

Utopian Individuals, Dystopian Societies: Buddhism, Anarchism and Conflict

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Among the first wave of Japanese anarchists we find the names of two Buddhist priests who were involved in the High Treason Incident (*Taigyaku Jiken*) and who died as a result of it: Uchiyama Gudo (1874-1911) and Takagi Kemmyo (1868-1914). Although Victoria also mentions Sasaki Dogen and Mineo Setsudo, two other Buddhist priests who were arrested along them (38), it seems that Gudo and Kemmyo were the most active and prolific of the four, having left a few significant writings behind them. Kemmyo's and Gudo's work is possibly the first attempt at wedding radical politics and Buddhist thought. These pioneers of Buddhist anarchism approach this uneasy combination in different ways, but they both seek Buddhist paradigms and narratives that legitimate resistance to oppressive authority and articulate an alternative utopian imagination. The two paths they draw are relevant not only to their time, but also to later projects that have tried to use Buddhism as a means of resistance and utopian imagining. Analogous dynamics and arguments can be found in the works of later Buddhist anarchists like Gary Snyder, Max Cafard, Ian Mayes or Jimmy Davis.

In order to discuss Kemmyo's and Gudo's work I will use two contrasting paradigms: Clark's systematic definition of anarchism in four points and the notions of *jiriki* and *tariki* that have permeated the history of Japanese Buddhism since its beginning. Clark's four points comprise:

- 1) a view of an ideal noncoercive, nonauthoritarian society; 2) a criticism of existing society and its institutions based on this nonauthoritarian ideal; 3) a view of human nature that justifies the hope for significant progress towards the ideal; and (4) a strategy for change, involving immediate institution of noncoercive, nonauthoritarian, and decentralist alternatives. (Clark in Ritzinger 50)

Both Kemmyo's and Gudo's writings engage these four points explicitly but do so from the particular angle of their respective Buddhist traditions: Uchiyama Gudo was a Soto Zen monk and Takagi Kemmyo a Jodo Shinshu priest. Much of both traditions self-understanding has to do with the *jiriki* / *tariki* dichotomy and how to reconcile it¹. Whereas Zen leans more towards *jiriki*, emphasizing the necessity of effort and discipline in striving towards enlightenment (even though enlightenment is meant to come of itself, in the fashion of *tariki*), Jodo Shinshu presents itself as the path of absolute *tariki*, in which relying on *tariki* alone is needed in order to be brought (closer) to enlightenment. However, the *tariki* of Jodo Shinshu is meant to manifest as *jiriki* is exhausted and it comes with the realization that from the beginning there is no *jiriki*, only *tariki*. In other words, even our first self-conscious and self-centered attempts at striving along the path are *tariki* in disguise. Analogously, Soto Zen also understands that enlightenment cannot be earned through self-contrived efforts, though they might be necessary; it is meant to come spontaneously, like the agency of the Buddha Amida in the Jodo Shinshu tradition².

The different roles played by the *jiriki* / *tariki* dyad in each tradition in turn inform the way Gudo and Kemmyo analyze the current social order and imagine alternatives to its oppressiveness. Thus, the emphasis on the necessity of *jiriki* renders Gudo's discourse more proactive and aggressive and the emphasis on *tariki* makes Kemmyo's formulation more libertarian, paradoxically stressing the irreducible autonomy of the individual. This becomes evident when both authors imagine the utopian model meant to guide their projects. Gudo turns to a (semi-)historical example:

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

¹ Cestari has explored the political connotations of these terms in relation to the Kyoto school (65-73).

² These concepts are briefly explained in relation to the Obaku shu, a tradition that combines both Pure Land and Zen elements, in Baroni 110-113.

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 idea that if this could be applied to one village, one county, or one country, what an extremely good system would be created. (Victoria 41)

Gudo is careful enough to distance himself from the current state of his “sect” in Japan by placing a Zen ideal society in the past and in China. This move enables him to criticize the way in which Zen is practiced and the dystopian society it is actively contributing to³. Moreover, the idealized Chinese Zen monastery of the past becomes a point of connection between socialism and Buddhism, since it instantiates an allegedly egalitarian lifestyle. Whereas Gudo’s claims might not be historically accurate it is worth noting that in choosing a blueprint for a free society he turns to a historical example, implying that such a society can be actualized again at any given historical moment, if only we strive towards its achievement like the Chinese Zen monks did.

