
The Zen of Assassination: The Cases of Fukusada Mugai and Yamamoto Gempō

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Thanks to a recent spate of articles, coupled with such books as *Rude Awakenings* and my own *Zen At War*, the close and supportive relationship existing between Japanese Zen-affiliated leaders and the Japanese military during the Asia-Pacific war (and before) is becoming better known and understood. There remains, however, one major gap in this history. That is to say, what was the role of such Zen leaders, if any, in the domestic repression that took place in concert with Japan's expansion onto the Asian continent? Did, for example, Zen masters and their lay disciples play a role in the domestic assassinations that were such a prominent feature of Japanese public life during the early to mid-1930s?¹

The following is an introduction to this question. It examines the roles played by two prominent Zen masters, Fukusada Mugai and Yamamoto Gempō, in the events surrounding the assassinations of three major military, political, and financial leaders. While neither of these masters pulled the trigger of an assassin's pistol or wielded an assassin's sword, they were nevertheless convinced, like their lay disciples, Lt. Colonel Aizawa Saburō and Inoue Nisshō, that Zen Buddhism as they understood it justified the killing of fellow Japanese in the name of "destroying the false and establishing the true" (*haja ken-shō*).²

This said, I would caution my readers that what they are about to read is not intended to be a statement about the nature of Zen (Buddhism) in any theoretical or abstract sense. Rather, it is a description of what a number of prominent Zen leaders *believed* or *inter-*

preted Zen to be in 1930s Japan. Further, in introducing D. T. Suzuki's thought into the discussion I do not mean to imply that he was in any way directly involved in the incidents I describe. My intent is simply to demonstrate that the interpretations of Zen and Buddhism put forth by the principals in these incidents were not simply theirs alone, but were representative, at least to some degree, of the intellectual climate then existing in Japanese Zen circles.

I would further point out that my conflated use of the words "Buddhism," "Mahayana Buddhism," and "Zen" is done purposely. That is to say, I seek to introduce readers to the way in which these terms were used by the principals themselves at the time. If contemporary scholars of Buddhism must of necessity make distinctions between these terms, we must also recognize that for most believers of Buddhism (or any other religion for that matter) their "sectarian viewpoint" represents, to them at least, the essence if not the totality of their faith. This attitude was embodied, for example, by the 1930s Sōtō Zen master Iida Tōin (1863–1937) when he wrote: "Zen is the general repository for Buddhism" (quoted in Victoria 1997, 101). Thus, in seeking to understand the (Zen) Buddhist faith of those below, we must, at least initially, seek to understand Buddhism as they themselves understood it.

The Assassination of Major General Nagata Tetsuzan: A Brief Historical Introduction to the Incident

The Manchurian Incident of September 1931 set off a chain of events that led in the first instance to the establishment of the Japanese puppet state of Manchukuo in February 1932 and eventually to the outbreak of full-scale war with China in July 1937. Japanese aggression abroad, however, did not imply unanimity of opinion at home, for widely diverse groups of civilian politicians, ultranationalists, leftists, and military officers of various ranks, continued their attempts to bend domestic and foreign policy to their particular viewpoints and ideologies. In short, in the early to mid-1930s, Japan was still some distance away from the monolithic emperor-centered, military-dominated society it would become by the end of the decade.

In seeking to understand how the military ultimately emerged triumphant in Japanese society, it is crucial to understand the role played by the domestic assassinations of both civilian and military figures. Although assassination is the ultimate form of political intimidation, in Japan of the 1930s (and before) right-wing inspired violence rarely resulted in anything more than a short prison sentence

for the “patriotic” perpetrator(s) involved, at least, that is, up through the major military uprising of 26 February 1936.³ It is also noteworthy that no matter how disparate the views of the assassins were, the one thing they and their supporters always agreed on was their deep concern for the “welfare of the nation.”

One military assassin, Lt. Col. Aizawa Saburō (1889–1936), was an active and partisan member of what was popularly known as the “Imperial Way Faction” (*Kōdō-ha*). Arrayed against this faction was a second grouping of military officers collectively known as the “Control Faction” (*Tōsei-ha*). It should be noted, of course, that dividing the military leadership of the 1930s into only two factions represents a gross oversimplification of the multi-factioned army leadership which was also split on the basis of such things as age, educational background, and even former clan affiliation.

Inasmuch as this is not an article on military factionalism, however, let it suffice to note that domestically, members of the Imperial Way Faction sought to bring about a “Shōwa Restoration,” i.e., the direct rule of the Emperor, something they interpreted as being closely connected with the implementation of domestic economic policies based on an ideology of national socialism. As for foreign policy, they were strongly anti-communist and therefore regarded the Soviet Union, rather than the United States, Great Britain and other Western powers, as the chief threat to the Japanese empire.

By comparison, the Control Faction was more accepting of the status quo, at least at home. They accepted a basically capitalist society with the continued private ownership of factories and land. In the foreign policy arena, however, they not only advocated ever greater advancement onto the Asian continent, especially in China, but looked favorably on proposals to forcibly acquire basic raw materials such as oil and rubber from the colonized countries of Southeast Asia, even at the risk of war with the Western masters of these countries.

Both military factions, it must be stressed, were equally committed to the maintenance and, if possible, the expansion of Japan’s own colonial possessions. In this sense the struggle within the military was not one of “good guys” versus “bad guys,” or even “moderates” versus “radicals.” In the end, however, what may be termed the more “realistic” stance of the Control Faction meant that its leaders eventually gained control of the military (and then the government), gradually purging 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 those younger and more radical officers associated with the Imperial Way faction. Having been one of the few high ranking officers to oppose the purge, General Mazaki Jinsaburō (1876–1956), then Inspector General of Military Training, was a hero (or “saviour”) to Imperial Way sympathizers, among them Lt. Colonel Aizawa Saburō. Thus, when in July 1935 Aizawa learned that General Mazaki had himself been purged, the former took it upon himself to seek revenge, and the man he chose for assassination was Major General Nagata Tetsuzan (1884–1935), Director of the Military Affairs Bureau at the War Office and widely regarded as the leader of the Control Faction.

During his first visit to Nagata’s office, Aizawa only verbally demanded that the General step down. The latter, however, dismissed him out of hand. This refusal led Aizawa to take more drastic action, and at 9:45 a.m. on the morning of 12 August 1935 he burst into General Nagata’s office, sword drawn. Although Nagata successfully dodged Aizawa’s first blow, he was unable to escape the following two. Having previously been a swordsmanship instructor at the military academy, Aizawa’s clumsiness in dispatching Nagata was the source of some embarrassment, and as he subsequently revealed in his confession: “I had failed to kill Nagata with one blow and as a fencing master I felt deeply ashamed” (quoted in Bergamini 1971, 802).⁴ Ashamed or not, after wounding a second officer who attempted to defend Nagata, Aizawa calmly walked from Nagata’s office to the nearby military dispensary where, seeking treatment for a minor cut to his finger, he was arrested by the military police.

