

## ***Samādhi* Power in Imperial Japan**

*Brian Victoria*

### **Abstract**

*Samādhi* and the mental power associated with it form the foundation upon which the Zen school is built. Without *samādhi*, “Zen”, i.e. “meditation”, would become just another “mental health” practice rather than the basis for a profound realization of the true nature of the self. Yet, inasmuch as this long-acknowledged mental power constitutes an indivisible and integral part of *samādhi*, there is the ever-present danger that it can be misused or abused by oneself and/or others. The abuse described in this article, while rooted in premodern Japan, was most clearly visible during the period of Japan’s modern military aggression, beginning with the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95 and extending through Japan’s ultimate defeat in the Asia-Pacific War on August 15, 1945. During this period, *samādhi* power was, among other uses, employed to enhance the meditator’s ability to kill others. This article focuses on the abuse of *samādhi* power within Imperial Japan (1868-1945) with the express hope that once exposed and understood, its abuse will never be repeated.

## Introduction

The distinguished scholar of religion at the University of Chicago, Emeritus Professor Martin Marty, described one aspect of religion as follows:

Positive thinkers and public relations officers for the faiths would repudiate this notion or evade the fact. They want religion to be nothing but gospel, good news. Apologists for the faiths usually minimize the distress that can come with religion or that religion can produce. You will not read about the destructive element in religious impulses in the advertisements for the church of your choice. Yet if the pursuit of truth is still to be cherished as a foundational theme in the academy, one must note the feature of religion that keeps it on the front page and on prime time: it kills. Or if, as the gun lobbies say of weapons—that they do not kill: people do—one must say of religion that if it does not kill, many of its forms and expressions motivate people to kill. Experts on what motivates the scores of wars or, as some would have it, “tribal conflicts.” today know that not only do many belligerent partisans wear names like “Protestant” and “Catholic,” “Shi’ite” and “Sunni”, “Jewish” and “Sikh,” but leaders and followers alike fire on the demonized Other, the enemy, in the name of God or the gods.<sup>1</sup>

In reflecting on Marty’s comments the first thing to note is that while he states that it is “religion” that kills, the examples he provides do not include Buddhism. Why not?

Buddhists, this author among them, would like to believe that Buddhism is the one great exception to the rule that religion kills, for the very first precept both lay and clerical Buddhists commit themselves to observe is “not to kill”. Therefore Buddhists unconditionally pledge not to engage in killing, especially of their fellow human beings. Yet knowledgeable readers know that, unfortunately, this is not true.

Historically speaking, there have been many instances in Buddhism’s long history in Asia where people identifying themselves as Buddhists have not only killed but asserted their deadly actions were in accord with the Buddha *Dharma*. To give but one example, in Chapter Five of the Mahāyāna *Mahāparinirvāṇa*

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<sup>1</sup> Marty, “An Exuberant Adventure: The Academic Study and Teaching of Religion,” p. 14

*Sūtra*, Shākyamuni Buddha is quoted as instructing Bodhisattva Kāśyapa: “The reward for protecting Wonderful Dharma is extremely great and innumerable. O good man! Because of this, those *upāsakas* [laymen] who protect *Dharma* should *take the sword and staff* and protect such a *bhikṣu* [male cleric] who guards *Dharma*.”<sup>2</sup> (Emphasis mine)

However, the focus of this article is not on the larger question of the relationship of Buddhism to violence and/or war. Instead, it looks at just one particular use (or abuse) of Buddhism in Imperial Japan (1868-1945) in support of Japanese aggression in Asia and beyond. It focuses on the employment of meditation-derived *samādhi* power (*zenjō-riki*, 禅定力) in support of war and violence in modern Japan, most especially, but not exclusively, during the Asia-Pacific War (1937-45). In addition, this article addresses the question of whether this use of *samādhi* power can be said to have been a “misuse” or “abuse” of that power.

### ***Samādhi* Defined**

Let us begin with a definition of *samādhi*. *Samādhi* refers to a state of meditative consciousness. The term *samādhi* derives from the Sanskrit root *sam-ā-dhā*, which means 'to collect' or 'bring together' and is often translated as 'concentration' or 'unification of mind'. In early Buddhist texts, *samādhi* is associated with the term *samatha* (calm abiding). In the *suttas* (Skt., *sūtras*), *samādhi* is defined as one-pointedness of mind, a meditative absorption attained through the practice of meditation, i.e. *dhyāna* (Kor. Seon, J. Zen, Ch. Chan).

*Dhyāna*, a core Buddhist practice commonly translated as meditation, is a state of ‘no mind’, referring to a series of cultivated states of mind which lead to a state of perfect equanimity and awareness (*upekkhā-sati-pārisuddhi*). Upon entering into *samādhi*, the mind becomes still, yet totally aware of the present moment: a one-pointedness of mind. As such, *samādhi* also lies at the heart of the last of the eight elements of the Buddhist Noble Eightfold Path.

Because “one-pointedness of mind” is an intrinsic and indivisible part of *samādhi*, the *mental* power produced by this concentrated state of mind is a potent force for understanding the nature of the self in the hands of an experienced meditator. Given their indivisible nature, the terms *samādhi* and *samādhi* power are used interchangeably in this article.

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<sup>2</sup> Yamamoto, Kosho, trans. The *Mahayana Mahaparinirvana Sutra*, Chapter Five, p. 39, available on the Web at: <http://info.stiltij.nl/publiek/meditatie/soetras/mahaparinirvana.pdf>.

### ***Samādhi* Power Weaponized**

For those who have experienced it, *samādhi* is a luminous experience that seems to the meditator to be beyond time and place, though it is definitely not a trance-like experience in which the meditator is transmitted to a supernatural realm. In fact, if anything, the meditator is more fully “present” in the realm of the “here and now” than ever before. Not only that, the meditator has a wonderful sense of “oneness” with his or her surroundings. Thus, the use of anything related to *samādhi* to harm another sentient being, would appear, on the face of it, to be utterly impossible.

