

Uchiyama Gudō

Radical Sōtō Zen Priest

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By the time of the Russo-Japanese War it is fair to say that the clerical and scholarly leaders of Japan's traditional Buddhist sects were firm supporters of the government's policies, especially its war policies. But this does not mean that there was no Buddhist resistance to the government. There were, in fact, a few Buddhist priests who not only opposed what they believed to be their government's increasingly repressive and imperialistic policies but actually sacrificed their lives in the process of doing so.

This chapter will focus on one such group of "radical" Buddhists. Because they were quite small in number, it might be argued that this attention is unwarranted, but few as they were, they had a significant impact on the Buddhist leaders of their time, especially as those leaders continued to formulate their individual and collective responses to Japan's military expansion abroad and political repression at home.

Radical Buddhist Priests and the High Treason Incident

It is the High Treason Incident (Taigyaku Jiken) of 1910 that first brought to light the existence of politically radical Buddhist priests. Twenty-six people were arrested for their alleged participation in a conspiracy to kill one or more members of the imperial family. Four of those arrested were Buddhist priests: Shin sect priest Takagi Kemmyō (1864–1914), a second Shin priest, Sasaki Dōgen; a Rinzai Zen sect priest, Mineo Setsudō (1885–1919); and Sōtō Zen sect priest Uchiyama Gudō (1874–1911). All of the defendants were convicted and twenty-four were condemned to death, though later twelve had their sentences commuted to life imprisonment. Uchiyama Gudō was the only priest to be executed. The remaining three Buddhist priests were among those with commuted sentences, though they also all eventually died in prison, Takagi Kemmyō at his own hand.

As the execution of Gudō indicates, the authorities clearly considered him to be the worst of the four priests. This is not surprising, for of all the priests Gudō was the most actively involved in the movement that the Meiji government found so reprehensible. Gudō also left behind the most written material substantiating his beliefs. This said, even Gudō's writings contain little that directly addresses the relationship he saw between the Law of the Buddha and his own social activism. This is not surprising, since neither he nor the other three priests claimed to be Buddhist scholars or possess special expertise in either Buddhist doctrine or social, political, or economic theory. They might best be described as social activists who, based on their Buddhist faith, were attempting to alleviate the mental and physical suffering they saw around them, especially in Japan's impoverished rural areas.

The Japanese government attempted to turn all of the accused in the High Treason Incident into nonpersons, even before their convictions. The court proceedings were conducted behind closed doors, and no press coverage was allowed, because, the government argued, would be "prejudicial to peace and order, or to the maintenance of public morality." Gudō's temple of Rinsenji was raided and all his writings and correspondence removed as evidence, never to surface again. Only a few statues of Buddha Shakyamuni that Gudō had carved and presented to his parishioners were left behind. Even his death did not satisfy the authorities. They would not allow his name to appear on his gravemarker at Rinsenji. In fact, when one of his parishioners subsequently dared to leave some flowers on his grave, the police instituted a search throughout the village

of Ōhiradai, located in the mountainous Hakone district of Kanagawa Prefecture, to find the offender.

Uchiyama's Life

Early Life

Uchiyama was born on May 17, 1874, in the village of Ojiya in Niigata Prefecture. His childhood name was Keikichi, and he was the oldest of four children. Gudō's father, Naokichi, made his living as a woodworker and carver, specializing in Buddhist statues, family altars, and associated implements. As a child, Gudō learned this trade from his father, and, as noted above, later carved Buddhist statues that he presented to his parishioners at Rinsenji. Even today these simple yet serene nine-inch images of Buddha Shakyamuni are highly valued among the villagers.

Gudō was an able student, earning an award for academic excellence from the prefectural governor. Equally important, he was introduced at an early age to the thinking of a mid-seventeenth-century social reformer by the name of Sakura Sōgorō. Discussions of such issues as the need for land reform to eliminate rural poverty and the enfranchisement of women were an integral part of his childhood education.

Gudō lost his father at the age of sixteen. In his book *Buddhists Who Sought Change (Henkaku o Motometa Bukkyōsha)*, Inagaki Masami identifies this early death as a significant factor in Gudō's later decision to enter the Buddhist priesthood. On April 12, 1897, Gudō underwent ordination in the Sōtō Zen sect as a disciple of Sakazume Kōjū, abbot of Hōzōji temple.

