

**Religion and War**  
**A Study of Wartime Japan**

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### A Study of Wartime Japan

In order to establish eternal peace in East Asia, arousing the great benevolence and compassion of Buddhism, we are sometimes accepting and sometimes forceful. We now have no choice but to exercise the benevolent forcefulness of "killing one in order that many may live (issatsu tasho)."<sup>1</sup>

This quotation comes from a statement made by Hayashiya Tomojiro and Shimakage Chikai in 1937 as a response to Chinese Buddhist protests against their book, *The Buddhist View of War (Bukkyo no Senso Kan)*. Contrary to the popular understanding of Indian and Chinese Buddhist ideas of compassion, this statement goes directly against the principle of non-violence. A strict foundation for all Buddhists is the compassionate spirit. Harming life is a sacrilegious act and is never fully condoned in any popular Buddhist doctrine.<sup>2</sup> During the first forty years of the twentieth century, however, Japanese Buddhist monks, priests, and their orders joined the national fervor of Japan's aggressive imperialism. Many sincerely believed

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<sup>1</sup> Hayashiya Tomojiro, and Shimakage Chikai, Bukkyo no Senso Kan. Tokyo: Daito Shuppansha, 1937.

<sup>2</sup> The doctrines referred to are the various Indian, Chinese, and Japanese texts that describe Mahayana Buddhism and compassion.

the justification that killing may be necessary for the betterment of all.

How is it possible that the idea of compassion without compromise was manipulated into 'killing is appropriate within certain justifications'? What motivations or conditions forced the change in traditional Buddhist thought? The answer to these questions lies in the development of a syncretism of religious beliefs, government policy, and culture. This paper's purpose is to investigate the nature of the change in Buddhist thought as it applies to the nature of wisdom and compassion, particularly how and why it happened.

Evidence will be given that the change in Buddhist thought was a result of propaganda, oppression, and societal pressures. These efforts were instigated mainly on behalf of the Japanese government initially but came to be incorporated in the theology of the Japanese citizens including Buddhist monks and lay members. To understand how this occurred, a brief review of Japanese Buddhism and Shinto, as well as an overall view of some key points of Japanese history are necessary.

## History of Meiji Era Japan and Key Points of Japanese Culture

Japan has had a long uni-cultural<sup>3</sup> history in comparison to the rest of the world. As an island nation, it has been able to preserve isolationist policies, and yet not succumb to stagnancy. Instead, Japan thoroughly promotes investigation of new ideas. Today, we admire Japan for its rapid growth and adaptability that caused it to become a world power in a matter of a century. Modern Japan has evidently been built on a sturdy foundation of industrial and academic advancement. That foundation commenced with the Meiji era and continued to the present.

At the beginning of the Meiji era, the emperor established a charter oath detailing the expected motion of events for the next half-century. This charter is quite idealistic and seems contrary to the real events of the Meiji era. Nevertheless it is important to understand what the initial thoughts of the new government were. Therefore the five articles are:

1. Councils widely convoked shall be established, and all affairs of State decided by public discussion.

2. All measures, governmental and social, shall be conducted by the united efforts of the governing and the governed.
3. The unity of the imperial and the feudal governments shall be achieved; all the people, even the meanest, shall be given full opportunities for their aspirations and activities.
4. All absurd usages of the old regime shall be abolished and all measures conducted in conformity with the righteous way of heaven and earth.
5. Knowledge shall be sought from all over the world, and thus shall be promoted the imperial polity.<sup>4</sup>

Article numbers four and five are the only articles that assumed full or partial completion. "Measures conducted in conformity with the righteous way of heaven and earth" resulted in strengthening of Shinto practices and attempted abolishment of many areas of Buddhism.

The knowledge referred to in article five was pursued with passion and commitment to ultimately intertwine new ideas with the old. Domestic ideas radically changed to form neoteric<sup>5</sup> thoughts on philosophy, politics, and religion. Some examples of these neoteric deliberations

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<sup>3</sup> Uni-cultural is used to describe a culture with minimal influx of foreign peoples.

<sup>4</sup>Quoted in Anesaki, *History of Japanese Religion*, p. 331.

<sup>5</sup> new

were present in the influences of European philosophers such as Kierkegaard, then later Heidegger and Sartre, as they blended with Buddhist existentialist thought.

Political thought and the possibility of a government and nation without class discrimination sparked the initiation of parties including communist and socialist delegations.<sup>6</sup> These examples are just a few of the ideas with a philosophical nature and do not even include the necessary social and industrial adjustments.

It must be recognized that the social and industrial elements of burgeoning Japan were the primary transformation. Such elements experienced a metamorphosis as society coped with Japan evolving into an expansionist nation geographically and economically. To avoid becoming overwhelmed by foreign assertions of colonization, Japan reached out and assumed a motley identity of technological and social experimentation. The current leaders of the Meiji era knew that in order to survive they must compete on the same level as their foreign counterparts. Japan had begun its forward progression to become technologically and economically contemporary.

