

The Rehabilitation of a Japanese Buddhist Heretic

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ABSTRACT—This study focuses on the life and death of Uchiyama Gudō (1874–1911), a disrobed Sōtō Zen priest, who had his priestly status posthumously restored to him on April 13, 1993, eighty-two years after his execution by the Japanese government for alleged participation in a plot to assassinate a member of the Imperial family in 1910. This article seeks to answer the questions of how and why this all came about and raises questions about what it means, in Buddhist terminology, to be “defeated” in the holy life and expelled from the Sangha as a result.

KEYWORDS: Japanese Buddhist heretics, socialist Buddhist movement, Uchiyama Gudō, Zen Buddhism

Introduction

Doctrinally speaking, this article describes a phenomenon that could only happen within the Mahayana tradition of Buddhism. That is to say, only the Mahayana tradition allows for the possibility of the restoration of clerical status to someone who was formally deprived of that status for having broken

one or more of the four *pārājikas* (defeats).¹ In the Theravada tradition, should Buddhist *bhikkhus* break any one of these rules they are automatically “defeated” in the holy life and immediately forfeit membership in the Sangha for the remainder of their lives.

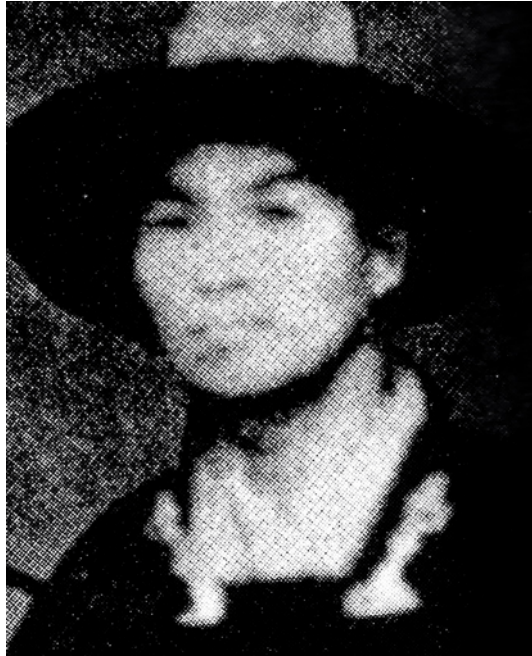


FIGURE 1: Portrait of Uchiyama Gudō, 1874–1911
(Photo © <https://nmmc.jp/archive-person>)

¹ The four *pārājikas* for male clerics are: 1) sexual intercourse, i.e., engaging in any sexual intercourse; 2) stealing, i.e., the robbery of anything worth more than 1/24 troy ounce of gold as determined by local law; 3) killing, i.e., bringing about the death of a human being—whether by killing the person, arranging for someone to kill the person, inciting the person to die, or describing the advantages of death; 4) lying, i.e., lying to another person that one has attained a superior human state, such as claiming to be an arahant when one knows one is not, or claiming to have attained one of the *jhānas* when one knows one has not.

Although it may be apocryphal, the *Brahmajālasūtra* (J. *Bonmōkyō*) of the Mahayana tradition offers the possibility of redemption. While those who intentionally break the *pārājikas* should still be ousted from the Sangha, as Bernard Faure notes, “the culprit can now rehabilitate himself through his own repentance and through the merits of others”.² This article deals with one such cleric, a Sōtō Zen priest by the name of Uchiyama Gudō (内山 愚童; 1874–1911), who was expelled from the priesthood in 1909 and subsequently hung to death by the Japanese government on January 24, 1911 [FIG. 1]. It was not until April 1993 that the Sōtō Zen sect restored Gudō’s clerical status. The Sōtō Zen sect now claims that Gudō “was a victim of the national policy of that day”.³ How did this all come about? Before addressing this question, let me briefly introduce the socio-political and religious background into which Gudō was born. Like all of us, Gudō was both a unique individual as well as a product of his times.

1. Historical background

The arrival in Japan of Commodore Matthew Calbraith Perry (1794–1858) and his small fleet of four black steamships on July 8, 1853, set off a chain of events that led to an end to Japan’s 220-year-old isolation policy with the opening of Japanese ports to American trade. This in turn led to the establishment of diplomatic relations between Japan and the Western great powers, and, eventually, to the collapse of the ruling Tokugawa shogunate. The Meiji Restoration of 1868 signaled the restoration of political power from the Tokugawa shoguns to the Emperor though, in reality, it was the Emperor’s senior advisors who exercised power in the Emperor’s name.

Post-restoration Japan faced a multitude of problems as it attempted to centralise political power in the new capital of Tokyo, even while attempting to industrialise as rapidly as possible. This included the creation of a modern military that could protect Japan from the ever-present danger of being colonised by one or another of the Western imperialist powers. With these goals in mind Japan adopted the slogan of “Enrich the country, strengthen the military” (J. *fukoku kyōhei*). Eventually, however, as a newly minted “empire”, this slogan was extended to include Japan’s actions abroad. Its first acquisition

² See Faure 1998: 92.

³ See Victoria 2006: 47.

through military conquest was the island of Taiwan following victory in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895. Japan thereby became the first non-Western nation to join the ranks of the imperialist powers.

Japan's two traditional religions, i.e., Buddhism and Shinto, were deeply influenced by the momentous changes occurring in Japanese society. While major Shinto shrines were given state financial support in exchange for promoting worship of the Emperor and his ancestors, an estimated 40,000 Buddhist temples were destroyed, together with their statuary, as a consequence of a government directive known as *shinbutsu bunri*, the separation of Buddhas from Shinto gods. On the one hand, this set in motion an attempt among Buddhist leaders to reform and otherwise “modernise” their faith while at the same time making them realise how critical it was to their survival to demonstrate their loyalty to the Emperor and state which he embodied. If anything, this was one of the most compelling reasons why Japanese Buddhist leaders went on to become such staunch supporters of both government-sponsored, rapid capitalist development at home and imperialist expansion abroad.

Uchiyama Gudō's childhood

With this background in mind, it's clear that Uchiyama Gudō's birth on May 17, 1874, came just as Japan was in the early years of its headlong rush into modernity. The village of Ojiya where Gudō was born is located in Niigata Prefecture on the Japan Sea coast. On the one hand, this prefecture had long flourished as a major rice producing area and Niigata, its major city, was the first Japanese port on the Sea of Japan to be opened to foreign trade. Nevertheless, Niigata Prefecture's geographical location, with its heavy snowfall, long, cold winters and limited growing season, worked against major industrial development. Added to this was the ever-present danger of flooding and, in the event of poor weather, occasional crop failure and famine.