Gudo overlooks the hierarchies and power-relations at work within monastic Buddhism (abbot / teacher) and the history of power struggles within Zen communities in China⁴. However, by so doing he provides a very concrete alternative to the oppressive social order that does not appear imported from the West, but that lies at the very heart of Zen Buddhism. This choice places Gudo more towards the communist end of the anarchist spectrum, valuing equality over freedom and regarding uniformity in eating or clothing in a positive fashion. The risk in this approach is that the disciplined Zen lifestyle might turn into an oppressive calque of the old society, with a tendency towards regimentation and overregulation. Takagi Kemmyo avoids this problem by placing his model for a utopian society out of history, though not entirely out of this world.

As a Jodo Shinshu, Kemmyo’s ideal social model is the Pure Land of the Buddha Amida, “the place in which socialism is truly practiced” (191). This realm is created and shaped by Amida Buddha’s vows which guarantee total equality to anyone born in the Pure Land: “If Amida enjoys delicious meals of a hundred flavours, sentient beings (of the Land of Bliss) also enjoy delicious meals of a hundred flavours” (ibid.). Whatever the Buddha is, does or enjoys, so do everyone in his land. Although Kemmyo does not elaborate on the nature of the Pure Land and its relationship to the human world, it is worth considering that only in more recent times the Pure Land has been regarded as a radically transcendent and other-worldly realm. As Curley points out, “until the modern period, the Pure Land was open to being understood as heterotopia –an enacted utopia, or an immanent space of difference, neither strictly transcendent nor strictly immanent” (7).

Takagi Kemmyo remains within Jodo Shinshu orthodoxy in considering that human beings cannot reach or establish the Pure Land on earth, at least not as human beings and not in this corrupt world. However, this does not lead him to consider all social endeavors futile and to simply focus on a good rebirth after death. Far from it, Kemmyo encourages his readers to act in the spirit of the Pure Land, the realm of equality, while living in the world of inequalities. Although the perfection of the Pure Land will always fall short of human achievement, it is worth moving in its direction, allowing it to become a utopian or heterotopian compass. Moreover, social activism that aims to move closer to the Pure Land model is not meant to be the result of our contrived efforts (*jiriki*) but needs to be grounded in Amida Buddha’s agency as a cosmic compassionate force (*tariki*).

By placing his utopian model out of history and the agency to achieve it beyond ordinary human efforts, Kemmyo formulates a socialism that is libertarian in orientation,

³ Victoria’s famous *Zen at War* is a lengthy study of how the Zen schools supported the Japanese war effort. This was the social and institutional background of Uchiyama Gudo’s rebellion.

⁴ A well-known story that instantiates these power struggles is that of Hui Neng’s (Dummolin 123-154).

leaving particular goals, means of struggle or interpretations up to the individual. To act in the egalitarian, noncoercive and compassionate spirit of the Pure Land is in his own words to “do what the Buddha wishes me to do, practice what he wishes me to practice and make the Buddha’s will my own will” (192). This statement might be misleadingly seen as submissive, if what Kemmyo means by the Buddha is understood in too narrow a way. It is questionable that Kemmyo regarded the Amida Buddha as a discrete being who could tell him what to do at each given moment, so we ought to interpret his statement in a more metaphorical way⁵. To do the Buddha’s wishes is to express the spirit of egalitarianism that created the Pure Land while existing in a world of hierarchies and oppression.

Since the ego-self belongs to the world of hierarchies it will naturally reproduce its oppressive patterns even when trying to overcome them (*jiriki*), so Kemmyo looks for an egalitarian and noncoercive force beyond the human self (*tariki*) in order to actualize his utopian project. This force lies hidden in every human being and it constitutes what Kemmyo identifies with the qualities of a Buddha. His notion of Buddhahood becomes more explicit when he discusses Shakyamuni, the historical Buddha, instead of Amida, the ahistorical cosmic Buddha, as “a great socialist of the spiritual realm” and celebrates his “theory of individualism” (190). Unlike Gudo, Kemmyo leans more towards an idealist, individualist and libertarian conception of anarchism by prioritizing a personal and transformative encounter with a non-historical, non-material Buddha and his egalitarian Pure Land, over a community of strong willed members driven by the same purpose⁶.