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<sup>6</sup> McLaren, Walter. A Political History of Japan During the Meiji Era. New York: Russell & Russell Inc., 1965

Though Japan was at the height of its adaptive period during the Meiji era, it would be wrong to assume that these changes were the first of their kind in Japan. Japan has been a nation devoted to adopting and improving new ideas for at least a thousand and a half years. Chinese Buddhism and Confucianism are two examples of the new ideas that were integrated into the culture. They were integrated so fully that to be Japanese today requires participation in cultural and social rules founded on these two religious traditions. Along with the native religion of Shinto, Buddhism and Confucian ideals have become a part of everyday life in ritual and in thought. Examples of these internalized ideals are present in filial piety<sup>7</sup> and a work ethic of 'together for the good of all' which is similar to the Buddhist concept of Buddha nature.<sup>8</sup> Buddha nature is structured upon the concept of oneness of everything. Everything in existence is part of the one and so the above concepts demonstrate similar recognition of the One rather than focus on the individual.

Fundamental to everyday life and ritual practice is the ability to be polytheistic. In Japan, people are allowed the unrestricted practice of more than one

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<sup>7</sup> Filial piety is the loyalty the each person shows to their family.

<sup>8</sup> Buddha-nature will be more thoroughly explained on page 13.



religion. Many Japanese will claim to be Buddhist yet they may also visit Shinto shrines and give offerings to Shinto gods. Religions of Japan are rarely pure in the hearts and minds of the people because to practice one does not mean giving up another. This pattern is undeniably invaluable in defining the reactions of the Japanese people to metamorphoses of belief. In other words, the Japanese people from the beginning have been able to accept varied developments in their religion and culture. Having an open mind in this particular manner may answer in part why Buddhist doctrine was so radically altered. The primary developers of change, namely the government and subservient theocracies, took advantage of the flexible period of that era to initiate ideas that promoted their way of thinking.

As the meshing of beliefs culminated during the Meiji era, development of Japanese Buddhism and Shinto constituted a modernization of doctrine as well as a tempering of spirit. The tempering and modernization of doctrine was designed to prepare the Japanese people initially for the Japanese-Russo war and continued to apply up until the end of World War Two. The preparation resulted in an outpouring of nationalist tendencies more enthusiastic than Japan had ever experienced before. So efficient was the national spirit that it carried the

Japanese nation to victory in the Japanese-Russo war and continued expansion throughout China. (10)

Nowhere was this modernization of doctrine more evident than in the focus on Shinto as Japan's national religion and foundation for national pride. Doctrinally, Buddhism in Japan was in some instances overlooked or modified to support nationalism and the war effort though not to the extent Shinto experienced. Just prior to World War II,

The government dealt with the major religions, for example, less by challenging their doctrines than by restructuring them under centralized rule. The religious organizations law, enforced in April 1940, placed all denominations and faiths under home ministry, which administered them after November 1940 through its new bureau of religious ceremonies.

Nearly all temples, sect shrines and churches cooperated with the authorities so that they could continue their worship unimpeded<sup>9</sup>.

The actions of the government just prior to World War II were similar to those taken during the early Meiji era with the Buddhist religion. Buddhism was nearly wiped out during the early Meiji era because the government persisted

in attempting to block certain foreign ideas. The persons involved in the blocking were members of the Office of Rites and active believers of National Learning<sup>10</sup>. (20, pg.4) Foreign ideas that went counter to the idea of nation and throne as divine in origin were seen as foreign intrusion and contaminating the pure Japanese culture. To those of the Office of Rites<sup>11</sup>, Buddhism originated in China and therefore should be cleansed from Japan. In the process approximately, 4,500 Buddhist temples and halls were eliminated. (11, pg. 65) Priests were forced to return to lay life when the temples in which they lived were shut down. Those still young enough to fight, age eighteen to forty-five were drafted into the imperial army. As a result of these changes Buddhism in Japan was effectively stunted and traditions held for centuries could have been lost. There is a strong likelihood that this process set the foundation for the upcoming change to Buddhist doctrine and thought. With the Buddhist clergy drafted into the military or without a home, those following in their footsteps may not have had the benefit of normal teaching.

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<sup>9</sup> Thomas R. H. Havens, *Valley of Darkness* p. 68.

<sup>10</sup> National Learning was a Shinto-dominated school of thought that in part believed the notion of nation and throne as divine in origin had become despoiled by foreign intrusion, namely ideas from China such as Buddhism.

In 1872, the government was compelled to reestablish Buddhist members to somewhat similar positions and living conditions they had previously experienced because of multiple riots by Japanese peasants in protest. The previous Office of Rites was abolished and a Ministry of Doctrine was created which was supposed to be responsible for administration over both Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples. The purpose of the Ministry of Doctrine was to propagate the "Great Teaching" according to Brian Victoria in Zen at War. He states that three principles were widely distributed throughout Japan by Doctrinal Instructors<sup>12</sup> appointed by the Ministry of Doctrine. These principles are:

1. The principles of reverence for the national deities and of patriotism shall be observed,
2. the heavenly reason and the way of humanity shall be promulgated,
3. and the throne shall be revered and the authorities obeyed.<sup>13</sup>

Victoria also notes that Buddhist clergy could hold the position of Doctrinal Instructor along with Shinto priests

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<sup>11</sup> The Office of Rites was established by the government to control Shinto practices and at the time remove Buddhist clergy from any roles pertaining to Shinto training.

<sup>12</sup> Doctrinal Instructors were state appointed teachers that traveled to various Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples to pass along the Great Teachings and in other ways support the government.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Anesaki, *History of Japanese Religion*, p. 335.

and scholars of National Learning. Through these Doctrinal Instructors and the principles of the "Great Teaching", the government gained control of Buddhism at the roots where thought and beliefs could be transformed. Though the Great Doctrine<sup>14</sup> was eventually abolished in 1875 due to a harsh reaction from many Buddhist leaders, the government attempts surely had an effect on the people.

