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### A Blueprint for Buddhist Revolution: The Radical Buddhism of Seno'o Girō (1889–1961) and the Youth League for Revitalizing Buddhism

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James Mark SHIELDS

## A Blueprint for Buddhist Revolution

### The Radical Buddhism of Seno'ō Girō (1889–1961) and the Youth League for Revitalizing Buddhism

In the early decades of the twentieth century, as Japanese society became engulfed in war and increasing nationalism, the majority of Buddhist leaders and institutions capitulated to the status quo. One notable exception to this trend, however, was the Shinkō Bukkyō Seinen Dōmei (Youth League for Revitalizing Buddhism), founded on 5 April 1931. Led by Nichiren Buddhist layman Seno'ō Girō and made up of young social activists who were critical of capitalism, internationalist in outlook, and committed to a pan-sectarian and humanist form of Buddhism that would work for social justice and world peace, the league's motto was "carry the Buddha on your backs and go out into the streets and villages." This article analyzes the views of the Youth League for Revitalizing Buddhism as found in the religious writings of Seno'ō Girō to situate the movement in its social and philosophical context, and to raise the question of the prospects of "radical Buddhism" in twenty-first century Japan and elsewhere.

KEYWORDS: Seno'ō Girō—Japan—radical Buddhism—Marxism—socialism—Nichiren—Buddhist reform

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For us, religion is life itself. Society is our concern. That is to say, society is what we are made of. Politics, economics, education, the military as well as the arts and so on, are all subsumed under religion. All aspects of social life must be subject to critique and reform in light of the spirit of the Buddha. Thus aspiring to change society, to know ourselves, to sincerely repent and to simultaneously repay with gratitude the grace [*on* 恩] we have received—all these are part of the life of faith. At that level, there is no difference between the movement to better society conducted in faith and the same call to action from those believers in historical materialism, whether socialist or communist.

—SENO’O GIRŌ 1975, 253

EVERY SO OFTEN over the past century Buddhist activists in Asia and the West have attempted to draw a bridge across the seemingly vast gap between Buddhism and radical politics based on the provocative premise that Buddhism can add to radical political praxis, and vice versa. While such attempts at Buddhist progressive politics have usually been under-theorized, we can trace a genealogy of references to the supposed accommodation between Marx and the Buddha in the work of at least two prominent Western thinkers: Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908–2009) and Jacques Derrida (1930–2004).

Lévi-Strauss argues that both Buddhism and Marxism aim for “liberation,” and as a result, have no obvious conflict. Far from being a teaching of resignation, he insists:

This great religion of not-knowingness... bears witness, rather, to our natural gifts, raising us to the point at which we discover truth in the guise of the mutual exclusiveness of being and knowing. And, by a further audacity, it has achieved something that, elsewhere, only Marxism has brought off: it has reconciled the problem of metaphysics with the problem of human behavior.

(LEVI-STRAUSS 1961, 396)

Furthermore, Lévi-Strauss sees within Buddhism a potential “missing link” in the chain between the quest for individual contentment and the drive for social justice. This resides in the fact that Buddhist liberation is a dialectical process that sublates and thus contains and “validates” its many stages—stages

that incorporate an ethic of compassion and altruism. Summing this up, he concludes:

Between Marxist criticism which sets Man free from his first chains, and Buddhist criticism, which completes that liberation, there is neither opposition nor contradiction. Marxism and Buddhism are doing the same thing, but at different levels. (LÉVI-STRAUSS 1961, 395–96)

Though Lévi-Strauss's remarks might be dismissed as offhand comments within the swelling conclusion to a work that is famously anecdotal, they struck a chord with his student Jacques DERRIDA, who comments on them in his own magnum opus (1967). For Derrida, Lévi-Strauss raises a salient issue that remains to be fully explored: that is, whether Marxist criticism provides a sufficiently rounded analysis of human "suffering" and the path to "liberation," and, if not, whether it may or must be supplemented by alternative forms of criticism—such as "for example, Buddhist criticism" (DERRIDA 1967, 120). But for Derrida, Lévi-Strauss undercuts any possibility of cross-fertilization by glossing over the differences and asserting the essential similarity of Buddhism and Marxism—something he is only able to do at the expense of history itself. In other words, Derrida's concern is that the *only* point at which both Marxism and Buddhism can come together is a point of common weakness: *the lack of a deep sense of history or historical consciousness* (DERRIDA 1967, 138).

In a recent work Bill MARTIN (2008) takes up this exchange between Derrida and Lévi-Strauss, arguing with Derrida that despite Buddhism's positive commitment to individual liberation, it "does not appear to have anything to say" about the problem of production, and about history as understood in the materialist sense. According to Martin:

In Buddhism, history is primarily illusion and error, and though it could perhaps be considered the process by which one comes to enlightenment, as well, or at least the context, there is nothing in Buddhism that allows us to focus on the particularities of history. We might even go so far as to say that, in Buddhism, it is history itself that is evil, and the point of enlightenment is to "rise above" this evil, to become "light" by throwing off the burden of historicity. Then one can see that this evil, like history, never really existed in the first place. (MARTIN 2008, 35–36)

Without worrying for now about the adequacy of Martin's picture of Buddhism, both he and Derrida hit upon a theme that is often perceived, with some justification, as the weakness of a religious tradition that claims to promote *liberation from suffering*—a liberation that, at least in East Asian Mahāyāna Buddhism, is believed to transcend the personal or individual. A brief glance at Asian history reveals that, when it comes to sociopolitical matters, the vast majority of