Over the following seven years, Gudō studied Buddhism academically and trained as a Zen novice in a number of Sōtō Zen temples, chief among them the monastery of Kaizōji in Kanagawa Prefecture. On October 10, 1901, Gudō became the Dharma successor of Miyagi Jitsumyō, abbot of Rinsenji. Three years later, on February 9, 1904, Gudō succeeded his master as Rinsenji's abbot, thus bringing to an end his formal Zen training.

The temple Gudō succeeded to was exceedingly humble. For one thing, it had no more than forty impoverished families to provide financial support. Aside from a small thatched-roof main hall, its chief assets were two trees, one a persimmon and the other a chestnut, located on the temple grounds. Village tradition states that every autumn Gudō would invite the villagers to the temple to divide the harvest from these trees equally among themselves.

In his discussions with village youth, Gudō once again directed his attention to the problem of rural poverty. He identified the root of the problem as being an unjust economic system, one in which a few individuals owned the bulk of the land and the majority of the rural population was reduced to tenancy. Gudō became an outspoken advocate of land reform, something that would eventually come to pass, but not until many years later, after Japan's defeat in the Pacific War.

What is significant about Gudō's advocacy of land reform is that he based his position on his understanding of Buddhism. In discussing this period of his life in the minutes of his later pretrial hearing, Gudō stated:

The year was 1904 ... When I reflected on the way in which priests of my sect had undergone religious training in China in former times, I realized how beautiful it had been. Here were two or three hundred persons who, living in one place at one time, shared a communal lifestyle in which they wore the same clothing and ate the

same food. I held to the ideal that if this could be applied to one village, one county, or one country, what an extremely good system would be created.

The traditional Buddhist organizational structure, the Sangha, with its communal lifestyle and lack of personal property, was the model from which Gudō drew his inspiration for social reform.

It was also in 1904 that Gudō had his first significant contact with a much broader, secular social reform movement, anarcho-socialism. Gudō appears to have first come into contact with this movement as a reader of a newly established newspaper, the *Heimin Shimbun* or “The Commoner’s News.” By the early months of 1904 this newspaper had established itself as Tokyo’s leading advocate of the socialist cause, and Gudō later expressed its impact on him: “When I began reading the *Heimin Shimbun* at that time [1904], I realized that its principles were identical with my own and therefore I became an anarcho-socialist.”

Gudō was not content, however, to be a mere reader of this newspaper. In its January 17, 1904 edition, he wrote:

As a propagator of Buddhism I teach that “all sentient beings have the Buddha-nature” and that “within the Dharma there is equality, with neither superior nor inferior.” Furthermore, I teach that “all sentient beings are my children.” Having taken these golden words as the basis of my faith, I discovered that they are in complete agreement with the principles of socialism. It was thus that I became a believer in socialism.

The phrase, “all sentient beings have the Buddha-nature” is one of the central themes of the Lotus Sutra, as is the phrase, “all sentient beings are my children.” The phrase, “within the Dharma there is equality, with neither superior or inferior” comes from the Diamond Sutra. Regrettably, this brief statement is the only surviving example of Gudō’s understanding of the social implications of the Law of the Buddha.

Even this brief statement, however, puts Gudō in direct opposition to Meiji Buddhist leaders such as Shimaji Mokurai. In his 1879 essay entitled “Differentiation [Is] Equality” (*Sabetsu Byōdō*), Shimaji maintained that distinctions in social standing and wealth were as permanent as differences in age, sex, and language. Socialism, in his view, was flawed because it emphasized only social and economic equality. That is to say, socialists failed to understand the basic Buddhist teaching that “differentiation is identical with equality” (*sabetsu soku byōdō*). Or phrased somewhat more philosophically, socialists confused the temporal world of form (*yūkei*) with the transcendent world of formlessness (*mukeni*), failing to recognize the underlying unity of the two. It was Shimaji’s position that would gain acceptance within institutional Buddhism.

Village Priest and Social Activist

Of the eighty-two persons who eventually expressed their allegiance to socialism in the pages of the *Heimin Shimbun*, only Gudō and one other, Kōtoku Shūsui, were later directly implicated in the High Treason Incident. This suggests that Gudō, like Kōtoku, was a leading figure in the nascent socialist movement, but that was not the case. Gudō’s relative physical isolation in the Hakone mountains limited the role that he was able to play. He might best be described as a rural social activist or reformer who, in his own mind at least, based his thought and actions on his Buddhist faith.