Assassin Lt. Col. Aizawa Saburō and Zen

Aizawa 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 29th Infantry Regiment headquartered in the northern Honshū city of Sendai. On a Monday morning in the spring of 1915 Aizawa’s company commander, Prince Higashikuni Naruhiko (1887–1990), uncle to Emperor Hirohito, addressed the assembled company officers as follows: “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” (quoted in Suguwara 1971, 180–81).⁵ As simple as this statement was, it nevertheless proved to be the catalyst for Aizawa’s

Zen practice, for as he later related: “I was troubled by the fact that I knew so little of what it meant to serve the country” (181).

Aizawa therefore decided to personally visit Banryū to seek further clarification of this matter. On doing so, Banryū related to him the well-known example of Kusunoki Masashige (1294–1336), a loyalist military leader during the period of the Northern and Southern Courts (1332–90). Defeated in battle and facing death, Masashige is said to have made a vow to be reborn seven times over in order to annihilate the enemies of the 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 practice Zen meditation” (1971, 181). 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 he sought out an equally famous Sōtō Zen master resident in the city of Sendai itself, Fukusada Mugai (1871–1943), abbot of the large temple complex of Rinnōji. Mugai, however, following a time-honoured Zen tradition, initially refused to accept Aizawa as his lay disciple. “If you’re just coming here for character-building, I don’t think you’ll be able to endure [the training],” Mugai told him (quoted in Yamada 1991, 191). 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 a neophyte monk (*unsui*).

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 the temple. Hearing 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 Imperial University and yet another of Mugai’s lay disciples. With this arrangement in place, Aizawa continued to train under Mugai through the spring of 1917.

As to what he gained from this training, Aizawa later testified at his pre-trial hearing: “The result of [my training] was that I was able to deeply cultivate the conviction that I must leave my ego behind and serve the nation” (quoted in Sugawara 1971, 81). When, during the court martial itself, the judge specifically asked which one of Mugai’s teachings has influenced him the most, Aizawa immediately replied, “Reverence for the emperor [is] absolute” (203). 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” (quoted in Katano 1994, 191).

Not surprisingly, 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, 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 that you will fully recover from your illness just as quickly as possible” (quoted in Katano 1994, 193).

Sōtō Zen Master Fukusada Mugai’s Defense

Given the closeness of the master-disciple relationship between Aizawa and Mugai, it is not surprising to learn 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 the tenth. 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*).

Aizawa’s court martial began on 28 January 1936. 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 Imperial army was thus being changed into a private concern and the supreme command was being violated. If nothing was 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... (quoted in Byas 1943, 111).

It should be noted that the “[right of] supreme command” referred to in this passage meant that the military was, constitutionally-speaking, not subject to the control of the civilian government. Rather, in theory at least, it was directly under the Emperor’s command (and that of his designated representatives). In practice, this meant that anyone (other than the Emperor himself) who sought to interfere with, or restrict the military in any way could be charged with “violating” not simply the military’s prerogatives but the right of command of the Emperor himself—a charge akin to treason.

In light of this, why did Aizawa chose to assassinate another military man, indeed his lawfully appointed superior officer? Was he not thereby violating the very right of supreme command he claimed to be defending? To this charge Aizawa replied:

I marked out Nagata because he, together with senior statesmen and financiers and members of the old army clique like General Minami and General Ugaki, were responsible for the corruption of the army. The responsibility for the army rested on Nagata, the Director of the Military Affairs Bureau. He was the headquarters of all 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 (quoted in Byas 1943, 111–12).

With this in mind, let us turn to the “spiritual” dimension, or motivation, which lay behind Aizawa’s act. Here Aizawa testified 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 the Imperial rule as established by the Emperor Meiji (quoted in Byas 1943, 113; italics mine).

Although the above words appear to leave little room for a “Zen connection” to the incident, the phrase “The world is deadlocked...” will shortly be seen to be pregnant with the “flavour” of Zen. More to the point, however, is the following short, yet key comment Aizawa made in describing his state of mind at the moment of the assassination itself: “I was in an absolute sphere, so there was neither affirmation nor negation, neither good nor evil” (quoted in Heisig 1994, 22).

Is this a manifestation of the Zen spirit? The well-known exponent of Japanese culture and Zen, Reginald Blyth (1898–1964), would certainly have recognized it as such. In postwar years he wrote: “From the orthodox Zen point of view,...any action whatever must be considered right if it is performed from the absolute” (Blyth 1966, 123).

Mugai, for his part, appeared as a witness for the defense at the ninth hearing held on 22 February, only days before the outbreak of the major 26 February Incident. Following his court testimony, Mugai returned to the witness waiting room where he was interviewed by a reporter for the *Yomiuri Shimbun*. Mugai said:

Although I don't intend to discuss the incident itself, I would like to say that I have known Aizawa's parents for the past thirty years. For this reason there is no one better acquainted with Aizawa's childhood and character than I am. While it is true that Aizawa's Zen practice is still immature in some respects, I think that the decisive action he took in accomplishing his great undertaking transcended both life and death. Even should he receive the death penalty, Aizawa will be satisfied, for as long as his ideas live on, life and death are of no concern to him (quoted in Katano 1994, 189).

If the preceding comments leave some doubt as to what Mugai really thought of his disciple and his "great undertaking," Mugai would later clarify his position in a pamphlet entitled *A Glimpse of Lt. Col. Aizawa (Aizawa Chūsa no hen'ei)*. In a section labelled "Comments by Fukusada Mugai-rōshi," Mugai wrote:

Aizawa trained at Rinnōji for a period of three years starting when he was yet a lieutenant. In applying himself to his practice with untiring zeal, he acted just as if he were a Zen priest, something quite impossible for the ordinary person to do. His character was honest and pure, and from his youth he had, through his Zen training, continually strengthened his resolve to "destroy the false and establish the true" as he sought the Buddha way. I believe the recent incident was truly a reflection of the purity of mind he had acquired over a period of more than twenty years since having been a young officer. That is to say, he was burning with his ideal of destroying the false....

Aizawa's act was definitely not one of madness. Without discussing whether it was right or wrong, I know that, prior to acting, he had repeatedly given the matter serious thought. His was not a rash undertaking nor one, as many now say, of seeking fame for himself. Neither, I am convinced, was it one of simple blind faith. There is no doubt that, given Aizawa's purity of character and self-sacrificing devotion, he felt compelled to do what he did in the face of present-day corruption.

I believe in Aizawa. The consistency of Aizawa's character lies in his readiness to serve sovereign and country on the basis of a resolute and unshakable faith that enabled him to transcend life and death. I am

certain this is not a question of placing too much confidence in him, for I know that many of his former classmates [at the military academy] also recognize the nobility of his spirit (quoted in Katano 1994, 190).

In light of Mugai's admiration for his disciple, it is hardly surprising that the close relationship between these two lasted even beyond the grave. Following Aizawa's execution by the military authorities on 3 July 1936, it was Mugai who 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, too, reveal the esteem Mugai had 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 which forbade both elaborate memorial services and the erection of shrines or monuments in his memory. Thus, by honouring a man the army had branded as 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!" (quoted in Katano 1994, 193).