At this point in time, harsh reactions of Buddhist leaders were the last bit of opposition directed at the government they could pursue without fearing political backlash. Cooperation with the authorities was expected and demanded in the latter half of the Meiji era. Persecution was a threat that the shrines and temples had to face if they resisted. As a result, few attempted any blatant resistance, though there were some examples of indirect resistance, which will be discussed later.

As noted, governmental policy relied on the collaborative efforts of those in the upper ranks of Buddhist and Shinto shrines and temples to be implemented into the populace. Eventually, the government alone probably would have been able to encourage nationalistic tendencies without religious assistance. Much of the

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<sup>14</sup> Composed of Great Teachings and Ministry of Doctrine.

encouragement would subsist in various forms of propaganda consisting of 'Japan as the ideal nation' and 'leader of ideal change for the rest of the world'. Though such propaganda was used, it would have taken much longer without religious support and ultimately would not have had such wide-ranging affects as it did with the advent of Shinto/Buddhist nationalism.

An important aspect to remember is that Americans and quite a few other countries are accustomed to a nation and government operating within a separation of religion and state. In Japan, religion has always existed as a part of the state, and rulers had even relied on the Shinto religion to justify their right to rule. Buddhism too, was introduced as a state funded religion, and many emperors provided for the building of temples throughout the countryside. Therefore, as a manner of encouraging Japan's expansionist policies and gaining public support for them quickly, religious support was necessary.

### **Buddhist Teachings: An Overview**

In order to understand how much Buddhist doctrine changed or was interpreted differently during the Meiji and

following era, a basic understanding of certain teachings is necessary. The teachings that will be discussed are of the Mahayana Pure Land and Zen traditions, which have several distinctions that will be reviewed. Compassion is important in both traditions though it is valued as the highest concern for a Pure Land Buddhist. The important teachings both Zen and Pure Land Buddhism share are Buddha-nature, the doctrine of no self and the doctrine of emptiness. They all apply in various ways to create a coherent Japanese Buddhist worldview.

The doctrine of no self is at the simplest the rejection of the self or ego. Rejection of the self is not held to be a negative perspective however. Its significance is that one must reject the desires of the self because they will obscure the true reality. Desires may include attachment to self and the surrounding world, pursuing and receiving pleasure, and avoiding pain.

True reality is the idea of Buddha-nature. Buddha-nature can be understood as an entity formed from countless other entities, though they are so intertwined that they can be neither separated nor differentiated. "All is Buddha" is a popular saying that describes this single entity. From the very insignificant pebble in a stream to the great mountain that dwarfs all in its presence, all is

Buddha. People, animals, the environment, and all other physical aspects are one. Each of these singularly seeming examples does not exist independently of one another, except in the definitions we dualistically give them. To recognize this principle of dualism and truly understand it is to be enlightened.

The doctrine of emptiness is the identification of the inherent ignorance we have regarding our dualistic worldview. This worldview is based upon the subject and object distinction. Everything is viewed from how it affects the self. Buddhists believe that the notions of subject and object are empty and do not reflect the true reality because of their fundamental split of the one, Buddha-nature. Ultimately, there is no distinction between you and me and therein can be recognized the definition of Buddha-nature.

The Brahmajala Sutra is an Indian Buddhist text that details ten rules each Buddhist should live by. The first rule is not to kill. (18) Given that this rule is the first of ten, it assumes an impression of being the most important. Interestingly enough, this sutra was of great influence to Japanese Buddhist tradition, particularly in the Tendai and Shingon traditions. (18, pg. 111) Beatrice



Suzuki explains how vigorously the rule of no killing is to be observed:

A son of Buddha with a compassionate mind should think of all men as his father and all women as his mother, for these beings in the past have been his parents [example of Buddha-nature]. If he kills them it is as if he were killing his parents. Even if animals are being killed or suffering, every means should be taken to deliver them. <sup>15</sup>

An important aspect to all Mahayana traditions is the idea of a Bodhisattva. The Bodhisattva is an enlightened individual who, at the instant of attaining Nirvana<sup>16</sup>, turns away to devote himself/herself to saving all others who have not been enlightened. From a theological perspective, Mahayana Buddhists may see that it is their duty to help others become enlightened, possibly through whatever means necessary.

A final characteristic of Buddhists is 'hongaku' or original enlightenment. Original enlightenment means that all are enlightened but through the three poisons<sup>17</sup> their enlightened understanding is obscured. In this special

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<sup>15</sup>Beatrice Suzuki, Mahayana Buddhism: A Brief Outline, p. 112.

<sup>16</sup> Complete and total Enlightenment, true understanding of the surrounding world and reality.

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characteristic all people have within them the ability to become enlightened by overcoming the three poisons.

Two important schools of Mahayana Buddhism are Zen and Pure Land. These schools composed a large number of the Buddhists in Japan during the period of the Meiji era through World War II. Though both originate from similar teachings, there are some fundamental differences. Zen Buddhism teaches that salvation through enlightenment is realized by committing proper moral deeds and meditation. The focus is on the efforts of the individual to reach their goal.

Pure Land Buddhists reach enlightenment by belief and faith in Amida Buddha<sup>18</sup> and his saving grace. By praying to the Bodhisattva to help save and enlighten them, eventually they will attain Nirvana along with Amida Buddha.