Gudō's childhood (lay) name was Keikichi. He was the oldest of four children. Gudō's father, Naokichi, was a carpenter initially employed to repair Buddhist temples in the neighborhood, at least before the wholesale repression of Buddhism following the Meiji Restoration. He subsequently made his living as a woodworker and carver, specialising in Buddhist statues, family altars, and associated implements. As a child, Gudō learned this trade from his father, and later, after becoming a priest and temple abbot, carved Buddhist statues that

he gave to his parishioners. Even today these simple yet serene nine-inch-tall (c. 23 cm) carvings of Buddha Śākyamuni are highly valued by the descendants of his parishioners [FIG. 2].



FIGURE 2: One of the few remaining statues of Buddha Śākyamuni that Uchiyama Gudō carved as gifts for his impoverished parishioners (Photo © Brian Victoria)

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 a social reformer by the name of Sakura Sōgōrō (1605–1653). Something of a legendary figure, Sakura is said to have appealed directly to the feudal lord of Sakura domain (today’s Chiba Prefecture) in 1652 when he was serving as a headman of one of the domain’s villages. His appeal consisted of a request that the lord ease the peasants’ burden of heavy taxes and bad crops. On the one hand, Sakura’s appeal was successful but, in those days, direct appeals to feudal lords were forbidden. Hence, Sakura was arrested and believed to have been executed (crucified) in 1653 together with his sons, and possibly his wife. He went on to become a heroic figure through numerous stories and plays about his life, an inspiration and model of self-sacrifice for Gudō and many other rural youths. Thus, discussions of the need for land reform to eliminate rural poverty were an integral part of Gudō’s childhood education.

Gudō lost his father at the age of sixteen. In his book *Buddhists Who Sought Reform (Henkaku o motometa Bukkyōsha)*, Inagaki Masami identifies this early death as a significant factor in Gudō’s later decision to enter the Buddhist priesthood.⁴ Needless to say, the loss of one or more parents, especially at an early age, has been a classic reason for entering the Buddhist priesthood, though the impoverishment that accompanies such a loss is often a contributing factor.

Life as a Zen priest

Gudō was ordained as a Sōtō Zen priest on April 12, 1897, as a disciple of Sakazume Kōjū, abbot of Hōzōji temple. Over the following seven years, Gudō both 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 was designated as the Dharma successor of Miyagi Jitsumyō, abbot of Rinsenji temple. Three years later, on February 9, 1904, Gudō succeeded his master as Rinsenji’s abbot, thus bringing to an end his formal Zen training.

⁴ See Inagaki 1974: 110.



FIGURE 3: *Uchiyama Gudō's temple of Rinsenji as it appears today, with a metal roof instead of the original thatched roof (Photo © Brian Victoria)*

The temple Gudō acceded to was, even by the standards of that day, exceedingly humble. For one thing, it was located in a small village in the Hakone mountains southwest of Tokyo in Kanagawa Prefecture. With little land suitable for cultivation, there were only forty impoverished peasant families available to provide financial support. Aside from a small, thatched-roof Buddha Hall, the temple's main assets were a single persimmon and chestnut tree located on the temple grounds [FIG. 3]. Village tradition states that every autumn Gudō invited villagers to the temple to divide the harvest from these trees equally among themselves.

Early social activism and thought

In his discussions with village youths, 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 were reduced to tenancy.

Gudō thus became an outspoken advocate of land reform, something that would eventually come to pass, but not until many years later, that is to say, only after Japan’s defeat in the Asia-Pacific War (WW II) in August 1945. 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 realised 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.⁵

The traditional Buddhist organisational structure, i.e., the Sangha, with its communal lifestyle and lack of personal property, was the model from which Gudō drew his inspiration for societal reform. It was also in 1904 that Gudō had his first significant contact with a much broader, secular reform movement, i.e., 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 would later express its impact on him as follows: “When I began reading the *Heimin Shimbun* at that time [1904], I realised that its principles were identical with my own and therefore I became an anarcho-socialist”.⁶ Gudō was not content, however, to be a mere reader of this newspaper. In its January 17, 1904 edition, he explained why he had become a socialist:

As a propagator of Buddhism, I teach that “all sentient beings have 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.⁷

⁵ See Inagaki 1974: 112–113 (my translation).

⁶ See Inagaki 1974: 115 (my translation).

⁷ See Kashiwagi 1979: 29 (my translation).

The phrase, “all sentient beings have 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 *Buddhadharma*.

Even this brief statement, however, puts Gudō in direct opposition to Meiji Buddhist leaders like Shimaji Mokurai (1838–1911). In his 1879 essay entitled “Differentiation [is] Equality” (*Sabetsu Byōdō*), Shimaji maintained that distinctions in social standing, wealth, etc. were as permanent as differences in age, sex, and language. Socialism, in his view, was flawed because it emphasised 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 (*mukeyi*), failing to recognise 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 (1871–1911), would later become directly implicated in the High Treason Incident (see *infra*). 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 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 in the Hakone mountains that would eventually thrust him into the historical limelight. The background to this development was the ever-increasing efforts of the Japanese government and police to suppress the growing socialist movement with its pacifist platform. This suppression took the form of repeatedly banning 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 urban-centered, socialist anti-war 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 came to an end with a Japanese victory. The victory, however, was a costly one, both in terms of the government's expenditure 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 established. In this atmosphere of significant social unrest, the government pursued its suppression of socialism even more relentlessly than before. Thus, 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.

Gudō's "underground press"

Returning to Gudō, the remaining members of the socialist movement found themselves no longer able to advocate socialism openly. Frustrated, the more radical members of the movement began to engage in clandestine actions of various kinds. A few became convinced there was only one avenue left open to them, i.e., taking some form of "direct action" against the Imperial House itself. For his part, Gudō visited Tokyo in September 1908 where he met with Kōtoku Shūsui. This led Gudō to purchase the necessary equipment to set up a secret press within his own temple. The printing equipment was hidden in the storage area located beneath and to the rear of the Buddha altar in the Main Buddha Hall. Gudō used this press to turn out not only popular socialist tracts and pamphlets, but he also wrote and published his own materials, including his best-known work, "In Commemoration of Imprisonment: Anarcho-Communism—Revolution" (*Nyūgoku Kinen-Museifu Kyōsan—Kakumei*) [FIG. 4].