Nevertheless, before and during the Asia-Pacific War Japanese Zen leaders, including D. T. Suzuki, often wrote about this meditation-derived mental power, emphasizing the effectiveness of *samādhi* power (*J. jōriki*) in battle. On the military side, one of the first men to write about the importance of *samādhi* power was Vice Admiral Yamaji Kazuyoshi (1869-1963). Yamaji wrote a book entitled *Zen no Ōyō* (“The Practical Application of Zen”), in which he described how he put his many years of Zen training to practical use during the Russo-Japanese War (1904-5). He discussed *samādhi* in a section of his book entitled “The Realm of *Samādhi*” as follows:

In Zen there is something called “*samādhi*”. This is a realm where there is neither “self” nor “others”, neither mountains nor rivers; the entirety of one’s whole mind becomes the character *mu* (*muji*), [the sound of] one hand (*sekishu*). If you do not endeavor to sit quietly in this realm you will never realize enlightenment.

At first, I was unable to unify my spirit by becoming the character *mu* or [the sound of] one hand for even three to five minutes. I was attacked by various illusory and worldly thoughts from the front, rear, left and right. However, as I continued to practice, it gradually became easier to enter *samādhi*. And after sitting quietly in the realm of *samādhi* I was finally able to penetrate my assigned *kōan*, achieve great peace of mind (i.e. become enlightened) and experience a feeling of great exultation. It was then I realized the mental state where “throughout heaven and earth I alone am honored”.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The words “throughout heaven and earth I alone am honored” are alleged to have first been

In the midst of war, each time I sat quietly and entered *samādhi* a wise plan would suddenly appear. Furthermore, the moment I saw the enemy a countermeasure would emerge. Still further, when faced with various problems in daily life, I found my practice of *zazen* very helpful to their resolution.<sup>4</sup>

In this passage, we learn of the wide usage enjoyed by *samādhi* power. First, it allowed the Vice Admiral to devise a “wise plan” even in the midst of war. Moreover, when the enemy appeared, *samādhi* power facilitated “countermeasure(s)”, i.e. countermeasures to *more effectively kill the enemy*. And even in “daily life” *samādhi* power was a valuable resource for solving various problems. If not precisely a “man for all seasons”, *samādhi* was definitely a “power for all seasons”.

With the advent of the Asia-Pacific War (1937-45), meditation-derived *samādhi* power became even more prominent, as demonstrated by the life and death of Zen adept Lt. Col Sugimoto Gorō (1900-1937). Sugimoto died on the battlefield in China in 1937, and his Rinzai Zen Master Yamazaki Ekijū (1882-1961) 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 due to *samādhi* power....

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spoken by Shākyamuni Buddha shortly after his birth. In quoting these words the author is claiming that he became enlightened at that time, i.e. he became a “Buddha” (*lit.* an awakened one).

<sup>4</sup>Yamaji, *Zen no Ōyō* (“The Practical Use of Zen”), pp. 29-30. I wish to express my appreciation to Alice Freeman for having introduced me to this book.

Although it can be said that his life of thirty-eight years was all too short, for someone who has truly obtained *samādhi* power, long and short are not important. The great, true example of Sugimoto Gorō was that of one who had united with emptiness, embodying true loyalty (to the emperor) and service to the state. I am convinced he is one of those who, should he be reborn seven times over, would reverently work to destroy enemies of the emperor (written on the 11<sup>th</sup> of February of the 2,598<sup>th</sup> year of the imperial reign) [1938].<sup>5</sup>

These descriptions by Yamazaki make it clear just how wide-ranging *samādhi* power was believed to be. It provided Sugimoto with the same power as that of ancient Zen masters, i.e. the power to choose one's posture at the time of death even when mortally wounded. Additionally, it facilitated a state of true loyalty to the emperor such that an early death on the battlefield was "not important". In fact, Sugimoto's death was regarded as no more than a prelude to his being reborn and repeatedly killed in loyal service to emperor and state.<sup>6</sup> Needless to say, Rinzai Zen Master Yamazaki Ekijū expressed no concern for the "all too short" lives of slain enemy soldiers.

As for Sugimoto himself, he described the importance of his meditation-based Zen practice as follows:

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. It is exactly the awakening to the nothingness (*mu*) of Zen that is the fundamental spirit of the unity of sovereign and subjects. Through my practice of Zen I am able to get rid of my ego. In facilitating the accomplishment of this, Zen becomes, at it is, the true spirit of the imperial military.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Victoria, *Zen at War*, pp. 125-26.

<sup>6</sup> The reference here is to Kusanoki Masashige (1294-1336), a 14th-century samurai and devout Buddhist, who fought for Emperor Go-Daigo in an attempt to wrest rulership of Japan away from the Kamakura shogunate. In post-Meiji Restoration Japan, the Japanese government promoted Kusanoki as the ideal of *samurai* loyalty and a model for all Japanese soldiers. According to legend, when his army was completely surrounded, with only 50 of his original 700 horsemen still alive, Kusanoki and his brother pledged to be reborn seven times to serve the emperor.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Victoria, *Zen at War*, p. 124.



The unit officers were all assembled in the martial arts hall to practice *zazen*.

Note that Sugimoto’s claim Zen practice makes it possible “to get rid of my ego” is not simply the distortion of an Imperial military officer. In January 1937, for example, Ishihara Shummyō, a Sōtō Zen priest and editor of the Buddhist magazine *Daihōrin*, wrote:

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>8</sup>

Unlike Yamazaki, his Zen master, Sugimoto did not emphasize the importance of *samādhi* power in describing what he had gained from Zen meditation. Instead, he credited his acquisition of egolessness to Zen, an accomplishment that allowed him to “live in the spirit of the unity of sovereign and subjects”. And thanks to this, Zen became nothing less than “the true spirit of the imperial military”.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.



*The 'god of war' (J. gunshin), Imperial Army Lt. Col. Sugimoto Gorō.*

Had the preceding quotations appeared in a Zen sectarian publication, one might question their effect on the Japanese public as a whole. However, these quotations were included in a book entitled *Great Duty (Taigi)*, of which more than 100,000 copies were printed. Okuno Takeo, then a middle school student, described the effect this had:

By 1943 and 1944, the war situation in the Pacific War had gradually worsened. Middle school students began to read Sugimoto Gorō's *Great Duty* with great enthusiasm.... By word of mouth we got the message, "Read *Great Duty*, it's terrific! It teaches what true reverence for the emperor really is." I was then attending Azabu middle school [in Tokyo].

In 1943 my friends and I took turns in reading a single copy of *Great Duty* that we had among us. As a result, we decided to form a student club we called the Bamboo-Mind Society (Chikushin-kai) to put into practice the spirit of *Great Duty*....