India and China developed these concepts of Buddha-nature, emptiness, no self and the Mahayana tradition long before they came to Japan. Though Japanese Buddhists embraced these concepts, they were not free from alteration. The following discussion will recount some history of Buddhism in Japan and how it was integrated within the social and political structure.

## History and Integration of Buddhism into the Japanese Culture

Japanese Buddhism is believed by many uninformed people to be a religion concerned purely with compassion and peace. Naturally this thinking leads to other impressions such as the theory that all Buddhists are anti-war and anti-violence. This belief is by far incomplete, and incompatible with Japanese Buddhism's past. It will become clear that religious doctrine and state policy is rarely separate in Japanese history. Accordingly, proof will be given to support the claim that some forms of Buddhism have had a long history of participating willingly in the defense of the state. Zen Buddhism, in particular, was adopted and modified to be a spiritual technique to supplement the warriors' physical training. This modification will help show that Japanese interpretation of Buddhism does not have a past as a religion free from justifying the taking of human life.

As noted earlier, Buddhism has not remained independent from adoption into warrior tradition and politics. The vehicle of the past was the samurai warrior

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<sup>18</sup> Amida Buddha is the first Buddha and Bodhisattva.

class, which integrated Zen Buddhism into their way of life through practicing some traditions while ignoring others. Zen Buddhism's adoption into the Japanese culture was an early link between religion and the military.

One of most important initial guides of this budding religion was the great Zen teacher Eisai. He made two trips to China in his early years during the twelfth century A.D. (12, p. 28) His goal was to return to Japan and encourage Zen to become a more independent religious practice. Though Zen customs had existed in Japan since the seventh century A.D., they were mainly practiced by the Tendai Buddhists. (12) When Eisai returned from China as a Rinzai Zen master, he proceeded to gain the favor of the first Shogun<sup>19</sup> and was granted funds to build a temple. (12, 28) Here is a first example of the initial ties between religion and state. Many years after the building of the first temple, Zen Buddhism had become an established sect, though it still retained relations to the Tendai and esoteric practices.

By the middle of the thirteenth century A.D., Zen Buddhism had been fully adopted by the Samurai warriors and their lords as the religion of choice for several reasons. One such reason was the ritual and repetition of Zen and

its natural tendency toward discipline. (12) Warriors already thought highly of military discipline, so it was not difficult to adopt the necessary determination and pursuit of proper Zen meditation.

Meditation is essential to the practice of Zen Buddhism because it is necessary to clear the mind of hectic thoughts like dualism and attachment. Only then can one hope to attain enlightenment. The Samurai class favored meditation because of its inherent benefits in conflict. A warrior could enhance his skills as a fighter by blocking out thoughts like the consequence of the fight. Such consequences could include his possible death or dismemberment which are thoughts regarding the self, a wrong thought according to the doctrine of no self. Through meditative practices warriors could learn to control their bodies and minds, very important skills when in the heat of battle. Therefore, meditative routines are a second reason for the Samurai to adopt Zen practices.

A third popular aspect of Zen Buddhism was its apparent lack of explicit pomp and ceremony. (12) For a Samurai warrior, life was to be lived with a lack of creature comforts. Further interpretation of this idea is demonstrated by Winston King, the author of Zen and the Way

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<sup>19</sup> The Shogun is a Japanese militant dictator ruling in a form of feudal monarchy.

of the Sword, when he writes, "the very physical context and environment of the Zen monastery and its meditation hall (zendo) appealed to the warrior sensibilities. Like everything about Zen, it was simple spare and natural (this last a tie to Shinto)."<sup>20</sup>

King mentions the tie to Shinto because he believes that it is important to illustrate that Shinto beliefs were not completely replaced by Buddhist practices. An example of the many instances of Buddhist and Shinto complimentary relations appeared in defense of the nation. During early Buddhist times in Japan, Buddhist and Shinto clergy frequently came together to pray for victory when Japan was being attacked. As King describes, preservation of the nation was believed to be first and foremost during the Mongol attacks of the sixteenth century. (12, p.32)

Foreshadowing events of future Japan, the clergy supported the defense of the nation before their respective religions. Nationalism was the first and foremost 'religion' of Japan throughout its checkered history. As will be described and defended later, Shinto was a root religion in Japan's past and fundamental to all further developing religion and polity.

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<sup>20</sup> Winston King, *Zen and the Way of the Sword*, p. 160.

Shinto was not the only religion to have such a great effect on the Japanese Samurai. Confucianism was another religious ideal assumed by Japan from China in the early years of idea exchange. Some may argue that Confucianism is not a religion. However, for the purpose of showing how intimately it is intertwined in other religions and social life in general, it will here be regarded as a belief system similar enough to other religions and therefore referred to as such. That said, Japanese Confucianism was truly inseparable from Buddhism and Shinto.

Confucianism enforced family loyalty and tradition that was a necessary structure of the Samurai/Lord hierarchy. The relationship of the son and his duty to the family in Confucianism reflected the relationship between a Samurai and his Lord. The family was the Samurai's clan and he would do anything to protect and preserve those in it. Comparable to many practices in Confucianism, the samurai occupation was often a family trade passed on from father to son. (12) King explains that the teaching of karmic destiny in Buddhism was a large factor in making killing excusable as a Buddhist:

It should be said in all fairness that many Buddhist warriors did retire to monasteries, in their later years usually, to pursue their spiritual welfare and

in some measure atone for their un-Buddhist conduct in killing their fellow men. But there was an inbuilt factor in Buddhism itself that worked against the teaching that all life, especially human life, is sacred. This was the Buddhist teaching of karmic destiny<sup>21</sup>

To kill and destroy was a Samurai's destiny, and it was necessary for him to attempt to kill the best he knew how. As King implies, Samurai were often remorseful of their fate. However, believing that their fate was predetermined along with the pressures of a Confucian ethic, the Buddhist Samurais' belief that life was sacred was overpowered.