FIGURE 4: Cover of the booklet written and printed by Uchiyama Gudō. The five horizontal characters in two lines at the top of the pamphlet cover read: “Anarcho-Communism”. The four Chinese characters on the right-hand side read: “In Commemoration of Imprisonment”. The two characters on the pennant read, “Revolution” (Photo © Brian Victoria)

This work is interesting for a number of reasons, not least of all because it contains a pointed critique of the then widespread understanding of the Buddhist doctrine of karma. After beginning with a lament for the poverty of tenant farmers, Gudō wrote:

Is this [your poverty] the result, as Buddhists maintain, of the retribution due to you because of your evil deeds in the past? Listen, friends, if, having now entered the 20th century, you were to be deceived by superstitions like this, you would still be [no better than] oxen or horses. Would this please you?⁸

Gudō clearly understood that the Buddhist doctrine of karma was being used to provide 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 (1860–1919), the Rinzai Zen priest who was D.T. Suzuki’s master, was typical of those Buddhist leaders who advocated this interpretation. He said:

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!⁹

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: Anarcho-Communism—Revolution” lay not in its critique of certain aspects of Buddhist doctrine, but rather in its blistering denial of the heart and soul of the Meiji political system, i.e., the Imperial system. It was, in fact, this denial of Japan’s Imperial system that more than any other single 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

⁸ See Kashiwagi 1979: 197 (my translation).

⁹ See Yokoyama 1993: 136.

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, Nagasune-hiko 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.¹⁰

Imprisonment

Gudō printed between 1,000 to 2,000 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 Imperial 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 it to passersby. Predictably, it was not long before copies fell into the hands of the police. This in turn sparked an immediate nationwide search for both its 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 his temple of 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.

¹⁰ See Kashiwagi 1979: 198–201 (my translation).

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” Kashiwagi 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”.¹¹ Nevertheless, Gudō was convicted of both charges and initially sentenced to a total of 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 took more serious action. Thus, on June 21, 1910, Gudō was deprived of his status as a Sōtō Zen priest though he continued to regard himself as one to the end of his life.

The High Treason Incident

It was the High Treason Incident (*Taigyaku Jiken*) of 1910 that first brought public attention to the existence of politically radical Buddhist priests. Specifically, there were three Buddhist priests who were arrested, and convicted for their alleged participation in a conspiracy to kill one or more members of the Imperial family. These three were part of a larger group of twenty-six in all who were also convicted of the same crime. Of the three priests, Uchiyama Gudō was the only one to be executed. Although the remaining two were also initially sentenced to death, they later had their sentences commuted to life imprisonment. Both of them would eventually die in prison, though the Shin (True Pure Land) sect priest, Takagi Kenmyō (1864–1914) died at his own hands. The remaining priest was Rinzaï Zen sect-affiliated Mineo Setsudō (1885–1919).

The High Treason Incident began on May 25, 1910, when two socialists, Miyashita Takichi (1875–1911) and Niimura Tadao (1887–1911) were arrested in Nagano Prefecture after police had searched their quarters and found chemicals used to make explosives. In the minds of the police this was sufficient evidence to indicate 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. Although by this time Gudō had already been in prison for a full year, this did not prevent him from becoming a suspect once again.

¹¹ See Kashiwagi 1984: 11 (my translation).

At the conclusion of their investigation, charges were brought against a total of twenty-six persons, including Gudō, the two additional priests, and one woman, Kanno Sugako (1881–1911). If convicted under Article 73, i.e., “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. Thus, what was on trial were ideas, not facts. 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 (1858–1926), 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.¹²

In her diary entry for January 21, 1911, Kanno identified the other persons involved in the plot besides herself as being Kōtoku, Miyashita, Niimura and Furukawa Rikisaku (1884–1911). Kanno’s plea on behalf of the other defendants fell on deaf ears. As for Gudō, Chief Prosecutor Hiranuma Kiichirō (1867–1952) went on to identify his earlier writing, with its uncompromising denial of the Imperial system, as “the most heinous book ever written since the beginning of Japanese history”.¹³ He also mentioned a second tract which Gudō had printed, entitled “A Handbook for Imperial Soldiers” (*Teikoku Gunjin Zayū no Mei*).

¹² See Hane 1988: 57.

¹³ See Inagaki 1974: 128 (my translation).

In this, Gudō went so far as to call on conscripts to desert their encampments *en masse*. Additionally, Gudō repeatedly and forcefully advocated both land reform in the countryside and democratic rights for all citizens.

Execution

There was never any doubt at the time 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, that uncertainty vanished when the court rendered its verdict. All defendants were found guilty, and twenty-four of them, Gudō and the two other Buddhist priests, were condemned to death. However, on January 19, a day later, an Imperial rescript was issued which commuted the sentences of twelve of the condemned to life imprisonment. In this way, two of the Buddhist priests, i.e., Takagi Kenmyō and Mineo Setsudō were spared the hangman's noose, but, as already noted, both of them would later die in prison. Mikiso Hane has suggested why the government was so determined to convict all of the defendants:

The authorities (under Prime Minister Katsura Tarō [1848–1913], who had been directed by the [elder statesman] Yamagata Aritomo [1838–1922] 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.¹⁴

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 structure represented a serious threat to the future of the nation. Those holding this view had to be eliminated by any means necessary.

Acting with unprecedented haste, the government executed Gudō and his ten alleged male co-conspirators inside the Ichigaya Prison compound on the morning of January 24, 1911, less than a week after their conviction. Kanno Sugako, the only woman, would die the following day. Gudō was the fifth to die, 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”.¹⁵ The next day, when Gudō's younger brother, Seiji, came to

¹⁴ See Hane 1988: 56.

¹⁵ See Yoshida 1959: 476 (my translation).

collect his body, he demanded that the coffin be opened. Looking at Gudō's peaceful countenance, Seiji said, "Oh, elder brother, you passed away without suffering. [...] What a superb face you have in death!"¹⁶

Post-execution developments

As his execution indicates, the authorities clearly considered Gudō to be the "worst" of the three Buddhist priests. This is not surprising for, of all the priests, Gudō was the most actively involved in the socialist movement that the Meiji government found so reprehensible. Gudō also left behind the most written material related to his beliefs. That said, even Gudō's writings contain relatively little that directly addresses the relationship he saw between the *Buddhadharma* and his own social activism. This is hardly surprising inasmuch as neither he, nor his two fellow priests, claimed to be Buddhist scholars or possess special expertise in either Buddhist doctrine or social/political/economic theory.

