Bucknell University
Bucknell Digital Commons

Faculty Contributions to Books | Faculty Scholarship

Summer 7-1-2014

Seno'o Giro: Life and Thought of a Radical Buddhist

James Shields
Bucknell University, jms089@bucknell.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.bucknell.edu/fac_books


Part of the Asian History Commons, Buddhist Studies Commons, Ethics and Political Philosophy Commons, Ethics in Religion Commons, History of Religion Commons, History of Religions of Eastern Origins Commons, Intellectual History Commons, Japanese Studies Commons, Political History Commons, Political Theory Commons, and the Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons

Recommended Citation
Shields, James, "Seno'o Giro: Life and Thought of a Radical Buddhist" (2014). *Faculty Contributions to Books*. 91.
https://digitalcommons.bucknell.edu/fac_books/91

This Contribution to Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Scholarship at Bucknell Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Contributions to Books by an authorized administrator of Bucknell Digital Commons. For more information, please contact dcadmin@bucknell.edu.

30

Seno'o Giro

The Life and Thought of a Radical Buddhist

James Mark Shields

Editor's Introduction

In the collision between Asia and the colonizing Western nations, Buddhism adapted according to the logic of each country's own traditions and the circumstances created by each nation's historical response to this challenge. In countries that were under direct colonial rule (Sri Lanka, Burma, Cambodia, Vietnam), Buddhist reformers linked the revival of their tradition to the struggle to throw off colonial rule. Japan, however, retained its independence by closing itself off from the outside world; once it reopened after restoring the emperor to power in 1868, its leaders sought to ensure its sovereignty by westernizing and modernizing as quickly as possible. The country was mobilized under an encompassing nationalism based on loyalty to the ruler; after threats of closing temples and strong urging that monks marry, Buddhists were under great pressure to conform to this situation. Most did so. The biography of Seno'o Giro here represents a circle of Buddhist leaders in early twentieth-century Japan who refused this compromise and who looked to their own tradition to both critique the status quo of exploitative imperial capitalism and critique the Buddhist elite who had knuckled under to nationalism and its growing militarism.

Like other Buddhist thinkers across Asia, Seno'o Giro's attempted to link the compassionate teachings of the Buddha with the utopian doctrines in modern socialist and Marxist thought. Seno'o Giro's connections to the distinctively Japanese Nichiren School naturally proved suitable for this purpose. This school arose in the tumultuous Kamakura period (1185–1333), when its founder, Nichiren (1222–1282), developed a unique and influential interpretation of the relationship between religious practice and social affairs. Like many of his contemporaries, Nichiren was convinced that the chaos of his times meant that the world had

Buddhists: Understanding Buddhism Through the Lives of Practitioners, First Edition. Edited by Todd Lewis.
© 2014 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd. Published 2014 by John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

reached its "latter days," a Buddhist teaching about a period known as *mappo* when the dharma would begin to decline and eventually disappear. Nichiren felt that it was incorrect to retreat to seek enlightenment in meditation (as in Zen) or to focus on chanting and cultivating faith to secure rebirth in another world (as in the Pure Land schools); he taught that individual and national "salvation" could only be found within society itself – remade according to the teachings of the *Lotus Sutra*. He did insist on chanting the name of the title of this text as his school's main ritual. But his school also sought to inspire visionary leaders who would work for social reform, so that a "Buddha land" would be created on earth in which there would be both peace and prosperity. This school, and its offshoots such as the Soka Gakkai (see the biography of Soka Gakkai member Keiko Yonamine in Chapter 31), continue up until the present to focus actively on advancing economics, education, and political activism to engage in what can be called "Buddhist mass politics." In this biography of Seno'o Giro, we can witness the power of Buddhist teachings to inspire individuals to create a compassionate world on a large scale; we can also see that the prophetic voice of Nichiren heard eight hundred years ago has continued to inspire selfless and courageous lives up until the present.

Buddhism is nothing but the truth of development and change.

Seno'o Giro

Introduction

On a rainy afternoon on April 5, 1931, an extraordinary meeting was taking place in a small room on the third floor of the Young Men's Buddhist Association dormitory at Tokyo Imperial University. With some 30 lay Buddhists in attendance, most in their twenties and early thirties, along with four watchful uniformed police officers, Seno'o Giro (1889–1961) inaugurated the Youth League for Revitalizing Buddhism (Jp. Shinko Bukkyo Seinen Domei), an experiment in Buddhist social activism that set itself up as a vanguard of socialist protest against poverty, injustice, colonialism, and imperialism.