It is important to note that Karmic destiny is a fundamental notion of the Hindu faith and not native to Japan. Most likely such notions of karmic destiny did not escape the attention of Buddhists who traveled to India and China to discover more concerning the origins of the Buddhist faith. Karmic destiny is one more concept that could have been appropriated by Japan that fit the notion of duty and servitude.

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<sup>21</sup>Winston King, *Zen and the Way of the Sword*, p. 33.



Karmic destiny is not the only reason Zen Buddhist Samurai were encouraged to kill. An argument could also be made that in all practicality, Buddhists would necessarily support defense of the nation (a Shinto ethic) to protect themselves. Not all Buddhists were prepared to die for a moral belief. It would take a great rejection of cultural development, during a period when Buddhism had become overwhelmingly popular, for all Buddhists to change their way of life. It has been verified that throughout Japan's history, the Japanese adopt and incorporate religion, philosophy, and technology rather than replace what has come before. To understand how this has occurred, the religion of Shinto will be analyzed historically to see how it was integrated into the culture and, ultimately, all other belief systems of the Japanese culture.

## Shinto History and Integration into the Japanese Culture

Just as the history of Buddhism was important in understanding the Samurai and previous religious change before the Meiji era and wars of the twentieth century, an

accurate picture of Shinto and its development will be necessary for the claims of this thesis. Shinto development can most easily be divided into three stages of development and change. These stages consist of mythology and cosmology, the divine emperor, and Shinto as a State religion.

To begin, Shinto is a religion that has existed in Japan with its indigenous peoples and has influenced or been influenced by every other major religious institution. Confucianism, Buddhism, Christianity, Taoism and Chinese Dualism have all had an effect on Shinto in some way or another. Specifically, Confucianism, Buddhism, and Christianity in all their various forms have had to integrate with Shinto in order to be accepted by the Japanese people.

The old communal form of religion that was normal in the West two thousand years ago exists in Japan today as a powerful social and religious force. Into this religion the Japanese individual is born; loyalty to its belief and practice is his first qualification as a "good Japanese." It is not his by election; even when he chooses to attach himself to a universal religion like Buddhism or Christianity, the old is ever there as a vital all-pervading influence,

fundamentally conditioning his mentality and conduct and supplying a pattern to which all else must be accommodated.<sup>22</sup>

In the early state of Shinto, worship included animistic and natural practices. Everything animate and inanimate was believed to have a spirit or soul and as such, was worthy of being worshipped. Gods of Shinto were those that came from mythological beginnings and often were represented as controlling natural events like the sun, wind, or rain. The Japanese word for the sacred, powerful, mysterious, or superior was "kami". "Kami" described the deity spirit in all living and non-living things. "Kami" is the basis for the Shinto religion and was fundamental in understanding the cosmology of the world.

It is important to note that the shrines of early Shinto were simple and had only symbolic representations. There was little institution and unique practices were created by the family worship of "kami". Tradition became important naturally as the care of shrines was passed down by generations of the family. Later, when state Shinto was developed shrines and tradition would become extremely elaborate and unoriginal.

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<sup>22</sup> D.C. Holtom, *Modern Japan and Shinto Nationalism*, p. 2.

Early Japan was divided into clans or families and often each would have its own deity that was considered superior to all. After the Yamoto clan assumed control of most of Japan, the Sun Goddess became the top deity to be worshipped by everyone. At this point there was an imperial family that was established by the Yamoto clan and the emperor placed at its head was believed to receive his powers from the Sun Goddess. This was the beginning of the stage of the Divine Emperor. The idea of a family or clan never left the Japanese people when the emperor assumed power.

He (the emperor) is regarded as a living kami, loved and revered by the nation above all things on earth, and himself loving and protecting the nation, who are deemed sons of Kami-nagara ("the gods themselves") and are entrusted to his care by the kami...Thus Shinto (doctrine of the kami) is kundo (doctrine of the Emperor), for Shintoism is Miadoism; "the kami's will is the Emperor's will" is a maxim inscribed on the heart of every Japanese.<sup>23</sup>

The Divine Emperor was believed to be the direct link for the new nation of Japan to the Sun Goddess, the most powerful of deities. As such, he ruled from a position of

Divine Right and throughout Shinto's history has been seen as a descendent of those created by the first deities. As a result of this form of ruling, the emperor gradually became recognized as almost a deity in likeness.

Capitalizing on this theme, the government of Meiji era Japan used propaganda to encourage deifying of the emperor and adopted Shinto as a state religion and object of nationalism.

The third and last stage Shinto has participated in is the form of a nationalistic state religion. During the Meiji era, the government reinstalled the notion of a divine emperor. Previously, the emperor had lost most of his significance and power to the Shoguns and military dictators who had ruled from the ninth to the nineteenth century. During this period Shinto also lost most of its popularity.<sup>24</sup> According to William K. Bunce, "Shinto was so overshadowed by Buddhism and absorbed so completely into the Buddhist system that it was engaged in a constant struggle for survival."<sup>25</sup> Shinto's reemergence as a powerful state religion caused a role reversal for Buddhism and the result was a much less powerful Buddhist institution. Ultimately, ties between Shinto and the state

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<sup>23</sup> Kunitake Kume, "Shinto," in *Fifty Years of New Japan*, II. London, 1910 p. 30.