In contemporary terms, Gudō and his fellow priests 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. In addition, the Japanese government attempted, even before their convictions, to turn all of those allegedly involved in the High Treason Incident into "non-persons". One example of this was the fact that the entire court proceedings were conducted behind closed doors with no press coverage allowed, for the government argued that doing so would be prejudicial to peace and order as well as the maintenance of public morality.

In yet another example of government actions, Gudō's temple of Rinsenji was raided and all his writings and correspondence taken away as evidence never to be seen again. The only things left behind were a few statues of Buddha Śākyamuni that Gudō had carved and gifted to his parishioners. Even his death did not satisfy the authorities, for they would not allow his name to appear on so much as a grave marker at Rinsenji. Instead, his grave was marked by a small triangular rock not more than 50 cm high [FIG. 5]. When one of his parishioners dared to leave some flowers on his unmarked grave, the police instituted a village-wide, albeit ultimately unsuccessful, search to identify the offender.

¹⁶ See Yoshida 1959: 478 (my translation).



*FIGURE 5: The small, uncarved, triangular stone in the foreground that originally served as Uchiyama Gudō's one and only grave marker
(Photo © Brian Victoria)*

The Sōtō Zen sect reacts

Readers will not be surprised to learn that Sōtō Zen sect officials raised no objection to Gudō's execution despite the fact that he was one of their own. In fact, as previously mentioned, Gudō had already been disrobed as a result of his previous convictions for illegal printing. Nevertheless, the administrative head of that sect, Morita Goyū (1834–1915), on the day preceding Gudō's execution, felt obliged to issue a statement abjectly apologising for not having adequately controlled the likes of Gudō. In part, Morita said:

I am profoundly dumbstruck that there could have been someone like Uchiyama Gudō in this sect, a sect whose basic principle has been, since its founding, to respect the Emperor and protect the state. I therefore apologise most profusely and profoundly and pledge that I will guide and educate the priests of this sect to devote all of their energies to their proper duties and thereby actively practice being of service to society.¹⁷

In addition to this apology, the Sōtō sect hierarchy also issued a number of directives to all affiliated temples and educational institutions. Typical of these was the directive of February 15, 1911, which, after condemning Gudō yet again, advised sect adherents to “exercise vigilance over both themselves and others [...] in order to expiate this most serious crime in the sect's last one thousand years”.¹⁸

The Rinzai Zen sect's reaction

Although a second Zen priest, Mineo Setsudo, affiliated with the Rinzai Zen sect, was not executed, but given a life sentence, leaders of the fifteen branches of the Rinzai Zen sect issued similar apologies and directives to those of the Sōtō sect. In the case of Myōshinji, the largest branch of Rinzai Zen, the administrative head, Toyoda Dokutan (1840–1917) had this to say:

The essence of the Rinzai sect since its founding in this country has been to protect the nation through the spread of Zen. It is for this reason that in front of the central Buddha image in our sect's temples we have reverently placed a memorial tablet inscribed

¹⁷ See *Sōtō Shūhō*, 1911, no. 340 (my translation).

¹⁸ *Ibid.* (my translation).

with the words, “May the current Emperor live for ten thousand years”, thereby making our temples training centers for pacifying and preserving our country. [...] We make certain that adherents of our sect always keep in mind love of country and absolute loyalty [to the Emperor] [...], that they do not ignore the doctrine of karma or fall into the trap of believing in the heretical idea of “evil equality” [as advocated by socialists, et al.].¹⁹

In Dokutan’s condemnation of “evil equality” (*aku byōdō*) can be heard an echo of Shimaji’s earlier critique of socialists for their failure to understand the identity of differentiation and equality, and confusing the worlds of form and formlessness. The bifurcation of form and formlessness had by then become the dominant theoretical position of Buddhist thought. As such, it served to legitimate Buddhism’s involvement in war while providing ammunition for attacking Western expansionist policies in Asia. It further provided justification for institutional Buddhism’s assistance to Japan’s own imperialist expansion.

The Shin sect’s reaction

While Takagi Kenmyō was a Shin sect priest given a life sentence, he received similar treatment from his own sectarian leaders, for they were no less appalled by the actions of one their own, though Kenmyō, too, had been stripped of his clerical status. Two administrative leaders of the Higashi Honganji branch of the Shin sect, Ōtani Eiryō and Kuwakado Shidō, issued an admonition to all subordinate temples on January 20, 1911. It stated in part:

Last year [1910] there were those who, having adopted socialist extremism, hatched an extraordinary plot. Those who did so both violated a basic principle of this sect, which teaches the coexistence of relative and ultimate truth, and cast aside the Buddhist doctrine of causality. This is not the way in which priests of this sect should act. [...] Nevertheless, there was such a priest [Takagi Kenmyō] in this sect. [...] Adherents of this sect should quickly rectify their thinking in accordance with this sect’s teaching that the Law of the Sovereign [*rājadharmā*] is paramount and relations between men should be based on

¹⁹ See Yoshida 1959: 510 (my translation).

benevolence. [...] They must be taught, in accordance with this sect's teaching of the coexistence of relative and ultimate truth, just how deep is the gratitude they owe to both Heaven and their Country. [...] Especially those in this sect in supervisory roles must pay special attention to what the priests and laity under their supervision are doing. [...] You must eliminate misconceptions, being ever vigilant.²⁰

Even though there were no priests of the Nishi Honganji branch of the Shin sect directly involved in the trial, the leader of that sect, Ōtani Sonyū (1886–1939), nevertheless felt compelled to issue his own statement. It began by noting that society was being “infected by dangerous thoughts” and went on to point out that “those who mistakenly involved themselves in such lawless speech and actions are not simply enemies of the state but of the [Shin] sect as well”.

As justification for his position, Sonyū pointed out that Japan was a “flawless state” to which all sect adherents should selflessly devote themselves. In particular, “as teachers, sect priests should observe tendencies in social thought in order to promote national stability and maintain social order”. In so doing, they would insure that “the splendor of our sect will be exalted”.²¹ Neither Sonyū nor the other Shin leaders, it would appear, ever considered the possibility that the Law of the Sovereign might come in conflict with the Law of the Buddha, i.e., the *Buddhadharma*, let alone what they would do if it ever did.