Although Kemmyo’s ideas might be deemed too abstract and removed from material realities they allow for a social model that is more open to change and reformulation, much in

⁵ In order to understand Kemmyo’s statement we ought to turn to Shinran’s view on the relationship between human beings and the Amida Buddha. Amstutz briefly summarizes Shinran’s stance on literal readings of the Amida Buddha narrative and visionary experiences in the following manner:

once Shinran’s mature doctrine was established, the importance of classical visionary experience dropped away and played little part in the later mainstream teaching. Shinran’s interpretation of the Pure Land mythos had a relatively modern character because it short-circuited the mediating feature of conventional Buddhist religiosity which had consisted of the supernormal bodhisattvas and visionary experience. Although the mythic framework had been set up by the efforts of the bodhisattva Dharmakara in the immemorial past, Shinran’s own interpretation of *shinjin* went directly to the “formless” or “non-cognitive” realm of *paramarthasatya* as active agent, thus bypassing the deities and altered states traditionally cultivated by specialists. Through *eko*, ultimate enlightenment (the Amida) communicated with the world of the human directly, changing the Amida from a more or less physical, concretely visualized deity to a relatively abstract representation of perfected *pratyasamutpada*. Shinran’s [and Kemmyo’s] Amida was no longer an object either “interior” or “exterior”, but was still a transforming “force” still somehow “other” by virtue of the gap between ignorance and enlightenment. (145-6)

⁶ In this respect Toshimaro argues that any genuine social ethic that emerges from Jodo Shinshu would have similarly libertarian overtones:

Shin Buddhist social ethics is not anything that can be expressed through general plans or slogans, but rather something that those who have attained *shinjin* will undertake, based on their own decision in accordance the particular circumstances in which they find themselves. [...] each human being is distinct as each carries karmic conditions peculiar to that particular person and therefore, they cannot be lumped together, as it were, and treated as if they were all the same. However, should there be a common element in Shin Buddhist social ethics, it is that it accords with Amida Buddha’s compassion. (183)

the vein of more recent anarchist thought⁷. Kemmyo's immanent / transcendent Pure Land provides a negative mirror that enables him to not only criticize the dystopia he lives in but also the potentially authoritarian alternatives that might be posed against it. Since the Pure Land cannot be reached in this life and in this world, any alternative social situation will still be open to criticism and change, as part of a dialectical process that leads towards the eventual, and ever-deferred, fulfillment of the Pure Land. This model is more flexible than Gudo's, since it regards human attempts at actualizing utopia as a dialectical evolution whose final goal lies always elsewhere.

However different in their conceptions of a free society, Gudo and Kemmyo engage in a rather similar analysis of the oppressive society they live in. Using diverging rhetorical styles they both criticize the emerging powers of Meiji Japan: the Emperor, Capitalism and the Military. Gudo engages in classical anarchist rhetoric by denouncing the alliance of new and old elites of his time as "the three leeches that suck the people's blood: the emperor, the rich and the big landowners" (44). Gudo particularly aims his attack at the Emperor, as the visible head of the status quo. For this purpose Gudo begins by demythologizing the emperor as a divine being; he is not son of the gods as enshrined by Shinto and modern state ideology but the descendent of thieves who "came forth from one corner of Kyushu, killing and robbing people as they went. They then destroyed their fellow thieves" (ibid.).

Gudo's view of the emperor is not based on a Buddhist rejection of the divinity of the ruler (though as Victoria points out "it harkens back to Buddhism's earlier attitudes [towards rulers]" (227). Even though there is an iconoclastic and demythologizing thread running through the history of Zen, Gudo does not invoke it in order to attack the emperor, articulating his critique through another semi-historical power analysis. The fact that he sees "the divinity of the emperor as a base superstition" (Davis 169) has more to do with the power implications of such belief than with its incompatibility with Buddhist doctrines. A similar concern animates Gudo's critique of how the idea of *karma* has been used for legitimating poverty and social exclusion:

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? (Victoria 43)

Again, Gudo's issue with this particular interpretation of *karma* has little to do with it not being aligned with the original intent of the Buddha. It is a superstition because it keeps people in a submissive position, unable to overthrow the structures that oppress them.

In fact Uchiyama Gudo's gives no hint about how to interpret *karma* or any other Buddhist doctrine for that matter. In one of his scarce references to Buddhist sources he emphasizes equality as the "basis of [his] faith" (Victoria 41). This equality has more to do with metaphysics and the Buddhist concept of interdependence than with society, but Gudo sees a correlation between the two and sees Buddhist notions such as every being's potential to become Buddha (Buddha nature) or the evenness of phenomena when seen as impermanent and non-substantial as being "in complete agreement with the principles of socialism" (Victoria 41).

