Journal of Buddhist Ethics
ISSN 1076-9005
<http://blogs.dickinson.edu/buddhistethics>
Volume 19, 2012

*Imperial-Way Zen: Ichikawa Hakugen's Critique and
Lingering Questions for Buddhist Ethics*

Reviewed by Douglas Ober

University of British Columbia
dfo@interchange.ubc.ca

Copyright Notice: Digital copies of this work may be made and distributed provided no change is made and no alteration is made to the content. Reproduction in any other format, with the exception of a single copy for private study, requires the written permission of the author. All enquiries to:
cozort@dickinson.edu

A Review of *Imperial-Way Zen: Ichikawa Hakugen's Critique and Lingering Questions for Buddhist Ethics*

Douglas Ober¹

Imperial-Way Zen: Ichikawa Hakugen's Critique and Lingering Questions for Buddhist Ethics. By Christopher Ives. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009, x + 274 pages, ISBN 978-0-8248-3331-2 (hardcover), US \$52.00.

In recent years, a number of important studies have addressed the fact that the popular and essentialist view of Buddhism as a passive, peace-fostering religious tradition belies its historical and cultural complexity. When facing such situations as the ninth century Buddhist monk dPal gyi rDo rje's assassination of the Tibetan King gLang Dar ma, the tale of a Bodhisattva's "compassionate killing" in the *Upāyakauśalya-sūtra*, or the more recent proclamation by the Thai Buddhist monk Phra Kittivuddho that "the killing of Communists is not demeritorious" (*khā khommunit mai bāp*), both scholars and practitioners of Buddhism have had to confront Buddhism's sometimes ambiguous and disheartening involvement with violent behavior. Christopher Ives's *Imperial-Way Zen: Ichikawa Hakugen's Critique and Lingering Questions for Buddhist Ethics* is a further contribution to this recent critical turn.

The fundamental question that runs through *Imperial-Way Zen* is, how did Zen, a religious tradition supposedly intent on liberating people

¹ University of British Columbia. Email: dfo@interchange.ubc.ca

from the ego and its entanglements in such things as political affairs and violence, come to actively support and even glorify Japanese imperialism and violence in what is known in East Asia as the Fifteen-Year War (1930–1945)? Ives’s delicate yet critical reflection on this question emerges through a sustained discussion of the life and work of Ichikawa Hakugen (1902–1986), the Zen priest, professor and activist who was also the foremost critic of so-called “Imperial-Way Zen” (*kōdō zen*). Over several decades, Ichikawa was insistent that Japanese Buddhism acknowledge its support for the war, and he sought to understand the precise relationships between Japanese militarism and Zen Buddhist ideology and practice that made it possible.

Chapter one, titled “Useful Buddhism, 1868–1945,” summarizes the historical developments that took place in Japan from the time of the Meiji Restoration through the end of the Second World War. Here, Ives focuses on the relations between a myriad of Buddhist institutions and the Japanese state, describing how, after undergoing severe state persecution during the early Meiji period (1868–1872), and in an effort to distance itself from the recently discredited Tokugawa government, Buddhism was reinvented as a modernizing force. This “New Buddhism” (*Shin Bukkyō*), as it came to be known, was seen as “socially useful.” That is, it pursued a variety of social service projects, supported the Emperor through nation-building activities, and projected itself as universally appealing and compatible with a modern, scientific world. In essence, New Buddhism, alongside Confucianism, Shinto, and other nationalistic ideologies, presented itself as a positive and worthy contribution to the body of the Japanese state—the *kokutai*—and the glory of the Imperial-Way (44–50).

In chapters two and three, Ives introduces the reader to Ichikawa’s critique of the causes of Imperial-Way Zen. Ichikawa’s focus is two-fold: On the one hand, he emphasizes Japanese Mahāyāna Buddhist metaphysics and philosophy, and on the other, the sociological and historical aspects of Zen as a lived religious tradition. Regarding the

former, Ichikawa understands Zen as recommending in all circumstances—including extreme ones, such as warfare—that one should separate oneself from the agitated mind, passively accept one's place in life, and ultimately cultivate a "peace of mind" (*anjin*) that is independent of circumstance. In other words, Zen Buddhists are expected to simply "accept things as they are" and "seek mental peace." In Ichikawa's view, this orientation is a product of Zen's historical genesis in the world of crumbling kingdoms and the social turmoil that marked China in the sixth through eighth centuries. For Ichikawa, the tradition that emerged out of this chaos was a "centralized despotic feudal system," coupled with "a Chinese-style, non-doctrinal, practice-oriented Buddhism that provides a simple and direct path to peace of mind in everyday life through accordance with experiential facts" (56-57). The historical emphasis on "according with circumstances," and "accommodationism" (*junnō-shugi*) to both societal problems and one's feudal rulers led to the absence in Zen of a genuine social ethic. "Living like the water that takes the shape of whatever vessel into which it is poured," Ives writes, "Zen Buddhists run the risk of succumbing to a kind of flexible, shifting submission that lacks the consistency of principles, convictions, and actions necessary for a critical social ethic" (71).

While the primary focus of these chapters is the elite aspects of Zen doctrine, they also target more conventional Buddhist conceptions such as the role of karma in Japanese society and Zen thought. A number of conservative Zen priests utilized notions of karma in a manner to justify social discrimination, demand obedience to fixed social hierarchies, and even thwart those who wished to criticize conditions of poverty. Some modern Japanese Buddhists, Ives points out, argued against the "evil equality" (*aku-byōdō*) of socialism and Marxism because it contradicted the social basis of karma (86-87). Here, Ives also presents Ichikawa's argument within the larger context of Confucian notions of harmony, tolerance, non-resistance and debt.