The scholarly reaction

In March 1912 a book was published under the title of “Essays on Reverence for the Emperor and Patriotism” (*Sonnō Aikoku-ron*). The nineteen separate essays contained in this work were written by fifteen leading scholars, one government official, and three intellectuals, including Buddhist scholar-priest, Ōuchi Seiran (1845–1918). In addition to Seiran, there were also such well-known Buddhist scholar-priests as Inoue Enryō (1858–1919) and Nanjō Bunyū (1849–1927), not to mention Murakami Senshō (1851–1929), a noted Buddhist historian.

²⁰ See *Chūgai Nippō*, 1911, no. 3259 (my translation).

²¹ See *Honzan Rokuji*, October 15, 1910.

The book's connection to the High Treason Incident was made clear in its preface. The incident was referred to as "marking the greatest disgrace of the Meiji period".²² As a result of the disturbance this incident caused, the book's editor, Akiyama Goan, wrote that he had decided to ask the leading thinkers of his day to clarify the true nature of reverence for the Emperor and patriotism "in order to exterminate vermin and provide the material to fill up ant holes".²³

The titles of the various essays provide a good indication of the book's content. Tokyo University Professor Inoue Tetsujirō (1855–1944) wrote on "The Noble Cause of the Founding of the State", while Murakami Senshō contributed an essay entitled: "Loyalty [to the Emperor] and Filial Piety in Buddhism". Ōuchi Seiran's essay was entitled: "On Revering the Emperor and Repaying [One's Debt of Gratitude to] the Buddha". Seiran used his essay to renew the attack on Christianity, writing:

Christianity and our Imperial House can never coexist, for it is impossible to truly revere the Imperial House while believing in Christianity. [...] Christianity not only turns its back on the righteous Buddhist teaching of cause and effect, but it is a heretical teaching that tears apart the establishment of our Imperial House and destroys the foundation of our country. [...] Therefore we must all join together to prevent this heretical teaching from spreading throughout our land.²⁴

Inoue Enryō entitled his essay: "A Treatise on the National Polity, Loyalty [to the Emperor], and Filial Piety". In his essay, he presented the following syllogism:

The land of our nation is sacred, and since our nation developed on this sacred land, it should also be called sacred. [...] Our Imperial House is sacred, and since all of the subjects in this land are its offspring, children of the gods and grandchildren of the Emperor, therefore they are sacred. [...] Our loyalty [to the Emperor] and patriotism are sacred [...] whereas in the West such things are private matters and therefore lifeless. Why? Because

²² See Akiyama 1912: 1.

²³ Ibid.: 2.

²⁴ See Akiyama 1912: 49–52.

the people and the King [in Western countries] do not become one family [...] since society is based on individuals who only think of themselves.²⁵

In the above comments it is not difficult to see that the Buddhist essayists were determined to demonstrate that they, no less than their secular counterparts, were totally and completely dedicated to the Emperor and the state. In this effort, it must be admitted, they were eminently successful. With the state's assistance, "vermin" like Uchiyama Gudō had indeed been exterminated. Their role was to fill up the remaining "ant holes".

The Government's reaction

Needless to say, the Japanese government was no less interested than the sectarian Buddhist leaders and scholars in ensuring that religious figures would never again oppose its policies. With this goal in mind, it sponsored a "Conference of the Three Religions" (Sankyō Kaidō) which opened on February 25, 1912. This conference was attended by seventy-one representatives from Buddhism, Shinto and Christianity as well as numerous sponsoring government ministers and officials. The government's unprecedented inclusion of Christian representatives revealed that the patriotic fervor of the new creed, as demonstrated during both the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese wars, had at last been officially recognised.

The conference concerned itself with passing a number of resolutions calling for such things as support of the Imperial way (*kōdō*) and promotion of national morality. Conference participants also advocated cooperation between politics, religion, and education as a way to ensure national prosperity. Notto Thelle makes the connection between the High Treason Incident and this conference very clear, when, after describing the conference agenda, he states:

The plot to assassinate the emperor in 1910 made a great impact upon the political situation. [...] There is no doubt that the government policy toward religions and its support of religious cooperation was stimulated by apprehensions about socialism and other "dangerous thoughts".²⁶

²⁵ Ibid.: 144-149.

²⁶ See Thelle 2021: 252.

The government was, without question, successful in its efforts. As a result of this conference, many influential leaders in the Buddhist and Christian establishments cooperated with each other not only to strengthen the state, but foster patriotic spirit, national unity, and moral strength in a time they perceived as fraught with danger. It is no exaggeration to say that this conference was akin to driving the last nail in the coffin of any semblance of Buddhist independence from state policies, especially those relating to questions of war and peace. This blind and near total obedience to the government on the part of Japan's religious leaders, Buddhist and non-Buddhist alike, was destined to become the most enduring religious legacy of not just the High Treason Incident but of the entire Meiji period, which itself came to an end in 1912.

2. Post-war developments culminating in Gudō's rehabilitation

In order to understand the events that led to the restoration of Gudō's clerical status, we must first understand the related post-war developments that took place within Japanese Buddhism, for what occurred was definitely not an isolated event. Instead, the restoration took place during a period of reflection and repentance on the part of many (but not all) leaders of Japan's traditional Buddhist sects regarding their slavish if not fanatical support of Japan's wars of aggression and aggrandisement from the Meiji period onwards. Three declarations of sectarian war responsibility and complicity took place prior to the restoration of Gudō's clerical status. The first of the three was made by the Higashi Honganji branch of the Shin sect in 1987, while the companion Nishi Honganji branch followed suit four years later in 1991. For its part, it was not until 1992 that the Sōtō sect published a "Statement of repentance" (*Sanshabun*) apologising for its wartime role.

What all of these statements share in common is the fact that even the earliest of them, i.e., the Higashi Honganji branch's declaration of 1987, was not issued until more than forty years after the end of the war. By comparison, the first Christian organisation in Japan to issue a similar statement was twenty years earlier in 1967. This latter statement was entitled, "A confession of responsibility during WW II by the United Church of Christ in Japan". Even this recognition of wartime complicity by Japan's largest Protestant organisation was more than a generation in the making.

It should be readily apparent that the three statements of Buddhist war complicity represent only a small percentage of Japanese Buddhism's thirteen major sects with their numerous branches. For example, prior to Gudō's reinstatement none of the fifteen branches of the Rinzai Zen sect formally addressed this issue in any manner.²⁷ In that sense, it can be said that the following statements represent only the beginning rather than the end of this important, if not crucial, issue for institutional Japanese Buddhism.