In spite of Gudo's metaphysical egalitarianism providing a negative reflection of the hierarchical social order of his time, his criticism of the latter is not inherently based on the former. Gudo seems to expose the cult of the emperor not because they contradict Buddhist principles but because they are oppressive. His socialism does not seem to be based on his faith as much as his faith seems to confirm his socialism. The egalitarian doctrines of Buddha

⁷ The issue of prefiguring a free society through the history of Anarchism is discussed at length by Marshall in terms of "Means and Ends" (625-638)

nature and interdependence / emptiness play a much lesser role in Gudo's social critique than the Pure Land does in Kemmyo's.

Kemmyo articulates his critique of Meiji society in direct and dialectical opposition to the Pure Land, the realm of socialism. While being much gentler in his rhetoric, Kemmyo condemns the military establishment and ridicules those who try to support it by using Buddhist arguments. In the same way that Gudo focuses on the emperor as the embodiment of the oppressive society he lives in, Kemmyo aims his attack at the interplay of war, power and capitalism. Thus, he denounces how "we live in a country where the common people are sacrificed for the fame, peerage and medals of one small group of people. It is a society in which the common people in general must suffer for the sake of a small number of speculators" (191).

In the vein of Shinran, Kemmyo regards this dystopian state of affairs as the sign of the times, a regrettable condition that includes himself: "our subjective faculties are replete with ambition. This is truly the world of defilement, a world of suffering, a dark night" (192). Following a tradition that stretches back to the origins of Jodo Shinshu, Kemmyo criticizes his society by criticizing himself, who is a product of such society. However, Kemmyo's vision of all-pervasive corruption does not make him surrender into inaction. He regards the quintessential Jodo Shinshu practice, the *nembutsu*, as the Buddha's wake up call to rise against the oppressive darkness of his times and move towards the Pure Land. This does not only have soteriological implications but, as I will discuss later, is also a call to follow the spirit of the Pure Land in this defiled world, which effectively means to resist and disobey its corrupt authorities.

Neither Kemmyo nor Gudo engage particularly with debates about human nature and its relation to their utopian projects, however, their view of human potential can be inferred from the way in which they address their readers. Both authors clearly believe that their fellow citizens are able to overthrow tyrannical rule and to manage themselves in a fairer way. This confidence seems a given in Gudo's writing and it runs parallel to the Zen *jiriki* ethos. If human beings are able to successfully apply themselves to overcome their own defilements and self-centredness they can surely come together like the Chinese Zen monks, and bring about a free society. The issue is more complex for Kemmyo, since Jodo Shinshu's *tariki* approach relies entirely on the cosmic Buddha's agency and rejects human efforts or calculations. This has led to Jodo Shinshu being characterized as quietist and conservative⁸. Although *tariki* does not involve a complete denial of human agency, as Kemmyo's writings instantiate, it certainly involves a refusal of self-willed, contrived actions.

Not surprisingly Kemmyo and Gudo advocate for very similar actions and causes: land reform (Gudo), resisting conscription and refusing to fight the emperor's wars (both), encouraging tenant farmers not to pay taxes (Gudo), refusing to participate in imperial institutions (Kemmyo), giving up the capitalist "struggle for existence" (Kemmyo 192) and embracing a communal lifestyle (both). Their only difference in terms of aims and addresses lies in Gudo's radical wish to "get rid of the present government" and "have a free nation without an Emperor" (Gudo in Notehelper 170) and Kemmyo's gentler approach of verbally challenging the ruling classes to "cast off aristocratic pretensions and cease looking down upon the common people" (192).

It is worth noting how Gudo simply challenges his audience to rebel in a *jiriki* fashion, whereas Kemmyo also advocates for similar goals but following the less forward *tariki* way. Thus, Kemmyo does not see himself or his fellow citizens as able to rebel against the established order, but he believes rebellion and even the fulfillment of a better society to be possible. In Kemmyo's thought the only way human beings could achieve this is,

⁸ A lengthy discussion of these issues among modern Jodo Shinshu thinkers can be found in Dessi (79-127).

paradoxically, by not trying to do it in too deliberate or self-conscious a way. Social transformation is possible in so far as the agent is the Amida Buddha and not the human self. The human self partakes in the same darkness from which power, hierarchy and oppression come from and is in turn shaped by those negative dynamics as they pervade the society in which the self exists. However, the heterotopia of the Pure Land provides a social alternative that humans could accomplish by enabling the Buddha to do the revolution through them.