Significance

In evaluating the above, it should be noted that Mugai was far from the first modern Zen master to heap lavish praise on a military disciple. The famous Meiji period Rinzai Zen master Nantembō (1839–1925), for example, praised his own famous disciple, Army 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 went on to add: “There is no *bodhisattva* practice superior to the compassionate taking of life” (quoted in Victoria 1997, 37).

This said, Mugai was certainly unique in praising a military man who had been labelled a traitor to his country. It is abundantly clear, however, that Mugai did not regard Aizawa as such. On the contrary, he was convinced, as was Aizawa himself, that such acts were necessary in order to “break the deadlock facing the nation in the present emergency.” Although the historical validity of this statement is questionable, what is of interest here is the almost uncanny resemblance between Mugai’s thought and that of D. T. Suzuki (1870–1966). Only two years later, in 1938, Suzuki would claim:

Zen has no special doctrine or philosophy, no set of concepts or intellectual formulas, except that it tries to release one from the bondage of birth and death, by means of certain intuitive modes of understanding peculiar to itself. It is, therefore, extremely flexible in adapting itself to almost 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 or economic dogmatism. It is, however, generally animated with a certain revolutionary spirit, and *when things come to a deadlock*—as they do when we are overloaded with conventionalism, formalism, and other cognate isms—Zen asserts itself and *proves to be a destructive force* (Suzuki 1959, 63; italics mine).

In supporting the actions of an assassin, it can be said that Mugai demonstrated just how “extremely flexible” Japanese Zen of the 1930s was “in adapting itself to almost any philosophy and moral doctrine....” In this context the question must be asked if there was anything in Suzuki’s interpretation of Zen that would have argued against Mugai’s endorsement of his disciple’s action?

I suggest there is nothing. That is to say, the type of Zen advocated by Suzuki, Mugai, and other Zen leaders of that period was, under the right conditions, just as amenable to supporting assassination at home as it was to supporting Japan’s aggression abroad. In arguing this I would point to yet another of Suzuki’s statements:

Zen did not necessarily argue with them [warriors] about the immortality of the soul or righteousness or the divine way *or ethical conduct*, but it simply urged *going ahead with whatever conclusion rational or irrational a man has arrived at*. Philosophy may safely be left with intellectual minds; Zen wants to act, and the most effective act, once the mind is made up, is to go on without looking backward. In this respect, Zen is indeed the religion of the samurai warrior (Suzuki 1959, 84, italics mine).

Whether or not Aizawa's act was rational is yet another contestable point, but for both Suzuki and Mugai the question of "rationality" was, in any event, of little or no consequence. Furthermore, like Suzuki, Mugai did not wish to consider "whether [his disciple's act] was right or wrong." For both Suzuki and Mugai there was only one direction for the Zen practitioner to proceed—straight ahead "without looking backward."

In pointing out the similarity in thought between Mugai and Suzuki, I am not suggesting these two men were either acquaintances or directly influenced each other's thinking. This said, it is interesting to note the existence of an indirect link between the two men in the person of Hōjō Tokiyoshi. As noted above, Mugai had arranged for Aizawa to reside in Hōjō's home during the period he trained at Rin-nōji. Not only was Hōjō then president of Tōhoku Imperial University, he was also the same man who, as D. T. Suzuki's former high school mathematics teacher, had first introduced Suzuki to Zen.

One indication of Hōjō's own Zen orientation is that he originally trained as a layman under the noted Rinzai Zen master, Imakita Kōsen (1816–92), abbot of Kamakura's Engakuji. In the 1870s Kōsen had been a leading figure in promoting reverence for the emperor and unquestioning loyalty to the state by virtue of his role as a national evangelist for the Meiji government's ill-fated Ministry of Doctrine. No doubt it was Hōjō's influence that led Suzuki to train at Engakuji beginning in 1891, first under Kōsen until the abbot's death the following year and then under Kōsen's successor, Shaku Sōen (1859–1919).

Be that as it may, Suzuki's connection to Hōjō did not end in high school, for the latter eventually resigned his university presidency to become head of the prestigious Gakushūin (Peers' School) in Tokyo in June 1917. It was at Gakushūin that Suzuki once again found himself under Hōjō's tutelage, for Suzuki had been an English teacher at this same school ever since his return to Japan from the United States in 1909.

While I have no evidence indicating the indirect link between Mugai and Suzuki was anything more than coincidence, I do believe it reveals something about the intellectual climate within Zen circles of that era. That is to say, it was perfectly acceptable to represent Zen as being a "destructive force" as long as that destruction was in the service of some alleged "greater good," most especially in the service of the state and its policies. Although it was highly unusual for this destructiveness to be directed against representatives of the state, even this was not unprecedented, for, as will be seen below, Zen-

related figures had already been deeply involved in the assassination of a number of civilian government and financial leaders in 1932. Borrowing Suzuki's words once again, it can be argued that this was the inevitable price Japanese Zen in the 1930s had to pay for its willingness to be found "wedded to anarchism or fascism, communism or democracy, atheism or idealism, or any political or economic dogmatism."

The Blood Oath Corps Incident

In his seminal book on the relationship of institutional Buddhism to Japanese militarism, entitled *Nihon Fashizumu ka no Shūkyō* (Religion under Japanese Fascism), the late Zen scholar-priest Ichikawa Hakugen (1902–86) noted that Fukusada Mugai was not the only Zen master to have testified on Lt. Col. Aizawa's behalf. According to Ichikawa, in January 1936 Zen Master Yamamoto Gempō (1866–1961) also defended Aizawa's action, asserting that Buddhism sanctioned "killing one in order that many may live" (*issatsu tashō*; 1975, 168).

While Ichikawa offered no supporting evidence for his citation, it would have been entirely consistent with this noted Rinzai Zen master's character to have given such testimony. For it is a well-documented fact that a little more than a year previously, on 15 September 1934, Gempō had testified in a similar vein at the trial of his lay disciple Inoue Nisshō (1886–1967), leader of a band of ultranationalist assassins whom the investigating prosecutor, Kiuchi Tsunenori (dates unknown), had dubbed the *Ketsumeidan* (Blood Oath Corps). Before examining Gempō's testimony in this earlier trial, however, it is necessary to understand something of the events that led to the actual assassination of two of Japan's most prominent financial and political leaders with plans to assassinate some twenty more.

Social Background to the Incident(s)

The Shōwa era, initiated by Emperor Hirohito's formal ascent to the throne in 1926, was characterized by great social and political domestic instability almost from its outset. In 1927, for example, there was a severe bank crisis that resulted in the closure of some twenty banks. In 1928, worried by the growth of left-wing elements, the government carried out the mass arrest of 1600 persons, including the leaders of

the Japanese Communist Party, who were suspected of harbouring “dangerous thoughts” as defined by the Peace Preservation Law.