The 1987 Declaration of the Higashi Honganji branch

The following admission of war responsibility was made as part of the "Memorial service for all war victims" held on April 2, 1987. The statement was read by Koga Seiji, administrative head of the branch. It read in part:

As we recall the war years, it was our sect that called the war a "sacred war". It was we who said, "The heroic spirits [of the war dead] who have been enshrined in [Shinto's] Yasukuni Shrine have served in the great undertaking of guarding and maintaining the prosperity of the Imperial Throne. They should therefore be revered for having done the great work of a Bodhisattva". This was an expression of deep ignorance and shamelessness on our part. When recalling this now, we are attacked by a sense of shame from which there is no escape. [...] Calling that war a "sacred war" was a double lie. Those who participate in war are both victims and victimisers. In light of the great sin we have committed, we must not pass it by as being nothing more than a "mistake". The sect said to revere things that were never taught by Saint [Shinran]. When we who are priests think about this sin, we can only hang our heads in silence before all who are gathered here.²⁸

The 1991 Declaration of the Nishi Honganji branch

The following statement was issued by the administrative assembly of the Nishi Honganji branch on February 27, 1991. It was entitled "The Resolution to make our sect's strong desire for peace known to all in Japan and the world".

²⁷ It was not until 2001 that two major branches of the Rinzai sect, i.e., Myōshinji and Tenryūji, admitted and apologised for their support of the Japanese war effort.

²⁸ See *Shūkyō-sha no Sensō Sekinin*, 1994, p. 34 (my translation).

The central focus of this declaration, however, was the Gulf War coupled with the question of nuclear warfare mentioned in the second and third paragraphs. The sect's own wartime role did not rate mention until the fourth paragraph and included the following:

Although there was pressure exerted on us by the military-controlled state, we must be deeply penitent before the Buddhas and Patriarchs, for we ended up cooperating with the war and losing sight of the true nature of this sect. This can also be seen in the doctrinal sphere, where the [sect's] teaching of the existence of relative truth and absolute truth was put to cunning use.²⁹

The Sōtō Zen sect's Declaration of war responsibility

In 1992 the Sōtō sect published a "Statement of repentance" apologising for its wartime role. If the Rinzai Zen sect was initially unwilling to face its past, it cannot be claimed that the post-war leadership of the Sōtō Zen sect was any more anxious to do so. Yet, a series of allegations concerning human rights abuses by this sect had the cumulative effect of forcing it to face its past in spite of its reluctance. Unquestionably, the single most important event in this series of allegations was the sect headquarters' publication in 1980 of "The History of the Sōtō Sect's Overseas Evangelisation and Missionary Work" (*Sōtō-shu Kaigai Kaikyō Dendō-shi*). In the January 1993 issue of *Sōtō Shūhō*, the sect's administrative headquarters announced that it was recalling all copies of the above-mentioned publication. The reason given was as follows:

The content of this book consists of the history of the overseas missionary work undertaken by this sect since the Meiji period, based on reports made by the persons involved. However, upon investigation, it was discovered that this book contained many accounts that were based on discriminatory ideas. There were, for example, words which discriminated against peoples of various nationalities. Furthermore, there were places that were filled with uncritical adulation for "militarism" and "the policy to turn [occupied peoples] into loyal Imperial subjects".³⁰

Immediately following the above announcement was a "Statement of repentance" issued by the administrative head of the sect, Ōtake Myōgen. The

²⁹ Ibid.: 39 (my translation).

³⁰ See *Sōtō Shūhō*, 1993, no. 688, p. 26 (my translation).

statement contained a passage which clearly shows how the preceding work served as a catalyst for what amounted to the sect's condemnation of its wartime role. The statement's highlights are as follows:

We, the Sōtō sect, have since the Meiji period and through to the end of the Pacific War, utilised the good name of “overseas evangelisation” to violate the human rights of the peoples of Asia, especially those in East Asia. This was done by making common cause with, and sharing in, the sinister designs of those who then held political power to rule Asia. Furthermore, within the social climate of “ceasing to be Asian and becoming Western”, we despised the peoples of Asia and their cultures, forcing Japanese culture on them and taking actions which caused them to lose their national pride and dignity. This was all done out of a belief in the superiority of Japanese Buddhism and our national structure. Not only that, but these actions, which violated the teachings of Buddhism, were done in the name of Buddha Śākyamuni and the successive Patriarchs in India, China and Japan who transmitted the Dharma. There is nothing to be said about these actions other than that they were truly shameful.

We forthrightly confess the serious mistakes we committed in the past history of our overseas missionary work, and we wish to deeply apologise and express our repentance to the peoples of Asia and the world. Moreover, these actions are not merely the responsibility of those people who were directly involved in overseas missionary work. Needless to say, the responsibility of the entire sect must be questioned in as much as we applauded Japan's overseas aggression and attempted to justify it.

Even further, the Sōtō sect's publication in 1980 of the “History of the Sōtō Sect's Overseas Evangelisation and Missionary Work” was done without reflection on these past mistakes. This meant that within the body of the work there were not only positive evaluations of these past errors, but even expressions which tried to glorify and extol what had been done. In doing this, there was a complete lack of concern for the pain of the peoples of Asia

who suffered as a result. The publication involved claimed to be a work of history but was written from a viewpoint which affirmed an Imperial historical understanding, recalling the ghosts of the past and the disgrace of Japan's modern history.

We are ashamed to have published such a work and cannot escape a deeply guilty conscience in that this work was published some thirty-five years after the end of the Pacific War. The reason for this is that since the Meiji period our sect has cooperated in waging war, sometimes having been flattered into making common cause with the state, and other times rushing on its own to support state policies. Beyond that, we have never reflected on the great misery that was forced upon the peoples of Asia nor felt a sense of responsibility for what happened.

The historian E.H. Carr has said: "History is an endless conversation between the past and the present". Regretfully, our sect has failed to engage in that conversation, with the result that we have arrived at today without questioning the meaning of the past for the present, or verifying our own standpoint in the light of past history. We neglected to self-critically examine our own "war responsibility" as we should have done immediately after having lost the war in 1945.

Although the Sōtō sect cannot escape the feeling of being too late, we wish to apologise once again for our negligence and, at the same time, apologise for our cooperation with the war. [...] We recognise that Buddhism teaches that all human beings are equal as children of the Buddha. And further, that they are living beings with a dignity that must not, for any reason whatsoever, be impaired by others. Nevertheless, our sect, which is grounded in the belief of the transference of Śākyamuni's Dharma from master to disciple, both supported and eagerly sought to cooperate with a war of aggression against other peoples of Asia, calling it a holy war.