Buddhist individuals and institutions have opted to support the powers that be and the status quo, even when this has entailed supporting a system of suffering for the majority of ordinary people.<sup>1</sup>

On one level, this is not surprising, and may be at least partly attributed to the innate conservatism of religious institutions. And yet, it does raise important questions about the meaning of social liberation and structural suffering in Buddhist traditions, questions which have been addressed by only a select few figures in the history of modern Buddhism. In short, why has the promise of Lévi-Strauss not been fulfilled? What are the problems, paradoxes, and possibilities of connecting traditional Buddhist doctrine with progressive or radical politics—specifically, those emerging out of Marxist socialism? This article explores these questions by examining in some detail the life and work of Senoō Girō 妹尾義郎 (1889–1961), founder of the Youth League for Revitalizing Buddhism (Shinkō Bukkyō Seinen Dōmei 新興仏教青年同盟), an experiment in radical Buddhism from 1930s Japan.

### *Buddhist Socialism in Japan*

The notion of “Buddhist socialism” in Japan predates the Youth League for Revitalizing Buddhism, having been suggested by various scholars and Buddhist figures during the Meiji period.<sup>2</sup> As early as 1882, the founder of the Eastern Socialist Party (Tōyō Shakaitō 東洋社会党), Tarui Tōkichi 樽井藤吉 (1850–1922), wrote that the “children of the Buddha” had a special mandate to look upon the people with compassion. At about the same, Katayama Sen 片山 潜 (1859–1933) began promoting a “spiritual socialism” founded on both Christian and Buddhist ideals. While the early Showa scholar Tanaka Sōgorō 田中惣五郎 (1894–1961) viewed socialism as a mixture of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Western

1. Nowhere in East Asia has Buddhist support for the state been more evident than in Japan, a nation whose very political structure evolved in concert with institutional Buddhism. While it is true that relations between state and *sangha* in Japan were occasionally fractious, this is due less to Buddhist support of the common people against the state than to the fact that Buddhist institutions were at times so powerful as to actually challenge the secular leadership itself for supremacy.

2. As Large rightly notes, though much has been written on the connections between Christianity and socialism in modern Japan, very little attention has been paid to the Buddhist equivalent, despite the fact that “it constitutes in effect a modern Japanese Buddhist tradition of protest comparable in kind if not in scale to that found in Japanese Christianity” (LARGE 1987, 153). In fact, surprisingly little scholarly attention has been given to the topic of Buddhist socialism on a broader scale, and what does exist tends to focus on economics more than politics (see E. F. SCHUMACHER’s chapter on “Buddhist economics” in his 1973 *Small is Beautiful*, and P. A. PAYUTTO’S 1992 essay of the same name). The best brief analysis of Buddhist socialism can be found in HARVEY (2000).

ideas, others felt that the Mahāyāna insistence on compassion was enough to render the Buddhist traditions of East Asia socialist in nature.

Though most of the modernizing “New Buddhists” of the early twentieth century were resistant to socialism, a few, such as Mōri Shian, were sympathetic to the Commoner’s Society (Heiminsha 平民社), founded in 1903. The final years of the Meiji period saw a turn towards Buddhist socialism in the writings of Shin priest Takagi Kenmyō 高木顕明 (1864–1914), for whom socialism was “much more deeply related to religion than to politics” (TAKAGI 2001, 55)—and, most dramatically, in the famous case of Uchiyama Gudō 内山愚童 (1874–1911), the Sōtō Zen priest who protested against rural poverty as “unjust and anti-Buddhist,” and as a result was arrested and executed on trumped-up charges of plotting to assassinate the emperor in what is known as the High Treason Incident (*taigyaku jiken* 大逆事件) (VICTORIA 1997, 66–73; 2003, 204–207; ISHIKAWA 1998; DAVIS 1992, 169–70). Even the writings of the Shin sect reformer Kiyozawa Manshi 清沢満之 (1863–1903), whose “spiritualism” (*seishinshugi* 精神主義) comes under criticism from progressive Buddhists, contain hints of utopian socialism, such as his references to a “Buddhist country” (*nyorai no kokka* 如来の国家) that might one day replace the present capitalistic and materialistic one.<sup>3</sup>

These experiments in progressive and radical Buddhism are particularly striking given the growing social conservatism from the late Meiji period (NAJITA 1980, 122),<sup>4</sup> as well as the general scepticism with which socialist movements have been viewed by Buddhists in Japan and elsewhere. Traditional Buddhist teachings of karma have long been used to both explain and inevitably justify social inequalities, and Japan is no exception to this rule. Buddhist Enlightenment figure Shimaji Mokurai 島地黙雷 (1838–1911) was neither the first nor last to blame poverty on the laziness and general moral laxity of the poor (DAVIS 1992, 177, footnote 53). Moreover, for all its emphasis on compassion, East Asian Mahāyāna Buddhism has a particularly quietistic side due in part to the assimilation of Confucian political ideals (including harmony and hierarchy) as well as interpretations of more arcane doctrinal teachings such as no-self (Sk. *anātman*; Jp. *muga* 無我) and emptiness (Sk. *śūnyāta*; Jp. *kū* 空).<sup>5</sup> Despite the emphasis on interdependence and mutual interpenetration that one finds in East Asian

3. Though Seno’ō would later criticize Kiyozawa’s “spiritualism” for not paying enough attention to material needs, he generally agreed with the Shin sect reformer’s conviction that materialism by itself was insufficient for true social change (SENO’Ō 1975, 386). In this way, as LAI (1984, 40) notes, his vision was similar to Tolstoy’s Christian socialism.

