

Is Zen a Terrorist Religion? (Three Zen-related Terrorist Incidents in 1930s Japan)

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Abstract

This article seeks to answer the question of whether the Zen school of Buddhism in Japan can be considered a terrorist faith. It begins with a brief historical introduction to three major terrorist incidents in 1930s Japan, all of which had a clear connection to the Zen school, including both the Rinzai and Sōtō Zen sects. In chronological order the three incidents are the Blood Oath Corps Incident of 1932; the Aizawa Incident of 1935, and the Young Officers' Uprising of 1936 (J., *Ni Ni-Roku Jiken*). Following the introduction, the Zen connection to each of these incidents is identified. The conclusion addresses the question of whether Zen, or at least Zen in prewar Japan, may accurately be identified as a terrorist faith.

Introduction

To question whether Zen, a major, traditional school of Buddhism in Japan, could be a terrorist faith would seem an oxymoron at best if not downright preposterous. After all, the very first precept all Buddhists, of whatever school or sect, lay or cleric, is the pledge “not to take life.” Moreover, in 1938 D.T. Suzuki (1870-1966), the best known proponent of Zen in the West, claimed: “Whatever form Buddhism takes in different countries where it flourishes, it is a religion of compassion, and in its varied history it has never been found engaged

in warlike activities.”¹ How could a “religion of compassion,” moreover, one that has never engaged in warlike activities, possibly be involved in the killing and destruction of innocents that is the hallmark of terrorism?

In order to address this question I begin with a brief introduction to the three terrorist incidents in question. This will be followed by a look at the Zen connection to each of these incidents. Finally, I will answer the question of whether Zen, or at least Zen as understood in prewar Japan, may be accurately identified as a terrorist faith.

Brief Introduction to the Three Incidents

The First Incident

Popularly referred to as the *Ketsumeidan Jiken* (“Blood Oath Corps Incident”), the first incident consisted of a 1932 assassination plot directed at allegedly corrupt powerful businessmen as well as the liberal politicians associated with them. Although the terrorist group planned to assassinate some twenty victims, it succeeded in killing only two: Inoue Junnosuke, former Finance Minister and head of the Rikken Minseitō (Constitutional Democratic Party), and Dan Takuma, Director-General of the Mitsui financial combine.

The arrest of the assassins led to the discovery of a band of ultranationalists led by Inoue Nisshō (1887-1967), a Zen-trained layman who has heretofore been mistakenly identified as a Nichiren sect adherent.² Inoue was born in 1886 in Gunma Prefecture and spent his early adulthood as a spy for the Japanese military in Manchuria and northern China.

Even as a child, Inoue was deeply concerned with spiritual questions. In particular, he sought to understand the standards for distinguishing good from evil, right from wrong. This eventually led him to undertake Zen training in Manchuria even while serving as a spy for the Imperial Army. Eventually, however, he was compelled to abandon his Zen training in order to devote himself wholly to his spying activities.

¹ D. T. Suzuki, *Zen Buddhism and Its Influence on Japanese Culture*, p. 34.

² For a detailed discussion of how this (mis)identification of Inoue with the Nichiren sect came about, see *Zen Terror in Prewar Japan, Portrait of an Assassin*, especially pp. 197-201.

IS ZEN A TERRORIST RELIGION?



Inoue Nisshō at his arrest

Upon his permanent return to Japan in February 1921, Inoue was finally able to devote himself exclusively to Zen training, though this time on his own, i.e. without a teacher. As a result, he claimed to have had an enlightenment experience in the spring of 1924, after which he determined, in accordance with Zen tradition, to undergo “post-enlightenment” (*gogo*) training under Yamamoto Gempō, abbot of Ryūtakuji temple in Mishima, Shizuoka Prefecture. Yamamoto was recognized, as he still is, as one of the Rinzai Zen sect’s most accomplished modern Zen masters.



Inoue Nisshō's temple, Risshō Gokokudō

While training under Yamamoto, Inoue was invited by Count Tanaka Mitsuaki (1843-1939), former Imperial Household Minister, to head the newly built temple of Risshō Gokokudō (Temple to Protect the Nation [by] Establishing the True [Dharma]). Although, as a layman, Inoue lacked the credentials to become a temple abbot, inasmuch as the new temple was unaffiliated with any sect, Inoue was nevertheless able to function as its abbot. It was here that Inoue turned the temple into a training center for a band of youthful, ultra-rightist radicals. Inoue became convinced that national reform could be achieved only through the elimination, i.e. assassination, of corrupt politicians in league with the selfish interests of financial combines known as *zaibatsu*.

Inoue embraced the tactic of *ichinin issatsu* (lit. “one person kills one”) and drew up a list of some twenty political and business leaders whose assassinations would be the first step toward restoring supreme political power to the emperor, the immediate goal of a broad-based, ultranationalist movement known as the “Shōwa Restoration” (*Shōwa Isshin*). Toward this end Inoue distributed Browning automatic pistols to his band members. However, only two of them were able to carry out their missions before they, Inoue and the remaining band members were apprehended.



Rural girls sold into sexual bondage arrive in Tokyo

Historically, one of the most important consequences of the Blood Oath Corps Incident sprang from the subsequent trial in that it gave Inoue and his co-defendants a platform to broadcast their ultranationalist views. Many in the general public of what was then an impoverished country came to sympathize with the aims of the conspirators, if not necessarily their methods. In a more general sense the trial and its aftermath contributed to the erosion of the rule of law in 1930s Japan as well as a growing sense of social instability.



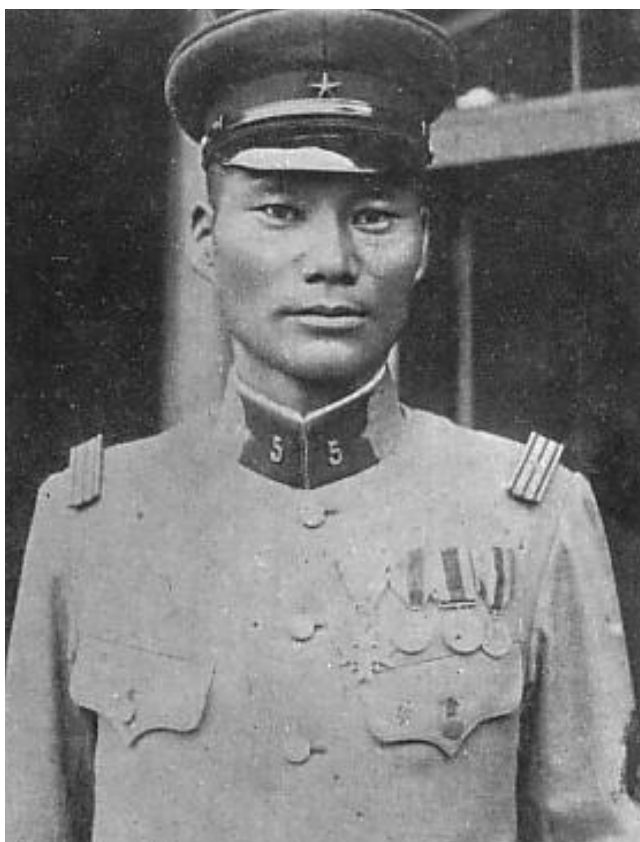
Rural boys eat raw radishes to satisfy their hunger

The sense of social instability was compounded when, on 15 May 1932, Prime Minister Inukai Tsuyoshi (1855-1932) was assassinated by a second group of Inoue's terrorist band, composed for the most part of young naval officers and cadets. This assassination, in combination with the previous two, provided the pretext to end political party-based government in Japan which was composed of a cabinet headed by a prime minister from the majority political party. Thus, with parliamentary democracy effectively ended, Emperor Hirohito and his close civilian and military advisors were able to select prime ministers to their liking up through Japan's defeat in August 1945.

For his part, Inoue was sentenced to life imprisonment in 1934 but released under a special amnesty in 1940 under a special amnesty that erased his entire criminal record. Almost unbelievably, given his terrorist background, shortly after his release Inoue was invited to become the live-in advisor to Prince and Prime Minister Konoe Fumimaro (1891-1945). Konoe headed the government until shortly before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941. Konoe committed suicide in December 1945 following Japan's defeat, while Inoue died in 1967, living with a former *geisha* in Kamakura.

The Second Incident

There were other assassins active during the 1930s, many of them officers in the Imperial Army. One of the most prominent of these was Lt. Col. Aizawa Saburō (1888-1936) of the Forty-First Regiment stationed in Fukuyama, Hiroshima Prefecture. He was a senior member of a group of relatively young army officers who, at least in their own eyes, were characterized by their complete and total devotion to a uniquely divine emperor. Appropriately, they designated themselves the Young Officers' Movement (*Seinen Shōkō Undō*) and willingly identified themselves with the larger Imperial Way Faction (*Kōdōha*) within the Army, which included some of Japan's highest ranking military officers.



Lt. Col. Aizawa Saburō

Like Inoue and his band, the young officers were dedicated to a Shōwa Restoration and attached the pejorative label “Control Faction” (*Tōseiha*) to those officers of any rank who, by refusing to join them, stood in the way of realizing their goals, especially major domestic reforms. Both military factions were, however, equally committed to the maintenance and, if possible, the expansion of Japan’s colonial empire. In this sense, the struggle within the military was not one between ‘good guys’ and ‘bad guys’, or even ‘moderates’ versus ‘radicals’. In the end, however, what may be termed the more realistic, if not opportunistic, stance of the Control Faction meant that its leaders eventually gained the upper hand in the military (and then the government), gradually purging senior members of the Imperial Way Faction from positions of leadership, beginning as early as January 1934.