Especially in Korea and the Korean Peninsula, Japan first committed the outrage of assassinating the Korean Queen [in 1895], then forced the Korea of the Lee Dynasty into dependency status [in 1904–1905], and finally, through the annexation of Korea [in 1910], obliterated a people and a nation. Our sect acted as an advanced guard in this, contriving to assimilate the Korean people into this country, and promoting the policy of turning Koreans into loyal Imperial subjects.

When human beings exist as human beings, they cannot help but seek a place where they belong. People feel secure when they have a guarantee of their identity coming from such things as their own family, language, nationality, state, land, culture, religious belief, etc. Having an identity guarantees the dignity of human beings. However, the policy to create loyal Imperial subjects deprived the Korean people of their nation, their language, and, by forcing them to adopt Japanese family and personal names, the very heart of their national culture. The Sōtō sect, together with Japanese religion in general, took upon itself the role of justifying these barbaric acts in the name of religion.

In China and other countries, our sect took charge of pacification activities directed towards the peoples who were the victims of our aggression. There were even some priests who took the lead in making contact with the secret police and conducting spying operations on their behalf.

We committed mistakes on two levels. First, we subordinated Buddhist teachings to worldly teachings in the form of national policies. Then we proceeded to take away the dignity and identity of other peoples. We solemnly promise that we will never make this mistake again. [...]

Furthermore, we deeply apologise to the peoples of Asia who suffered under the past political domination of Japan.

We sincerely apologise that in its overseas evangelism and missionary work the Sōtō sect made common cause with those in power and stood on the side of the aggressors.³¹

In spite of the positive good that has resulted from the Sōtō sect's statement of apology, post-war Zen scholars like Ichikawa Hakugen (1902–1986) have made it clear that the rationale for Zen (and Buddhism's) support of Japanese militarism in particular, and state-sponsored warfare in general, is far more deeply entrenched in Zen and Buddhist doctrine and historical practice, especially within its Mahayana tradition, than any Japanese Buddhist sect has yet to publicly admit.

Of all the Japanese Buddhist sects to date, the Sōtō sect's statement of apology is certainly the most comprehensive. Yet, it almost totally ignores the question of the doctrinal and historical relationship between Buddhism and the state, let alone between Buddhism and the Emperor. Is, for example, "nation-protecting Buddhism" an intrinsic part of Buddhism or merely a historical accretion? Similarly, is the vaunted unity between Zen and the sword an orthodox or heretical doctrine? Is there such a thing as a physical "life-giving sword" or is it no more than a Zen metaphor that was terribly misused out of context during the war years?

The restoration of Uchiyama Gudō's status as a Sōtō Zen priest

In reading the preceding apology it is difficult to escape the feeling that, forty-eight years after the end of the war, it was, in the words of the text, "too late" for the leader of the Sōtō Zen sect to address the issue of war responsibility. That said, the chronology of events makes it clear that without the earlier war-related apology it would have been impossible for the Sōtō sect to have restored Uchiyama Gudō's priestly status, some eighty-three years after having deprived him of it.

This does not mean, however, that post-war concern about the unjust treatment Gudō suffered at the hands of the Japanese government and Meiji-era Sōtō Zen authorities only began following the sect's admission of war responsibility in the early 1990s. For this, it is possible to trace the initial focus on Gudō back as far as the 1970s when a group of lay Buddhist social activists, historians, lawyers, and a few Zen clerics, including the author of

³¹ See *Sōtō Shūhō*, 1993, no. 688, pp. 28–31 (my translation).

this article, began holding Buddhist memorial services for Gudō on an annual basis at his former temple, Rinsenji, on the anniversary of his death, i.e., on January 24. For many years, however, the Sōtō sect headquarters ignored the activities of this group.

It was only in the latter part of the 1980s, following the establishment within the sect of the “Bureau for the Protection and Advocacy of Human Rights”, that visits to Gudō’s grave and related research began. It had previously been taboo to discuss Gudō’s life and thought let alone his ousting from the sect. At the beginning of the 1990s, the Secretariat of the sect’s administrative headquarters, together with the sect’s Mutual Aid Association, began to sponsor memorial services for Gudō and engage in related research. This in turn led to a reconsideration of Gudō’s thought and actions and, eventually, to a reevaluation of the sect’s actions taken toward Gudō. The basis for the restoration of Gudō’s clerical status was now in place.

It was these actions, in combination with the sect’s admission of war responsibility, that served as the background, if not the catalyst, for the announcement in the July 1993 issue of the sect’s administrative organ that as of April 13, 1993, Uchiyama Gudō’s status as a Sōtō Zen 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 [then] government’s repressive policies”.³² The sect’s explanation of the cause of this turnabout was contained in a subsequent article that appeared in the September 1993 issue of the same periodical. Written by the sect’s 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 which should be seen as farsighted. Thus, we have much to learn from them, for today his writings are respected by people in various walks of life, starting 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 recognise

³² See *Sōtō Shūhō*, 1993, no. 694, p. 16 (my translation).

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 were those which strongly aligned the sect on the side of an establishment dominated by the Imperial system. These actions were not those 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.³³

While the Sōtō statement clearly views Gudō as a victim of government repression, it presents no new evidence in support of his innocence. Rather, 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. In that sense, this statement must be treated with some scepticism, perhaps more as a reflection of the sect's regret for what it came to recognise in post-war years as its slavish subservience to the state.

With regard to the question of whether a definitive statement can be made about Gudō's guilt or innocence, or that of many defendants in this case, the evidence (or rather lack of evidence) suggests it cannot. In the first instance, as has been noted, the government's attempt to turn the accused into "non-persons" resulted in the destruction of critical evidence. More importantly, when in 1975 the descendants 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, deceased and therefore unavailable for questioning about their statements and actions either in or out of court. It was factors like these which, at the end of his study, finally led the historian Fred Notehelfer to admit "an element of mystery [...] continues to surround the trial".³⁴ It probably always will.

³³ See *Sōtō Shūhō*, 1993, no. 696, pp. 12–16 (my translation).

³⁴ See Notehelfer 1971: 185.

3. Questions for further consideration

Was Uchiyama Gudō truly innocent?