4. Seno’ō was inspired by Kawakami’s writings, and particularly pleased to discover that they shared a love for the Mahāyāna *Sutra of Infinite Meaning* (Jp. *Muryōgikyō* 無量義經) (LARGE 1987, 160), a sutra frequently regarded as a “prologue” to the *Lotus Sutra*.

5. See ICHIKAWA 1970, 150–54, for an extended analysis of the “problems” associated with Buddhist progressivism, and also IVES 2009, 55–56.

Mahāyāna thought—especially the influential Kegon 華嚴, Tendai 天台, and Zen 禪 schools—East Asian Buddhists have rarely used these concepts to support a critique of structural inequalities and systems of oppression, focusing instead on “private” acts of sin and vice.

With its relative openness, the Taisho period (1912–1925) witnessed a blossoming of Marxism and left-wing activism in Japan—in philosophical, political, and literary forms. Within this broader wave, the movement most closely connected to Buddhism was the Muga-ai or Selfless Love society, founded by former Shin priest Itō Shōshin 伊藤証信 (1876–1963), whose mission was to promote and engage in compassionate action towards the poor and oppressed. Another figure in this movement was economist and writer Kawakami Hajime 河上肇 (1879–1946), author of the socialist classic *Bimbō monogatari* 貧乏物語 (Tales of poverty; published as a serial in the *Osaka Asahi Shinbun*, 1916). Despite these Taisho developments, by the early Showa period (1926–1989) the tide had begun to turn against progressive politics, religious or otherwise. By the late 1920s, while Buddhist institutions in Japan were claiming neutrality in growing struggles between labor and management, Buddhist leaders knew on which side their bread was buttered. So-called factory evangelists would parrot the government mottos about strength, harmony, and unity, while denouncing “socialist agitators” (DAVIS 1992, 177).

### *The Youth League for Revitalizing Buddhism*

It was in this context that Senoō Girō established the Youth League for Revitalizing Buddhism, based on the straightforward notion that “the capitalist system generates suffering and, thus, violates the spirit of Buddhism.” The group’s initial mouthpiece was a journal called “Under the Banner of Revitalized Buddhism” (*Shinkō bukkyō no hata no moto ni* 新興仏教の旗の下に), though this title was soon shortened to “Revitalized Buddhism” (*Shinkō Bukkyō* 新興仏教). In addition to the regular publication of its journal, the league held a yearly national conference called “Revitalized Buddhist Youth” (*Shinkō bussei* 新興仏青) where various positions were proclaimed and debated. For example, the third conference held in January 1933 asserted the league’s opposition to nationalism, militarism, warfare, and the annexation of Manchuria (Jp. *Manshūkoku* 満州国); 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 the fifth conference held in January 1935 made explicit the league’s intent to restructure the capitalist system, vigorously challenge “reactionary religious sects,” and allow each person to reach a state of perfection through inner purification (KASHIWAHARA 1990, 215). Needless to say, most if not all of these positions were in conflict with the trends of

the times, towards growing nationalism, militarism, and imperialism. In fact, they would seem to be framed in such a way as to draw attention to the movement.

By 1936, according to Japan's Ministry of Justice records, membership in the Youth League had reached 400 (with over 100 subscribers to the journal), with 22 branches established in 17 prefectures, making it an object of legitimate concern for the government.<sup>6</sup> Yet, it was Seno'ō's active involvement with the broader left-wing popular front that would lead to his eventual arrest.<sup>7</sup> Under the auspices of the Public Order Preservation Act (*Chian iji hō* 治安維持法) of 1925, Seno'ō was arrested on 7 December 1936 and charged with treason. In the spring of 1937, after five months of relentless interrogation, Seno'ō would confess his crimes and pledge his loyalty to the emperor. Sentenced to five years in prison, he was released due to ill health in 1942. After the war, he resumed his work for peace and social justice, though in a more subdued vein (McCORMICK 2002; LAI 1984).<sup>8</sup>

### *Radical Buddhism: Basic Principles*

As with the New Buddhists of the late Meiji period, Seno'ō and the Youth League were fighting a war on two fronts: against conservative Buddhist institutions and so-called Imperial Way Buddhism (*kōdō bukkyō* 皇道仏教), and against anti-Buddhist and anti-religious (*hanshūkyō* 反宗教) forces.<sup>9</sup> This would require a

6. These numbers vary widely depending on the source. The league itself claimed as many as 3000 "members" (the number reached by its predecessor, the Nichirenist Youth League, before its dissolution), while Ministry of the Interior records give much lower figures (524 subscribers and 146 members in 18 branches across 14 prefectures); see ŌTANI 2008, 6, footnotes 17 and 18.