Internal instability was further increased by the worldwide depression that began in the United States in 1929. Raw silk was still Japan’s greatest single export item, and the world depression greatly reduced both demand and prices. Coupled with this was the necessity to feed a population increasing by nearly one million persons a year and find jobs for a work force growing at an annual rate of approximately 450,000 persons.

As prices for both silk and rice fell, Japan’s farming population, many of whom were tenants, found themselves caught between constant taxes on the one hand and a reduction in income on the other. In addition, successive poor harvests in the early 1930s, especially in the northern prefectures, brought widespread starvation to many parts of the country. All of this contributed to a rapid rise in rural debt, delinquent tax payments, and more and more farmers who either lost their land altogether or were forced to sell their daughters into prostitution. Tenant farmers frequently sought redress from high rents by resorting to organized tenancy disputes, many of which were suppressed by the police and, on occasion, by the military as well. Japanese society was in a state of crisis that in many people’s eyes required immediate and drastic remedies.

At the time, the two major conservative political parties, the Seiyūkai and Minseitō, took turns in ruling the country through party-based cabinets. There were other civilian and military groupings (as noted above) active on both the political left and right. Irrespective of their political ideology, they all shared the common belief that they, and they alone, had the answer(s) to Japan’s many ills. Some of these groups, especially those associated with the ultraright, were quite willing to resort to the assassination of prominent political and financial figures in their quest to bring about a military *coup d’état*. This *coup* in turn was typically seen as the harbinger of the “Shōwa Restoration,” previously mentioned. It was here that the civilian ultranationalists linked up with military factions, especially those composed of younger officers, many of whom were themselves products of rural poverty.

Assassin Inoue Nisshō and Zen

In order to understand Inoue Nisshō’s readiness to lead a band of assassins, it is necessary to examine, first of all, the role Zen and Zen training played in his life. Interestingly, his training began in October

1912 not in Japan but in Manchuria. It was there that, as a university dropout, Inoue had first found work with the Japanese-owned South Manchuria Railroad Company. This is not to suggest, however, that he began his training under the guidance of a Chinese Ch'an master. On the contrary, Inoue's first master was a Japanese Sōtō Zen master and "missionary" by the name of Higashi Soshin (dates unknown). Inoue relates that under Soshin's guidance he meditated on a daily basis for more than a year "almost forgetting to eat or sleep" (Inoue 1953, 98). Inoue claimed to have passed a number of *kōan* during this period and, in recognition of his accomplishment, Soshin granted him the lay name of "Yuishin" (mind-only; 99).

Although Inoue would eventually leave Soshin to become a spy and translator for the Japanese army in northern China, he noted in his later autobiography entitled *Ichinin Issatsu* (One Person Kills One Person) that Soshin's parting words were to have a profound impact on his religious life. Inoue wrote: "When I went to bid farewell to Zen master Higashi Soshin, he said to me: 'Had we had more time, I would have liked to instruct you on the *Lotus Sūtra*.' At the time I didn't think much about it, but in later years this master's words were to have a major impact on my spiritual life" (Inoue 1953, 99).

Back in Japan

Inoue returned to Japan permanently in February 1921 and in the early summer of 1922 resumed his religious training in an abandoned Buddhist nun's hermitage known as Santoku-an located near his home village of Kawaba in Gumma prefecture. Here Inoue once again engaged in the intensive practice of *zazen* though this time he trained completely on his own. Sometime later, however, Inoue felt that his practice of *zazen* was, if anything, actually increasing the level of distress he felt not lessening it. Inoue wrote:

After having practiced [*zazen*] for some time, I noted that during the time I was seated my mind became clear. However, when I had to stand up to do things like relieving myself, there was no change in my state of mind, and I continued to be afflicted by the same doubts as before. Since I didn't know of any other method [of training], I continued to practice [*zazen*] day and night but my mental anguish only increased (Inoue 1953, 183).

As a result, Inoue eventually switched to something he called *dai-moku-zammai*, i.e., the state of *samādhi* achieved through the repetitive invocation of the phrase *Namu-myōhō-rengē-kyō* (Adoration to the

Marvelous Dharma of the *Lotus Sūtra*). It should be noted, however, that the inspiration for this latter practice came not from any Nichiren sectarian influence but rather from a vivid dream Inoue had had while yet in China, in which he had seen this phrase engraved on a stone pagoda in the midst of what at the time seemed to be a life-threatening situation.

After further months of *daimoku-zammai* practice accompanied by still more visions, Inoue finally had an initial enlightenment experience in the spring of 1924. Significantly, Inoue employed classic Zen terminology to describe his breakthrough:

I experienced a oneness in which the whole of nature and the universe was my Self. I was overwhelmed with the feeling that “heaven and earth [and I] are of the same root,” and “the ten-thousand things [and I] are of one substance.”⁶ This was something I had never felt before, a truly strange and mysterious state of mind. I thought to myself “This is really weird!” 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 melted away without a trace (Inoue 1953, 197).

One of the doubts which had plagued Inoue the most was how to determine standards for good and evil, right and wrong. Here too, the Zen “solution” to this question is evident, for Inoue stated:

It is truly a case in which, from the very beginning, “good and evil do not differ [from one another].” Rather, when our thoughts and actions are in accord with the truth of a monistic universe, this is good. When they are not, this is evil.... This said, 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 and evil] or think about what is right or wrong (Inoue 1953, 198).

As will be seen shortly, Inoue did at least live up to his own perception of right and wrong. Or perhaps more accurately, when he subsequently embarked on his career as the leader of a band of ultranationalist assassins, he would find no need to “think about what is right or wrong.”

Further Zen Training

Although Inoue did not resume formal Zen training until sometime after his solitary experience of “enlightenment,” he did, again in the best Zen tradition, realize the need for “post-enlightenment” (*gogo*) training. As he explained: “The reason that strange phenomena don’t occur very often during the practice of *zazen* is because one’s spirit is unified through the use of *kōans*, facilitating the rapid acquisition of wisdom. In my case the strange phenomena that I experienced were an initial stepping stone toward the realization of wisdom” (Inoue 1953, 208).

The temple Inoue chose for his post-enlightenment training was the famous Rinzai temple of Ryūtakuji, founded by Hakuin (1685–1768) the great seventeenth century reformer of Rinzai Zen. It is true, however, that Inoue chose to continue his Zen training only after having first visited the Nichiren sect’s headquarters on Mt. Minobu where he found the training “unsatisfactory” (Inoue 1953, 220). In addition, he also attended a week long seminar conducted by Tanaka Chikaku (1861–1939), the famous exponent of a right-wing brand of Nichiren nationalism known as *Nichirensnugi* or “Nichirenism.” As to why he ultimately chose to stay with Zen rather than adopt Nichirenism, Inoue wrote:

The reason I chose Zen is that, while Nichirenism is all right, it is full of discussion and debate. Furthermore, this discussion is of a scholarly type in which putting theory into practice only comes later, if at all.... What the nation and our people need now, however, is not theory but actual reform. That is to say, implementation must come first, and the theory later. As far as I’m concerned, theory can be left up to those specialists who call themselves scholars. Given this and my own personality, which eschews both doctrines and creeds, I realized that Zen was the best for me (quoted in Onuma 1971, 62).