The following are a few highlights from the League's inaugural proclamation, read publicly that afternoon:

> The modern era is one of suffering. Brothers who want to share fellowship are engaged in conflict beyond their control, while the general public is forced to beg for scraps of bread. Whether you run or you fight, the present age is one of chaos and distress. In such an age, what do Buddhists see, and what contributions are they making? Drunk with their own peace of mind, the majority of Buddhists do not see a problem... They say: "Religion is above this; religion values harmony." And yet, the fact is that religion is playing the role of an opiate, imposed upon the people. Unless the righteous indignation of young Buddhists is aroused, nothing will be done about this. The present condition is not one that those of pure heart can endure...
>
> As for us, we cannot help but firmly call for a revitalized Buddhism... Recognizing that most of the current suffering has its origins in the capitalist economic system, a revitalized Buddhism pledges to collaborate with the people to make fundamental reforms in the interest of social welfare. It is a Buddhism for the people – whose aim is to revolutionize the bourgeois Buddhism of the present... Young Buddhists! Now is the time for us to rise up! Let's throw all conventions aside at once and return to the Buddha. And, beginning with our own personal experience of the Buddhist spirit of love and equality, let's boldly turn to a restructuring of the capitalist system. Let's make every effort to construct our ideal Buddhist society![1]

With its relative openness, the short-lived Taisho period (1912–25) witnessed a blossoming of Marxism and left-wing activism in Japan – in philosophical, political, and literary forms.

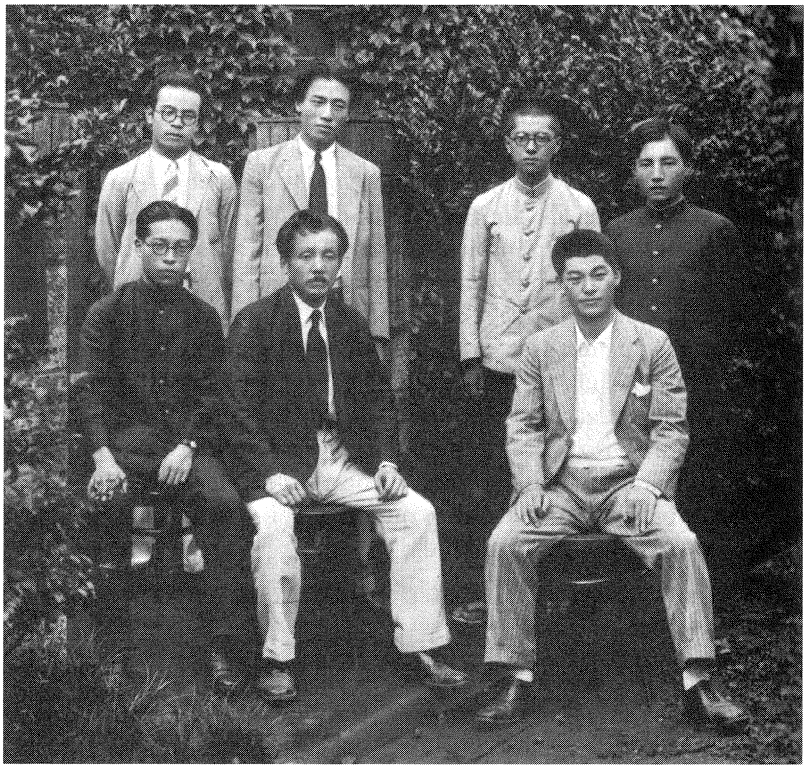

Figure 30.1 Seno'o Giro (front row, middle) and his associates. Reproduced by permission of Iwanami Shoten, Publishers, Tokyo.

Despite these developments, by the early Showa period (1926–1989), tides had begun to turn decisively against progressive politics, religious or otherwise. By the late 1920s, while Buddhist institutions in Japan were claiming neutrality in the growing struggles between labor and management, Buddhist leaders knew on which side their bread was buttered – or, perhaps, who was supplying the soy sauce. So-called "[Buddhist] factory evangelists" would parrot the government mottos about strength, harmony, and unity, while denouncing "socialist agitators."[2] It was in this context that Seno'o Giro established the Youth League for Revitalizing Buddhism, based on the simple but disarming premise that the capitalist system generates suffering and, thus, violates the spirit of Buddhism.