7. In addition to his association with the National Council of Trade Unions and Proletarian Party of Japan, Seno'ō was involved with the following left-wing organizations: Han Nachisu, Han Fassho Funsai Dōmei 反ナチス反ファッショ粉碎同盟 (Anti-Nazi, Anti-fascist Demolition League, July 1933); Kyokutō Heiwa Tomo no Kai 極東平和友の会 (Far East Friends of Peace Association, August 1933); Tōkyō Musan Dantai Kyōgikai 東京無産団体協議会 (Tokyo Proletarian Convention, September 1933); and Tōhoku Kikin Kyūen Musan Dantai Kyōgikai 東北飢饉救援無産団体協議会 (Northeast Famine Relief Proletarian Convention, December 1933).

8. While Lai's study is significant in providing the first English analysis of Seno'ō's thought, his article is riddled with psychologistic generalizations that limit its usefulness and date it as a piece from the early 1980s. The only other English-language study of Seno'ō and the Youth League is that of LARGE (1987) which, though solid, does not delve very deeply into the philosophy or ethics of Seno'ō's Buddhist socialism.

9. Leaving aside the residual anti-Buddhist rhetoric emerging from proponents of State Shinto, the two most significant *hanshūkyō* movements of this period were the Nihon Hanshūkyō Dōmei 日本反宗教同盟 (Japan Anti-Religion Alliance), led by Sakai Toshihiko 堺利彦 (1871–1933) and Takatsu Seidō 高津正道 (1893–1974), and the Nihon Sentōteki Mushinronsha Dōmei 日本戦闘的無神論者同盟 (Japan Militant Atheists' Alliance), established by Akita Ujaku 秋田雨雀 (1883–1962) (HONMA 1971).



delicate balance of apologetics and criticism. The league's "Manifesto" presents the following three foundational principles:

1. We resolve to realize the implementation of a Buddha Land in this world, based on the highest character of humanity as revealed in the teachings of Śākyamuni Buddha and in accordance with the principle of brotherly love.
2. We accept that all existing sects, having profaned the Buddhist spirit, exist as mere corpses. We reject these forms, and pledge to enhance Buddhism in the spirit of the new age.
3. We recognize that the present capitalist economic system is in contradiction with the spirit of Buddhism and inhibits the social welfare of the general public. We resolve to reform this system in order to implement a more natural society.

(KASHIWAHARA 1990, 214)

In general, the Youth League interpreted Buddhism in atheistic, humanistic, and ethical terms. In this they followed a number of their Buddhist Enlightenment and New Buddhist forebears. Yet while the rejection of preceding and existent forms of Buddhism is also reminiscent of these earlier movements, the language regarding the problems of the capitalist system—and the more explicit emphasis on material well-being—is new.

According to Seno'o, the league was established for three principle reasons that are reflected in the three governing principles mentioned above: 1. to overhaul or replace the decadent Buddhist institutions of the day with a form of Buddhism more suited to the modern age; 2. to put an end to the longstanding and often violent conflict between Buddhist sects; and 3. to engage in a reconstruction of the capitalist economic system—which is in contradiction to the Buddhist spirit. Here is how Seno'o frames the economic issue in terms both pragmatic and Buddhist:

Praying to Śākyamuni Buddha will not make your rice bins overflow with rice. When you are poor, the Buddha taught that you should work diligently to earn money. However, in times like ours, when a fractured economic system makes it such that work brings no reward, we are taught that we must begin by remodeling that broken economic system in order to ensure the social welfare of the general public. We cannot expect to rely on commonplace slogans like "no poverty can catch up with industry." According to the words of our Buddha, when you are sick, you should search for an appropriate cure and reflect on the cause of the illness. If you wish to preserve your health, no amount of prayer or devotion can match this.

(SENO'O 1975, 274)

In his work, Seno'o insists on a proper understanding of the causes and conditions of poverty. Since these causes and conditions are both material *and* spiritual, then naturally the solution to poverty must also, against the secular Marxists, include aspects of the spiritual and material (SENO'O 1975, 312–13, 386).

Further, Seno'ō strongly denounces the Buddhist establishment for utilizing Buddhist doctrines such as karma and the wheel of rebirth as explanations—and ex post facto justifications—for social inequalities (SENO'Ō 1975, 275).<sup>10</sup> Along similar lines, he criticizes the oft-employed Buddhist expression of “differentiation is equality” (*sabetsu soku byōdō*) as being an abstract concept that cannot and should not be applied to the social realm (INAGAKI 1974, 16).<sup>11</sup> More generally, Seno'ō rejected the metaphysics of harmony—what Critical Buddhists like Hakamaya Noriaki and Matsumoto Shirō would later call “topicalism”—found within much of the Mahāyāna philosophical tradition, and reaching a peak within the Tendai synthesis and *hongaku* thought more generally.<sup>12</sup>

It is perhaps more accurate to say that—in developing his earlier commitment to “Nichirenism”—Seno'ō came to see harmony and the overarching vision of totality presented in Mahāyāna/Tendai thought and the *Lotus Sutra* as a goal to be reached through historical (including economic and political) transformation, rather than an a priori ontological ground that must simply be recognized (LAI 1984, 22). In similar fashion, suffering was an existential condition to be analyzed and eliminated, rather than—as some within the Tendai and associated traditions would have it—an illusory concept to be transcended via a dialectics of emptiness or a deeper realization of Buddha-nature.