This said, it is also true that Inoue did write of his deep admiration for Nichiren as a historical personage, a man whose life of perseverance in the face of great adversity seemed to parallel his own. Yet even this statement must be qualified by noting that Inoue had first studied Nichiren’s life only after having had his initial enlightenment experience (Inoue 1953, 220).

At Ryūtakuji, located near Mishima in Shizuoka prefecture, Inoue came under the guidance of the noted Rinzai Zen priest Yamamoto Gempō. The close relationship formed between these two men would last their entire lives. One indication of this is what must be consid-

ered one of the more bizarre plans hatched during the Asia-Pacific War, in which Gempō proposed at the beginning of 1941 that the two of them fly behind enemy lines in China in an attempt to convince Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek to surrender to Japan.⁷

When Inoue first went to Ryūtakuji in the fall of 1926, however, Japan was not yet formally at war with China, and thus Inoue was able to engage in traditional Rinzai-style Zen training. In particular, Inoue was attracted to the practice of *yaza*, the solitary late-night practice of meditation. "After bedtime at 8 p.m.," he recounted, "I would enter the Hakuin Memorial Hall where I practiced *zazen* until around eleven. At times I continued my practice until 1 a.m." (Inoue 1953, 236). In addition, Inoue participated in week long intensive meditation periods known as *sesshin* that were held at the temple once a month. Eventually Inoue was put in charge of the temple kitchen, one of the most responsible and difficult positions at a Zen temple.

In April of 1927 Inoue received an invitation to participate in the founding of a small temple in the village of Oarai on the seacoast near the city of Mito to the north of Tokyo. This temple was to be built in conjunction with the construction of a nearby hall memorializing Emperor Meiji (*Meiji Kinenkan*). Whereas the centerpiece of the *Meiji Kinenkan* was to be a bronze statue of Emperor Meiji, the centerpiece of the temple was to be a bronze statue of Nichiren, selected for his well-known dedication to the defense of Japan. The Nichiren (and nationalist) orientation of this new temple is also reflected in the name selected for it, *Risshō Gokokudo*, or the Temple to Protect the Nation [by] Establishing the True [Dharma].

It should be noted, however, that Inoue was, initially at least, an interested bystander in the construction of this temple. The planning and fundraising for its construction was in the hands of former imperial household minister Count Tanaka Mitsuaki (1843–1939) and the president of Ibaragi Transport Company, Takeuchi Yūnosuke (dates unknown). As temple records indicate, contributions toward the temple's construction came from scores of Japan's top political and military leaders, for from its outset this temple was designed to become the "foundation for the reform of the state" through training Japanese youth (Inoue 1953, 247). Nevertheless, Inoue initially declined the invitation to head the temple, for the simple reason that the temple, lacking traditional parishioners, had no source of income.

Once persuaded to direct the temple's activities, Inoue did put on the robes of a Buddhist priest though this was an act entirely of his own making, unsanctioned by any Buddhist organization or sect. It was this "imitation" of a Buddhist priest, coupled with the presence

of Nichiren's statue in the temple, that would later result in both Japanese and non-Japanese scholars alike mistakenly identifying Inoue as a "Nichiren priest." Inoue never made this claim for himself, his robes notwithstanding.

Having agreed to head the temple, Inoue threw himself into the work of training a group of youth who would eventually number some twenty in all. Inoue's goal was to create a band of volunteers with a "do-or-die" spirit. Toward this end he employed a variety of training methods that included *zazen* practice in the morning and evening; assigning *kōan* and conducting private interviews with his disciples, i.e., *dokusan*; *daimoku* recitation; and fasting. In fact, youth seeking admittance to his group were first required to undergo a seven day fast. Inoue explained the rationale for this requirement as follows: "Without doing this [i.e., fasting] the youth would talk big and spout nothing but theory, unable to undergo true [Buddhist] training. The reason that numerous training centers ended in failure was because they forgot this essential element in the hardening-up process" (1953, 248–49).

Although Inoue had initially conceived of his band as engaging in legal political activities, by 1930, under the prodding of young military officer sympathizers, Inoue realized he must take more resolute measures. He justified this new direction as follows: "In an emergency situation, emergency measures are necessary. What is essential is to restore life to the nation. Discussions over the methods for doing this can come later, much later" (Inoue 1953, 254).

And toward what goal were Inoue and his band's "emergency measures" directed? Inoue explained: "We had taken it upon ourselves to engage in destruction, fully aware that we would perish in the process. Therefore we had no interest in developing constructive proposals of any kind" (Inoue 1953, 272). Yet, how was Inoue able to justify such "destruction" on the basis of his Buddhist faith?

In actual fact, Inoue found no difficulty in doing so, for his Zen training provided him with the rationale, i.e., the taking of life was none other than an expression of Buddhist compassion. During lectures at his temple on the thirteenth century Zen collection of *kōan* known as the *Mumonkan*, Inoue maintained that it was Buddhist compassion that had motivated Nansen (Ch. Nan-ch'üan, 748–834) to kill the monastery cat in case number fourteen. 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 (quoted in Onuma 1963 v.3, 184).

The Time for Action Draws Near

As the next step in achieving their goals, Inoue and key members of his band shifted their base of operations to Tokyo in October 1930. Finding a home with other ultranationalist groups in the nation's capital, Inoue continued his recruitment of youth, including some from Japan's most prestigious universities, who were prepared in his words to become "sacrificial stones" (*sute-ishi*).⁸ Employing Zen terminology, one of Inoue's band members later explained: "We sought to extinguish Self itself" (quoted in Onuma 1963 v.3, 187).

That Zen terminology should have continued to play a prominent part in the discourse of even those band members recruited in Tokyo is not surprising in light of the fact that the band members' "religious training" had by no means come to an end. In a recent personal interview, ninety year old Yotsumoto Yoshitaka (b. 1908), a Tokyo University student at the time Inoue recruited him, informed the author that the band members frequently practiced *zazen* at the Rin-zai temple of Ryū-un-in located in Tokyo's Bunkyo ward.⁹ It was here that Yamamoto Gempō conducted *zazenkai* (Zen training sessions) on his regular visits to the Tokyo area. There is, however, no record indicating that Gempō was directly involved in Inoue and his band's plans for "revolution."

Yet, why had Inoue and his band chosen assassination as their method of revolution? Were there no other more humane ways of bringing about the fundamental reform of Japanese society which Inoue sought? Inoue stated: "In explaining why 'assassination' was the most appropriate method to have employed, I would point out that...this method 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" (quoted in Onuma 1971, 30).

It was exactly this point that Inoue believed distinguished his revolution from those that had taken place in Western countries. In the French and Russian revolutions, Inoue claimed, the revolutionaries had worked to insure their own survival in order that they might

secure a leadership role for themselves in the post-revolutionary era. As a consequence they were quite willing to kill any and all persons who stood in their way. The result was a massive loss of life.