Early Life and Its Context

But who was Seno'o Giro? Let us turn back the clock to 1889, the year of his birth. The late 1880s was a time of great transformation in Japanese society. In fact, one might say that the previous two decades saw unparalleled change, with the collapse of the centuries-old rule by the *shogun* of the Tokugawa family (in concert with regional warlords). The country then experienced, in short order, a new government and the "restoration" of the Imperial Throne (in 1868), followed by a period of remarkable openness to Western ideas and technologies, accompanied by a brief but intense and traumatic persecution of Buddhism. In 1889, a new constitution was proclaimed, quickly followed by the Imperial Rescript on Education, which helped lay the ideological foundations for twentieth-century Japanese nationalism and imperialism.

Seno'o Giro was born on December 16, 1889, in the village of Tojo, in the Nuka district of Hiroshima prefecture (now part of Shobara city).[3] His father Tamejiro, a sake-brewer, died while Seno'o was still young. His mother Haru, who claimed ancestral ties to the once-mighty Ashikaga samurai clan, was well known for her

kindness. As the fourth male child in a family of nine children, the young Giro was never at a loss for companionship. According to later reminiscences of his sister Noriko, he was a kind but passionate (and occasionally hot-headed) youth. In 1908, the year of the Akahata or "Red Flag Incident," in which dozens of left-wing activists were rounded up following a street demonstration, Giro entered the English Law Department at the First Higher School (Ichiko) in Tokyo, Japan's most prestigious prewar college preparatory school. Among his fellow students were Kawai Eijiro (1891–1944), who would emerge as an outspoken liberal (and anti-Marxist) in the 1930s, as well as future luminaries: prominent political scientists Kamikawa Hikomatsu (1889–1988) and Takagi Yasaka (1889–1984), art historian and museum director Yashiro Yukio (1890–1975), politician and wartime finance minister Kaya Okinori (1889–1977), and Yakushi Shiko (1889–1984), the lawyer who would defend Seno'o at the time of his arrest in 1936. It was an eclectic group, but one that, as Inagaki Masami notes,[4] shows remarkable consistency with respect to future individual social engagement.

The primary influence on Seno'o's education was Nitobe Inazo, the well-known Quaker writer and author of *Bushido: The Soul of Japan*, who served as Headmaster of the First Higher School from 1906 to 1913, a period during which Nitobe was regarded – at least among students – as "the most popular man in Japan."[5] From Nitobe, Seno'o gained an appreciation for Western principles of equality and individual dignity, through his exposure to thinkers such as Whitman, Longfellow, and Tolstoy. Yet it was not the famed Nitobe but rather an elderly local tofu maker, Matsuzaki Kyutaro (1852–1920), who would introduce Seno'o to the *Lotus Sutra*, the ancient Buddhist scripture that would shape his thinking and activities for the rest of his life. Like his more famous contemporary the writer and rural activist Miyazawa Kenji (1896–1933), who was also raised in a Pure Land household (Jodo Shinshu), Seno'o would eventually turn toward Nichiren Buddhism, the Japanese school that reveres the *Lotus Sutra* above all other texts.

Early in his second year of high school, Seno'o was diagnosed with bronchial catarrh (in addition to anemia), and in December 1909 he was forced to drop out of school and return home to Tojo, to be nursed by his mother and sister-in-law. Despite several attempts to return to Ichiko, Seno'o spent the bulk of the next two years in a state of prolonged convalescence, eventually withdrawing from school in September 1911. To make matters worse, at around the same time, the family sake-brewing business began to fail. After his 16-year-old sister died of lung disease in June 1911, upon the recommendation of his newfound acquaintance Matsuzaki, Seno'o turned to the *Lotus Sutra*, as well as the Bible, for consolation and strength. Over the next few months Seno'o spent much time at a local Nichiren sect temple, where he participated in ritual readings of the *Lotus Sutra*. He became familiar with the head priest of the temple, and was encouraged to read the writings of the founder, the thirteenth-century Japanese Buddhist reformer Nichiren (1222–1282). He also read texts of the Tendai school (Ch. Tiantai), which was transmitted from China in the early ninth century CE by the Japanese monk Saicho (767–822, also known as Dengyo Daishi).