Ironically, it was Gudō's relative physical isolation that eventually thrust him into the historical limelight. The Japanese government and police devoted ever-increasing efforts to suppressing the growing socialist movement with its pacifist platform. This suppression took the form of repeated bannings of politically offensive issues of the *Heimin Shimbun*; arresting, fining, and ultimately jailing the newspaper's editors; and forcefully breaking up socialist meetings and rallies. With two of its editors (including Kōtoku Shūsui) on their way to jail for alleged violations of the press laws, the *Heimin Shimbun* printed its last issue on January 25, 1905. When the newspaper closed down, the socialist antiwar movement within Japan virtually came to an end, thereby enabling the government to prosecute its war with Czarist Russia free of domestic opposition.

In September 1905 the war with Russia ended with a Japanese victory. The victory was, however, a costly one, both in terms of the government's expenditures on armaments and the high number of military casualties. When it became general knowledge that the peace terms did not include a war indemnity, riots broke out in Tokyo and martial law was immediately imposed. In this atmosphere of significant social unrest, the government pursued its suppression of socialism even more relentlessly than before. On February 22, 1907, the Socialist Party was banned and socialists were harassed, beaten, and jailed. By 1908, unable to hold public meetings or publish either newspapers or magazines, what was left of the socialist movement went underground. Prohibited from advocating socialism openly, some members of the movement came to believe that the only way they could succeed was to take some form of "direct action" against the imperial house itself.

It was these circumstances which prompted Gudō to visit Tokyo in September 1908. He not only met with Kōtoku Shūsui but purchased the necessary equipment to set up a secret press within his own temple. The printing equipment itself was hidden in the storage area located underneath and to the rear of the Buddha altar in the Main Hall. Gudō used this press to turn out popular socialist tracts and pamphlets, and he also wrote and published his own materials, including his best-known work, *In Commemoration of Imprisonment: Anarcho-Communism-Revolution* (XXXXXXXX XXXXXX *Nyūgoku Kinen-Museifu Kyōsan-Kakumei*).

That work is interesting for a number of reasons. It contains a pointed critique of the then prevalent understanding of the Buddhist doctrine of karma. After beginning with a lament for the poverty of tenant farmers, Gudō writes:

Is this [your poverty] the result, as Buddhists maintain, of the retribution due you because of your evil deeds in the past? Listen, friends, if, having now entered the twentieth century, you were to be deceived by superstitions like this, you would still be [no better than] oxen or horses. Would this please you?

Gudō clearly understood that the Buddhist doctrine of karma was being interpreted as providing the justification for social and economic inequality. That is to say, if tenant farmers were impoverished, they had no one to blame but themselves and their own past actions. Shaku Sōen was typical of the Buddhist leaders who advocated this interpretation: "We are born in the world of variety; some are poor and unfortunate, others are wealthy and happy. This state of variety will be repeated again and again in our future lives. But to whom shall we complain of our misery? To none but ourselves!" Gudō was also critical of certain aspects of Buddhist practice. For example, on May 30, 1904, he wrote a letter of protest to the abbot of Jōsenji, Orihashi Daikō. In this letter he requested that the Sōtō sect cleanse itself of the practice of selling temple abbotships to the

highest bidder. When Daikō refused to endorse his position, Gudō expressed his determination to push for this reform on his own.

The real significance of *In Commemoration of Imprisonment* lay not in its critique of certain aspects of Buddhist doctrine, but rather in its blistering rejection of the heart and soul of the Meiji political system, the emperor system. It was, in fact, this rejection of Japan's imperial system that, more than any other factor, led to Gudō's subsequent arrest, imprisonment, and execution. He wrote:

There are three leeches who suck the people's blood: the emperor, the rich, and the big landowners ... The big boss of the present government, the emperor, is not the son of the gods as your primary school teachers and others would have you believe. The ancestors of the present emperor came forth from one corner of Kyushu, killing and robbing people as they went. They then destroyed their fellow thieves, Nagasunehiko and others ... It should be readily obvious that the emperor is not a god if you but think about it for a moment.

When it is said that [the imperial dynasty] has continued for 2,500 years, it may seem as if [the present emperor] is divine, but down through the ages the emperors have been tormented by foreign opponents and, domestically, treated as puppets by their own vassals ... Although these are well-known facts, university professors and their students, weaklings that they are, refuse to either say or write anything about it. Instead, they attempt to deceive both others and themselves, knowing all along the whole thing is a pack of lies.