Predictably, this purge of leaders produced a strong backlash, especially among the younger and more radical officers associated with the Young Officers’ Movement. Having been one of the few high-ranking officers to oppose the ongoing purge, Gen. Mazaki Jinsaburō (1876-1956), then inspector-general of military training, was a hero (or ‘savior’) to the Young Officers, among them Lt. Col. Aizawa. Thus, when in July 1935 Aizawa learned that General Mazaki had also been purged, the former took it upon himself to seek revenge. As a midranking officer, Aizawa later claimed he acted in order to save still younger officers from ruining their careers by taking matters into their own hands.

The man Aizawa chose for assassination was Maj. Gen. Nagata Tetsuzan (1884-1935), director of the Military Affairs Bureau at the War Office. Nagata was known not only for his brilliant mind but equally for his attention to detail and the calm and thoughtful manner in which he reached decisions. None of these, however, were qualities that appealed to the deeply felt yearnings of Aizawa and his comrades for a swift and thoroughgoing restructuring of Japanese society, especially land reform, even though they were unsure of the details. Unsure, that is, because possession of a detailed plan for social reform would have impinged on the prerogatives of the emperor, something unthinkable for loyal subjects (although not necessarily for the highest-ranking officers of the Imperial Way Faction). Inasmuch as Nagata actively opposed their call for a Shōwa Restoration, he had to be eliminated.



Maj. General Nagata Tetsuzan

At approximately 9:20 a.m. on 12 August 1935, Aizawa entered the War Ministry from the rear and went to the first-floor office of an old friend, Lieutenant General Yamaoka Shigeatsu (1882-1954), head of army maintenance. Ostensibly, Aizawa had come to inform the general of his imminent departure for Taiwan. After sharing tea, Aizawa asked Yamaoka if Nagata was in his office on the second floor. Informed he was, Aizawa excused himself and, at 9:45 a.m., burst in on Nagata, sword in hand. Nagata did not immediately realize what was about to happen, for he was deep in conversation with Colonel Niimi Hideo, chief of the Tokyo Military Police.

Ironically, the two men were just then discussing what to do about the growing discontent in the army. Quickly coming to his senses, Nagata jumped up and headed for the door, successfully dodging Aizawa's first blow. He was, however, unable to escape the next, a thrusting blow from the back that momentarily pinned the general to the door. Not yet dead, the general was given a final blow to the head by Aizawa as the former lay outstretched on the floor. Making no attempt to escape, Aizawa was arrested by the military police shortly thereafter.

Aizawa's public court-martial began on 28 January 1936, at the headquarters of the First Division in Tokyo and received wide press coverage. Testifying on the general background to his act, Aizawa stated:

I realized that the senior statesmen, those close to the throne, and powerful financiers and bureaucrats were attempting to corrupt the Army for the attainment of their own interests; the Army was thus being changed into a private concern and the supreme command [of the emperor] was being violated. If nothing were done I was afraid the Army would collapse from within. The senior statesmen and those close to the throne are indulging in self-interest and seem to be working as the tools of foreign countries who watch for their chance to attack Japan.³

As to why he chose Nagata to kill, Aizawa stated:

I marked out Nagata because he, together with senior statesmen, financial magnates and members of the old Army clique like Generals Minami and Ugaki, was responsible for the corruption of the army. The responsibility for the Army rested on Nagata, the Director of the

³ Quoted in Victoria, *Zen Terror in Prewar Japan: Portrait of an Assassin*, p. 254.

Military Affairs Bureau. He was the source of the evil. If he would not resign there was only one thing to do. I determined to make myself a demon and finish his life with one stroke of my sword.⁴

Aizawa also testified about his devotion to the emperor as follows:

The emperor is the incarnation of the god who reigns over the universe. The aim of life is to develop according to His Majesty's wishes, which, however, have not yet been fully understood by all the world. The world is deadlocked because of communism, capitalism, anarchism, and the like. As Japanese, we should make it our object to bring happiness to the world in accordance with His Majesty's wishes. As long as the fiery zeal of the Japanese for the Imperial cause is felt in Manchuria and other places, all will be well, but let it die and it will be gone forever. Democracy is all wrong. Our whole concern is to clarify Imperial rule as established by Emperor Meiji.⁵

The Third Incident

Despite Aizawa's claim to have acted in order to save young officers from taking matters into their own hands that is exactly what a group of young officers, associated with the Imperial Way faction, did on 26 February 1936. On a snowy wintry morning, they and more than 1,400 troops under their command attempted a *coup d'état*. Their immediate goal, as yet another attempt at establishing the Shōwa Restoration, was violently to purge the government and military leadership of their factional rivals and ideological opponents.

Toward this end the rebels assassinated a number of leading officials, including two former prime ministers,⁶ and occupied the government center of Tokyo. However, they failed in their attempt to assassinate Prime Minister Okada Keisuke (1868-1952) or secure control of the Imperial Palace. Although their supporters in the senior echelons of the Imperial Army attempted to capitalize on their actions, divisions within the military, in combination with Emperor Hirohito's vehement opposition to their attempted coup, meant the young officers were unable to achieve a change of government. Facing overwhelming opposition as the army moved against them, the rebels surrendered on 29 February.

⁴ Quoted in Victoria, *Zen Terror*, p. 255.

⁵ Quoted in Victoria, *Zen Terror*, p. 255.

⁶ https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Prime_Minister_of_Japan



Young Officers' Uprising

Unlike earlier examples of ultra-rightwing political violence by military officers and civilians like Inoue, this time the coup attempt had severe repercussions. After a series of trials closed to the public, nineteen of the Uprising's leaders were executed by firing squad for mutiny and another forty imprisoned. The radical Imperial Way faction thereby lost its influence within

the army, and the period of “government by assassination” came to a close. Nevertheless, the military, i.e. primarily members of the Control Faction like Tōjō Hideki (1884-1948), increased their influence within the government. The Marco Polo Bridge Incident, marking Japan’s full-scale invasion of China proper, occurred the following year.

The Zen Connection to Each Incident

Introduction

Having briefly reviewed the three historical incidents, we next look at the significant role Zen played in each of them. I refer, first of all, to the role leading Zen masters, affiliated with both the Rinzai and Sōtō Zen sects, played in the incidents as well as the influence Zen training and thought had on the actual perpetrators of the incidents.

In seeking to evaluate the role Zen played, it is of critical importance to realize that the relevant Rinzai Zen masters, i.e. Yamamoto Gempō (1866-1961) and Seki Seisetsu (1877-1945), as well as Sōtō Zen master Fukusada Mugai (1881-1943), were far from the first modern Zen masters to support, even praise, disciples who engaged in killing. To give but one example, the noted Meiji period Rinzai Zen master Nantembō (1839–1925) praised his own famous Army disciple (and Dharma heir), General Nogi Maresuke (1849–1912) as follows:

I have no doubt that Nogi’s great accomplishments during the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese Wars were the result of the hard [Zen] training he underwent. The ancient Zen patriarchs taught that extreme hardship brings forth the brilliance [of enlightenment]. In the case of General [Nogi] this was certainly the case. All Zen practitioners should be like him. A truly serious and fine military man.

And Nantembō added, “There is no Bodhisattva practice superior to the compassionate taking of life.”⁷

⁷ Quoted in Victoria, *Zen Terror*, p. 258.

The Zen Connection to the Blood Oath Corps Incident

The head of the terrorist band, Inoue Nisshō, had begun his Zen training in Manchuria under the guidance of Azuma Soshin (1883-1966), a Japanese Sōtō Zen missionary who had been sent to minister to the Japanese residents of what was then, in effect, a Japanese colony. Even while working as a spy for the Imperial Army, Inoue practised *zazen* assiduously and passed a number of *kōan*. In recognition of his disciple's accomplishments, Azuma bestowed on Inoue the lay Buddhist name of *Yuishin* (Mind-only).

As previously noted, Inoue claimed to have had an enlightenment experience in the spring of 1924. He described his enlightenment as follows:

I experienced a oneness in which the whole of nature and the universe was my [true] Self. I was overwhelmed with the feeling that “heaven and earth [and I] are of one substance,” and “the ten thousand things [and I] are of the same root.” This was something I'd never felt before, a truly strange and mysterious state of mind. I thought to myself, “This is really strange!” And then I thought, let me examine my past doubts in light of the enlightened realm I had just entered. As I quietly reflected on these doubts, I was astounded to realize that my doubts of thirty years standing had disappeared without a trace.⁸

Although Inoue had achieved what he believed to be enlightenment on his own, he nevertheless used classical Zen terminology to describe its contents. The two phrases Inoue quoted above are contained in the fortieth case of the *Blue Cliff Record* (J., *Hekiganroku*; Ch., *Biyān Lu*), the famous twelfth-century collection of one hundred *kōan* that has been described as containing “the essence of Zen.”⁹

In the case in question, the conversation partner of the famous Zen master Huairang (677–744) cites a passage from an earlier essay written by Sengzhao (384–414) describing the oneness of heaven, earth, and humanity.¹⁰ Significantly, Sengzhao is known for the deep influence Taoist thought and terminology exerted on his understanding of Mahāyāna philosophy, especially the Madhyamaka school's teaching of “emptiness” (Skt., *śūnyatā*; J., *kū*).