<sup>24</sup> Bunce, William, *Religions in Japan*. Tokyo, 1955

lessened any political sway Buddhism may have had. Typically Buddhists attempted to stay away from politics and in the past they had not even needed to participate because the government naturally provided for and encouraged Buddhist practices. (7)

### Reasons for Supporting War

We have discussed the history of Japan, the religions of Buddhism and Shinto, and finally those who participated in supporting certain wars must be examined. Their thoughts and ideas regarding the place of religion in war and government are often contrary to the incontrovertible concepts of compassion and wisdom. More to the point, what can make a Buddhist priest dedicated to the precepts of Mahayana Buddhism believe that killing 'for the good of all' is reasonable? Shinto has shown itself to be a powerful motivator in molding the beliefs of such priests, however, there were those who argued from a Buddhist perspective with their evidence arising out of the Dharma<sup>26</sup>.

All is empty, say the Buddhists. Life and death do not exist for there is no self. Since all are part of the

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> The Dharma is the Buddhist word for the doctrine (encompasses all Buddhist teachings).

whole, giving one's life to the whole is perfectly acceptable and even reasonable. These are examples often used to justify killing and allowing oneself to be killed without remorse. The Japanese State was seen as the whole and devotion to it was to be unquestioned. By assimilation of the individual into the whole, Japanese State, the concept of no-self was realized. A unique example to the Japanese military was the concept of a "kamikaze"<sup>27</sup> attack. This attack was designed during the end of World War II to kill or destroy as much of the enemy as possible. The honorable death became worshiped as the greatest possible justification for ending one's life. The argument given is not one that traditional Buddhists would accept. However, there were those who promoted this way of thought to ease the task of killing or dying.

In the past, propaganda played a crucial role in helping soldiers to forget or ignore that they are killing other human beings. The United States, Germany, Russia and Japan have often used caricatures to depict the enemy as uncivilized, violent, immoral, or even evil throughout wars of the twentieth century. Racial or cultural slurs are popularized to dehumanize the enemy in the eyes of the

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<sup>27</sup> A "kamikaze" attack usually involved a suicide death by guiding some weapon of destruction such as a warplane or torpedo into an enemy ship, installation, or other important target.

nation's people. The propaganda's principle form and purpose is similar to the defense some Buddhists gave above. If there is no self and all is empty, it is necessary to question what the purpose of life may be. Some answer that the doctrine Buddha Nature defends the giving of one's life for the benefit of all.

Unsurprisingly, of the many Japanese Buddhist supporters of the various wars, the staunchest were the practitioners of Zen Buddhism. Zen Buddhist history has shown to be particularly involved in violence within the Samurai context, although during the twentieth century, the Samurai class had largely disappeared. In their place was introduced a modern military built upon foreign samples though possessing a somewhat different ideology. Loyal to the emperor and supported by religion, Japan's modern military could be compared to the will and fervor of those who participated in the Christian crusades.

One argument for the purpose of a military is the defense of a nation. Many Buddhists believed that the practicality of a military was necessary to protect their nation. It is easy to assume that many Buddhists will ignore the threat of death or extinction from a conquering nation in favor of respecting and embracing ultimate compassion. Buddhists, however, are people nonetheless,



and quite a few may fear death for themselves or their nation. This is not to say that all Japanese Buddhists fear death and in the case of Buddhist soldiers death became twisted into an ultimately selfless act. Though this appears to be a contradiction, human nature is rife with them so it is possible that some believed and taught different things at the same time. As long as one is not doing the dying, death may seem much nobler.

Revisiting the concept of Buddha Nature, one may believe that once the self has merged with the nation, then self-preservation becomes state preservation. With this in mind, the great effort to create excuses for the killing in defense of the nation is understandable. Combine the power of nationalist spirit with the natural feeling of self-preservation and there will be Buddhists who support the war and the government in its military actions.

The problem of defense of the nation versus the expansion into foreign territories remains unsolved. To resolve this issue, several Buddhist scholars and priests adopted the principle that expanding Japan was for the benefit of all. Japanese nationalism and spirit was taken to such extent that all neighboring nations like China were to be included in Japan's greatness. The idea of "benefit of all" was expanded to include nations other than Japan

and it became the duty of the Japanese people's to bring about the expansion. A necessary follow-up to these nationalistic ideas is an excursion into who popularized them. Who were these Zen and other Buddhist practitioners who preached for the benefit of the government and Japanese nation? These people will be exposed in the following remainder of the paper.