Imprisonment

Gudō printed between one and two thousand copies of the tract containing the foregoing passages and mailed them to former readers of the *Heimin Shimbun* in small lots wrapped in plain paper. Its radical content, especially its scathing denial of the emperor system, so frightened some recipients that they immediately burned all the copies they received. Others, however, were so excited by its contents that they rushed out onto the streets to distribute the tract to passersby. It was not long, predictably, before copies fell into the hands of the police. This in turn sparked an immediate nationwide search for the tract's author and the place and means of its production.

On May 24, 1909, Gudō was arrested on his way back to Rinsenji after having finished a month of Zen training at Eiheiji, one of the Sōtō sect's two chief monasteries. He was initially charged with violations of the press and publications laws and, at first, believed he would simply be fined and released. Upon searching Rinsenji, however, the police claimed to have discovered a cache of explosive materials including twelve sticks of dynamite, four packages of explosive gelatin, and a supply of fuses.

One contemporary commentator, Kashiwagi Ryūhō, claims, though without presenting any proof, that the charges relating to the possession of explosive materials were false. In an article entitled "Martyr Uchiyama Gudō" he states: "The dynamite had been stored at his temple in conjunction with the construction of the Hakone mountain railroad. It had nothing to do with Gudō." Nevertheless, Gudō was convicted of both charges and initially sentenced to twelve years' imprisonment. On appeal, his sentence was reduced to seven years.

On July 6, 1909, even before his conviction, officials of the Sōtō Zen sect moved to deprive Gudō of his abbotship at Rinsenji. Once he had been convicted, they quickly moved on to yet more serious action. On June 21, 1910, Gudō was deprived of his status as a Sōtō Zen priest, though he continued to regard himself as one until the end of his life.

Toward a Second Trial

On May 25, 1910, two socialists, Miyashita Takichi and Niimura Tadao, were arrested in Nagano Prefecture after police searched their quarters and found chemicals used to make explosives. In the minds of the police this was concrete evidence of the existence of a wider conspiracy against the imperial house. This in turn led to Kōtoku Shūsui's arrest a week later, and the investigation and interrogation of hundreds of men and women in the following months. By this time Gudō had already been in prison for a full year, yet this did not prevent him from becoming a suspect once again.

At the conclusion of its investigation, charges were brought against twenty-six persons, including Gudō and one woman, Kanno Sugako. If convicted under Article 73, "Crimes Against the Throne," of the new criminal code, all of them could face the death penalty. Under Article 73 prosecutors had only to show that the defendants "intended" to bring harm to members of the imperial house, not that they had acted on this intent in any concrete way. Ideas, not facts, were on trial.

The trial commenced in Tokyo on December 10, 1910. Kanno Sugako not only admitted in court that she had been involved in the alleged conspiracy but indicated how many others had been involved as well. Upon being asked by the presiding judge, Tsuru Jōichirō, if she wished to make a final statement, Kanno responded:

From the outset I knew that our plan would not succeed if we let a lot of people in on it. Only four of us were involved in the plan. It is a crime that involves only the four of us. But this court, as well as the preliminary interrogators, treated it as a plan that involved a large number of people. That is a complete misunderstanding of the case. Because of this misunderstanding a large number of people have been made to suffer. You are aware of this ...

If these people are killed for something that they knew nothing about, not only will it be a grave tragedy for the persons concerned, but their relatives and friends will feel bitterness toward the government. Because we hatched this plan, a large number of innocent people may be executed.

In her diary entry for January 21, 1911, Kanno identified the other persons involved in the plot as Kōtoku, Miyashita, Niimura, and Furukawa Rikisaku.

Kanno's plea on behalf of the other defendants fell on deaf ears. As for Gudō, Chief Prosecutor Hiranuma Kiichirō went on to identify his earlier writing, with its uncompromising denial of the emperor system, as "the most heinous book ever written since the beginning of Japanese history." He also mentioned a second tract which Gudō had printed, entitled *A Handbook for Imperial Soldiers (Teikoku Gunjin Zayū no Mei)*. Here Gudō had gone so far as to call on conscripts to desert their encampments *en masse*. In addition, Gudō had, as already noted, repeatedly and forcefully advocated both land reform in the countryside and democratic rights for all citizens.