Education and Formative Influences

During his long convalescence, Seno'o spent much time walking in the countryside. Upon finally regaining his health in November 1911, he took up a position as English and composition instructor at his local alma mater, the Tojo First Normal Higher Elementary School. Though he continued in this position for two years, these were not happy times for Seno'o. While he greatly enjoyed teaching the young children, he found the pedagogical approaches of his fellow teachers stilted and mechanical. During this same period an interest in Christianity sparked, though he still remained wedded to the *Lotus Sutra* and the teachings of the Nichiren sect.

In August 1913, Seno'o left Tojo Elementary to apply for admission to the East Asian Common Cultural College (Toa Dobun Shoin), a school established in 1900 by the Japanese foreign ministry in Shanghai in order to promote good relations between the two modernizing countries. It seems that Seno'o applied to this overseas school on a whim, though the prospect of free tuition – and the possibility of foreign adventure – no doubt played a role. Along with three others, Seno'o successfully passed the admissions test and gained acceptance to the academy, but he was unable to travel to Shanghai

due to the fact that the school's buildings had been burned down in the aftermath of China's 1911 Revolution. Until the Shanghai academy was rebuilt, Seno'o and the others were sent to Nagasaki on the southern Japanese island of Kyushu to undertake Chinese-language training. Over the next few months, in the midst of recurring health troubles, no doubt exacerbated by his sparse lodgings at a local Nichiren temple, Seno'o once again turned to the *Lotus Sutra*. He quickly made the acquaintance of the temple head priest, who taught Seno'o "basic Buddhism" (i.e., the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, the 12 stages of dependent origination) as well as the specifically Mahayana teachings of the bodhisattva's six "perfections" (Skt. *paramita*), the doctrine of Buddha nature (i.e., the "spark" or "seed" of awakening in all sentient beings), and the Tendai doctrine of the nondualistic interpenetration of all things (Jp. *inchinen sanzen*). Although the Shanghai academy was soon ready for its new Japanese recruits, Seno'o's continuing health problems compelled him to give up the journey to Shanghai. While his companions set off for China in late 1913, he returned home to Tojo, now 24 years old but still without much direction in terms of his life's course.

Things were no better at home – that fall, the family lost its entire stock of sake and was facing financial ruin. At this time, Seno'o's elder brother, who had run the business since the death of Seno'o's father, also fell ill. In order to relieve the family of some of its burden during this difficult time, Seno'o decided to spend some time abroad. In spring 1914 he sailed to Taiwan, then a Japanese colony, where he took up a position in a patent office in the city of Chilung. Once again, however, illness cut short the young Seno'o's plans. In March 1915, upon doctor's orders, he reluctantly returned to Japan, where he was diagnosed with pulmonary tuberculosis, an inflamed appendix, and pleurisy.

Immersion in the Nichiren Buddhist Tradition

Despite (or perhaps because of) his seemingly endless battles with illness, in September of that same year, 1915, Seno'o made the bold decision to embark on a nationwide pilgrimage to the thousand most significant temples of the Nichiren sect. Known as the Sengaji, this difficult pilgrimage ends at Kuonji, the Nichiren temple headquarters located on the slopes of Mt. Minobu, a sacred mountain not far from Mt. Fuji, in central Japan. Even for healthy persons, the Sengaji normally takes many years to perform. Somewhat to Seno'o's surprise, the first few temples he approached in Okayama prefecture refused him lodging, making his early journey very difficult. At this point, however, he was told of a small temple called Shakuson Shuyoin in the town of Soja, run by a Nichiren priest named Shaku Nikken (b. 1875?). Recognizing that Seno'o was in no condition to complete his pilgrimage, the priest and his wife, Myozenni, asked him to stay at Shakuson. Accepting the offer, Seno'o repaid the couple by acting as an instructor for 30 orphans under their care, reading them books (such as *Aesop's Fables*) and drawing cartoons for them. Seno'o also actively engaged in Nichiren religious practice, including daily chanting of the *daimoku* (i.e., repetition of the name of the *Lotus Sutra*): "*Nam-myoho-renge-kyo*." The views of Shaku and Myozenni would have a profound effect on the young seeker, so much so that, in December 1915, at the age of 26, Seno'o entered the Nichiren priesthood at Myohonji. And yet, what he learned from Abbot Shaku was not entirely "orthodox"; the older man was a maverick who had little respect for many aspects of institutional Buddhism and was fiercely critical of the character of most priests. Thus, even while deepening his commitment to the ideas and practices of Nichiren Buddhism, Seno'o was simultaneously charting a path toward independence from the traditional Buddhist establishment.