We brought in instructors from the outside and held study meetings. The same kind of *Great Duty* study circles sprang up in all the middle schools in Tokyo. We then started to communicate among ourselves.... I later learned that in almost all middle schools throughout Japan *Great Duty* had been fervently read and student study societies had been created.<sup>9</sup>

As this quotation reveals, Sugimoto's book had a major impact on Japanese youth, for it taught them "true reverence for the emperor." True reverence was, of course, acquired through the egolessness derived from Zen meditation, not to mention semi-miraculous *samādhi* power. Was the influence of *Great Duty* limited to youth alone?

Although a printing of more than 100,000 copies suggests the book was influential, it is impossible to accurately gauge its impact. What can be said is that the book included endorsements from two Imperial Army generals as well as a high-ranking government official. They clearly had no difficulty with the book's Zen-related content. In this they were no different than school officials throughout the nation. Why this broad support for what was clearly a publication promoting a sectarian viewpoint? Moreover, the publication dared to state that Zen was "the true spirit of the imperial military"!

At least part of the explanation is provided by Leonard Humphries in his book, *The Way of the Heavenly Sword*:

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 128.

[In Japan] the overriding lesson of the [Russo-Japanese] war appeared to be the decisive role of morale or spirit in combat. Japan's centuries-old samurai tradition had strongly emphasized the importance of the intangible qualities of the human spirit (*seishin*) in warfare, and this war served to reestablish their primacy.... After fifty years of borrowing from the West, the Army, like the people, was now relieved and proud to find new relevance in the nation's traditional values.<sup>10</sup>

Humphries' quote is interesting for a number of reasons. As we have seen, Zen's connection to the Russo-Japanese War was clear, including both Zen leaders and major military figures. In the ensuing decades, this relationship grew ever stronger for the reason that Humphries mentions, i.e. "the decisive role of morale or spirit in combat." Partial to Zen as always, D.T. Suzuki was in complete agreement with Humphries:

Zen discipline is simple, direct, self-reliant, self-denying, and this ascetic tendency goes well with the fighting spirit. The fighter is to be always single-minded with just one object in view: to fight and not to look either backward or sidewise. To go straightforward in order to crush the enemy is all that is necessary for him.... Good fighters are generally ascetics or stoics, which means to have an iron will. When needed, Zen supplies them with this.<sup>11</sup>

One point not included in the quotes by Humphries and Suzuki is that it was the officer corps of the Imperial Army that considered itself to be the rightful inheritors, the modern embodiment, of the *samurai* class. Having read dozens of descriptions of Imperial military-related Zen practice, the author can attest to the fact that the practitioners themselves were always officers, and senior ranking officers at that. This is not surprising in that the *samurai* were an elite class within Japanese society. Moreover, officers in the Imperial military, especially high-ranking officers, often came from former *samurai* families. Therefore, if the spirit of Japan's "centuries-old *samurai* tradition" were to be carried on it would be done by the officer corps, especially its leaders.

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<sup>10</sup> Humphries, *The Way of the Heavenly Sword*, p. 12.

<sup>11</sup> Suzuki, *Zen Buddhism and Its Influence on Japanese Culture*, p. 35.

This does not mean, however, that Japan's lower-ranked, conscripted soldiers, mostly from a rural background, were without a Buddhist means of support for their fighting spirit, and more importantly, willingness to die. Just as in premodern Japan, the rural population remained, for the most part, adherents of the faith-based, True Pure Land (Shin) sect. It was the Russo-Japanese War that first demonstrated to the officer corps just how important this faith-based form of Buddhism was to Japan's war effort. Imperial Army General Hayashi Senjūrō (1876-1943) wrote:

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 entirely 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 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.... When people possessing religious faith stand at the verge of death, they are truly great.<sup>12</sup>

If the preceding is spoken from the viewpoint of a military leader, Shin sect-affiliated scholar-priest Ōsuga Shūdō (1876-1962) provided a doctrinal explanation of the Shin sect soldier's conduct on the battlefield:

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 just a fight, a fight employing the compassionate mind of 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>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Victoria, *Zen at War*, p. 31.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 34-35.

Given this background, it will come as no surprise to learn that Shin-affiliated soldiers would, up through Japan's defeat in August 1945, launch their often suicidal attacks on enemy positions repeatedly shouting "*Namu Amida Butsu*" (I take refuge in Amida Buddha). While the conscripted, lower-ranked soldiers of the Shin sect were not expected to have the leadership abilities of the Zen-trained officer corps, the two Buddhist groups had in common the willingness to die.

### Zen in Premodern Japan

Another point Humphries made was that "Japan's centuries-old *samurai* tradition had strongly emphasized the importance of the intangible qualities of the human spirit (*seishin*) in warfare." If so, did Zen play a role in promoting the importance of the human spirit in warfare?

Inasmuch as D.T. Suzuki was a strong proponent of the Zen connection to the *samurai* spirit, he provided numerous examples demonstrating this connection. For example, Suzuki relates a story set less than one hundred years after the Zen sect's introduction to Japan at the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century. It concerns Hōjō Tokimune (1251-1284), the eighth regent (*J. shikken*) of the Kamakura shogunate (military government). Tokimune, like his father Tokiyori, was a devoted Zen practitioner. In 1279 he invited Mugaku Sogen (Ch. Wuxue Zuyuan, 1226-1286) from the Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279) to become the abbot of Kenchōji temple in Kamakura.

Not long after Mugaku's arrival, in 1281, Kublai Khan ordered his troops to invade Japan a second time, having failed on their first attempt in 1274. Upon receiving word that the Mongol soldiers were on their way, Tokimune went to Mugaku (aka Bukkō Kokushi) and said:

"The greatest event of my life is at last here."

Bukkō asked, "How do you plan to face it?"

Tokimune uttered "*Kwatsu!*" as if he were frightening away all the enemies actually before him.<sup>14</sup>

Bukkō was pleased and said, "Truly, a lion's child roars like a lion!"<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> *Kwatsu* (aka *Katsu*) is a piercing shout, thought to reveal the awakened state (*J., satori*) of the Zen master, and/or to induce the initial awakening experience in a student. It gives concrete form to the Zen belief that "reality" cannot be expressed with words and letters.

<sup>15</sup> Suzuki, *Zen Buddhism and Its Influence on Japanese Culture*, p. 41.