⁸ Quoted in Victoria, *Zen Terror*, p. 67.

⁹ Quoted in Victoria, *Zen Terror*, p. 67.

¹⁰ Quoted in Victoria, *Zen Terror*, p. 67.

Inoue also used this occasion to examine his long-held doubts concerning the standards for distinguishing good from evil, right from wrong. Up to that point, Inoue had thought good and evil were two opposing entities. Now, however, Inoue realized:

It is truly a case in which, from the very beginning, “good and evil do not differ [from each another].” Rather, when our thoughts and actions are in accord with the truth of a non-dualistic universe, this is good. When they are not, this is evil. For example, in the case of a relationship between two people, if you think and act on the basis that “self” and “other” are one, that is good. On the other hand, if you do no more than think (without action), that is evil. Yet concrete manifestations of good and evil do differ from one another according to the time, place, and those involved. Thus, there is no need to be attached to a particular concept [of good or evil] or think about what is right or wrong.¹¹

In light of his subsequent career as the leader of a band of ultranationalist terrorists, it is significant that Inoue’s essentially antinomian, enlightenment experience freed him from having to “think about what is right or wrong.”

As a Temple Abbot

It was in the midst of his post-enlightenment training that Inoue accepted Count Tanaka’s invitation to head a newly constructed Buddhist temple. It was 1928 and the new temple was in the seaside village of Ōarai, near the city of Mito in Ibaraki Prefecture. Inoue threw himself into the work of training a small group of about 20 young people. He drew on a variety of Zen training methods, including meditation practice (*zazen*), assigning *kōans* and conducting private interviews with his disciples (*dokusan*), all to create an intrepid group of volunteers with a ‘do-or-die’ (*kesshi*) spirit.

While Inoue had initially intended to train young people for legal political activism, by 1930, under pressure from both events and young civilian and military adherents, Inoue decided more drastic measures were necessary, convinced that an emergency situation required emergency measures. He claimed it was essential to first restore life to the nation, with debates over

¹¹ Quoted in Victoria, *Zen Terror*, p. 68.

methods coming later, much later. Inoue fully expected his political actions would lead to his death, but he, like his band members, was prepared to perish in the process of fomenting revolution.

Inoue found the basis for his commitment to destruction in his previous Zen training, specifically, in the thirteenth-century Zen collection of forty-eight *kōan* known as the *Mumonkan* (Ch., *Wúménguān*), compiled by Wumen Huikai (1183-1260) in 1228. In case number fourteen of that collection, Inoue taught that Buddhist compassion had motivated Nansen (Ch., Nan-ch'üan, 748–834) to kill the monastery cat. Building on this, Inoue claimed:

Revolution employs compassion on behalf of the society of the nation. Therefore those who wish to participate in revolution must have a mind of great compassion toward the society of the nation. In light of this there must be no thought of reward for participating in revolution. A revolution that does not encompass a mind of great compassion is not Buddhist. That is to say, revolution is itself the mind of great compassion.¹²

In other words, in the violently destructive acts of revolution one finds Buddhist compassion at work. Inoue and his band members were prepared to both kill and die in the process of achieving revolution.

Time for Action

In October 1930, Inoue and his band shifted their base of operations to Tokyo. From there, Inoue recruited additional young people, including some from Japan's most prestigious universities. Employing a Buddhist metaphor, one of Inoue's band members later explained at their trial: "We sought to extinguish Self itself."¹³

Inoue's band chose assassination as their method of revolution. Why? Because as Inoue explained: "this method was the most appropriate because it required, whether successful or not, the least number of victims. . . . The critical issue is that there was no better method than implementing what I felt sure was best for the country, untainted by the least self-interest."¹⁴ In other words, inspired by the Bodhisattva ideal of sacrificing self on behalf of others, Inoue and his band

¹² Quoted in Victoria, *Zen Terror*, p. 113.

¹³ Quoted in Victoria, *Zen Terror*, p. 120.

¹⁴ Quoted in Victoria, *Zen Terror*, p. 113.

members believed that by being prepared to die in the process of revolution they could ensure as few people as possible fell victim to revolutionary violence.

Junnosuke Inoue (1869-1932), a former finance minister, was the band's first victim, shot on the evening of 9 February 1932 as he entered Komamoto Elementary School in Tokyo to deliver an election speech. His assassin was 20-year-old Onuma Shō (1911-1978), a onetime baker's assistant and carpenter's apprentice. On the morning of the assassination, Onuma was uncertain whether he would be able to carry out his assignment. Seeking strength from his Zen training, Onuma first recited four sections of the *Lotus Sutra* to calm himself. Thereafter, he started to practise Zen meditation: "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."¹⁵



Onuma Shō at his arrest

In his court testimony, Inoue made it clear that his Buddhist faith lay at the heart of his actions: "I was primarily guided by Buddhist thought in what I did. That is to say, I believe the teachings of the Mahāyāna tradition of Buddhism as

¹⁵ Quoted in Victoria, *Zen Terror*, p. 120.

they presently exist in Japan are wonderful.”¹⁶ With regard to Zen, Inoue said: “I reached where I am today thanks to Zen. Zen dislikes talking theory so I can’t put it into words, but it is true nonetheless.”¹⁷ Inoue went on to describe an especially Zen-like manner of thinking when he was asked about the particular political ideology that had informed his actions. He replied: “It is more correct to say that I have no systematised ideas. I transcend reason and act completely upon intuition.”¹⁸

The Zen influence on Inoue’s statement is clear. As D. T. Suzuki wrote in *Zen and Japanese Culture* in 1938:

Zen upholds intuition against intellection, for intuition is the more direct way of reaching the Truth. Therefore, morally and philosophically, there is in Zen a great deal of attraction for the military classes. . . . This is probably one of the main reasons for the close relationship between Zen and the samurai.¹⁹

Inoue testified that Buddhism taught the existence of Buddha nature. Although Buddha nature is universally present, he argued, it is concealed by passions, producing ignorance, attachment and degradation. He saw the Japanese nation as being similar. That is to say, the nation’s nature was truly magnificent, identical with the “absolute nature of the universe itself.” However, human passions for money, power and other fleeting things had corrupted the polity.

At this point, the trial judge interrupted to ask him: “In the final analysis, what you are saying is that the national polity of Japan, as an expression of universal truth, has been clouded over?”

Inoue replied: “That’s right. It is due to various passions that our national polity has been clouded over. It is we who have taken it on ourselves to disperse these clouds.”²⁰

Inoue meant that in planning to kill some twenty victims, he and his band sought to restore the brilliance and purity of the Japanese nation. Their victims were no more than obscuring “clouds.”

¹⁶ Quoted in Victoria, *Zen Terror*, p. 111.

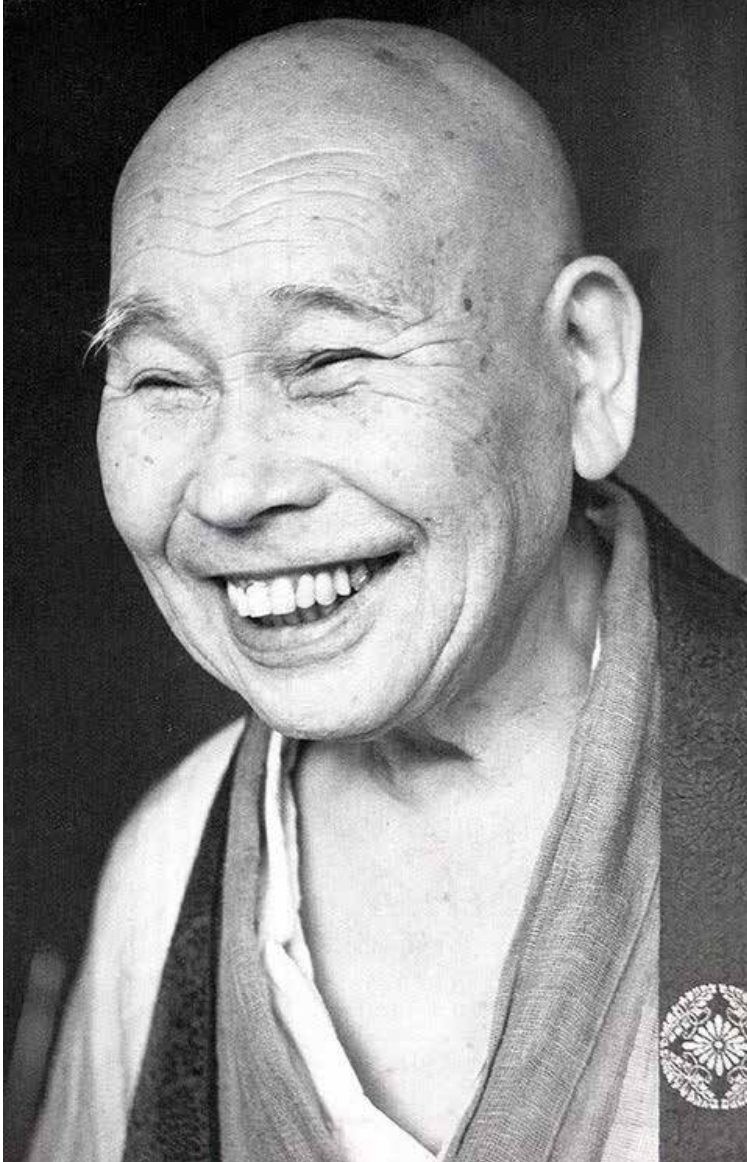
¹⁷ Quoted in Victoria, *Zen Terror*, p. 111.