In early 1916, just as Seno'o felt well enough to continue his pilgrimage to Mt. Minobu, his mother Haru became ill, and he returned to Tojo to assist with her care. After she died in late July, Seno'o spent the next two years in Tojo, where he became increasingly involved in the Nichirenist (Jp. Nichirenshugi) lay movement, which had been established several decades before by Tanaka Chigaku (1861–1939). While rooted in the teachings of sect-founder Nichiren, Tanaka sought in "Nichirenism" a more socially and politically engaged form of Buddhist practice, one that was also skeptical of monastic institutions. By the 1890s, under Tanaka's charismatic leadership, Nichirenism had taken on a

profoundly nationalistic hue, combining some of Nichiren's ideas on protecting the nation with the emerging imperialist ideology known as State Shinto. Seno'o had been introduced to Tanaka's work some years before, and now he formed a club, called the Society for Respecting and Revering Nichirenism (Nichirenshugi Sangyokai), in order to further study Tanaka's ideas.

In the summer of 1918, with his health substantially improving, Seno'o left Okayama for Tokyo in order to put his Nichirenist ideals into practice.[6] To his dismay, his request for direct assistance from Tanaka's Nichirenist academy, the National Pillar Society (Kokuchukai), was refused. Seno'o took this rebuff personally, blaming the size and "bureaucratic" nature of the society, which in his estimation led to a bias against followers coming from rural areas. He then turned his attention to the work of another significant teacher in the Nichirenist movement, Honda Nissho (1867–1931), who had recently published his own interpretation of the *Lotus Sutra* (*Hokkekyo no shinzui*, 1917). Though less overtly political than Tanaka's quest for "world unification" (Jp. *sekai toitsu*) under the *Lotus Sutra*, Honda looked for a unification of all Buddhist sects, and, also like Tanaka, questioned the traditional division between monastic and lay Buddhism. Finally, he sought a Buddhist solution to the deepening class rifts (and social unrest) occasioned by Japan's unbridled capitalism. These ideas appealed to Seno'o. He began to attend weekly meetings of Honda's Toitsudan (Unification Group), and, after an encouraging meeting with Honda in May 1918, dedicated himself to working for Nichirenist ideals as a layman. At the age of 28, it must have seemed to Seno'o that he had finally found his calling.

In 1919, Seno'o began working full time at Toitsudan, preparing for the society's weekly meetings and proofreading Honda's numerous publications. Honda's Sunday lectures drew hundreds of mostly working-class men and women seeking solace from their economic woes. In November 1919, under Honda's guidance, Seno'o established a group called the Greater Japan Nichirenist Youth Corps (Dainippon Nichirenshugi Seinendan), which brought together young Nichirenists – men and women – from across Tokyo. In September of the following year, Seno'o published an article in the inaugural issue of *Wakodo* (Youth), the group's organ, making the case for a recovery of the "humanist" element within traditional Nichiren thought to be an antidote to the increasing alienation people felt in modern society.[7] That same month, at the age of 30, Seno'o married Saito Fumiyo, a colleague from his time teaching at Tojo Elementary School. Seno'o's new bride subsequently gave birth to their first child, Tetsutaro, named in honor of Sato Tetsutaro (1866–1942), a prominent military theorist and admiral in the Japanese navy. The fact that Seno'o named his first-born son after a military ideologue shows that he was, at this point, still very much enmeshed in the nationalistic ideology of Nichirenism.