When Tokimune died, Mugaku eulogized him as a *bodhisattva* whose Zen practice had led to his enlightenment. For his part, Suzuki claimed that Tokimune's life demonstrated that "Zen is for the warrior."<sup>16</sup> True, Suzuki did not specifically attribute Tokimune's fearless attitude to *samādhi* power, but inasmuch as acquisition of this power is an integral part of Zen meditation, there can be no doubt that Tokimune's possession of this power contributed to, or may even have enabled, his fearlessness.

It is noteworthy that Mugaku was a Chinese priest, a fact that suggests the employment of Zen meditation in preparation for battle was not excluded from the Chinese Chan (Zen) tradition. Mugaku's acceptance, however, may also have been connected to the fact that, while yet in China, Mongol soldiers had nearly killed him at the time they invaded Southern Song.<sup>17</sup> Thus it would hardly be surprising if he harbored more than a little antipathy toward the Mongols and the prospect of once again coming under their control. After all, had the Mongols succeeded in conquering Japan, where else could Mugaku have fled?

A second illustration provided by Suzuki includes the great *samurai* general of 16<sup>th</sup> century Japan, Uesugi Kenshin (1530-1578). Kenshin instructed his retainers as follows:

Those who cling to life die, and those who defy death live. The essential thing is the mind. Look into this mind and firmly take hold of it and you will understand that there is something in you which is above birth-and-death and which is neither drowned in water nor burned by fire. I have myself gained an insight into this *Samādhi* and know what I am telling you. Those who are reluctant to give up their lives and embrace death are not true warriors.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 43.

<sup>17</sup> In 1275 the Mongols were completing their conquest of China, and enemy soldiers scoured the countryside looking to suppress pockets of resistance. A group of these raided Mugaku's temple, intending to put any monks they found to death as they had elsewhere. Although the other monks fled the temple, Mugaku remained. When a Mongol soldier drew his sword to kill him, Mugaku didn't move an inch. Instead, he recited the following poem in a loud voice: "Throughout heaven and earth there is not a piece of ground where a single stick can be inserted; I am glad all things are empty, including myself and the world; Honored be the sword, three feet long, wielded by the great Mongol swordsmen; For it is like cutting a spring breeze in a flash of lightning." Hearing this, the soldier was touched and sheathed his sword. He expressed his respect for Mugaku and left.

<sup>18</sup> Suzuki, *Zen Buddhism and Its Influence on Japanese Culture*, p. 56.

In this quotation, Suzuki is expressing Kenshin's belief that it was hesitation on the battlefield, stemming from fear of death, that would lead the warrior to lose his life by providing his opponent with an opening to strike him down. *Samādhi* power, on the other hand, supplied fearlessness in battle, i.e. transcendence of "birth and death", leading to victory. Suzuki, like virtually all Zen leaders of wartime Japan, agreed that the Zen practice of seated, cross-legged meditation (J. *zazen*), was the fountainhead of the mental power derived from *samādhi*, a power that was as available to modern Japanese soldiers as it had once been to *samurai* warriors.

Finally, Hakuin Ekaku (1686-1768), the great revitalizer of the Rinzai Zen sect in Japan, first provided Zen practitioners with an effective method for entering into the state of *samādhi*: "Straighten your spine and let your body become well settled. Then you must begin *susokukan* (breath-counting concentration). Among innumerable ways to enter *samādhi*, breath counting is the best."<sup>19</sup>

For Hakuin the state of *samādhi* was open to any Zen practitioner, yet he was convinced the warrior class had a distinct advantage in accomplishing what he considered to be "true meditation". Toward the end of a letter written to one of his feudal lord patrons, Hakuin wrote:

In my later years, I have come to the conclusion that the advantage in accomplishing true meditation lies distinctly in favor of the warrior class. A warrior must from the beginning to the end be physically strong. In his attendance to his duties and in his relationships with others, the utmost punctiliousness and propriety are required... With this exact and proper deportment, true meditation stands forth with an overflowing splendor. Mounted on a sturdy horse, the warrior can ride forth to face an uncountable horde of enemies as though he were riding into a place empty of people. The valiant undaunted expression on his face reflects his practice of peerless, true, uninterrupted meditation sitting. Meditating in this way, the warrior can accomplish in one month what it takes a monk a year to do; in three days he can open up for himself benefits that would take a monk one hundred days.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Hakuin, *Rohatsu Exhortations*, p. 1.

<sup>20</sup> Yampolsky, trans. *The Zen Master Hakuin*, p. 69.

Needless to say, Hakuin expressed no concern about, let alone opposition to, the deaths of an “uncountable horde of enemies”. As the two previous examples have shown, the Zen sect had, from its introduction to Japan, expressed little or no concern for the very first precept all Buddhists, both lay and cleric, pledge to follow, i.e., not to take life. Of course, a good argument can be made that Zen, or even Buddhism as a whole, would not have survived in a warrior-dominated society like Japan had it maintained its doctrinal commitment not to kill. Zen’s longstanding embrace of the warrior class led, during the later Asia-Pacific War, to a flood of comments by Zen leaders like this one by Sōtō Zen Master Harada Sōgaku (1870-1961):

[If ordered to] march: tramp, tramp, or shoot: bang, bang. This is the manifestation of the highest Wisdom [of Enlightenment]. The unity of Zen and war of which I speak extends to the farthest reaches of the holy war [now under way]. Verse: I bow my head to the floor in reverence for those whose nobility is without equal.<sup>21</sup>

In postwar years, Harada became well-known in Zen circles in the US for his dedication to the practice of *zazen*. His well-known American disciple, Philip Kapleau, praised Harada as follows: “Probably more than anyone else in his time, he revitalized, through his profound spiritual insight, the teachings of Dōgen-zenji, which had gradually been drained of their vigor through the shallow understanding of priests and scholars of the Sōtō sect in whose hands their exposition had hitherto rested.”<sup>22</sup> While Harada’s interpretation of meditation may have been quite “vigorous”, not unlike that of his premodern Zen predecessors, the fundamental nature of his wartime vigor was dedicated to one thing and one thing only – the application of Zen meditation to the battlefield – and death.

### **Samādhi Power as Terrorism**

Before attempting to consider to what extent the application of *samādhi* power to the battlefield is Buddhist, there is one further use of *samādhi* power in modern Japan that deserves to be adduced, i.e. Buddhist-related acts of terrorism in 1930s Japan. As is well known, the first victims of Hitler and the Nazis’ rise to

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<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Victoria, *Zen at War*, p. 137.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 135-36.

power were not foreign nations or even German Jews. It was Hitler's political enemies, especially but not exclusively German communists, socialists and other predominantly domestic forces who dared oppose Hitler and the Nazis. Sometimes these forces were imprisoned and murdered in concentration camps and at other times they were murdered in the streets or at their homes in domestic incidents of Nazi-sponsored acts of terror.