### Those Who Supported War: Three Individuals and Their Perspectives

If we look at this [unified relationship between religion and the state] from the point of view of international morality, we see that the purpose of maintaining soldiers and encouraging the military arts is not to conquer other countries or deprive them of their rights or freedom. Rather they are done only to preserve the existence of one's country and prevent it from being enroached upon by unruly heathens.<sup>28</sup> (20, p.24)

According to Brian Victoria in Zen at War, D.T. Suzuki wrote the above with several fundamental precepts in mind. This particular point proves the need for a standing

military and what its reaction it should take if the nation is threatened. Victoria also summarizes several more of Suzuki's thoughts in five separate points: "(1) Japan has the right to pursue its commercial and trade ambitions as it sees fit." Such pursuit was an important measure during the Meiji era for Japan was in the process of extensive economic development. "(2) Should 'unruly heathens' (jama gedo) of any country interfere with that right, they deserve to be punished for interfering with the progress of all humanity." Victoria displays here the Japanese ideal of one nation built upon many nations, imperialism at its best. "(3) Such punishment will be carried out with the full and unconditional support of Japan's religions, for it is undertaken with no other goal in mind than to ensure that justice prevails." According to this statement, religions have no reason to object to military actions as long as they are designed to further justice. "(4) Soldiers must, without the slightest hesitation or regret, offer up their lives to the state in carrying out such religion-sanctioned punishment." Sacrificing life in this way is often thought to be the Zen ideal according to Suzuki and others. "(5) Discharging one's duty to the state on the battlefield is a religious act." By making

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<sup>28</sup> D.T. Suzuki, Shin Shukyo Ron in Vol. 23, Suzuki Daisetsu Zenshu, pp. 139-40.

war and its process a religious act, soldiers are pious in fulfilling their purpose. (20, p. 25)

Suzuki was an obvious supporter of war to some degree but even more fervent was his Zen master Shaku Soen. Soen was involved in the Japanese-Russo war effort in a more personal way. He went to war with the First Army Division as a Buddhist chaplain. Chaplains could have objected to the war in theory, yet still be compelled to help the soldiers from a compassionate position. However, Soen had two very different reasons for aiding the soldiers. First, he wanted to test his faith by experiencing horror of the battlefield. If after observing the slaughter of human beings his trust in the righteousness of the war was not deterred, then he would continue his support with renewed and strengthened faith.

His second reason relates to the outcome of the first objective. Should his faith be reinforced, then Soen wanted to encourage the soldiers that the war effort they were also participating in was noble. Soen's reasoning is best defended through his own words.

I wished to convince them [soldiers] of the truths that this war is not a mere slaughter of their fellow-beings, but that they are combating an evil, and that at the same time, corporeal annihilation really means

a rebirth of [the] soul, not in heaven, indeed but here among ourselves. I did my best to impress these ideas upon the soldiers' hearts.<sup>29</sup>

Soen goes on to say that war is a great evil but it is necessary to combat the evil and injustice in the world. The Japanese-Russo war was currently being fought and Soen most likely wrote in response to the Russian aggression and occupation of certain parts of China. China was believed to be the impoverished brother to Japan, who had recently become economically and industrially powerful. The Japanese government wanted to expand Japanese territory and could, by claiming that they were protecting China, oust Russians out of Chinese land assume it as their own. In this way, an aggressive action could be defended as a police action both politically and religiously.

War is an evil and a great one, indeed. But war against evils must be unflinchingly prosecuted till we attain the final aim. In the present hostilities, into which Japan has entered with great reluctance, she pursues no egotistic purpose, but seeks the subjugation of evils hostile to civilization, peace, and enlightenment. She deliberated long before she took up arms, as she was aware of the magnitude and

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<sup>29</sup> Brian Victoria, *Zen at War*, p. 26.

gravity of the undertaking... a price paid in streams of blood and by the sacrifice of many thousands of living bodies... Were it not for the consolation that these sacrifices are not brought for an egotistic purpose, but are an inevitable step toward the final realization of enlightenment, how could I, poor mortal, bear these experiences of a hell let loose on earth.<sup>30</sup>

Japan attempted to further their interests in China well into World War Two. Consequently, operations included producing hundreds of thousands of soldiers from the outset of the Japanese-Russo War. Until now, the views of an academic Buddhist and a Zen master have been discussed but little has been said concerning a Buddhist practicing soldier.

Sugimoto Goro was a soldier who fought in China for a number of years before the advent of World War Two. Highly decorated and a passionate crusader of the proper attitude towards religion and state, he was venerated among the military and the government. Goro was not only a soldier but also a Zen Buddhist practitioner who wrote about a soldier's duty and the way in which he should serve. As

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

will be shown, Goro was a perfect result of the state Shinto shaping of the Japanese people.

As discussed earlier Shinto doctrine was based upon the emperor at the top of a hierarchy appointed by the gods. To devote oneself to the emperor and his decrees was a proper act. Sugimoto Goro focused much of his writing on this principle and held the emperor to be near godlike. Worship of the emperor was a logical measure for Goro and he borrowed several tenets of Buddhist thought to reinterpret how one should practice Zen if not all Buddhism.

The destruction of attachment of self to various fixations is recognized as fundamental to achieving enlightenment. However, the destruction of attachment to self in non-altered Buddhist thought is not the destruction of self. Some had come to believe that attachment to self was synonymous with self-preservation. Fear of death meant that one had not let go. To not fear death would in many cases, be important in a soldier's profession. Thus Goro purported sacrificing oneself selflessly for the emperor was of the highest form of devotion and worship fulfilling both Shinto and Buddhist ideals. In the following words Goro expresses how easy it is to avoid attachment to self and worries concerning death.