In general, these were good years for Seno'o. He spent his time writing for and editing the youth corps journal, traveling around the country lecturing on Nichirenism, and caring for his small family. However, hints of dissatisfaction with his chosen course – and specifically with some of the ideals and practices of the Nichirenist movement – were beginning to surface. One historical event that would have a lasting effect on Seno'o's thought – and had no small effect on his turn toward radical politics – was the Great Kanto Earthquake of September 1, 1923. This great tragedy, which devastated the city of Tokyo and caused the deaths of over 140,000 ordinary Japanese, drove home for Seno'o the Buddhist doctrine of impermanence and the brute reality of suffering in this world. Perhaps even more significant, however, was the aftermath, which unleashed massive scapegoating of foreigners, particularly Koreans. This made Seno'o question the conceits of liberal progressivism regarding the natural goodness of humanity while driving home the necessity of *active* compassion over contemplation or meditation.[8] In other words, he began to wonder whether it was enough to simply espouse the personal ideals of "liberty" and "progress" without aiming for a more fundamental transformation of society.

New Movements: Merging Nichiren Buddhism and Western Radical Traditions

By 1926, Seno'o was starting to entertain serious doubts about the justice of the capitalist

system, and began to consider socialism as a practical foundation for his thoughts on social and religious reform.[9] This turn seems to have been prompted by his increasing contact (and sympathy) with both tenant farmers and factory workers. He began reading the work of left-leaning writers, both Japanese – e.g., Kawakami Hajime (1879–1946), Yamakawa Hitoshi (1880–1958), and Hosoi Wakizo (1897–1925) – and European – e.g., Romain Rolland, Bukharin, Lenin, Marx, and Engels.[10] Although this turn to socialism represents a move away from the specific political leanings of Nichirenism, it could also be understood as a differential extension of the fundamental insights of Tanaka and Honda with regard to the fusion of religion and politics. Indeed, although he would come to renounce the Nichiren sect as an institution, the establishment of the Youth League for Revitalizing Buddhism in 1931 was an attempt to bring about a form of Buddhism that Nichiren himself would have advocated had he been alive in Seno'o's own day.[11]

As one of a number of popular new "reform" movements that arose during the tumultuous Kamakura period (1185–1333), the Nichiren sect developed a unique and influential interpretation of the relationship between religious practice and social affairs. Accordingly, Nichiren taught that it is incumbent upon visionary leaders to work for social reform, so that a "Buddha land" on earth can be created in which there is both peace and prosperity.[12] This includes involvement in what we would today call mass politics, as well as economics, education, and various aspects of culture. The underlying premise behind this religiopolitical vision is that:

> The self and society are mutually intertwined, and, together as one, shape reality. Thus, in conjunction with one's own transformation and salvation, the surrounding environment will also change and be saved, which in turn will again have an impact on one's own transformation.[13]

Perhaps unsurprisingly, however, there is little in Nichiren's writings to suggest what modern scholars would call "historical consciousness" of, and imperative to address, "structural suffering" in society and the need for sociopolitical change. Seno'o rectified this problem by developing the concept of *hansei* (critical reflection or meditation) as fundamental to Buddhist social and political reform. *Hansei* is a deeply penetrating form of self-reflection that must be grounded in one's existence with and among others.

For Seno'o, the state itself must undergo constant *hansei* as one of the primary qualities of rulership, along with humaneness and moral practice. Seno'o went so far as to suggest that these three virtues were the true meanings behind Japan's Imperial Regalia, or *Sanshu no jingi*: the mirror, jewel, and sword that traditionally have been understood as symbols attesting to the divine authority of the emperor. In similar fashion, Seno'o offered a reinterpretation of the Three Jewels/Refuges of traditional Buddhism, in which Buddha represents the manifest human ideal, dharma the law of selfless love, and sangha a new society, free of exploitation.[14]

Seno'o and the Youth League were fighting a war of interpretation on two fronts: on the one hand against conservative, co-opted Buddhist institutions and on the other against anti-Buddhist and antireligious forces.[15] This required a delicate balance of apologetics and criticism. In general, Seno'o's Youth League interpreted Buddhism as an atheistic, humanistic, and ethical religion. Their rejection of existent forms of Buddhism is also reminiscent of these earlier movements; their critique of the capitalist system – and the more explicit emphasis on material wellbeing – was new.

In addition to its journal, *Under the Banner of Revitalized Buddhism*, the Youth League held an annual national conference, called "Revitalized Buddhist Youth." Here various positions were proclaimed and debated. For example, at the third conference, held in January 1933, the League asserted its opposition to nationalism, militarism, warfare, and the annexation of Manchuria; the fourth conference, held in January 1934, stated their commitment to building a "cooperative society," promoting internationalism, and bringing about a mutually productive unification of all Buddhist sects; and at the fifth conference, held in January 1935, the League explicitly proclaimed its intent to restructure the capitalist system, vigorously challenge "reactionary religious sects," and allow each person to reach a state of perfection through inner purification.[16] Needless to say, most if not all of these positions were in conflict with the trends and views of the political elite of the time, and so the Youth League began to draw critical attention to the movement.