Something similar occurred in 1930s Japan. Thus *samādhi* power was utilized by Zen-trained Buddhist terrorists of that era. For example, Onuma Shō (1911-1978) assassinated Japan's former finance minister, Inoue Junnosuke (1869-1932) 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 their half-closed meditative position I noticed the smoke from the incense curling up and touching the ceiling. At this point it suddenly came to me — I would be able to carry out [the assassination] that night.

Quotations like the above cannot but give further urgency to the question, should the employment of *samādhi* power in warfare and killing, including assassination, be considered a legitimate expression of the Buddha *Dharma*? Did Shākyamuni Buddha, in his many teachings, fail to address this question?

### **Samādhi Power in Mahāyāna**

In determining whether *samādhi* power's connection to violence and warfare is a legitimate expression of the Buddha *Dharma*, let us first look at the written record, i.e. Buddhist *sūtras*. Inasmuch as the Zen sect is part of the Mahāyāna school of Buddhism, the question is, are there any *sūtras* in this school that address the topic? The answer is yes, there is at least one that appears to, i.e. the *Surāṅgama Sūtra*. Chapter Six of this *sūtra* contains the following passage:

The Buddha told Ananda, “You constantly hear me explain in the *Vinaya* that there are three unalterable aspects to cultivation. That is, collecting one's thoughts constitutes the precepts; from the precepts comes *samādhi*; and out of *samādhi* arises wisdom. *Samādhi* arises from precepts, and wisdom is revealed out of *samādhi*. These are called the Three Non-Outflow Studies.” . . .

Ananda, I permit the *Bhikshus* to eat five kinds of pure meat. This meat is actually a transformation brought into being by my spiritual powers. It basically has no life-force. You Brahmans live in a climate so hot and humid, and on such sandy and rocky land, that vegetables will not grow; therefore, I have had to assist you with spiritual powers and compassion. Because of the magnitude of this kindness and compassion, what you eat that tastes like meat is merely said to be meat; in fact, however, it is not. After my extinction, how can those who eat the flesh of living beings be called the disciples of Shakyā?

You should know that these people who eat meat may gain some awareness and may seem to be in *samādhi*, but they are all great *rākshasas* [demons]. When their retribution ends, they are bound to sink into the bitter sea of birth and death. They are not disciples of the Buddha. Such people as these kill and eat one another in a never-ending cycle. How can such people transcend the Triple Realm?

*When you teach people in the world to cultivate samādhi, they must also cut off killing.* This is the second clear and unalterable instruction on purity given by the Thus Come Ones and the Buddhas of the past, World Honored Ones.

Therefore, Ananda, if cultivators of Chan *samādhi* do not cut off killing, they are like one who stops up his ears and calls out in a loud voice, expecting no one to hear him. It is to wish to hide what is completely evident.

*Bodhisattvas* and *Bhikshus* who practice purity will not even step on grass in the pathway; even less will they pull it up with their hands. How can one with great compassion pick up the flesh and blood of living beings and proceed to eat his fill?<sup>23</sup> (Emphasis mine)

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<sup>23</sup> The English translation of this *sūtra* appears on the Webpage of the “City of Ten Thousand Buddhas,” available on the Web at: <http://www.cttbusa.org/shurangama/shurangama3.asp> (accessed January 8, 2017).

On the one hand, this Mahāyāna *sūtra* makes it clear that those who “cultivate *samādhi*, they must also cut off killing.” However, when read in context, it is equally clear that the proscription against killing refers, in this instance, to the killing and eating of animals. In other words, it serves to promote vegetarianism for Buddhist practitioners. However, the strict vegetarianism promoted in this *sūtra* is one reason it has long been regarded as apocryphal, i.e. originating in its present form in China inasmuch as strict vegetarianism was not required of Buddhist clerics in India. Be that as it may, while the author cannot claim to have conducted an exhaustive study, it appears there are no passages in this or other Mahāyāna *sūtras* that explicitly prohibit, or even warn against, the application of *samādhi* power to warfare and violence.

There are no doubt apologists of Mahāyāna Buddhism who would claim that whether one is discussing the *Surāṅgama Sūtra* or similar writings, the opposition contained in them to all forms of killing is plainly visible. In principle I agree with this position, but unfortunately I have seen wartime Japan’s allegedly fully enlightened Zen masters draw semantic distinctions concerning killing that reveal just how easily Buddhist doctrines that appear to prohibit killing can be employed *in support of* killing and destruction.

I have introduced above the Japanese Buddhist terrorist, Onuma Shō, who killed Japan’s former finance minister Inoue Junnosuke in 1932. Almost unbelievably, it was one of the Rinzai sect’s most highly respected Zen masters of that era, Yamamoto Gempō (1866-1961), abbot of Ryūtakuji, who testified during the subsequent trial in support of Onuma and his fellow band of terrorists. The band was headed by Yamamoto’s lay disciple, Inoue Nisshō (1886-1967), and popularly known as the “Blood Oath Corps” (J. *Ketsumeidan*). Yamamoto stated:

In light of the events that have befallen our nation of late, there is, apart from those who are selfish and evil, no fair and upright person who would criticize the accused for their actions in connection with the Blood Oath Corps and 15 May Incidents.<sup>24</sup> Since agreeing to appear in court on behalf of the defendants, I have received several

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<sup>24</sup> The May 15th Incident refers to the second stage of the Blood Oath Corps Incident, i.e., an attempted *coup d'état* in Japan, launched on May 15, 1932 by reactionary elements of the Imperial Japanese Navy, aided by cadets in the Imperial Japanese Army and civilian remnants of the Blood Oath Corps. The Incident centered on the assassination of Prime Minister Inukai Tsuyoshi (1855-1932) by 11 young naval officers.

tens of letters. All of these letters, with but one exception, have expressed support for the defendants, identifying their actions as being at one with the national spirit. Notwithstanding this, however, it is utterly impossible to express by the spoken or written word the true meaning and intent of either Inoue or those allied with him in these two incidents.