Inoue and his band members, however, were prepared from the outset to perish themselves in the process of the revolution. The “selflessness” of their Buddhist faith enabled them to willingly sacrifice themselves, firm in the belief that others, particularly their comrades in the military, would follow after and construct the ideal society they sought. By being prepared to sacrifice themselves they could insure that as few persons as possible would fall victim to revolutionary violence. A youthful band member by the name of Onuma Shō (1911–78) clarified Inoue’s thinking in this regard as follows:

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 (quoted in Onuma 1963 v.3, 188).

Inoue himself summed up his attitude in the following short poem: “Dew taken up in the palm of the hand fades away in the summer morning” (quoted in Byas 1943, 61).

Assassination

Of the twenty some intended victims, only two were actually killed by members of Inoue’s youthful band. The first of these was Inoue Junnosuke (1869–1932), a former Finance Minister, who was shot on the evening of 9 February 1932 as he entered Komamoto Elementary School in Tokyo to deliver an election speech. His assassin was twenty-two year old Onuma Shō, introduced above, a onetime baker’s assistant and carpenter’s apprentice. In subsequent court testimony Onuma explained that he had debated with himself over whether to strike before Junnosuke spoke or afterwards. In the end he decided to strike before due to his concern that innocent well-wishers might be injured if he waited until Junnosuke’s departure.

This, however, was not Onuma’s only concern, for he was beset by anxiety over the act of assassination itself. Especially on the morning

of the assassination day he had been so upset he wondered whether he would be able to carry out his assignment. It was at this point that he sought strength from his Buddhist training as he began to quietly recite four sections of the *Lotus Sūtra* to calm himself. Thereafter he recited the *daimoku* four or five times and finally began to practice *zazen* in the full lotus posture. About this Onuma said:

After starting my practice of *zazen* I entered a state of *samadhi* 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 (quoted in Onuma 1963 v.3, 403).

Nearly four weeks later, on the morning of 5 March, Baron Dan Takuma (1858–1932), managing director of the Mitsui holding company, was shot just as his car pulled up to the side entrance of the Mitsui Bank Building. This time the assassin was a twenty-one year old band member by the name of Hishinuma Gorō (b. 1911). By this time Inoue himself had taken refuge in the “House of Heavenly Action,” a student hostel run by the Black Dragon Society (*Kokuryū-kai*) and located next door to the home of Japan’s most notorious ultranationalist leader, Tōyama Mitsuru (1855–1944). Six days after Takuma’s death, realizing his arrest was imminent, Inoue chose to turn himself in to the police.

Although Inoue’s direct involvement with assassinations ended with his arrest, his indirect involvement did not. Only two months later, on 15 May, a small group of young naval officers, cadets, and civilians, who had earlier plotted together with Inoue, launched a second wave of violence. This time the victim was no less than Inukai Tsuyoshi (1855–1932), prime minister and head of the Seiyūkai political party. Inukai’s death, coupled with the earlier assassinations, marked the end of party-based government in Japan which in turn contributed substantially to the eventual military takeover. Thus did Inoue and his band’s self-proclaimed dedication to “destruction” become a reality.

Court Trial

As for Inoue and his band, their trial began on 28 June 1933 but only lasted six weeks before the defendants successfully demanded that the presiding judge step down from the case due to his alleged

“inattention” (Okamura 1989, 326). The trial did not resume until 27 March 1934 under a new chief judge who gave the fourteen defendants, Inoue among them, the right to not only wear formal kimono (not prison garb) in the courtroom but expound at length the “patriotic” motivation for their acts.

In his own court testimony Inoue made it abundantly 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 Mahayana Buddhism as they presently exist in Japan are wonderful.... No matter how many sects Mahayana Buddhism may be divided into [in Japan], they all aim for the essence, the true form of the universe (quoted in Onuma 1963 v.1, 368).

If it can be said that Inoue took a rather ecumenical stance in his testimony, it is also true that he went on to express his indebtedness to both the Pure Land and Nichiren sects for having contributed to his “salvation.” With regard to Zen, however, he 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” (quoted in Onuma 1963 v.1, 369).

Inoue made another reference to 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 systematized ideas. I transcend reason and act completely upon intuition” (quoted in Maruyama 1963, 53).

Should the Zen influence on this statement be unclear to the reader, compare it with what D. T. Suzuki had to say in *Zen and Japanese Culture*:

From the philosophical point of view, 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. The military mind, being—and this is one of the essential qualities of the fighter—comparatively simple and not at all addicted to philosophizing finds a congenial spirit in Zen (Suzuki 1959, 61; italics mine).

For his part Inoue went on to describe the contribution Buddhism had made to his band’s acts. He first noted that Buddhism was a religion that taught the existence of “Buddha nature” (*Busshō*). Although Buddha nature is universally present, he asserted, it is concealed by passions, producing ignorance, attachment, and degrada-

tion. Japan is likewise a country that possesses a truly magnificent national polity (*kokutai*), a polity that is in fact identical with the “absolute nature of the universe itself.” Yet here too, human desires for such things as money, power, and so forth, had worked to conceal this incomparable national polity and resulted in dualistic ways of thinking, leading to the failure to comprehend the fundamental truth that matter and mind are one. Thus even though Japan’s national essence is excellent, degradation can occur.

At this point the judge interrupted to ask: “In the final analysis, what you are saying then is that the national polity of Japan, as an expression of universal truth (*shinyo*, Skt. *tathatā*), 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” (quoted in Onuma 1963 v.1, 87–88).

Inoue meant, of course, that in killing (and plotting to kill) Japan’s allegedly self-seeking and self-serving political and financial leaders he and his band had been doing nothing more than restoring the brilliance of the country’s peerless national polity. Within the Buddhist framework to which he adhered, his victims were no more than obscuring “clouds.”

Rinzai Zen Master Yamamoto Gempō’s Defense

The 15 September 1934 morning edition of the *Asahi Shimbun* carried the following headline: “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 his [Inoue’s] state of mind,’” (Tamaki 1980, 40)

Commencing his testimony at 11:10 a.m., Gempō said:

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.

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 practicing the ten virtues.¹⁰

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 Buddha Shakyamuni and Amida, who do not grasp the sword. Even the guardian Bodhisattva Ksitigarbha holds, in his manifestation as a victor in war, a spear in his hand. Thus Buddhism, which has as its foundation the true perfection of humanity, has no choice but to cut down even good people in the event they seek to destroy social harmony.

Although Inoue came to visit me in the midst of his spiritual training, I most definitely did not give him my sanction [i.e., confirming him as being fully enlightened] nor say that his practice was complete.

Thus on December 14th of last year [1933], I received a letter from Inoue stating that now more than ever he wished to become a Buddha, that is to say, to realize the fundamental unity of the universe and self and become one with all things. Since then I have visited him [in prison] and verified his intention. The [Buddha] Dharma is like a great ocean, the further one enters into it the deeper it becomes. I believe that Inoue's true work is set to begin from this point onwards. However, in the event he were sentenced to death, his wish would remain unfulfilled. This much I can vouch for.