At the same time, Seno'o became an active participant in various leftist and labor organizations, including the proletarian Social Masses Party, which he joined in 1932, and no fewer than three separate antifascist groups, with which he became involved in 1933 – not coincidentally, the very year that Hitler's Nazi party established power in Germany. Seno'o was first arrested in 1934, for taking part in a strike organized by the Social Masses Party. In April 1935, at the invitation of Kato Kanju (1892–1978) and Takano Minoru (1901–1974), leaders of the National Council of Trade Unions, Seno'o became editor of *Rodo Zasshi* (Journal of Manual Labor), whose aim was the establishment of a popular front.[17] In 1936, he participated in Kato's Convention of Proletarian Workers, later known as the Proletarian Party of Japan. He also stood, unsuccessfully, as that party's candidate in the Tokyo municipal elections.

Repression, Imprisonment, and Postwar Activities

At just this time, the government began to increase its repression of left-wing groups and liberal thought. By 1936, membership in the Youth League had reached nearly three thousand, and, although this made it an object of concern for the government, it was Seno'o's active involvement with the broader left-wing popular front that would lead to his eventual arrest. Along with hundreds of members of all these organizations, including Kato Kanju, Seno'o was arrested on December 7, 1936 and charged with treason, under the auspices of the Peace Preservation Act of 1925. After five months of relentless interrogation, Seno'o finally confessed his crimes and pledged his loyalty to the emperor in May 1937. In Japanese, this is called *tenko*, and refers to a person's "ideological conversion" to nationalism. The Youth League for Revitalizing Buddhism dissolved after a roundup of over two hundred members, many of whom were arrested on the "evidence" of Seno'o's confession. Sentenced in August 1939 to five years hard labor (subsequently commuted to three), he was released due to ill health on July 27, 1942, and, after spending two further months in a hospital, returned home in September 1942.

After the war, Seno'o quickly resumed his work for peace and social justice.[18] In May 1946 he helped found the Buddhist Socialist League (Bukkyo Shakaishugi Domei); in April 1947, he established the Shinano Buddhist Youth League (Shinano Bukkyo Seinen Domei); and, in April 1949, he became Chairman of the newly formed All Japan Buddhist Reform Alliance (Zenkoku Bukkyo Kakushin Remmei). He joined the Socialist Party in December 1949, and in the early 1950s took on leadership roles in a number of secular pacifist organizations, such as the Assembly of Citizens United for Peace, the Japan–China Amity Association, and the Japan–North Korea Amity Association. Finally, in 1959, he became a member of the Japanese Communist Party. Yet, while Seno'o remained active in left-wing politics until his death at the age of 71 in 1961, he was never able to forgive himself for his 1937 *tenko*.[19]

A quarter-century ago, in one of the first and only Western studies on Seno'o Giro and the Youth League for Revitalizing Buddhism, Whalen Lai made the case that the changeability of Seno'o's life effectively "recapitulated the whole dilemma of Japanese Buddhism since the Meiji Restoration ... and highlights well the unresolved conflicts at the heart of modern liberal Buddhism."[20] This was echoed a few years later by Stephen Large, who remarked that "Seno'o Giro exemplified a tradition of protest within Japanese Buddhism which merits further examination in future research to provide a more balanced perspective on Buddhism as a political force in modern Japanese history."[21]

It is indeed important to examine Seno'o's life in the broader traditions of Buddhist doctrinal interpretation, and the Japanese historical tradition of reform and social criticism, as well as in relation to the post-1868 movements in Buddhist and Japanese thought (the Kyoto School, Critical Buddhism, and Engaged Buddhism). Only then can we see the lingering tensions within Buddhist ethics that were perhaps present from the tradition's origins: between the "materialist" desire to create a more just society and the "spiritual" quest for personal liberation. For Seno'o Giro, this tension was acutely felt and a central thread in his biography. Whether or not he fully resolved it, his life stands as a testament to the problems as well as the possibilities of engaged Buddhist activism.