No doubt there are those who would ask why, in light of his devotion to religion, a believer in Buddhism like Inoue would act as he did? This is especially true given that Buddhism attaches primary importance to social harmony as well as repaying the four debts of gratitude owed others and practising the ten virtues.<sup>25</sup>

It is true that if, motivated by an evil mind, someone should kill so much as a single ant, as many as one hundred and thirty-six hells await that person. This holds true not only in Japan, but for all the countries of the world. Yet, the Buddha, being absolute, has stated that *when there are those who destroy social harmony and injure the polity of the state, then even if they are called good men killing them is not a crime.*

Although all Buddhist statuary manifests the spirit of Buddha, there are no Buddhist statues, other than those of Shākyamuni Buddha and Amitābha Buddha, who do not grasp the sword. Even the guardian Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva 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 that they seek to destroy social harmony.*<sup>26</sup> (Emphasis mine)

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<sup>25</sup> The four debts of gratitude are: 1) the debt of gratitude to be paid to one's father and mother; 2) the debt of gratitude to be paid to the ruler of the nation; 3) the debt of gratitude to be paid to all living beings; and 4) the debt of gratitude to be paid to the three treasures [the Buddha, the *Dharma*, and the *Sangha*]. The ten virtues are: 1) No killing; 2) No stealing;

3) No improper sexual activity; 4) No lying; 5) No slandering; 6) No harsh words; 7) No gossip; 8) No coveting; 9) No aversion; 10) No incorrect views.

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Victoria, *Zen War Stories*, pp. 216-1

On the one hand, Yamamoto sought to preserve the Buddhist precept forbidding killing by consigning those who killed with an evil mind so much as “a single ant” to one hundred and thirty-six hells. On the other hand, killing even good people who were guilty of destroying social harmony was “not a crime”.

Social harmony is a major goal of Confucianism. Placing preeminent value on this Confucian ethic allowed Yamamoto to abrogate the Buddhist precept not to kill. Readers acquainted with the wartime Zen masters introduced in *Zen at War* will realize that Yamamoto was only one of many who acted similarly. Nevertheless, only a few Zen masters went as far as Yamamoto did by invoking a Confucian-tainted understanding of the Buddha *Dharma* to support domestic acts of terrorism. Notwithstanding this, Yamamoto was so highly regarded by his fellow Zen masters of wartime Japan that he was selected to head what was then the unified Japanese Rinzai Zen sect in 1946, in the immediate aftermath of Japan’s defeat.

### **The Nature of *Samādhi* Power According to Zen Masters**

**In postwar Japan no Japanese Zen leaders have attempted to address, let alone critique, their wartime advocacy of *samādhi* power on the battlefield, let alone its use in domestic terrorism.** This is despite the fact that both the Rinzai and Sōtō Zen sects have issued statements, however belatedly, repenting their support of Japan’s wartime aggression.<sup>27</sup> This does not mean, however, that no Zen masters have addressed this question. However, those who have done so are all Chinese Chan masters.

For example, there is a record of questions and answers between Master Ling Yuan and Master Xuyun during a seven-day winter retreat held in 1947. The record is entitled, “When the Mind Is at One Point, There Is Nothing That Cannot Be Accomplished” and contains the following passage:

The Grand Master (Xuyun) asked me (Ling Yuan): “What method are you using?” I (Ling Yuan) said: “Reciting Buddha’s name and investigating Chan. Both Chan and Pure Land are practised.”

Question: “How can you be investigating Chan when you are reciting Buddha’s name?” I said: “When I recite the Buddha’s name, there is this doubt of who is reciting Buddha’s name hidden

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<sup>27</sup> For an introduction to these apologies, see Victoria, *Zen at War*; pp. ix-xii, 152-57.

in my consciousness. So even though I'm reciting Buddha's name, I'm also investigating Chan."

Question: "Are there wandering thoughts or not?" Answer: "When the right thought (method) are [sic] brought forth, often wandering thoughts are there along with it. However, when the right thought is put down neither are there wandering thoughts, pure and at ease."

The Grand Master said: "This pure and at ease state is laziness, (You're already off the method.) like a rock soaking in cold water. If one is like this, even if he practises for one thousand years it is still useless. One must bring forth the right thought with a bold and persevering mind investigating till the end and really see through just who is reciting the Buddha's name. Only then can the investigation be shattered. You should really practise with great determination."

Question: "I have heard that the Grand Master had entered *samādhi* for eighteen days in Chung Nan Mountain, was there a mind to enter? or no mind to enter?" Answer: "If there is a mind to enter *samādhi* then one cannot be in *samādhi*. If there's no mind to enter *samādhi* then it's like a statue made out of wood or mud. *When the mind is at one point, there's not a thing that cannot be accomplished.*"<sup>28</sup>

It would be ridiculous to claim that when Ven. Ling Yuan stated, ". . . there's not a thing that cannot be accomplished," he was alleging, let alone promoting, the use of *samādhi* on the battlefield. Yet, in light of the way in which *samādhi* power was employed on the battlefield in Japan, both past and present, it can be said that claiming that *anything* can be accomplished by virtue of *samādhi* opens the door to the *possibility* of its misuse or abuse.

A second, seemingly more relevant, example is provided by the Master Ling Yuan's disciple, Master Sheng-Yen (1930-2009) in a *Dharma* talk entitled, "Supernormal Power", delivered on June 9<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> of 1985:

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<sup>28</sup> Master Ling Yuan and Master Xuyun, "When The Mind Is At One Point, There Is Nothing That Cannot Be Accomplished." The article consists of questions and answers between Master Ling Yuan and Master Xuyun in a seven-day winter retreat in 1947. Available on the Web at: <http://chancenter.org/cmc/2011/10/13/when-the-mind-is-at-one-point/> (accessed January 3, 2017)

The emphasis of the *Suraṅgama Sūtra* is on *samādhi* and the power of *samādhi*, the concentration of the mind. Through *samādhi*, the Buddha radiates his power, his teaching. Only through personal realization and experience attained through practice can *samādhi* be developed. Otherwise, it is impossible to achieve any real power or strength. Simply being associated with a powerful being or receiving the help of a deity is not enough. . . .

The practice and experience of *samādhi* generate mental power. This power does not necessarily have to be supernormal, but it can be. The important point is that *samādhi* can help increase mental power.

The practice of *dhyāna* and *samādhi* can clear a scattered mind, and bring it to a state of concentration. The mind can become so concentrated, in fact, that you can keep it on one single thought, *whatever thought you choose*. . . .