¹⁸ Quoted in Victoria, *Zen Terror*, p. 111.

¹⁹ Suzuki, *Zen Buddhism and Its Influence*, pp. 34-5.

²⁰ Quoted in Victoria, *Zen Terror*, p. 112.

Zen Master Gempō Yamamoto Testifies



Yamamoto Gempō, Inoue's Zen Master

The morning edition of *The Asahi Shimbun* newspaper on 15 September 1934 carried the news: “Zen Master Yamamoto Gempō, spiritual father of Inoue Nisshō, arrives in Tokyo to testify in court.” Yamamoto claims: “I’m the only one who understands Inoue’s state of mind.”²¹ Yamamoto began his testimony with a strong endorsement of Inoue’s spiritual attainment:

The first thing I would like to say is that Inoue has engaged in spiritual cultivation for many years. This led him to a direct realization of the most important element in religion — the true nature of the mind, something Buddhism calls perfect wisdom. Perfect wisdom is like a mirror that reflects humans, heaven, earth, and the universe. Inoue further realized that the true form of humans, heaven, earth, and the universe is no different than the true form of the Self. The manifestation of this truth of the universe is the Spirit of Japan, that is to say, the polity of Japan. It is in these things that Inoue’s spirit is to be found.²²

Addressing Inoue and his band’s actions, Yamamoto testified that “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.” Why? Because Yamamoto claimed their actions were “one with the national spirit.” But what about the Buddhist prohibition against taking life? Yamamoto explained:

It is true that if, motivated by an evil mind, someone should kill so much as a single ant, as many as 136 hells await that person. . . . 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.²³

While there is no question that Buddhism promotes “social harmony” between both individuals and groups, support for killing “those who destroy social harmony and injure the polity of the state” is nowhere to be found in Buddhist sutras. Instead, the source of these ideas comes from Neo-Confucianism, whose social ethics emphasise the importance of social harmony achieved through

²¹ Quoted in Victoria, *Zen Terror*, p. 121.

²² Quoted in Victoria, *Zen Terror*, p. 121.

²³ Quoted in Victoria, *Zen Terror*, p. 122.

a reciprocal relationship of justice between superiors, who are urged to be benevolent, and subordinates, who are required to be obedient and loyal.

Note, however, that in Japan it was Zen priests who had accepted and taught Neo-Confucianism, even while continuing to pay lip-service to Buddhism's traditional ethical precepts. As D.T. Suzuki explains:

During the Ashikaga period [1336–1568], the position of the Chu Hsi philosophy [i.e. Neo-Confucianism] as upholding the orthodox doctrine of Confucianism was generally recognized, and the Zen monks began to pursue its study with more than a zeal for sheer learning. They know where their Zen was most needed and where the Sung philosophy proved its most practical usefulness. They thus became its real official propagators, and their influence radiated from Kyoto as centre out into the remoter parts of the country.²⁴

Returning to Yamamoto, he ended his testimony by stating:

Inoue's hope is not only for the victory of Imperial Japan, but he also recognises that the wellbeing of all the colored races (i.e. their life, death or possible enslavement) is dependent on the Spirit of Japan. There is, I am confident, no one who does not recognise this truth.²⁵

In seeking to understand these words, we must remember that in pre-war (and wartime) Japan the state was headed by an allegedly divine emperor whose benevolence was claimed to extend to the wellbeing of all Asian peoples, especially those colonised by Western nations or endangered by the spread of communism. It was the emperor to whom the Japanese people were taught they owed absolute obedience and loyalty.

Yamamoto clearly shared this view. Thus, in the eyes of one of Japan's most highly respected Rinzaï Zen masters, who essentially replaced Buddhist with Neo-Confucian ethics, Inoue and his band's terrorist acts were by no means 'unBuddhist' or blameworthy. And, of course, Yamamoto was not alone in believing this. This helps to explain why, despite his court testimony defending

²⁴ Suzuki, *Zen and Its Influence*, p. 120.

²⁵ Quoted in Victoria, *Zen Terror*, p. 122.

terrorists, Yamamoto remained so highly respected by his fellow Zen masters that they chose him to head the then united Rinzai Zen sect in the years immediately following Japan's defeat in August 1945.

The Aftermath

As previously noted, Inoue and his band members were all found guilty though all, including Inoue, were released from prison by 1940. Inoue went on to become the live-in advisor to Prime Minister Fumimaro Konoe. In other words, a former leader of a band of terrorists exchanged his prison cell for life on a prime minister's estate. Significantly, Inoue never admitted to any kind of remorse for having ordered the assassination of some twenty Japanese political and financial leaders, of whom two were killed initially and one, Prime Minister Inukai, was killed shortly thereafter. In fact, Inoue later defended his actions, claiming that it was he who had "dealt a blow to the transgressors of the Buddha's teachings."²⁶



Prime Minister Inukai Tsuyoshi

²⁶ Quoted in Victoria, *Zen Terror*, p. 106.

The Zen Connection to the Aizawa Incident

Aizawa Saburō first encountered Zen at the Rinzai temple of Zuiganji located near Matsushima in Miyagi Prefecture. At the time, Aizawa was a twenty-six-year-old second lieutenant attached to the Twenty-Ninth Infantry Regiment headquartered in the northern city of Sendai in the same prefecture. On a Monday morning in the spring of 1915, Aizawa's company commander, Prince Higashikuni Naruhiko (1887–1990), paternal uncle to Emperor Hirohito, addressed the assembled company officers: “Yesterday I visited Zuiganji in Matsushima and spoke with the abbot, Matsubara Banryū [1848–1935]. He informed me that Buddhism was a religion that taught exerting oneself to the utmost in service to the country.”²⁷

Simple as this statement was, it nevertheless proved to be the catalyst for Aizawa's Zen practice, for as he later explained: “I was troubled by the fact that I knew so little of what it meant to serve the country.”²⁸ Aizawa decided to personally visit Banryū to hear more. Banryū related the well-known example of Kusunoki Masashige (1294–1336), a loyalist samurai leader at the time when the imperial system was divided into two contending parts, known as the Northern and Southern Courts Period (1336–1392), each court with its own emperor. Defeated in battle and facing death, Masashige is said to have vowed to be reborn seven times over in order to annihilate the enemies of the Southern emperor.

Banryū went on to inform Aizawa that, if he truly wished to acquire a spirit like that of Kusunoki, he “must study the Buddha Dharma and especially practise Zen meditation.”²⁹ Inspired by these words, Aizawa determined to do exactly that, though he first encountered the practical problem that Zuiganji was located some distance from Sendai, making it impossible for him to meditate there on a daily basis.

The result was that Aizawa sought out an equally well-known Sōtō Zen master resident in the city of Sendai itself, Fukusada Mugai, abbot of the large temple complex of Rinnōji. Similar to the way Yamamoto Gempō treated Inoue Nishō when the two first met, Mugai initially refused to accept Aizawa as his lay disciple. “If you're just coming here for character-building, I don't think you'll

²⁷ Quoted in Victoria, *Zen Terror*, p. 253.

²⁸ Quoted in Victoria, *Zen Terror*, p. 253.

²⁹ Quoted in Victoria, *Zen Terror*, p. 253.

be able to endure [the training],” Mugai told him.³⁰ Refusing to be dissuaded, Aizawa eventually gained Mugai’s acceptance. In fact, shortly after Aizawa began his training, Mugai granted him, in a highly unusual gesture, permission to board in the priests’ quarters just as if he were an *unsui* (novice monk).

Some months later, Aizawa encountered yet another barrier to his Zen practice when his regimental superiors decided it was improper for him to actually live at a Buddhist temple. Informed of this, Mugai set about finding alternative living quarters for his military disciple. It was in this way that Aizawa came to board with Hōjō Tokiyoshi (1859–1929), then president of Tōhoku University and another of Mugai’s lay disciples. With this arrangement in place, Aizawa continued to train under Mugai until the spring of 1917.

As to what he gained from his Zen training, Aizawa testified at his pretrial hearing: “The result of [my training] was that I was able deeply to cultivate the conviction that I must leave my ego behind and serve the nation.”³¹ During the trial itself Aizawa made a comment that indicated what he shared in common with Inoue Nisshō, i.e. antinomianism. In describing his state of mind at the moment of the assassination, Aizawa testified: “I was in an absolute sphere, so there was neither affirmation nor negation, neither good nor evil.”³²

In describing this aspect of Zen, the well-known Western exponent of Japanese culture and Zen, Reginald Blyth (1898–1964), wrote: “From the orthodox Zen point of view, any action whatever must be considered right if it is performed from the absolute.”³³

During the court-martial, the judge questioned Aizawa about the influence Mugai had on him. Specifically, he asked which one of Mugai’s teachings had influenced Aizawa the most. Aizawa immediately responded: “Reverence for the emperor [is] absolute.”³⁴ As for Mugai’s attitude toward his military disciple, one of Aizawa’s close officer friends described it as “just like the feelings of a parent for his child.”³⁵

Unsurprisingly, Aizawa felt the same about Mugai. This is revealed, among other things, by the fact that even after his imprisonment, Aizawa arranged for medicine to be sent to Mugai upon hearing of his master’s illness. In fact,

³⁰ Quoted in Victoria, *Zen Terror*, p. 253.