Inoue's hope is not only for the victory of Imperial Japan, but he also recognizes that the well-being 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 recognize this truth.

At this point the defendants are not thinking of themselves, but state they have entrusted themselves to the judgement of the law. For my part I am absolutely certain they have truly become one with the spirit of the gods and Buddhas (quoted in Onuma 1963 v.3, 737).

Verdict and Aftermath

Inoue and the members of his band were all found guilty and sentenced on 22 November 1934. In rendering his verdict, the presiding judge described the motivation of Inoue and his band as follows:

[The defendants maintain that] to overthrow the old system of organization is a destructive or negative act. To establish the new system of organization is a constructive or positive act. Without destruction, however, there can be no construction. Since ultimate denial is the same as genuine affirmation, destruction is itself construction, and the two are one and inseparable (quoted in Maruyama 1963, 53).

Knowingly or not, the judge had presented a somewhat popularized version of the classic Mahayana (and Zen) proposition regarding the higher unity or synthesis of what appear to the unenlightened to be opposites. Under the influence of the Madhyamika school of Buddhist philosophy, this proposition affirms the unity or identity of nirvana and *samsāra*, the relative and the absolute, form and emptiness, and so forth. The question must be raised, of course, of whether the founders of the Madhyamika school ever imagined that this proposition would one day be used to justify political assassinations! Be that as it may, as Gempō had hoped none of the defendants were sentenced to death. Inoue and the two actual assassins were given life sentences while the others received sentences ranging from fifteen down to as few as three years.

While the sentences were, especially by Japanese standards, clearly on the lenient side, what is more surprising is that eleven of the accused were amnestied and released from prison in early 1935. Inoue himself had his sentence made progressively shorter until in 1940 he, too, was released from prison. In what was legally speaking a most unusual step, Inoue's guilty verdict was totally erased from the judicial record. It was as if he had never been involved in the assassinations at all.

What is perhaps even more amazing is that shortly after his release from prison Prime Minister Prince Konoé Fumimarō (1891–1945) invited Inoue to become his advisor and confidant, going so far as to provide the latter with living quarters on his estate. In fact, Konoé had sought, initially unsuccessfully, to arrange a general amnesty for Inoue and other imprisoned rightists as early as June 1937 when he became prime minister for the first time. The fact that a former leader of a band of assassins could exchange his prison cell for life on a prime minister's estate is more than of passing historical in-

terest, for it reveals, borrowing Inoue's words, just how "clouded over" Japan's national polity had become.

This said, did Inoue, as a Buddhist, ever admit to feeling any kind of remorse for having ordered the assassination of some twenty Japanese political and financial leaders of whom two were actually killed? In point of fact, he did not. On the contrary, he later wrote: "It goes without saying that from the point of view of the Buddha Dharma, I am not a criminal. In fact, it was I who dealt a blow to the transgressors of the Buddha Dharma" (Inoue 1953, 285). That Inoue could have been so confident of the justness of his cause is not difficult to understand in light of the following statement: "I am firmly anchored in the truth of the universe acquired through my experience of enlightenment. Mine is a unique faith" (253).

Conclusion

In seeking to identify those Zen elements common to both incidents, it must be admitted that aside from "assassination," each of the two incidents described was replete with unique characteristics. Not least of these was the fact that in the case of Lt. Col. Aizawa Saburō we are dealing with the apparently isolated actions of a single man.¹¹ Thus it is possible to interpret his act as that of a mentally deranged individual, his Zen training notwithstanding. Carrying this logic through to Inoue and his band of assassins, however, we would have to hypothesize the existence of "group derangement," certainly not an impossibility but at least a little more unlikely.

What argues against either of these two interpretations, however, is the deep personal involvement of two leading Zen masters of their day, one from the Sōtō and the other from the Rinzai Zen tradition. Yamamoto Gempō was in fact so highly respected by his peers that in the immediate postwar years (1946–47) he was selected as the head of the entire Myōshinji branch of the Rinzai Zen sect. If he, too, was mentally unstable, then his affliction was truly one that was widespread among his Zen contemporaries.

There is, of course, another interpretation of events. That is to say, that Aizawa and Inoue were in fact acting out, albeit somewhat "unconventionally," values that if not necessarily Zen in origin, had nevertheless been incorporated into the worldview of Zen masters of that period. And what were these values?

First, there was the belief, as previously expressed by D. T. Suzuki, that "[Zen] is animated with a certain revolutionary spirit, and *when things come to a deadlock*—as they do when we are overloaded

with conventionalism, formalism, and other cognate isms—Zen asserts itself and *proves to be a destructive force.*” Certainly all of the assassins and their respective Zen masters would have agreed with this basic premise. Yet here the question begging to be asked is where and when did Zen teaching, claiming as it does to be the authentic transmission of the Buddha Dharma, come to be identified with “destruction” in any form, let alone the physical destruction of other sentient beings?

A second belief common to all of the Zen-influenced participants in these incidents, is that, as Suzuki once again articulated: “Zen [does] not necessarily argue...about *ethical conduct*, but it simply urge[s] going ahead with whatever conclusion rational or irrational a man has arrived at. Philosophy may safely be left with intellectual minds; Zen wants to act, and the most effective act, once the mind is made up, is to go on without looking backward” (Suzuki 1959, 84; italics mine).

If Zen masters Mugai and Gempō did not directly act themselves “with whatever conclusion rational or irrational a man has arrived at” they certainly endorsed the actions of their disciples who did, even as they acknowledged that their disciples were not yet “completely enlightened” (as, presumably, they themselves were). In identifying “action” (unencumbered by “rationality”) as the very essence of Zen, these Zen leaders no longer saw the need to “think” in any form, e.g., about what one was doing, the consequences of one’s action, the “morality” of one’s actions, and so on. This, of course, is what Suzuki called the state of “no-mind” (*mushin*), said to go beyond all forms of dualism including life and death, being and non-being, and, most significantly, *good and evil* (Suzuki 1959, 94).

Those who would maintain that Aizawa and Inoue distorted Zen teachings in justifying their acts of assassination are faced with the reality that two leading Zen masters did the same. Mugai, of course, saw Aizawa as someone who “through his Zen training, continually strengthened his resolve to ‘destroy the false and establish the true’ as he sought the Buddha way.” Similarly, Gempō advocated that “Buddhism, which has as its foundation the true perfection of humanity, has no choice but to cut down even good people in the event they seek to destroy social harmony.”

And then, of course, there are the words of D. T. Suzuki who in 1938 claimed that in the event a Zen-inspired swordsman is forced to pick up the sword,

it is really not he [the swordsman] but the sword that does the killing. He had no desire to do harm to anybody, but the enemy appears and makes himself a victim. It is as though the sword performs automatically its function of justice, which is the function of mercy.... When the sword is expected to play this sort of role in human life, it is no more a weapon of self-defense or an instrument of killing, and the swordsman turns into an artist of the first grade, engaged in producing a work of genuine originality (Suzuki 1959, 145).