What you can do depends on the power of your *samādhi*. If you have enough power, you can hold a piece of iron or steel in your hand and turn it into gold, then you could take it to a jewelry store and exchange it for cash. All of you in business should learn this technique. Of course, *the consequences of trying something like this are that you will probably get yourself killed or end up killing someone else*.<sup>29</sup> (Emphasis mine)

According to Master Sheng-Yen, there is no question that great mental power can be acquired through the practice of *samādhi*. In fact, so great is this power that it is possible for the meditator to “hold a piece of iron or steel in your hand and turn it into gold.” Yet, Master Sheng-Yen warns that the consequence of doing so would “get yourself killed or end up killing someone else.” In the context of the Master’s talk, however, his reference to killing appears more as a warning against the misuse of supernormal powers than an admonition against using *samādhi* power as an instrument to kill. Thus, while both of these Chinese masters address, at least obliquely, the possibility of *samādhi* power’s

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<sup>29</sup> Master Sheng-Yen, “Supernormal Power.” Available on the Web at: <http://chancenter.org/cmc/1986/05/12/supernormal-power/> (accessed January 3, 2017).

connection to killing, when read in context their respective discussions have no connection to the use of this power on the battlefield.

### ***Samādhi* Power in Theravāda**

If neither Mahāyāna sūtras nor Zen/Chan masters address this question, does this mean that the Buddhist tradition as a whole has failed to recognize this topic? Fortunately, when examining the Theravāda textual tradition, it is clear that Shākyamuni Buddha was well aware of the possibility of misusing *samādhi* power and criticized it accordingly. Proof of this is found in the following passage from the *Gopaka Moggallāna Sutta* (“Moggallāna the Guardsman” *Sūtra*), contained in the *Majjhima Nikaya* (the Middle-length Discourses):

The Blessed One, brahmin, did not praise every type of meditation, nor did he condemn every type of meditation. What kind of meditation did the Blessed One not praise?

Here, brahmin, someone abides with his mind obsessed by sensual lust, a prey to sensual lust, and he does not understand as it actually is the escape from arisen sensual lust. While he harbours sensual lust within, he meditates, pre-meditates, out-meditates, and mis-meditates.

*He abides with his mind obsessed by ill will, a prey to ill will ...*

With his mind obsessed by sloth and torpor, a prey to sloth and torpor ...

With his mind obsessed by restlessness and remorse, a prey to restlessness and remorse ...

With his mind obsessed by doubt, a prey to doubt, and he does not understand as it actually is the escape from arisen doubt.

While he harbours doubt within, he meditates, pre-meditates, out-meditates, and mis-meditates.

The Blessed One did not praise that kind of meditation.<sup>30</sup>  
(Emphasis mine)

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<sup>30</sup> Bhikkhu Bodhi & Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli, trans. “Gopakamoggallāna Sutta: With Gopaka Moggallāna.” Available on the Web at: <http://www.wisdompubs.org/book/middle-length-discourses-buddha/selections/middle-length-discourses-108-gopakamoggallana-sutta>

Inasmuch as becoming “obsessed by ill will” is the *sine qua non* for killing another human being, it would appear to be self-evident that, according to this *sūtra*, Shākyamuni Buddha (aka the Blessed One) proscribed the use of meditation for the purpose of killing, among a number of other misuses. Despite this, however, it must be acknowledged there are Buddhists, even in the Theravāda school, who circumvent this prohibition by asserting it is permissible to kill if it is done *without ill will*.

For example, Capt. Somya Malasri, a former Thai monk, is currently one of two active duty US Army Buddhist chaplains. He explained the Buddhist rationale for warfare as follows:

A lot of people ask if a Buddhist can be a soldier because the first precept is no killing. 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 practise your religion. In Buddhism, 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>31</sup> (Emphasis mine)

On the one hand, it must be admitted there is doctrinal support for Capt. Malasri’s position. Significantly, the clearest expression of this support is to be found in the Mahāyāna school, not in Theravāda. The *Upāyakauśalya Sūtra* (“Skillful Means Sūtra”) contains a story about Shākyamuni Buddha in a former life, i.e. when he was yet a *bodhisattva* on his way to Buddhahood. As a ship’s captain, named “Greatly Compassionate”, Shākyamuni discerned that there was a robber onboard whose intent was to rob and kill all five hundred of the passengers who were themselves *bodhisattvas*. Although reluctant to take life, Shākyamuni ultimately decided to kill the robber. He did so, however, not only without ill-will but, on the contrary, with compassion for both the would-be victims and even for the robber himself, for Shākyamuni sought to prevent the latter from being reborn and suffering in hell as karmic retribution for his evil deed.

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<sup>31</sup> Quotation posted on Friday, August 17, 2007 on the “Buddhist Military Sangha” website. Available on the Web at: <http://buddhistmilitarysangha.blogspot.jp> (accessed on January 9, 2017).

On the one hand, Shākyamuni's act of killing is presented in accordance with the view that acts of killing are instances of unwholesome karma, given the latter's universal and inescapable nature. Nevertheless, although the negative karma resulting from his killing of the robber should have accrued even to Shākyamuni, it did not, for, 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 *samsāra* [the ordinary world of form and desire], and that wicked man was reborn in heaven, a good plane of existence, after death."<sup>32</sup> In the Mahāyāna school, this *sūtra* has often been used to support those like Capt. Malasri who claim that a good Buddhist may kill if the act is done without ill-will toward the victim.

At least doctrinally, the Theravāda school takes a strong position against the use of violence and war. As the Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi notes: "The *suttas*, it must be clearly stated, do not admit any moral justification for war. Thus, if we take the texts as issuing moral absolutes, one would have to conclude that war can never be morally justified."<sup>33</sup> The *Seyya Jātaka*, for example, conveys a story about yet another of Shākyamuni's former lives as a *bodhisattva*. According to this story, the future Shākyamuni was a king of Benares and ruled well. However, he discovered one of his courtiers was involved in an intrigue in his harem and punished him with banishment. Angered, the banished courtier went to the court of an enemy king and persuaded him to lead an army against the king of Benares. When attacked, the king, i.e. Shākyamuni, offered no resistance, and was captured and imprisoned. While in prison Shākyamuni manifested such great compassion towards his enemy that, as a consequence, the latter's body was filled with great physical pain. Upon realizing the cause of his pain, the conquering king regretted his actions and set Shākyamuni free, returning his kingdom to him without any loss of life.<sup>34</sup>

In comparing these two stories, it is important to note that the Theravāda and Mahāyāna schools are united in emphasizing both the intention and goal of the actor in judging the karmic merit (or demerit) of a particular act. Yet, as Rupert Gethin noted, the Theravāda view is that killing can never be based on auspicious, *kuśala*, or neutral, *avyākṛta*, states of mind. Gethin writes:

In the Theravāda exegetical tradition, the notion that intentionally

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<sup>32</sup> Quoted in Chang, ed., *A Treasury of Mahāyāna Sūtras*, pp. 456-57.