³¹ Quoted in Victoria, *Zen Terror*, p. 253.

³² Quoted in Victoria, *Zen Terror*, p. 255.

³³ Quoted in Victoria, *Zen Terror*, p. 255.

³⁴ Quoted in Victoria, *Zen Terror*, p. 254.

³⁵ Quoted in Victoria, *Zen Terror*, p. 254.

it was this illness that prevented Aizawa from realizing his final wish—that Mugai be present to witness his execution. Having failed in this, Aizawa’s last message to Mugai read, “I pray you will fully recover from your illness just as quickly as possible.”³⁶

Given the closeness of the master–disciple relationship between Aizawa and Mugai, it is not surprising that Mugai was the second person to visit Aizawa in prison after the latter’s arrest on 4 September 1935. Mugai subsequently visited him once again on 10 September. The entries in the prison’s visitor log describe Mugai as Aizawa’s “teacher to whom is owed a debt of gratitude” (*onshi*). The purpose of the visits was recorded as a “sympathy call” (*imon*).

Execution

In light of Mugai’s admiration for his disciple, it was only natural that the close relationship between these two lasted even beyond the grave. Thus, following Aizawa’s execution by the military authorities on 3 July 1936, Mugai bestowed on his disciple a posthumous Buddhist name (*kaimyō*) consisting of nine Chinese characters, numerically speaking the highest honor a deceased Japanese Buddhist layman can receive. The meaning of the characters also reveals Mugai’s esteem for his disciple: “Layman of loyalty and thoroughgoing duty [residing in] the temple of adamant courage.”

Mugai bestowed this auspicious posthumous name on Aizawa in spite of the fact that a general order had been issued that forbade both elaborate memorial services and the erection of shrines or monuments in his memory. Thus, by honoring a man the Army had branded a “traitor to the nation” (*kokuzoku*), Mugai himself became the subject of an investigation by the military police. Although hospitalized at the time, upon being informed of the investigation, Mugai said: “Are there any traitors in the realm of the dead? If they [the military police] have any complaints, tell them to have the Minister of the Army come here and lodge them in person!”³⁷

Aizawa had yet a second connection to Zen following his death. A portion of his cremated ashes was retained in Tokyo and interred in a common grave for all twenty-two former officers and civilian sympathizers who were executed for their part in the Young Officers’ Uprising. The grave site is located at the Sōtō Zen temple of Kensōji in Azabu, Tokyo, founded in 1635 by the Nabeshima family, the former feudal lord of Hizen (present-day Saga Prefecture).

³⁶ Quoted in Victoria, *Zen Terror*, p. 254.

³⁷ Quoted in Victoria, *Zen Terror*, p. 257.

It was only in the postwar years that relatives of the deceased were allowed openly to hold memorial services at Kensōji. In 1952, these relatives erected a tombstone over the common grave that included the names of the deceased together with the following inscription: “Grave of the Twenty-Two Samurai.”

In 1965, this same group erected a statue of the Bodhisattva of compassion, Avalokiteśvara (*Kannon*), at the spot in Yoyogi, Tokyo, where the executions took place. This statue was dedicated to the memory of both the executed rebels and their victims. Even today, memorial services are held yearly at Kensōji on 26 February and 12 July (the day on which most of the condemned were executed).

The organizational name chosen by the relatives for their undertakings is *Busshin-kai* (Buddha Mind Association). One is left to ponder the connection between “Buddha mind” and the terrorist acts of the perpetrators. Their terrorist acts were dedicated to the restoration of complete political power to the emperor via a military coup, that is, the Shōwa Restoration.

The Zen Connection to the Young Officers’ Uprising

One of the Uprising’s key leaders was a Zen-trained layman by the name of Ōmori Sōgen (1904–1994). Like Inoue, Ōmori was an ultranationalist who shared a close connection to Tōyama Mitsuru, the ultimate ultranationalist fixer. As an ultranationalist, Ōmori joined his first right-wing organization, the *Kinki-kai* (Imperial Flag Society), in May 1927 at age twenty-three. The *Kinki-kai* sought to create a totally emperor-centric society. Among other things, this entailed the abolition of political parties and transfer of the nation’s wealth, especially industrial wealth, from the private sector to the emperor for disposal as befits a “benevolent father.”



Zen Master Ōmori Sōgen

Ōmori's initial connection to Zen was the result of his practice of *kendō* (the way of the sword) at the age of fourteen or fifteen. He subsequently trained under some of Japan's best-known masters, including Maeno Jisui (1870–1940), Oda Katsutarō, and Yamada Jirōkichi, fifteenth-generation head of the Jikishin Kage school of swordsmanship. Ōmori also studied a second Zen-related art, i.e. calligraphy, under Yokoyama Setsudo (1884–1966) of the Jubokudō school. In time, the two founded their own school of calligraphy known as the Hitsuzendō (Way of Brush and Zen).

Maeno Jisui, like so many teachers of swordsmanship, was also an experienced lay Zen practitioner in the Rinzai sect. Ōmori explained how his practice of swordsmanship led to an interest in Zen as follows:

Honestly speaking, the reason I entered the Way of Zen from the Way of the Sword had nothing to do with any lofty ideals on my part. Instead, being short, I realized that I had no hope of standing up to opponents taller than me if I couldn't compensate for their physical advantage by acquiring superior spiritual power. In short,

I entered the Way of Zen due to the fear experienced when sword fighting. I hoped to overcome this fear.³⁸

Subsequently, in the late spring of 1925, Ōmori met Seki Seisetsu, head of the Tenryūji branch of the Rinzai Zen sect. This marked a major turning point in Ōmori's life, for he would continue to train under this distinguished master for the next twenty years, i.e. until the latter's death in October 1945. It was in 1933, following eight years of intensive struggle with the *kōan* "mu," that Ōmori, aged 29, had his initial enlightenment experience. Ōmori related his enlightenment as follows:

I finished *zazen* and went to the toilet. I heard the sound of the urine hitting the back of the urinal. It splashed and sounded very loud to me. At that time, I thought, 'Aha!' and understood. I had a deep realization.³⁹

Ōmori added that thanks to his enlightenment, he realized that he was at the center of absolute nothingness (*zettai-mu*) as well as at the center of the infinite circle. "To be at the center of the infinite circle in this human form," he claimed, "is to be Buddha himself."⁴⁰

The Role of Jikishin Dōjō

On January 1, 1934, Ōmori established Jikishin Dōjō (lit., "Direct Mind" Training Hall) in the Koishikawa district of Tokyo. The training hall's title is an abbreviated form of the traditional Sino-Japanese Zen phrase, "pointing direct(ly) at the human mind, seeing one's nature, [and] becoming Buddha" (*jikishi ninshin, kenshō, jōbutsu*). Accordingly, it was here that Ōmori was able to combine his Zen training with his ongoing rightwing activism. The *dōjō*, created with the financial support of a number of right-wing activists, was aligned with the Imperial Way Faction, especially the Young Officers' Movement, and included such men as Nishida Mitsugi (1901-37), Kobayashi Junichirō (1880–1963), and another former Army officer, Shibukawa Zensuke (1905–1936). In the role of *dōjō* "advisor" was Tōyama Ryūsuke, the eldest son of ultranationalist fixer, Tōyama Mitsuru.

³⁸ Quoted in Victoria, *Zen Terror*, p. 262.

³⁹ Quoted in Victoria, *Zen Terror*, p. 262.

⁴⁰ Quoted in Victoria, *Zen Terror*, p. 262.

Ōmori made it possible to practice Zen, *kendō*, *jūdō*, and calligraphy at Jikishin Dōjō, all in preparation for the realization of the Shōwa Restoration. Japanese historian Arahara Bokusui described the *dōjō* as “giving the impression of having been the inner citadel of the Imperial Way Faction among all the patriotic organizations of the day.”⁴¹

An ordinary day at the *dōjō* began with wake-up at 6 a.m., followed by cleaning and then approximately forty-five minutes of *zazen* meditation, the time required for one stick of incense to be consumed. This in turn was followed by a morning worship service consisting of the recitation of Shinto prayers (not Buddhist sutras) before the hall’s main altar, on which was enshrined a large tablet of the Sun goddess, Amaterasu Ōmikami, alleged progenitor of the Imperial family and successive emperors. It should be remembered that not only Zen but Buddhism as a whole had long enjoyed a synchronistic relationship with Shinto since Buddhism’s introduction to Japan in the 6th century.

To the left of the main altar were three rows of photographs of Japan’s greatest military heroes and right-wing civilian leaders. To the right was an alcove in which, together with a flower arrangement and traditional Japanese swords, was hung a large scroll reading, “Enemy Countr[ies] Surrender!” (*Tekikoku Kōfuku*). From 4 to 6 p.m. every afternoon, there was martial arts practice. *Jūdō* was taught on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, while *kendō* was on Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday. Thursday afternoon was reserved for study circles, while calligraphy was practised on Sunday afternoon.

From the fifteenth of every month there was a five-day period of intensive Zen meditation (i.e. *sesshin*), commencing at 4 a.m. and lasting until 10 p.m. each day. The purpose of the *sesshin* was described as “the realization of our great pledge [to achieve the Shōwa Restoration] by acquiring an indestructible and adamant body of indomitable resolve through introspection and Zen practice.”⁴² Further, in justifying this rigorous training schedule, Ōmori wrote, “In *Bushidō*, as a traditional Way transmitted from ancient times, a person throws his mind and body into *Bushidō*. Forgetting himself and becoming one with the Way, he completely transforms the small self into the Way of the warrior. He then lives the Great Life.”⁴³

⁴¹ Quoted in Victoria, *Zen Terror*, p. 266.