References

Davis, W. (1992) *Japanese Religion and Society: Paradigms of Structure and Change*, SUNY Press, Albany.

Honma, Y. (1971) Hanshūkyō undō [Antireligious movements], in *Nihon shūkyōshi kōza* [Course in Japanese religions], vol. 4 (ed. S. Ienaga), San'ichi Shobō, Tokyo, pp. 66–103.

Inagaki, M. (1974) *Budda o seoite gaito e: Seno'o Giro to Shinkō Bukkyō Seinen Dōmei* [Carrying Buddha on their backs: Seno'o Giro and the Youth League for Revitalizing Buddhism], Iwanami Shoten, Tokyo.

Kashiwahara, Y. (1990) *Nihon bukkyōshi: Kindai* [Japanese Buddhist history: modernity], Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, Tokyo.

Kimura Noriaki (2000) Seno'o Girō ni kan suru Ikkō-satsu: Honda Nisshō no Eikyō [Reconsidering Seno'o Giro: the influence of Honda Nissho]. *Risshō Daigaku Nichiren Kyōgaku Kenkyūjō* [Research group for the study of Nichiren's teachings, Risshō University] 27.

Lai, W. (1984) Seno'o Girō and the dilemma of modern Buddhism: leftist prophet of the Lotus Sutra. *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 11 (1), 7–42.

Large, S. (1987) Buddhism, socialism, and protest in prewar Japan: the career of Seno'o Girō. Modern Asian Studies, 21 (1), 153–71.

Machacek, D.W. and Wilson, B.R. (eds) (2000) *Global Citizens: The Soka Gakkai Buddhist Movement in the World*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Matsune, T. (ed.) (1975) *Senō Girō to "Shinkō Bukkyō Seinen Dōmei"* [Seno'o Giro and the "Youth League for Revitalizing Buddhism"], San'ichi Shobō, Tokyo.

Nichiren (1990) Risshō Ankoku Ron [On establishing correct teachings for the peace of the nation], in *Selected Writings of Nichiren* (ed. P.B. Yamplosky), Columbia University Press, New York, pp. 11–49.

Ōtani Eiichi (2001) *Kindai Nihon no Nichirenshugi undō* [The Nichirenist movement of modern Japan], Hōzōkan, Kyoto.

Seno'o, G. (1975) *Seno'o Girō shūkyō ronshu* [Collected religious writings of Seno'o Giro], Daizō Shuppan, Tokyo.

Shields, J.M. (2012) A blueprint for Buddhist revolution: the radical Buddhism of Seno'o Girō (1889–1961) and the Youth League for Revitalizing Buddhism. *Journal of Japanese Religious Studies*, 39 (2), 333–51.

Tamamura, T. (1980) *Nihon bukkyōshi: III* [Japanese Buddhist history: III], Hōzōkan, Tokyo, pp. 129–32.

Further Reading

Sawada, M. (1996) *Tokyo Life, New York Dreams: Urban Japanese Visions of America, 1890–1924*, University of California Press, Berkeley.

Notes

1 Inagaki 1974: 3–6, my translation.
2 Davis 1992: 177.
3 The following account of Seno'o's early life (1889–1915) has been adapted from various sources but especially Inagaki (1974: 40–53) and Kimura (2000: 48–50).
4 Ingaki 1974: 33.
5 *Oriental Review*, November 10, 1910: 451.
6 The following account of Seno'o's involvement with Nichirenism, and Honda in particular, relies on Inagaki (1974: 57–75) and Ōtani (2001: 269–70).
7 See Matsune (1975: 24–45), Tamamura (1980: 393–411), and Large (1987: 155).
8 Seno'o 1975: 197–220.
9 Kashiwahara 1990: 214.
10 Inagaki 1974: 78–89.
11 Seno'o 1975: 260–2; Inagaki 1974: 11.
12 See Nichiren 1990.
13 Machacek and Wilson 2000: 103.
14 Seno'o 1975: 384–7.
15 See Honma 1971. For a more detailed analysis of the ideas of Seno'o and the Youth League, see Shields 2012.
16 Kashiwahara 1990: 215.
17 Large 1987: 163.
18 The following data on Seno'o's postwar activities are drawn largely from Kimura (2000: 52–4).
19 Large 1987: 171.
20 Lai 1984: 7.
21 Large 1987: 168.