In chapter four, the reader is introduced to Ives's own explanation for what stimulated Zen's involvement in Japanese imperialism. Ives rightly acknowledges that the "grandiose rhetoric about the trans-historical dimension of the Dharma has served to obfuscate the historical record and precluded close analysis of the Dharma *in history*" (100). Ives seeks data in the historical record, and in doing so, comes to criticize Brian Victoria (another prominent scholar and critic of Zen militarism) for his argument that the connection between Zen and *bushidō*, or the warrior code in samurai society, was the reason for Imperial-Way Zen. Ives contends that *bushidō* was "a construct readily available when Zen leaders sought an ex post facto justification for that support" (102), but that this position ultimately fails to take into account other social and political factors. Ives's fundamental argument is that Zen's involvement in the war effort was an extension of the traditional symbiosis between the Buddhist establishment and Japanese political elites. In particular, he focuses on the terminology of "Buddhism for the protection of the realm" (*gokoku Bukkyō*) and "protecting the Dharma, protecting the realm" (*gohō gokoku*) to demonstrate this continuity. Drawing on a wide range of critical theorists, such as Ernest Renan, Benedict Anderson, Ernest Gellner, Peter Berger, Émile Durkheim and Eric Hobsbawm, Ives is able to demonstrate how this relationship was shaped in large part by forces particular to early twentieth-century modernity: he argues that Zen support for the Imperial-Way was the result of "institutional self-interest, limited knowledge of the suffering the Japanese military was inflicting on other Asians, a traditional closeness to military leaders, indoctrination through the imperial education system, and by extension a good measure of patriotism as fully socialized Japanese citizens" (127).

Chapter five examines the question of war responsibility and the various positions Japanese Buddhists have maintained towards the war since 1945. Ives notes that in general, postwar historical and social studies texts in Japan largely overlook the Fifteen-Year War, opting instead to present "a largely sanitized view of Japanese history" (146). It

seems that Japanese Buddhists too have been slow to address their wartime responsibility and quick to reconstruct themselves as bastions of peace. Moreover, when institutional declarations of wartime responsibility did arise—beginning only in the late 1980s—it was largely due to outside pressure (*gai'atsu*). Ives concurs with Ichikawa that contemporary Buddhist celebrations of peace and democracy, however, are ultimately incomplete. In order to avoid “becoming ‘wedded’ to the reigning imperial ideology” once again, there needs to be a more sustained intellectual effort to “embrace critical analysis, formulate a set of explicit moral principles, and . . . lay a basis for both critical and constructive ethics” (186).

The last two chapters are dedicated to outlining some potential avenues for the creation of a genuine Zen social ethic. Chapter six returns again to Ichikawa and his own reflections on possible Zen Buddhist ethics. At a slim ten pages, however, this chapter only begins to introduce the reader to Ichikawa’s notion of “origin humanism” and “*sūnya*-anarchism-communism.” The brevity of this chapter is an unfortunate consequence of the fact that after constructing his basic ideas, Ichikawa “never fleshed them out into a systematic ethic” (166). Ives attempts to pick up where Ichikawa left off with his own exploration of a possible Zen social ethic. Quite poignantly, he critiques the idea put forth by eminent figures like D. T. Suzuki and Abe Masao that an insight into emptiness “automatically causes one to feel profoundly the suffering of others and to act reflexively to alleviate it” (172). Instead, he suggests that this desire to help others is derived more from texts and sermons on the importance of compassion, non-violence, and detachment than from the wisdom (*konponchi*) of *prajñā*. He also offers the interesting critique that it is not that Zen does not possess a social ethic of well-being and compassion, but rather that it “offers few specifics.” Buddhist compassion, he writes, is “a kind of ‘theological virtue,’ which, like the traditional Christian theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity (or love), orients a Zen Buddhist’s feeling and volition but leaves a void insofar as the construct of compassion gives little

specific guidance, especially when one dives into the chaotic, complex, and murky waters of politics, nationalism, and international relations” (175). Here, Ives is at his best, but unfortunately, he does not go much beyond this, leaving the reader wishing for more . . . perhaps a future text on what the specifics of Zen social ethics would look like or how it would be put into practice.

As a whole, *Imperial-Way Zen* is an excellent piece of scholarship and its well-written and lucid style makes it accessible to non-specialists. There is little to criticize. This is a sophisticated and thought-provoking reflection on Japanese Buddhist ethics and Zen militarism, but those readers looking for a detailed social history of Japanese Zen during the Fifteen-Year War will be disappointed. The text focuses on Japanese elites and intellectual thought, and only provides hints as to the degree to which these ideologies and figures actually influenced and permeated popular practice and belief. Ives rightfully acknowledges the difficulties in answering these questions (103-105, 125-126). Given this, it is curious that one of his own primary criticisms of Ichikawa and Victoria is that they emphasized the metaphysics and epistemology of Zen rather than its institutional relationships (101-102). This, of course, has been a major challenge to studies of Buddhism in general: the ability to balance lofty philosophy in light of ground-level social practice. *Imperial-Way Zen*, like Ichikawa’s own works then, is primarily an analysis of ethics and ideologies, but this is, to a large degree, what makes it such a fascinating and stimulating monograph.