⁴² Quoted in Victoria, *Zen Terror*, p. 266.

⁴³ Quoted in Victoria, *Zen Terror*, pp. 266-67.

For *dōjō* students, the “Great Life” clearly entailed a great deal of right-wing political activism, activism that would eventually bring imprisonment or death to many of its participants. Initially, however, the *dōjō*’s political activism took the form of publishing right-wing organs, the first of which was a monthly magazine entitled *Kakushin* (Essence). The initial issue was published on 18 September 1934, with the lead article titled: “Destroy the False and Establish the True—Risk Your Life in Spreading the Dharma—the Great Essence of the Shōwa Restoration.” The article contained the following call to action:

The [Shōwa] Restoration is a holy war to destroy the false and establish the True [Buddha Dharma] and applies equally to [Japan’s] domestic and foreign affairs. The *Essentials of Combat* [*Sentō Kōyō*] states: “The essence of victory lies in integrating various combat elements, both material and immaterial, so as to concentrate and give full play to power superior to that of your enemy at a strategic point.”

In this instance, “various combat elements, both material and immaterial” refer to the unity in speech and action of all military and civilians involved in the Restoration Movement and other patriotic activities. The “enemy” refers to the enemy amongst us, that is to say, today’s ruling powers who, with the backing of various financial cliques and elder statesmen, command the services of bureaucrats, big and small, as well as the police. The basis of power superior to this enemy is the force of all those dedicated to destroying the false and establishing the True. This force is to be found in the great unity of the people’s forces composed of the civilians and military of this imperial land. . . .

As a practical matter, we recognize that the Restoration can only be put into effect through the realization of a new cabinet of national unity centered on a unified Army and Navy. We must therefore support and promote the Army and Navy as the main force backing the Restoration while reverently seeking the promulgation of an imperial order that will promptly disperse the black clouds engulfing us. This is the proper duty of all citizens who cooperate with, and support, imperial policy.

Duty is heavier than mountains while death is lighter than feathers. Given this, how is it possible that the epoch-making, great undertaking [of the Shōwa Restoration] can be accomplished without the valiant, dedicated spread of the Dharma at the risk of your lives?⁴⁴

The Buddhist influence on this article is as unmistakable as its political extremism. In addition to the call for the “dedicated spread of the Dharma,” the phrase “destroy the false and establish the True” first appeared in a famous Chinese Buddhist treatise entitled *San-lun-hsüan-i* written by the Sui Dynasty priest Chi-ts’ang (643–712). It forms one of the fundamental tenets of the San-lun (Three Treatises; J., *Sanron*) school of Buddhism based on the Madhyamaka philosophy of Nāgārjuna. However, the “destruction” called for in this school originally had nothing to do with taking the lives of other sentient beings. Instead, it referred to “destroying” the *mind of attachment*, such “destruction” being in and of itself the establishment of the True Dharma. In Japan, the Nichiren sect attached particular importance to this phrase.

Needless to say, doctrinal subtleties of this nature were of no interest to Ōmori and his associates, for they sought to employ Buddhism as a means of bolstering their claim that the movement for a Shōwa Restoration was part of a “holy war.” Not only that, by calling on their readers to risk their lives on behalf of the Restoration, the article’s unspoken assumption was that killing “the enemy amongst us” was a necessary part of the process.

In the immediate aftermath of the failed Uprising, Ōmori was detained for questioning. However, after two months in detention, he was released because the police were unable to amass sufficient evidence to convict him of any offence. Nevertheless, in the Uprising’s aftermath he was arrested a second time and given a short prison sentence for distributing leaflets in support of the Uprising’s imprisoned leaders. Ōmori remained in prison for a year before being placed on probation for three years. Like Inoue, Ōmori received a full pardon in 1940.

Ōmori found his time in prison quite beneficial, both mentally and spiritually: “A solitary cell in a prison is a great convenience. Everything can be done in one room: the toilet is there; you can eat there; you can even study there. While I was there, I didn’t think I should read all the time, so during the day I read books, and at night I did *zazen*.”⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Quoted in Victoria, *Zen Terror*, p. 267.

⁴⁵ Quoted in Victoria, *Zen Terror*, p. 272.

On his release from prison, Ōmori was gratified to find that his Rinzai Zen master, Seki Seisetsu, expressed approval of his conduct. On the day of his release, Seisetsu visited Ōmori at the *dōjō* and said, “You had a long *sesshin* [intensive meditation period]. You had much hardship, but you did well.”⁴⁶ Seisetsu then took his disciple out to dinner. Ōmori summed up his prison experience as follows: “Since there is no other place where one can study so leisurely, everyone should do the right thing and get into prison.”⁴⁷ In light of Ōmori’s close connection to the Young Officers’ Uprising, one can only express surprise that he hadn’t succeeded in “do[ing] the right thing” earlier.



Zen Master Seki Seisetsu

⁴⁶ Quoted in Victoria, *Zen Terror*, p. 272.

⁴⁷ Quoted in Victoria, *Zen Terror*, p. 272.

Following war's end, Ōmori formally entered the Rinzai priesthood and became a prolific author of books about Zen. One of his books was entitled *Zen to Ken*. When the book was published in 1958 no less a personage than D.T. Suzuki praised it, saying, "I was enthralled by Mr. Ōmori's *Zen to Ken* (*Zen and the Sword*). With this, for the first time, we can speak of *Ken* and *Zen* as one."⁴⁸ In other words, Ōmori personified what D. T. Suzuki, among others, had long insisted was a Zen ideal — "the unity of Zen and the sword" (*Zenken ichinyo*).

Ōmori later served as president of the Rinzai Zen sect-affiliated Hanazono University and was the founder of Chōzenji International Zen Dōjō in Honolulu, Hawaii. To this day, Ōmori remains lauded, at least by his disciples, as the "greatest Zen master of modern times," whose very life is "worthy to be considered a masterpiece of Zen art."⁴⁹

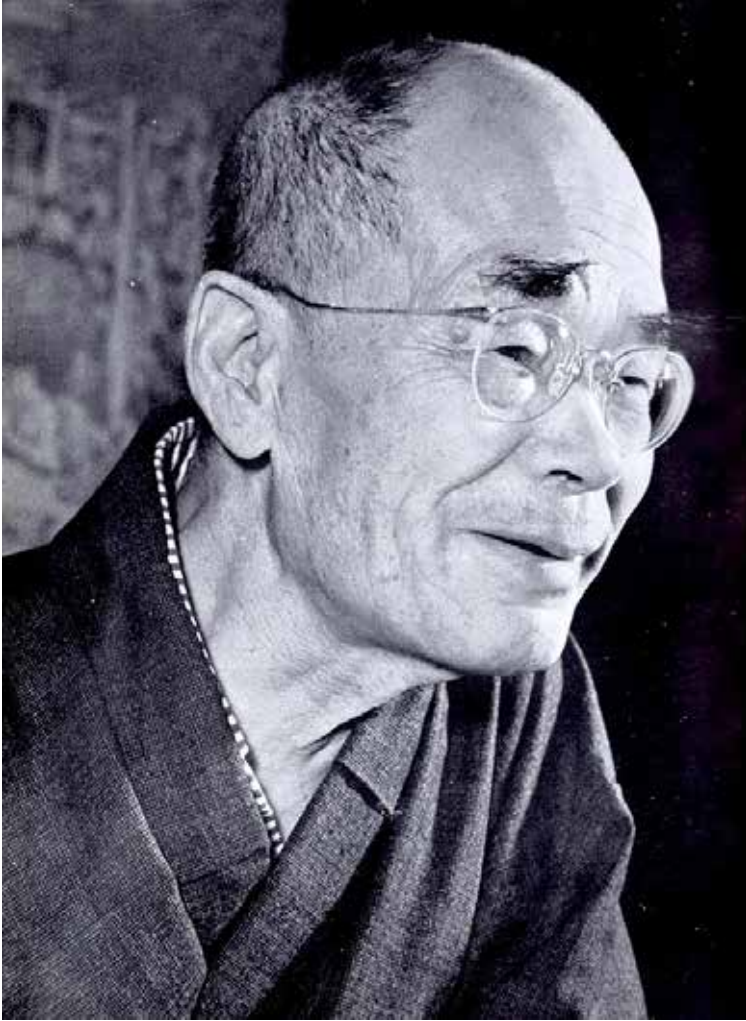
Conclusion

Is Zen a terrorist faith? Based on the role played by both Zen clerics and laymen in the three incidents described above, the answer must be: "Yes, it certainly *can be* a terrorist faith." That is to say, there are elements in Zen, especially in its Japanese formulation, that can be marshalled to *enable* acts of terrorism. However, this is not to claim that *Zen motivated* the Zen practitioners described in this article, either lay or cleric, to carry out their terrorist acts.

I vividly recall a presentation I made before the D.T. Suzuki Research Society in Kyoto on 4 August 2019. After discussing the Zen connection to the three incidents described above, I asked Society members if there were any teachings in Suzuki's voluminous writings on Zen prior to the end of WW II that would have militated against, or condemned, the use of Zen meditation, practice or doctrine as enabling mechanisms for committing terrorist acts. There was an awkward silence and then Sueki Fumihiko, one of Japan's leading Buddhist scholars, quietly said, "There are none."