While this concludes the study of “Buddhist heretic” Uchiyama Gudō, the restoration of whose clerical status signified his “rehabilitation”, it by no means signifies the end of the questions raised either by his initial arrest and execution or the post-war restoration of his status. The first question to be asked is whether Gudō was truly innocent of the charges levelled against him? Certainly, when viewed through the lens of “freedom of speech”, his initial writings, however critical they were of the Imperial system, should not have resulted in his imprisonment, especially in light of the fact that he did not call for the violent overthrow of the Emperor-centric, Meiji government.

Additionally, as Kanno Sugako pointed out in her court testimony, Gudō, as well as many of the other defendants, were not part of an admitted plot to harm a member of the Imperial family. Assuming her testimony to be true, Gudō should not have been sentenced to death. It was a true travesty of justice on the part of those Japanese political leaders who used the actual plot as an excuse to repress the entire socialist movement.

Unfortunately, however, the story does not end here, for there is creditable testimony that while Gudō was not part of Kanno’s plot, he nevertheless offered the dynamite in his possession to socialist activists in the Osaka area for use in what appears to have been a proposal for a second and independent plot to overthrow the Meiji government through violence. While this second plot does not appear to have progressed beyond the talking stage, if true, it does indicate Gudō’s willingness to employ violence against those political leaders, including the Emperor, he held responsible for the unjust social system prevailing in Japan, especially the plight of poverty-stricken tenant farmers.

Thus, given the importance of the role “intent” plays in Buddhist ethics, the question becomes if, as seems possible, Gudō had the intent to harm, or even kill, others, can he be said to have been innocent of having broken the third *pārājika*? If the charges involving a second plot were proven true, should Gudō have been expelled by the Sōtō Zen sect regardless of whether he was implicated in the first plot?

It can be further argued that it was Japan's secular authorities who wrongfully convicted Gudō in the first instance. Nevertheless, it was Sōtō Zen sect authorities who deprived Gudō of his priestly status based on his conviction in a secular court, not on the basis of their own independent investigation. For a Sangha that, at least in theory, is self-governing, was it proper for Sōtō Zen authorities to have accepted the judgement of secular authorities without any attempt to determine the facts on their own?

While these questions may all be considered hypothetical, they do point to far more difficult questions that have, I suggest, not yet been seriously grappled with, or resolved, by Buddhists, past or present. First, at what point, or under what circumstances, may a Buddhist, in accordance with Buddhist doctrine, employ or otherwise take part in violence? Do different standards apply depending on whether the Buddhist is a cleric, a monk, or lay person, especially given that even a lay Buddhist pledges to do no harm? Does it make a difference whether the violence is undertaken in personal self-defence versus at the direction of state authorities, e.g., organised warfare? And closely related to these questions is whether it is appropriate for Buddhist adherents, either clerical or lay, to be involved in social activism, let alone political revolutions, in the first place?

It is certainly easy enough to answer the first question concerning the use of violence, especially for clerics, with a blanket statement: "Never, under any circumstances!" Yet, in reviewing 2,500 years of Buddhist history, it is clear that many Buddhists, including clerics and monks, have not accepted, or at least abided by, this blanket denial. Were the leaders of every Buddhist sect in Japan who strongly, even fanatically, supported Japanese aggression throughout Asia from the Meiji period onwards still Buddhists when they did so?³⁵ Or should they, too, have been expelled from the Sangha for having broken the third *pārājika*? If so, who would have been in a position to expel them?

Needless to say, questions concerning the relationship of Buddhism to violence and social activism are as longstanding as they are contentious, therefore far beyond the confines of this article to address let alone resolve. Yet, as attested to by the ongoing connection of Buddhism to social upheavals and violence in such majority Buddhist countries as Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand and Tibet, these are questions that cannot be ignored if Buddhism wishes to continue to identify itself as a religion of peace and justice.

³⁵ For numerous examples of religious support for Japanese warfare, see Victoria 2006.

An equally difficult issue

As discussed in the introduction to this article, the Mahayana tradition allows for the possibility of the restoration of clerical status despite having been formally deprived of that status for having broken one or more of the four *pārājikas*. In the Theravada tradition, however, Buddhist monks who break any of these rules are said to have been “defeated” in the holy life, forfeiting membership in the Sangha for life. Thus, had Gudō been a Theravada monk it would have been impossible, either during his lifetime or posthumously, to have had his status restored no matter how mistaken the initial decision to disrobe him was. Is this fair?

This question takes on a particular urgency in the Theravada countries of Southeast Asia where social upheavals, civil wars and political revolutions, have repeatedly occurred in modern history and are ongoing. Inasmuch as social upheavals, much less civil war and political revolutions, nearly always include violence, and inasmuch as Buddhist clerics, to some degree, often play a role in these events, who decides who remains, and who does not, in the Sangha? Is a military government, often of a dictatorial nature, qualified to strip clerics of their status? If not, is the Sangha in such a country either able, or willing, to defy the military or otherwise dictatorial wishes of the country’s leaders regarding those Buddhist clerics whom the former consider “troublemakers”? Still further, is the fate of devout, yet unjustly accused, Buddhist lay persons in such countries of no concern to Sangha leaders?

If these are difficult questions to answer, they nevertheless pale in comparison to the most controversial issue of all, i.e. the question of whether, at least for certain Mahayana countries like Japan, the *pārājikas* retain any relevance at all. If this statement sounds extreme, remember that the very first *pārājika* prohibits sexual relations of any kind. Yet, nearly all Japanese clerics and their Western “Dharma heirs” are married or otherwise sexually active, sometimes with multiple partners. Should they be stripped of their clerical status?

It is tempting to think that if Mahayana clerics, especially in the Zen sect, whether Japanese or Western, were required to abide by the first *pārājika*, on pain of losing their clerical status if they failed to do so, there would have been far fewer sexual scandals than those that have occurred in Western Sanghas. But is this accurate? Or would it simply mean, in the case of Zen, that this sect would have attracted far fewer followers than it has? Or, on the contrary,

would enforcing this *pārājika* have prevented many of those initially interested in Zen from abandoning their practice out of disappointment, or even anger, at the moral lapses of those whom they believed to be “enlightened”?

Once again, discussion of these questions is far, far beyond the scope of this article though it should be clear that they, too, are topics that must be addressed if the Buddhist tradition is to grow and flourish in its new home in the West. If the “saga” of Uchiyama Gudō can become a catalyst for addressing these questions, it is clear that his execution, however unjust, opens the possibility of spiritual growth, insight and renewal for Buddhists of today.

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