### *A Blueprint for Buddhist Revolution*

Among all of Seno'ō's writings, the document that stands out as the most succinct expression of the theoretical and practical aims of the Youth League is one he published in January 1932 entitled *Shakai henkaku tojō no shinkō Bukkyō* 社会変革途上の新興仏教 (Revitalized Buddhism on the road to social reform) (SENO'Ō 1975). This essay is prefaced with a statement by the Youth League indicting the present capitalist system as the principle cause of economic and political insecurity

10. Criticism of the sociopolitical effects of karma in Buddhism can be seen in a number of contemporary works by scholars of Buddhist ethics, but also finds remarkable resonance in an essay by Polish thinker Leszek Kolakowski (1927–2009) entitled “The Priest and the Jester,” in which this “Marxist humanist” criticizes the similar legacy of theodicy in Western thought—including within Marxism itself (KOLAKOWSKI 1968, 13).

11. On both of these points, Seno'ō may have been thinking of and no doubt regretting some of his own words as a proponent of Nichirenism. In various pieces in the journal *Wakōdo*, he had argued for precisely such positions (for example, SENO'Ō 1975, 13, 48)—positions which, as LAI (1984, 17) notes, are doctrinally sound according to the metaphysical idealism inherent in mainstream Tendai-Nichiren thought.

12. Zhiyi 智顛 (538–597), the third patriarch and principal systemizer of Chinese Tiantai, developed the notion that the Three Marks of Existence (Sk. *trilakṣaṇa*; Ch. *sānxiàng* 三相) found in traditional (“Hinayāna”) Buddhism had been superseded by the Mahāyāna One Real Mark (Sk. *ekalakṣaṇa*; Ch. *yìxiàng* 一相).

for the general public—both farmers and urbanites. This is followed by a reaffirmation of the league's conviction that Buddhism—if understood, reorganized, and practiced on the basis of modern ideas—can be a solution to the problems unleashed by capitalism, and thus a foundation for the salvation of humankind (SENO'Ō 1975, 325). Seno'ō's piece begins with a critique of the notion that history is “progress,” using Marx's argument against the conservative political implications of the Hegelian thesis that “all that is rational is real; and all that is real, rational” (SENO'Ō 1975, 328).

Seno'ō goes on to affirm the revolutionary character of Japanese history, citing the Taika Reforms (*Taika no kaishin* 大化の改新) of 645, the medieval shift from imperial rule to rule by the samurai class, the rise to power of the bourgeoisie under the Meiji Restoration of 1868, and finally the emerging movements dedicated to bringing about a “revitalized society” (*shinkō shakai* 新興社会) as examples of dramatic, if not revolutionary, political upheavals in Japanese history. Further, Seno'ō argues, the history of Buddhism is similarly marked with a revolutionary spirit, in theory if not always in practice. In fact, Buddhism is “nothing other than the truth of development and change” (*hatten henka no dōri igai no mono de wa nai* 発展変化の道理以外のものではない). Throughout the twenty-five centuries of Buddhist history, alterations to doctrine and practice made by sect founders have largely suited the objective reality of changing social conditions—and are thus not simply the product of their own subjective beliefs. Further, no matter how much development and change occurs, Buddhism will always maintain its social value (SENO'Ō 1975, 329).

In the following section of the same essay, Seno'ō makes a link between the Youth League's quest for a “revitalized” (*shinkō* 新興) Buddhism, a new society, and contemporaneous movements towards revitalization in science, art, and education. Just as they have “liquidated” the previously outdated forms from earlier times, so too must Buddhism effect the same sort of liquidation or deconstruction. And yet institutional Buddhism is clearly unwilling to make this move, due to its apathy towards the concerns of the general public and its preference to appease the powers that be (SENO'Ō 1975, 329). If Buddhism is to become once again “Buddhism for society” (as opposed to “society for Buddhism”) then modern Buddhists must recapture the spirit of their Kamakura-era forbears and respond to the changing times. But what, exactly, are the demands of the times to which a modern Buddhism must adjust? Seno'ō duly provides the reader with the following list:

1. Modern science is atheist, and denies the existence of superhuman deities;
2. Modern science is anti-spiritualist, and does not recognize an afterlife;
3. Modern people are not satisfied with fairy-tale like forms of happiness, but rather wish to enjoy a complete happiness in their workaday lives;

4. The modern public longs for economic stability, and thus demands reform to the capitalistic system;
5. Enlightened people call for an end to nationalism and the birth of internationalism;
6. Progressive Buddhists [*shinpoteki bukkuyō shinja* 進歩的仏教信者] long for an end to sectarian division and the emergence of Buddhist unity

(SENO'Ō 1975, 330–31)

These, in short, are the needs of the age to which a revitalized Buddhism must respond. The first three points, along with number six, also happen to align well with modernist interpretations of Buddhism that had been promoted since the 1880s. It is also of note that with the exception of number six there is nothing in this list that distinguishes Seno'ō and the Youth League from the anti-religious vision of most mainstream socialists. And yet, this was a sticking point for Seno'ō; he remained deeply committed to promoting a vision for a new society based firmly in Buddhist principles, as he and his followers understood them.