To those who would assert that Suzuki's words were not meant as an endorsement of Japanese aggression abroad let alone assassinations at home, I would simply ask: What in Suzuki's voluminous prewar writings in either English or Japanese would argue *against* such an interpretation of his words? Furthermore, by the time Suzuki published the above in 1938 he, like other Japanese Buddhists of that period, already had ample opportunity to read of the very public rationalizations for Zen-inspired violence put forward by masters like Mugai and Gempō. Yet, did Suzuki ever criticize these masters for what they had said? Did he ever warn in the pre-war years against the danger arising from *misinterpreting* this aspect of his description of Zen?

And finally, what is to be made of the claim that the meditative state of *samādhi* (*sammai*), whether acquired through the practice of *zazen* or the repetitive chanting of the *daimoku*, could be legitimately employed in the taking of human life?

As important as these questions are, their answers lay beyond the scope of this article. What can be said is that the support for domestic assassination in 1930s Japan by Zen leaders like Mugai and Gempō was, sadly, not an isolated phenomenon. Ideologically speaking it was closely related to the rationale offered by nearly all Zen masters of that period for their fervent endorsement of their country's military aggression abroad (as documented in my book *Zen At War*).

Viewed within the larger context of the nature of religion itself, these two assassination incidents clearly reinforce a major insight of Martin E. Marty who wrote:

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 it does not kill, many of its forms and expressions motivate people to kill (Marty 1996, 14).

D. T. Suzuki, of course, would not have agreed with Professor Marty, at least as far as Zen is concerned, for he claimed: "Zen does

not affirm or negate temporal actuality. Actuality has historicity, with which the ultimacy of Zen has no dealings (quoted in Heisig 1994, 20). While it may be true that the “ultimacy of Zen” does not have any dealings with historicity, this article has demonstrated that Japanese Zen-related figures of the 1930s certainly did have a great deal to do with creating the history of that period, the tragic consequences of which we are only now beginning to understand.

Endnotes

1. In addition to the two incidents described in this article, the most important of these assassinations were first, the shooting of Prime Minister Hamaguchi Osachi (1870–1931) on 14 November 1930 (died 26 August 1931); second, the shooting of Prime Minister Inukai Tsuyoshi (1855–1932) on 15 May 1932; and third, the murders of four leading political, military and financial figures (together with the wounding of one more and the escape of three) during the abortive military uprising of 26 February 1936.
2. This phrase is later quoted by Fukusada Mugai in defense of his disciple, Lt. Col. Aizawa Saburō’s actions. It was also used over and over again by countless Zen masters and other Buddhist leaders during the Asia-Pacific War (and before) to justify their endorsement of Japan’s military actions abroad. In terms of origin, it forms one of the fundamental tenets of the Sanron (Ch. San-lun) school based on the Madhyamika philosophy of Nāgārjuna. It is important to be aware, however, that in this school the “destruction” called for had nothing to do with taking the lives of other sentient beings. Instead, it referred to “destroying” the mind of attachment. Such “destruction” was in and of itself the establishment of the true.
3. For a detailed exposition of the 26 February Incident, see, for example, Storry 1957, 177–91; Borton 1970, 386–89; or Bergamini 1971, 809–58.
4. It is noteworthy that Yamazaki Ekijū (1882–1961), one of those Rinzai Zen masters whom I identify in *Zen At War* (121–29) as a staunch supporter of Japanese militarism, conducted a memorial service for Major General Nagata following his assassination. It can therefore be said that at least in this instance prominent Rinzai and Sōtō Zen masters found themselves on opposite sides of the fence, though both remained, nevertheless, closely connected to the Japanese military. For further discussion of Ekijū’s role see Ichikawa 1975, 42–44, 81.
5. Prince Higashikuni was well-known for his interest in Buddhism. For details of some of the uses to which he put his Buddhist faith, see Bergamini 1971, 813–15, 1374–75. Readers unfamiliar with Bergamini’s work, however, are cautioned against accepting at face value the author’s always flamboyant and sometimes inaccurate description of events.

6. These phrases, including the words [and I], are to be found in case 40 of the famous Zen *kōan* collection, *Hekigan-shū*. D. T. Suzuki employed these phrases to illustrate “Zen aestheticism” (1959, 352–54).

7. According to Inoue, Gempō had been promised an aircraft to take them to the Nationalist Chinese wartime capital of Chungking by no less a figure than General Yamashita Tomoyuki (1885–1946), architect of the British defeat at Singapore and postwar convicted war criminal who was executed by the Allies on 23 February 1946 for his role as overall commander of rampaging Japanese troops during the final days of the Japanese occupation of the Philippines. Gempō was a personal friend of General Yamashita and was convinced that he and Inoue, who spoke Chinese, would be able to convince Chiang Kai-shek to accept Japan’s conditions for peace. Although Inoue readily agreed to accompany his master, senior military and diplomatic officials got wind of this proposal and ultimately vetoed it. This incident is related in Inoue 1953, 336.

8. The reference here is to the sacrifice of one’s own game pieces, i.e., “stones,” in the Japanese board game of *go*. The idea of making a tactical sacrifice in the interests of ultimate victory is similar to that of sacrificing a pawn in the game of chess.

9. The interview took place on 20 January 1998 at the Tokyo offices of the Sankō Industrial Construction Co. which even today is headed by the still active Yotsumoto. Ryū-un-in is also known as *Hakuzan dōjō* (training center) due to its location in the Hakuzan area of Bunkyō ward.

10. Although there is some variation in the content of the categories, the four individuals/groups to whom gratitude is owed are typically identified as: 1) one’s parents, 2) all beings, 3) one’s sovereign, and 4) the Three Treasures of Buddhism (i.e., Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha). The Ten Good Practices are typically identified as: 1) not killing, 2) not stealing, 3) not engaging in improper sexual conduct, 4) not lying, 5) not speaking deceitfully, 6) not speaking ill of others, 7) not using flowery language, 8) not coveting, 9) not getting angry, and 10) not holding false views.

11. Over the years a number of historians have speculated on whether other persons might have been involved, directly or indirectly, in Aizawa’s act. David Bergamini, for example, found circumstantial evidence implicating two of Emperor Hirohito’s uncles, Princes Higashikuni Naruhiko and Asaka Yasuhiko (b. 1887), together with a number of other influential figures including Emperor Hirohito himself (Bergamini 1971, 799–802). Other historians, however, dispute Bergamini’s thesis that this assassination, like other machinations of that period, was part of some all-embracing Imperial plot. In any event, when, in February 1998, this author discussed the same question with Lt. Col. Aizawa’s son, recently retired Aizawa Masahiko, the latter stated: “The full truth of this incident has yet to be made known.”

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36 ❖ The Zen of Assassination

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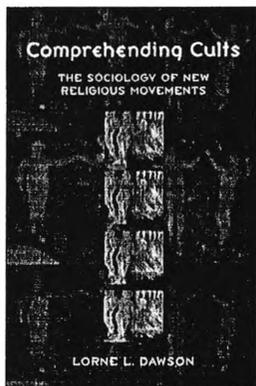
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