⁴⁸ Quoted in Victoria, *Zen Terror*, p. 261

⁴⁹ Quoted in Victoria, *Zen Terror*, p. 261.



D. T. Suzuki

On the one hand, I was grateful for the intellectual honesty of this distinguished scholar yet disappointed by the silence of the other participants. Why? Because Suzuki made it clear why none of his teachings could have been used to oppose terrorist acts. Suzuki wrote:

Zen has no special doctrine or philosophy with a set of concepts and intellectual formulas, except that it tries to release one from the bondage of birth and death and this by means of certain intuitive modes of understanding peculiar to itself. It is, therefore, extremely flexible to adapt itself almost to any philosophy and moral doctrine as long as its intuitive teaching is not interfered with. It may be found wedded to anarchism or fascism, communism or democracy, atheism or idealism, or any political and economical dogmatism. It is, however, generally animated with a certain revolutionary spirit, and when things come to a deadlock which is the case when we are overloaded with conventionalism, formalism, and other cognate isms, Zen asserts itself and proves to be a destructive force.⁵⁰

Since, according to Suzuki, Zen can be founded wedded to fascism or “any political and economical [sic] dogmatism” why couldn’t it have been wedded to “terrorism”, especially terrorism based on the *intuitive* thought of Inoue Nisshō who, moreover, clearly possessed “a certain revolutionary spirit” let alone proved to be “a destructive force”?

As for violence, Suzuki explained why there were no impediments to joining it to Zen as well:

In Japan, Zen was intimately related from the beginning of its history to the life of the samurai. Although it has never actively incited the latter to carry on their bloody profession, it has passively sustained them when they have for any reason once entered into it. Zen has sustained them in two ways, morally and philosophically. Morally, because Zen is a religion that teaches not to look backward once the course is decided upon; philosophically because it treats life and death indifferently.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Suzuki, *Zen Buddhism and Its Influence*, pp. 36-37.

⁵¹ Suzuki, *Zen Buddhism and Its Influence*, p. 34.

By contrast, in the *Yodhājīva Sutta*, the Buddha is recorded as having said:

When a professional warrior strives and exerts himself in battle, his mind is already seized, debased, and misdirected by the thought: “May these beings be struck down or slaughtered or annihilated or destroyed. May they not exist.” If others then strike him down and slay him while he is thus striving and exerting himself in battle, then with the breakup of the body, after death, he is reborn in the hell called the realm of those slain in battle.⁵²

This *sutta*, found in the Pāli canon, notes that the Buddha, at least initially, was reluctant to address this topic, but in the face of repeated requests, he gave the preceding reply. His response is particularly significant in that the Buddha was himself, at least by birth, a member of the warrior (*kshatriya*) caste. The prevalent view of this caste was that following death on the battlefield the warrior would be reborn in the company of deities (*devas*) slain in battle, i.e. a desirable state.

If one regards the *Pāli* cannon, as I do, as representative of the oldest stratum of the Buddha’s teachings, then the absence of an equivalent teaching in the Mahāyāna *sutras* demonstrates how far the latter tradition has, at least in this instance, strayed from this foundational teaching, still extant in the Theravāda tradition. It also shows how mistaken Suzuki was to accept uncritically the longstanding close relationship of the Zen school in Japan to the warrior class and its associated violence and killing. To be sure, Suzuki claimed that the Zen school did not actively incite the samurai to carry on their “bloody profession” but it nevertheless “passively sustained them.”

But what did Suzuki mean by his claim that Zen in Japan, from its outset, had “passively sustained” the samurai both morally and philosophically? Morally, he asserted, because it taught the samurai not to look backward once the course was decided upon and philosophically, because it treated life and death indifferently.

Here, the first question to be asked is what does “not to look backward once the course is decided upon” have to do with morality, i.e. distinguishing right from wrong, good from evil? Would it, for example, be “immoral” to have second thoughts, i.e. to change one’s initial course of action, if there were sufficient reason to do so? Is blindly following one’s initial decision, no matter how mistaken/destructive it turns out to be, an expression of *Buddhist* morality?

⁵² SN 42.3 (PTS: SN IV 309).

Is there any passage in the *vinaya*-based precepts governing the actions of Buddhists, either lay or cleric, to indicate this is the case?

As far as Japan is concerned, isn't blindly following one's initial decision, *without looking backward* no matter how mistaken/destructive it turns out to be, exactly what Japan did up through its abject defeat in WW II, all the while enjoying the enthusiastic if not fanatical support of Zen priests and other Buddhist clergy?⁵³ If Suzuki's claim accurately reflects the content of Zen morality since its introduction to Japan at the beginning of the 13th century, is there anything surprising about the clerics' later fanatical support for Japan's modern wars?

And what about the "philosophical" side to the equation, i.e. Zen's willingness to "treat life and death indifferently"? Suzuki develops this philosophical orientation further by adding: "From the philosophical point of view, Zen upholds intuition against intellection, for intuition is the more direct way of reaching the Truth."⁵⁴ In this connection, the reader will recall that Inoue Nisshō testified: "I have no systematized ideas. I transcend reason and act completely upon intuition."⁵⁵ This is not to suggest, however, there was a direct connection between the two men.

To be sure, there is ample scriptural precedent in the Zen school for its emphasis on intuition. For example, Zen's first patriarch, Bodhidharma, is said to have given a copy of the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* to his successor, Hui-k'o (487-593), and told him that it contained everything he needed to know. Serving as a cornerstone in the development of Ch'an (Zen) in China, this sutra contains all the major teachings of Mahāyāna Buddhism, with two of its teachings having particular import for Zen. The first of these is the teaching of the primacy of consciousness, i.e. all the objects of the world, and the names and forms of experience, are merely manifestations of the mind. Second, and even more importantly, the knowledge of this is something that must be realized and experienced for oneself and cannot be expressed in words. That is to say, it can, and must be, realized intuitively through intensive meditation. In the words of Chinese Zen masters, these two teachings became known as "have a cup of tea" and "taste the tea."

⁵³ Readers who doubt the accuracy of this statement are invited to read either of my two books on this topic, *Zen at War* or *Zen War Stories*.

⁵⁴ Suzuki, *Zen Buddhism and Its Influence* p. 34.

⁵⁵ Quoted in Victoria, *Zen Terror*, p. 208.

However, while granting this, there is, I suggest, nothing in Buddhist doctrine to suggest that the “taste the tea” includes, as Yamamoto Gempō claimed, assassinating those who destroy social harmony and injure the polity of the state.⁵⁶

The Role of Zen Meditation (*zazen*)

If the Zen school in Japan consisted only of (a questionable) morality and philosophy that merely “passively” condoned those involved in a “bloody profession,” then it could be said it differs little from similar violence-condoning rationales found in the world’s other major religions. However, Zen contains an additional feature that played an important role in all three terrorist incidents described above, i.e. the practice of meditation (*zazen*).

But what was it, exactly, about Zen meditation that made it so useful to not only Inoue and his band members but all of the terrorists described above?

One particularly insightful response is provided by Winston King in his 1993 book *Zen and the Way of the Sword*. King identified the fundamental problem to be that “Zen has no intrinsic ethical quality or inner monitor, but (to repeat) historically seems to be primarily a psychological technique for maximizing the visceral energies whatever their orientation.”⁵⁷

If Zen becomes, or better said, is *reduced* to a psychological technique – which clearly occurred – then nowhere is the exercise of this technique more effective than in the practice of *zazen*, a key component of which is the experience of *samādhi* and the acquisition of the mental power associated with it. This begs the question: did the Zen-related terrorists described above have an authentic experience of *samādhi* and the mental power associated with it?

Before attempting to answer this question, let us first examine *samādhi* and its associated mental power in more detail. *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 the mind.” In early Buddhist texts, *samādhi* is associated with the term *samatha* (calm abiding). In the Pali *suttas* (Skt., *sūtras*), *samādhi* is defined as one-pointedness of mind, a meditative absorption attained through the practice of meditation, that is, *jhāna* (Skt., *dhyāna*; Kor., *Seon*; J., *Zen*; Ch., *Ch’an*; Vietnamese, *Thiền*).

⁵⁶ For further discussion of this topic, see *Zen Terror*, pp. 215-16.

⁵⁷ Quoted in *Zen Terror*, p. 222.

Jhāna/dhyāna, a core Buddhist practice commonly translated as meditation, is described as a state of “no mind” in the Ch’an/Zen school. The four *jhānas/dhyānas*, as described in the *suttas/sūtras*, focus on the cultivation of two qualities: inner concentration and present-moment awareness, the former preceding the latter, which concludes with a state of perfect equanimity and awareness (Pāli, *upekkhā-sati-pārisuddhi*), when the mind becomes still, without conscious thought, yet open to experience in the present moment. As such, *samādhi* also lies at the heart of the last of the eight elements of the Buddhist Noble Eightfold Path (i.e. right concentration).

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 true nature of the Self in the hands of an experienced meditator. *Samādhi* and the psycho-spiritual power associated with *samādhi* are closely related to one another.