<sup>33</sup> Bodhi, "War and Peace: A Buddhist Perspective," *Inquiring Mind*, p. 5.

<sup>34</sup> For a complete recounting of this *Jātaka* story, see: <http://.sacred-texts.com/bud/j2/j2135.htm>

killing a living being is wrong involves a claim that when certain mental states (such as compassion) are present in the mind, it is simply impossible that one could act in certain ways (such as to intentionally kill). . . . The only criterion for judging whether an act is “moral” (*kusala*) or “immoral” (*akusala*) in Indian systematic Buddhist thought is the quality of the intention that motivates it.<sup>35</sup>

Therefore, according to Gethin, the Theravāda position is that killing can never truly be based on compassion, nor can it be auspicious. Gethin provides an additional example concerning a laughing king who orders the execution of a criminal. Buddhist commentaries state that in doing so the king’s mind, on a subtle level, is still qualified by aversion. Nevertheless, the Theravāda view does recognize that not all killing is equally inauspicious, e.g. killing a mosquito does not result in the same karmic recompense as killing a human being. Gethin recognizes there are a broad range of conditions in Theravāda serving to qualify the act of killing, including the moral status of the victim.<sup>36</sup>

By comparison with the Theravāda school, Mahāyāna appears, at least doctrinally speaking, to have a less stringent attitude toward the act of killing. Yet, as a *practical matter*, is it reasonable, or even possible, to expect participants in warfare, inevitably involving the killing of mass numbers of human beings, both civilians and military, to kill without “ill-will” or “compassionately”? As those who have been in the military well know, in reality, harboring “ill-will” toward an inevitably “evil” enemy is the *sine qua non* required to kill them. This is what soldiers tell them themselves in their attempt to morally justify their deadly acts.

Even were one to accept the doubtful premise that it was possible for a Buddhist soldier to go into battle without ill-will toward the enemy, i.e. to kill compassionately, how realistic is it to expect that same soldier to maintain this attitude after he has seen one or more of his fellow soldiers killed by the enemy? And what is a Buddhist soldier to do if he realizes that, for whatever reason, he is unable to kill without ill-will? At that point should the Buddhist soldier report his crisis of conscience to his military superior and ask to be relieved of duty? Or should he nevertheless kill the enemy, filled with ill-will, knowing that according to traditional Buddhist doctrine he is heading for one or another of various Buddhist hells for a very lengthy stay?

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<sup>35</sup> Gethin, “Can Killing a Living Being Ever Be an Act of Compassion? The analysis of the act of killing in the *Abhidhamma* and Pali Commentaries,” p. 167.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 177-82 for further discussion.

In light of these eminently *practical* questions, it is clear how little of the preceding nuanced discussion provides a practical guide to today's modern Buddhist soldier, whether affiliated with the Theravāda or Mahāyāna schools. Note, too, that despite a lack of doctrinal justification, both lay and clerical Theravāda Buddhists in contemporary Thailand, Myanmar (aka Burma) and Sri Lanka have shown they can also be violent *in practice*.<sup>37</sup>

In this connection, it is important to recall an exchange contained in the *Yodhājīva Sutta*. When Shākyamuni Buddha was asked whether it is true that soldiers who die on the battlefield are reborn in heaven, Shākyamuni remained silent. A second request elicited the same response. Finally, on being asked a third time, Shākyamuni replied by informing the questioner that soldiers dying on the battlefield will not be reborn in heaven. As Daniel Kent notes, “He [Shākyamuni] explained that those who die on the battlefield are *inevitably* overcome with hatred and pain and are born, according to those feelings, in a hell realm.”<sup>38</sup> (Emphasis mine)

## Conclusion

There can be no doubt that there have been those in the Mahāyāna school, most especially in Japan, who have utilized meditation-derived *samādhi* power as a useful tool to kill, especially on the battlefield. And despite the doctrinal disavowal in the Theravāda school, we have seen Theravāda adherents assert what might be described as a “get out of (karmic) jail free card,” making killing possible in this school as well, i.e. so long as the killing is done *without ill will*. This assertion, however, runs contrary to the Theravāda *Yodhājīva Sutta*, that states Shākyamuni Buddha explained those who die on the battlefield are *inevitably* overcome with hatred. By contrast, the Mahāyāna school, in doctrine as well as practice, appears to have either overlooked or ignored this issue altogether, thus facilitating the application of *samādhi* power to death and warfare without prohibition or condemnation.

Given this, I end with the hope readers realize that *samādhi* power can be used to promote and deepen self-understanding as well as bring harm to others, either singly, as in assassinations, or in mass, in the case of warfare.

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<sup>37</sup> For an introduction to Buddhist-related violence in contemporary Sri Lanka and Thailand, see *Buddhist Warfare*, Chapters Seven and Eight.

<sup>38</sup> Kent, “Onward Buddhist Soldiers: Preaching to the Sri Lankan Army,” *Buddhist Warfare*, pp. 157-58.

In other words, as liberating and sublime as *samādhi* power can and *ought* to be, it is also open to misuse and abuse. In short, when *samādhi* power is removed or disconnected from Buddhist ethics and its precepts, as occurred in the case of *samurai*-patronized Zen in Japan, it can easily be utilized to accomplish any narrow, self-centered and *deadly* purpose its practitioners choose to apply it to.

If Buddhism is truly to become a religion of peace, this and related issues can no longer be ignored. Needless to say, the abuse of *samādhi* power is only one part, albeit an important part, of the larger question of the overall relationship of Buddhism to violence and warfare. It is, however, the author's conviction that the most effective and convincing way to approach this larger question is to carefully examine each example, both in text and in practice, in which Buddhism has been linked to violence and war. For that reason, much research remains to be done before any overall conclusions can be reached. But, as the Chinese maxim states, "A journey of ten thousand miles begins with the first step."<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> From the quote 千里之行，始於足下， by the Chinese philosopher Laozi in the *Tao Te Ching*, chapter 64.

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