For Seno'ō and the Youth League, just as socialism can wake Buddhists up from their dogmatic slumbers, Buddhism serves to “soften” the harder edges of mainstream socialist atheism and materialism—in short, Buddhism gives a humanist element that socialism sometimes, perhaps inevitably, seems to lack. At some points in his work, Seno'ō seems to suggest that socialism, as it has been practiced both within and outside of Japan, falls prey to the same or similar tendencies as mainstream religions, including historical and institutional Buddhism: tendencies summed up by terms like “idealism” (*seishinshugi* 精神主義) “abstract” (*chūshōteki* 抽象的) and “reverence” (*sūkei* 崇敬). In an explicit critique of the increasingly vocal *hanshūkyō* movements of the early 1930s, Seno'ō asserts the value of Buddhist teachings such as no-self to (ironically) promote individual perfection as well as social liberation (SENO'Ō 1975, 378).

The following sections of *Shakai henkaku tojō no shinkō bukkuyō* examine these six points in more detail. On the question of atheism, Seno'ō cites both Friedrich Engels (1820–1895) and Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–1872) with regard to the problems inherent in belief in an absolute, transcendent deity. While this obviously pertains primarily to the Abrahamic God, it also applies to various forms of Buddhist practice, including Shin-shū 真宗 worship of Amida, Nichiren-shū 日蓮宗 praise to the eternal Buddha, and Shingon-shū 真言宗 rituals performed to Dainichi and so forth. Even Zen Buddhists, who, Seno'ō notes, are in theory less imbricated in the worship of superhuman forces, put their palms together to pay worship to Yakushi Nyorai and Kannon Bosatsu. Must we then accept the belief in superhuman forces as an essential character of Buddhism? Seno'ō's answer is a firm “no” (SENO'Ō 1975, 331). The proceeding argument is simple: belief in “God/gods” was born out of human ignorance (*muchi ga kami o umu* 無知が神を産む),

and since Buddhism is relentlessly opposed to ignorance, this belief must be liquidated.

Seno'o's brief overview of the origins of religious belief borrows much from Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) and James G. Frazer (1854–1941), but leans heavily on Marx and Engels when it comes to the discussion of the economic and sociopolitical implications of religious belief. Biblical lines such as “man does not live by bread alone” are, to Seno'o as to his Marxist forebears, dead giveaways; that is, little more than cynical catchphrases to keep ordinary people in a state of subservience through the invocation of otherworldly forms of happiness (SENO'O 1975, 333–34). In other words, religion—at least religion that seeks solace in superhuman figures and an afterlife—functions as an “opiate” (*ahen* アヘン) for the people. He also employs the by-now standard argument against an omnipotent, good deity based on the longstanding theological conundrum of theodicy: if god (or Amida, or Dainichi, or Kannon) is both supremely powerful and good, then why does suffering continue to occur—to both religious people and atheists alike?

Without wading into the deep waters of this debate, Seno'o might be accused of sleight-of-hand on this point, since he is willfully collapsing any and all distinctions between worship of the Christian God and paying reverence to Buddhist figures—who are neither creators of the universe, nor, with the possible exception of Amida, generally thought to have complete salvific power. At any rate, Seno'o does not spare noninstitutional religious practices such as geomancy and fortune-telling, which similarly advocate reliance on superhuman power of some form. No matter how deeply they may have penetrated the cultural or rural people, these “evil heresies” (*inshi jakyō* 淫祠邪教) must also be countermanded by a revitalized Buddhism, which has no choice but to promote “atheism” (*mushinron* 無神論) (SENO'O 1975, 334). Again, the point for Seno'o is that these practices act as “opiates” by taking away an individual's power to affect their own destiny. The problem is not, as it was for many of the earlier generation of New Buddhists, simply or mainly a matter of priestly corruption or institutional generation—the problem rather goes to the very heart of the way Buddhism is practiced as a “religion.” Thus, to establish—or reestablish—an atheistic and materialistic (*yuibutsuronteki* 唯物論的) form of Buddhism is, for Seno'o, to reestablish Buddhism as a form of humanism, based on the well-known humanist dictum (repeated by Marx): “the supreme reality for human beings is human being” (*ningen ni tai suru saikō no jitsuzai wa ningen de aru* 人間に対する最高の実在は人間である). This also means returning to the basic Buddhist teachings of the Four Noble Truths (*shitai* 四諦) and the twelve-link chain of dependent arising (*jūni innen* 十二因縁), which, in Seno'o's admittedly abbreviated interpretation, amount to a teaching of human emancipation (*jinrui kaihō* 人類解放) based on the practice of “selflessness” (*mugaizumu* 無我イズム), which is itself a

necessary conclusion of the more fundamental law of cause and effect (*engi no rihō* 縁起の理法) (SENŌ O 1975, 335). All this is fairly standard Buddhism, except for Senō's coinage of the term *mugaizumu* (lit., "no-self"-ism) to imply a more altruistic or other-directed form of the traditional doctrine of no-self (*muga*).