For those who have experienced a deep *samādhi*, it is a luminous experience that seems to the meditator to be beyond time and place, though it is definitely not a trancelike experience in which the meditator is transmitted to a supernatural realm. In fact, if anything, the meditator is more fully “present” in the “here and now” than ever before. The meditator may also subsequently experience a wonderful sense of “oneness” with his or her surroundings. Thus, to use *samādhi* to harm other sentient beings 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., *zenjōriki*) in battle.⁵⁸

It is important to note that these modern descriptions of *samādhi* power’s effectiveness on the battlefield were not the first time this phenomenon occurred in Japanese Zen history. For example, retired samurai-turned-Zen-priest Suzuki Shōsan (1579–1655) wrote, “It’s with the energy of Zen *samādhi* that all the arts are executed. The military arts in particular can’t be executed with a slack mind. This energy of Zen *samādhi* is everything. The man of arms, however, is in Zen *samādhi* while he applies his skill.”⁵⁹

⁵⁸ See, for example, Suzuki’s uncritical reference to Uesugi Kenshin’s use of *samādhi* in battle in *Zen Buddhism and Its Influence*, p. 56.

⁵⁹ Quoted in *Zen Terror*, p. 212

The reader will recall that *samādhi* was a key part of Onuma Shō's preparations to assassinate Inoue Junnosuke:

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.

Onuma's comments make it clear that *samādhi* power, acquired through meditation, was what had enabled him to commit his terrorist act. In short, *samādhi* power was as available to terrorists as it had once been to warriors and their soldier successors, for exactly the same reason — it enhanced their ability and determination to kill (and be killed).

The Bodhisattva Ideal

Inoue and his band members often referred to themselves as *sute-ishi* (pawns), fully prepared to sacrifice themselves in the course of assassinating their intended victims. In doing so, they identified themselves with a Mahāyāna Buddhist archetype, i.e. Bodhisattvas, ever ready selflessly and compassionately to sacrifice themselves for the benefit of all sentient beings. The reader will recall just how important a role Buddhist compassion played in Inoue's thinking as expressed in his court testimony:

Revolution employs compassion on behalf of the society of [our] nation. Therefore, those who wish to participate in revolution must have a mind of great compassion toward the society of [our] nation. In light of this there must be no thought of reward for participating in revolution. A revolution that does not encompass a mind of great compassion is not Buddhist. That is to say, revolution is itself the mind of great compassion.

At least in their minds, Inoue's band members regarded themselves as no less compassionate than their master. Onuma Shō, assassin of Inoue Junnosuke, testified:

Our goal was not to harm others but to destroy ourselves. We had no thought of simply killing others while surviving ourselves. We intended to smash ourselves, thereby allowing others to cross over [to a new society] on top of our own bodies. I think this is what our master Inoue meant when he told us that our goal was not to sacrifice personal affections on the altar of justice but to destroy ourselves. In the process of destroying ourselves, it couldn't be helped if there were [other] victims. This was the fundamental principle of our revolution. A mind of great compassion was the fundamental spirit of our revolution.⁶⁰

And, of course, Aizawa Saburō believed he was sacrificing himself in order to save junior officers in the Imperial Way faction from ruining their careers by taking matters into their own hands – as they nevertheless did in the Young Officers' Uprising. And in undertaking their Uprising, the young officers believed they were sacrificing themselves in order that Emperor Hirohito would, upon regaining absolute, unimpeded power, enact major domestic reforms, beginning with land redistribution, that would benefit their impoverished fellow Japanese. In other words, all of the terrorists introduced above were convinced they were sacrificing themselves out of their great compassion for others.



Young Officers' Uprising

⁶⁰ Quoted in *Zen Terror*, p. 120.

When all is said and done, what is missing in Japanese Zen, from the time of its adoption by the warrior class in the 13th century to the present, is very simple – a near total lack of, or disregard for, the *vinaya*-based precepts, the very first one of which is: not to take life.

True, a general commitment to the Bodhisattva ideal has always remained central to Zen, allowing followers to convince both themselves and others they were following Buddhism’s ethical prescriptions. However, by virtue of its wholesale adoption of the primary Neo-Confucian ethic calling for absolute loyalty unto death, Zen became an ever pliant tool in the hands of Zen’s powerful patrons. In other words, the Buddhist ethic of concern for the wellbeing of *all* sentient beings was replaced by a demand for unquestioning, *self-sacrificing* loyalty to one’s feudal lord and, in the modern period, to one’s nation as embodied in the person of the emperor.

In today’s world, where Buddhist-derived meditation, under the rubric of “Mindfulness Meditation” is now practised by Wall Street executives hoping to make a “killing on the stock market” and by US military personnel undergoing “warrior mind training,” something very much like a Zen bereft of Buddhist ethics is now finding a new home with different patrons, though still united by a common bond – to use the “visceral energies” derived from meditation “whatever their orientation,” i.e. for their own ends.

But in Zen, the Bodhisattva ideal remains available to add a veneer of self-sacrificing compassion to convince both self and others that even killing is being done on behalf of others or, as expressed by Inoue Nisshō: “kill one that many may live” (*issatsu tashō*).

I realize, of course, there are some Buddhists, particularly in the Mahāyāna tradition, who believe it is possible to kill without violating the first precept on the condition the killing is of widespread benefit and the killer is motivated solely by compassion. For example, Tibetan Buddhist scholar, Robert Thurman writes: “Surgical violence—killing the one to save the many—is part of the bodhisattva ethic.” True, Thurman notes the “bad karmic effects” accruing to the Bodhisattva from the act of killing but then adds: “You get bad karma, too, but because you’re acting out of compassion, not hatred, the good karma will outweigh the bad.”⁶¹ It is clear the perpetrators of the three terrorist incidents introduced in this article, especially the first, believed their killing was done

⁶¹ See Robert Thurman, “Rising to the Challenge: Cool Heroism”.

compassionately, i.e. killing the one (or few) in order to save the many. In Thurman's words, they were engaged in "surgical violence." Yet, if this were true, what is to prevent not only Zen but Buddhism as a whole from being considered a terrorist faith?

Postscript

While the focus of this article has been on the Zen Buddhist connection to terrorism, it is, needless to say, only one expression of religious terrorism as found in *all* of the world's major faiths at one time or another in their histories. And, of course, religious terrorism remains a current reality, Islam being what I refer to as "the flavor of the day." Thus one question to be asked, is whether there are any lessons for the present to be learned from the Zen-affiliated terrorism described in this article?

I suggest there are, beginning with the observation that Inoue's story reminds us that, first of all, terrorism is a tactic employed by the weak against the strong for the simple reason that terrorists lack the means to employ any other method. Initially, for example, Inoue claimed he did not intend to engage in terrorist acts. But he reached the conclusion that social reform could no longer wait, and embraced terrorism as the only tactic available to him. To believe, as many governments claim, that it is possible to 'stamp out' or 'eradicate' terrorism by killing all terrorists, or suspected terrorists, is akin to believing, in the case of an air force, that aerial bombardment as a tactic of warfare could be permanently eliminated if every living bombardier (or drone operator) were killed.

Second, terrorism is not simply an isolated product of crazed or fanatical religious adherents. Instead, there are nearly always underlying political, economic and social causes. Japan in the 1930s was a socially and economically unjust society. Corrupt business and political leaders showed little concern for the welfare of the majority of the Japanese people. The great economic disparity between rich and poor led to attempts, increasingly violent, to enact social reform. To many Japanese frustrated with ineffective peaceful and legal efforts, terror seemed the only remaining avenue available to enact change.

Third, terrorists do not view themselves as hate-filled, bloodthirsty monsters. Instead, as incongruous as it might seem, many are motivated, like Inoue and his fellows, by what they believe is a deep and compassionate

concern for their compatriots. “Kill one that many may live” is the Buddhist phrase Inoue and his band used to express their concern.⁶² They believed compassion and concern for the wellbeing of the majority of the exploited and oppressed in Japan, especially the rural poor, justified their violent actions. It couldn’t be helped if a few had to die for the majority to flourish. No matter how inhumane their acts, they were moral in their own eyes by virtue of their concern for others.

Fourth, I suggest that, counterintuitive as it may seem, religious terrorism is *not* primarily a religious phenomenon. Instead, as religious studies scholar Karen Armstrong notes, “Terrorism is fundamentally and inherently political, even when other motives—religious, economic, or social—are involved. Terrorism is always about power — acquiring it or keeping it.”⁶³

Note, however, that Armstrong’s assertion does not lessen the importance of religion’s role in terrorism, for it is equally true that all religions can (and have) been used by powerful behind-the-scenes actors as enabling mechanisms, serving to justify, or at least facilitate, the death of both others (i.e. the victims of terror) as well as themselves (the terrorists). In seeking to understand the rationale behind any act of terrorism the first question to be asked is, I suggest: “Who benefits?”

Finally, it is important to recognise that religious terrorists care so much about protecting or rescuing those in perceived need that they are typically willing to sacrifice their own lives in the process of carrying out their terrorist acts. Inoue and his band, for example, regarded themselves as no more than “sacrificial stones” (pawns) in the struggle to reform Japan. This conviction allowed them to view themselves as Bodhisattvas, ever-ready to sacrifice their own welfare for the sake of others out of their “great compassion.”

Such self-sacrifice resonates with the tenets of many religious faiths and enables terrorists to see themselves as not only ethical but even unselfish exemplars of their faith. Of all the connections between religion and terrorism this is perhaps the most powerful if not the most concerning – and enduring.

⁶² For a discussion of the Buddhist roots of this phrase, see *Zen Terror*; pp. 217-20.

⁶³ Quoted in *Zen Terror*; p. 246.

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