Many years later an alternative view of Gudō's role in the alleged conspiracy came from a somewhat surprising source, namely the administrative headquarters of the Sōtō Zen sect. In the July 1993 issue of *Sōtō Shūhō*, the administrative organ for this sect, an announcement was made that as of April 13, 1993, Uchiyama Gudō's status as a Sōtō priest had been restored. The announcement went on to say, "[Gudō's] original expulsion was a mistake caused by the sect's having swallowed the government's repressive policies."

The explanation as to what caused this turnabout in the sect's attitude toward Gudō was contained in a subsequent article that appeared in the September 1993 issue of the same periodical. Written by the sect's new "Bureau for the Protection and Advocacy of Human Rights," the highlights of the article are as follows:

When viewed by today's standards of respect for human rights, Uchiyama Gudō's writings contain elements that should be regarded as farsighted. We have much to learn from them, for today his writings are respected by people in various walks of life, beginning with the mass media. In our sect, the restoration of Uchiyama Gudō's reputation is something that will both bring solace to his spirit and contribute to the establishment within this sect of a method of dealing with questions concerning human rights ...

We now recognize that Gudō was a victim of the national policy of that day ... The dynamite found in his temple had been placed there for safekeeping by a railroad company laying track through the Hakone mountains and had nothing to do with him ... The sect's [original] actions strongly aligned the sect with an establishment dominated by the emperor system. They were not designed to protect the unique Buddhist character of the sect's priests ... On this occasion of the restoration of Uchiyama Gudō's reputation, we must reflect on the way in which our sect has ingratiated itself with both the political powers of the day and a state under the suzerainty of the emperor.

While the Sōtō sect's statement clearly views Gudō as a victim of government repression, it presents no new evidence in support of his innocence. It merely repeats Kashiwagi's earlier unsubstantiated claim that the dynamite found at his temple was put there as part of a nearby railway construction project. All in all, the Sōtō sect's statement must be treated with some scepticism, perhaps as more of a reflection of the sect's regret for what it came to recognize (in postwar years) as its slavish subservience to the state.

Because of this lack of evidence, no definitive statement can be made about the guilt or innocence of those on trial in the High Treason Incident. As noted earlier, much critical evidence was destroyed by the government as it sought to make the accused into "nonpersons." When in 1975 the descendents of one of those originally convicted in the case petitioned for a retrial, the Ministry of Justice stated clearly for the first time that the trial's transcripts no longer existed. Even if the transcripts had existed, it is doubtful that they would have provided definitive evidence, given that everyone directly connected with the trial was by then dead. Historian Fred Notehelfer admits at the end of his study of the case that "an element of mystery ... continues to surround the trial." It probably always will.

There was never any doubt at the time, however, that the defendants would be found guilty. The only uncertainty was how severe their penalties would be. On January 18, 1911, little more

than a month after the trial began, the court rendered its verdict. All defendants were found guilty, and twenty-four of them, Gudō and the three other Buddhist priests included, were condemned to death. One day later, on January 19th, an imperial rescript was issued which commuted the sentences of twelve of the condemned to life imprisonment. Three of the Buddhist priests—Takagi Kemmyō, Sasaki Dōgen, and Mineo Setsudō—were spared the hangman’s noose, though all would die in prison.

Toward Execution

Mikiso Hane has suggested why the government was so determined to convict all of the defendants:

The authorities (under Prime Minister Katsura Tarō, who had been directed by the *genrō* [elder statesman] Yamagata Aritomo to come down hard on the leftists) rounded up everybody who had the slightest connection with Kōtoku and charged them with complicity in the plot.

Yamagata was particularly concerned by the fact that the court testimony of nearly all the defendants revealed a loss of faith in the divinity of the emperor. For Yamagata, this loss of respect for the core of the state represented a serious threat to the future of the nation. Those holding this view had to be eliminated by any means necessary.

Acting with unaccustomed haste, the government executed Gudō and ten of his alleged co-conspirators inside the Ichigaya Prison compound on the morning of January 24, 1911, less than a week after their conviction. Kanno Sugako was executed the following day. Gudō was the fifth to die on the twenty-fourth, and Yoshida Kyūichi records that as he climbed the scaffold stairs, “he gave not the slightest hint of emotional distress. Rather he appeared serene, even cheerful—so much so that the attending prison chaplain bowed as he passed.”

The next day, when Gudō’s younger brother, Seiji, came to collect his body, he demanded that the coffin be opened. Looking at Gudō’s peaceful countenance, Seiji said, “Oh, older brother, you passed away without suffering ... What a superb face you have in death!”

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