Also of note is Senō's emphasis on awakening as "human liberation" that he also adds as a communal element lacking in most traditional renderings of the experience of *nirvana* or *satori*. The term *kaihō* 解放 is in fact best translated as "liberation" or "emancipation," and is generally used to apply to social or political freedom as understood in the Western liberal tradition (such as the women's liberation movement: *josei kaihō undō* 女性解放運動; emancipation of serfs: *nōdo kaihō* 農奴解放; and liberation theology: *kaihō shingaku* 解放神学). In Senō's reading of early Buddhism—or at least the fundamental teachings of Śākyamuni as he understands them—there is a decisive rejection of the existence of superhuman forces of any sort and a focus on contingency and the practice of selfless compassion for others. It is this unrelenting commitment to humanism that forms the bridge between Buddha and Marx, and forms a tool of critical resistance to the "nonsense" forms of Buddhism that practice reverence to superhuman buddhas and bodhisattvas, as well as to forms of Indian and Abrahamic theism. Finally—in a display of intellectual integrity—Senō criticizes nontheistic traditions that pay excessive reverence to founding fathers. This includes not only Confucians who revere Confucius but also communists who line up to pay respect to the deceased but embalmed Lenin. "Original Buddhism was not an opiate. In the end, Buddhism is atheistic. To begin with, a 'revitalized Buddhism' must assume this exalted position in order to liquidate the delusions of existing forms of Buddhism and completely destroy the opiate-like role played by existing Buddhism" (SENŌ O 1975, 336).<sup>13</sup>

In addition to being atheistic, Senō goes on to argue, Buddhism is "materialistic," at least in the sense of being concerned with the various forms of material suffering that occur in the world. Though it would be a mistake to take materialism to an extreme, Senō cites various teachings to show that the Buddha was clearly not antagonistic to a materialist perspective, and if anything was more resistant to the sort of world-denying idealism that one finds within brahmanistic asceticism.

13. The precise relation between Senō's ideas, "original Buddhism," and the various Mahāyāna sects is quite complex. Like most Buddhist modernists before and after him, Senō often appears to privilege a form of "basic" Buddhism rooted in the core teachings of Śākyamuni. However, unlike some modernists/fundamentalists, he resists "essentializing" Buddhism by limiting the dharma to this early set of ideas; he is quite open to the (Mahāyāna) notion—rooted in the doctrine of *upāya*—that the dharma—or at least, the way it is interpreted and practiced—must adapt to suit changing needs and circumstances. Thus, as mentioned above, he supports the work of the various sectarian founders for their attempts to "reform" Buddhism—both by taking it "back" to its ideals but also by moving it "forward" to suit contemporary needs.

Without a grounding in the material world, the dharma would become a means of escape from existence, and thus an “opiate” like any other religion.

Moreover, the founders of the various Japanese sects were committed to reinscribing the original Buddhist concern for worldly suffering. Hōnen and Shinran are lauded for their commitment to fomenting “religious revolution focused on actual life” (*genjitsu seikatsu o shitei shita shūkyō kakumei* 現実生活を指定した宗教革命) (SENO’O 1975, 350). Given Seno’o’s earlier affiliation with the Nichiren sect (and lifelong devotion to the *Lotus Sutra*), it is not surprising that Nichiren plays the central role in Seno’o’s genealogy of progressive sectarian founders. Seno’o argues that a central intention of the master’s *Rissho ankoku ron* is the promise of relief for the poverty-stricken of his day (SENO’O 1975, 351). Nichiren’s more general commitment to the ineluctable interconnection between individual and social “awakening” is the principle reason that Seno’o, long after his break with the Nichiren sect and even after his rejection of Tanaka Chigaku’s *Nichiren shugi*, continued to look to the work of Nichiren (and the *Lotus Sutra*) as a primary inspiration for his radical political ideals. Looking back at the ups and downs of two and a half millenia of Buddhist history, Seno’o asks, what do we learn? Is it possible to achieve a victory over materialism by promoting idealism (*bushitsushugi no koku-fuku wa seishinshugi no kōchō ni yotte* 物質主義の克服は精神主義の高調によって)? No, Seno’o answers, Buddhist history reveals the opposite: that is, the victory over idealism (or spiritualism) must come by way of advocacy of materialism.

For human beings, born from nature, nature must be our top priority. If concepts and matters of the spirit transcend ordinary existence, it is only natural that a powerless idealism will ignore or despise economic matters rooted in daily life. It is not the case that “the real world is built on ideas.” Rather, it is only from the total spectrum of our lives that concepts are born, and it is only through putting them into practice that development can occur.

(SENO’O 1975, 359)

In making his case for materialism against the pitfalls of abstract idealism, Seno’o is quick to note that the importance of “love” (*ai* 愛), which, he argues, “is neither a concept nor an illusion” (*tan naru kannen ya gensō de wa naku* 単なる觀念や幻想では無く), but rather a practice (*jissen* 実践)—and one that, when properly accompanied by objective criticism (*kyakkanteki hihan* 客観的批判), allows us “to recognize [the problems of] ordinary life” (SENO’O 1975, 363). Here again Seno’o’s interpretation of Buddhist compassion is brought in to soften the otherwise hard-edged Marxist critique. Buddhist love—embodied in the way of the bodhisattva—provides the humanist foundation for social revolution.<sup>14</sup>

14. See SENO’O 1975, 385, where Seno’o insists the Youth League is more than simply an economic movement (*tan naru keizai undō* 単なる経済運動), but rather one that promotes a “new



The recognition and practice of collective society by way of social science and the path of Buddhism are not by any means identical. Here there is some room for critique of both extremes, that is, collective forms of social organization and the capitalist ones. Therefore, Buddhists must take the initiative to advocate, practice, and participate in social reconstruction, and through such participation aim for personal [as well as social] purification. (SENO'Ō 1975, 367)