Warriors who sacrifice their lives for the emperor will not die. They will live forever. Truly, they should be called gods and Buddhas for whom there is no life or death...Where there is absolute loyalty there is no life or death. Where there is life and death there is no absolute loyalty. When a person talks of his view of life and death, that person has not yet become pure in heart. He has not yet abandoned body and mind. In pure loyalty there is no life or death. Simply live in pure loyalty!<sup>31</sup>

Goro tackles the idea of fear of death above by stating, "Warriors who sacrifice their lives for the emperor will not die. They will live forever." If this were to be believed, then fear of death becomes a moot point. Further observation of the Goro's words reveals the Shinto ideal of loyalty to the emperor is combined with the Buddhist ideal of existing as part of the one. Life and death become irrelevant because one is performing out a pure action, free from attachments, in the form selfless devotion. Obviously, the Buddhist ideal has become perverted but the message is clear. Interpretation of Buddhist thought has been united with Shinto nationalism

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid. p. 121.



for the purpose of religious justification of political ideals.

## **The Motivations or Conditions That Forced the Change in Traditional Buddhist Thought**

It is obvious that the motivations for change in Buddhist thought are a result of interference of the Japanese government. However, the change in doctrine was not the first example of its type as evidenced by Zen and Samurai. The government initiated these changes through a policy of persecution and support of Shinto as an insider, yet also as a competitor. The government also placed religion under its control several times throughout the Meiji and following eras. Government controls took the form of the Office of Rites, Ministry of Doctrine, Great Teachings, and also just prior to World War II, placed religions under the authority of the home Ministry.

The conditions involved for the transformations of doctrine were several wars and expansionistic tendencies. Actually, these conditions could also be listed as motivations of the government. Those Buddhists who supported the government would be inclined to defend it

more rigorously during a time of apparent turmoil, war for example.

Another motivation for change in traditional Buddhist thought was the development of change in Japan throughout the Meiji era. Buddhism, Shinto, and religion in general are a part of the Japanese culture. As the people changed, the religions did as well. Adaptation is one of Japan's greatest accomplishments and religions were no exceptions. Syncretistic practices are prominent in Japanese history as first secular Shinto, then Buddhism, and finally state Shinto were implemented into the culture and refined for several purposes. These purposes were at the most basic level religious practice, military superiority, and political aspirations.

An important condition relevant to doctrinal change was the great persecution Buddhism suffered during the Meiji era as detailed by the closing of Buddhist temples and conscription of priests. In this manner, the government was able to control Japanese Buddhist practitioners most thoroughly. After members of the theocracy were allowed to hold positions like Doctrinal Instructors, the government could place those priests considered most favorable into positions of support.

## What Were the Changes to Buddhist Doctrine: A Comparison

Those important doctrines of Mahayana Buddhists, which were modified or transformed to support the war effort, were the doctrine of emptiness, no self, and Buddha-nature. The doctrine of emptiness was, of course, recognition of a currently dualistic worldview, which was able to disappear when some Japanese Buddhists tied the individual to the state through practicing the doctrine of no self. They did this specifically by giving up the individual self for the self/soul of the nation.

Buddha Nature was also involved in this reinterpretation. The Japanese State became the One and therefore one should dedicate oneself to it. Also, another more global aspect developed from the idea of Buddha Nature. Japan became the nation that would lead the world to right mind and rid it of suffering, evil, etc. Therefore, it was not only for the good of Japan but for the best interests of the world that Japan continued expansionist wars. (20)

## Resistance to War and Maneuverings of the Japanese Government: A Brief Synopsis

Though Sugimoto Goro is an apparent zealot reflecting what many believed, not all Japanese people agreed with Japan's new initiative and directives. There seem so few people who resisted openly during Japan's war efforts that one must wonder what caused them to refrain from prominent outrage at Japan's aggression or development in government. An important reason that people did not object to the government was because of the severe punishment they would receive. In 1928 on March 15, over a thousand people were arrested, because of questionable involvement in antiwar activities.<sup>32</sup> A law called the Peace Preservation Act, created in 1925 allowed the government to arrest and imprisons those who were suspected of participating in seditious activities. This law was blatantly repressive, violating human rights and freedom of expression.<sup>33</sup> By 1928, the law had been revised to sanction the death penalty. If this deterring law wasn't already enough, activist were forced to worry about more than just themselves.

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<sup>32</sup> McLaren, Walter. A Political History of Japan During the Meiji Era. New York: Russell & Russell Inc., 1965

In Japan, the family is respected and revered and to bring negative attention upon it is to shame the entire genealogy. Those who resisted must have been willing to accept the possibility of losing their family's support. If this support structure was to be taken away, it must be replaced by another entity. A political party was an option until the government declared that parties opposing its policy were seditious as evidenced in the Peace Preservation and other acts.

Another possible support structure for many people who resist is a religion. However, no religion could afford to openly deny the government without punishment by restrictive edicts or laws. Religions or sects could also be attacked by the people themselves because they represented a threat to national unity. Christianity in Japan suffered both attacks from the government in the form of negative propaganda and from the people as a result of that brainwashing. Christian believers were more likely to exhibit opposing ideas or actions because they were accustomed to being persecuted as a foreign notion and therefore un-Japanese.

These are only a few likely reasons that there was not a more expansive opposition to the Japanese government's

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

policies. The first proposed thesis for this paper dealt with the idea of supporters and dissenters. After much research on the topic little material was found to exist regarding those who opposed the Japanese government. It is very possible that to date, texts regarding this subject have not been written or translated into English. In the interests of time and lack of fluency in the Japanese language I have chosen to ignore the research into those who resisted the change in Buddhist thought in favor of concentrating on the change itself. I propose that pursuing further research in the area of opposition of the Japanese government should be a course of action for future scholars of the English language.

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