In further elaborating what Buddhism can bring to socialist analysis, Seno'ō notes that at the root of the Buddhist worldview is a fundamental conception of the interdependence of matter and mind, and of mind and form. Thus it would be a huge mistake to simply reduce problems of economic welfare and the need for social restructuring to material concerns. Rather, progressive Buddhists must demand a movement that allows for the development of social existence in its many facets. For Seno'ō, this entails a recognition of the fuller implications of the social extension of the Buddhist doctrine of no-self—alternately rendered *mugaizumu*, *mugashugi* 無我主義, or *muga-ai* 無我愛 (SENO'Ō 1975, 367). This term becomes, for Seno'ō, the very embodiment of the Dharma, and must replace any and all attempts to find salvation by way of “idealistic abstractions” such as Pure Land's Amida, Shingon's Dainichi, and the Eternal Buddha of the *Lotus Sutra* (SENO'Ō 1975, 378).<sup>15</sup>

### *Reflections on “Radical Buddhism”*

As noted in the introduction, Claude Lévi-Strauss envisioned (Therāvada) Buddhism as he witnessed it firsthand “on the frontiers of Burma” in the 1950s as a bridge or middle way between Marxism and liberal humanism—or even more provocatively, as the *fulfillment* of Marxist criticism. Jacques Derrida and Bill Martin, however, voiced skepticism as to the plausibility—or the worth—of this connection, due to a perceived lack of historicism/criticism in Buddhist tradi-

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idealism” (*shin risōshugi* 新理想主義—note that this is not the same as *seishinshugi*, criticized above) and a “new humanism” (*shin jindōshugi* 新人道主義) in order to construct a “pure buddhaland” (*jō bukkokudo* 浄仏国土) in this world.

15. Here Seno'ō cites supportive passages from late-Meiji and Taishō Buddhist scholars Takakusa Junjirō 高楠順次郎 (1866–1945) and Shimaji Daitō 島地大等 (1875–1927) respectively. Unlike his lifelong connection to Nichiren's thought, Seno'ō was neither strongly influenced by—nor particularly interested in—“rival” Japanese sects such as Pure Land, Shin, or Zen. Having said that, as noted above he does attempt to distinguish the life and work of the Japanese founders of these sects from the inevitable degeneration of their ideas as they become institutionalized. This is a familiar tactic to religious reformers, one that allows them to claim precedent by appealing to traditional “masters” while distancing themselves from contemporary institutions that claim to follow their legacy. It also allows Seno'ō to adopt the mantle of pan-sectarianism—a staple of Buddhist modernism since Murakami Senshō in late Meiji.



tion (which Derrida also sees as a problem with traditional Marxism). Although this Western conversation on the prospects of radical Buddhism postdates the work and writings of Seno'o Girō and his Youth League for Revitalizing Buddhism, the questions raised by these three theoreticians are remarkably similar to those raised by Seno'o in his work. Like Lévi-Strauss, he saw Buddhism—or at least Revitalized Buddhism—as a necessary bridge between Marxist materialism and liberal humanism. While it would be too much to claim that Seno'o's work fulfills the “promise” of Lévi-Strauss, it certainly presents one of the earliest and most serious and sophisticated attempts to work out the tensions involved in bringing together the Buddhist goal of “awakening” with Marxist political praxis aimed at “liberation.” As noted above, Seno'o mounted a humanist critique of Marxist and socialist thought, which indicates that, unlike Lévi-Strauss, but more in tune with the critiques raised by Derrida and Martin, Seno'o was not content to rest with a naive/idealized picture of traditional Buddhism; nor was he content to allow traditional Marxism off the hook for its perceived faults—including a tendency towards anti-humanist (what Martin calls “reductivist”) materialism (MARTIN 2008, 19, 423).

So how did Seno'o move from Śākyamuni's teachings to his (that is, Seno'o's) radical agenda? The answer is disarmingly simple: via a sustained reflection on and commitment to Marxist (and more broadly radical political) principles. It is *not* that each specific Buddhist teaching (such as the Four Noble Truths or emptiness) can be directly aligned with one of Seno'o aims: for example, anti-imperialism or a commitment to a materialist conception of history. Rather, the “basic teachings” of Buddhism are interpreted in light of the more general problem of material suffering in the modern age, and, more specifically, in concert with Marxist arguments regarding the problems of ideology, alienation, and false consciousness. There is no question that Seno'o derived his radical political agenda from sources outside traditional Buddhism, such as the suffering caused by the economic system of the day and anxieties about deepening quasi-fascist ideology, the 1923 Great Kanto Earthquake, and various currents of Marxist and anarchist thought. Does this make his work any less “Buddhist”? This depends, ultimately, on how the tradition is understood. In Seno'o's own terms, “Buddhism” is nothing less than the constantly evolving set of mechanisms enabling human beings to relieve themselves and others from the various forms of suffering found in their immediate circumstances.

A quarter century ago, in one of the first and only Western studies on Seno'o Girō and the Youth League for Revitalizing Buddhism, Whalen Lai made the case that the vicissitudes 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” (LAI 1984, 7). This was echoed a few years later by Stephen Large, who remarked that

“Senō Girō 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” (LARGE 1987, 168). While I am certainly in favor of extending historical research on Buddhist forms of social protest and Buddhist radicalism, I would like to also ensure that the important theoretical work of Senō and like-minded progressive and radical Buddhists be subject to serious and sustained analysis, and not be dismissed as superficial or secondary to their social and political activities. One lingering issue, of course, is whether or not the radical Buddhism of Senō Girō and like-minded thinkers is (or can be) internally consistent—a problem that warrants further investigation.

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