For Kemmyo, the socialist Pure Land emerges in human consciousness through the *nembutsu*, or the invocation to the Amida Buddha, which is the expression of the Buddha's liberative agency. Thus, he regards "'Namu Amida Butsu' [as] the voice that leads everyone equally to salvation [i.e. enlightenment]" (192) and combines his encouragement to recite the *nembutsu* with more politically charged pieces of advice: "Cease taking pleasure in victory and shouting *banzai*" or "Remove all thoughts of the struggle for existence from your minds and exert yourselves for the sake of community life" (192). Kemmyo seems to regard these admonishing slogans as synonymous to the *nembutsu* and thus as expressing the Buddha's wish or the ethos of the egalitarian Pure Land.

By appropriating one of Shinran's innovations, namely the idea that one is born in the Pure Land in this life as one entrusts to the Buddha by saying the *nembutsu*, Kemmyo sets the foundation for forging a resistant community of Buddhists. By reminding his readers that "people who recite Namu Amida Butsu are included among the inhabitants of the Land of Bliss" (193) and then making statements such as "I do not feel that a person of the Land of Bliss should take part in warfare" (191), he is in the gentle and indirect *tariki* way advocating for resistance to authorities. In this respect Kemmyo discards the more established interpretation of *shinzoku nitairon* in Jodo Shinshu, establishing a correlation between the ultimate truth (i.e. the socialism of the Pure Land) and the relative truth (i.e. the application of its principles in the human realm) in a way that does not make them identical but presents one as the natural consequence of the other⁹.

If the Pure Land is understood as the realm where non-authoritarian socialism is practiced, living in its spirit in the world of hierarchies is to stand in open defiance to its operations and legitimacy. Unlike Gudo, who belonged to the smaller Soto Zenshu, Kemmyo was part of the largest Buddhist denomination in Japan and so "those who recite the *nembutsu*" (193) would have been a substantial section of Japan's population (perhaps even the majority). The popularity of the Pure Land as a symbol, being widely used even outside Buddhist contexts, make Kemmyo's appropriation powerfully familiar and subversive, while keeping the somewhat conciliatory and all-inclusive tone associated with the Pure Land narrative.

To sum up, the work of Uchiyama Gudo and Takagi Kemmyo presents non-authoritarian socialism as inherent in Buddhist narratives and sees the fulfillment of a free society as a natural consequence of applying the Buddhist teachings. The interweaving of Buddhist motifs and anarchist themes is less clear in Uchiyama Gudo, partly because fewer of his writings did survive and partly because he seems more concerned about effective action than about articulating Buddhist anarchism. In the spirit of the Buddha, Gudo is merely concerned with (social) suffering and its ending. On the other hand, Kemmyo spells out in more detail the political implications of the Pure Land narrative, achieving a fairly complex and nuanced formulation of radical Buddhism, albeit refusing to commit to a blueprint of a free society or to specific actions that will bring them about (much in the way in which *shinjin* is regarded in Jodo Shinshu).

Moreover, in a *jiriki* fashion, Gudo is confident about our human abilities enabling us to walk together towards enlightenment, which for him is synonymous with egalitarian

⁹ An analogously divergent, though dissimilar, view of the two truths can be found in Shigaraki 123-126.

emancipation. In Gudo's view the Pure Land could be created on earth, as experiences from previous centuries seem to demonstrate. Conversely, by following the *tariki* path Kemmyo imagines the Pure Land as pure impossibility in our corrupt world, though its egalitarian spirit can be discovered and expressed in the world. Expressing the Pure Land before actually reaching it can be seen as a prefiguration of a free society in the shell of a non-free society. As more Buddhist voices begin to question capitalism and its hierarchies, more attention ought to be paid to Gudo's and Kemmyo's generation and the multiple strategies they deploy from bringing the Buddhist and the anarchist traditions together. This amalgamation is shaped by the internal logic of various Buddhist themes (e.g. *tariki* / *jiriki*) which fulfill a double purpose: to set an alternative non-eurocentric genealogy for antiauthoritarian ideas and to imagine new ways of conceptualizing political agency, utopia and social criticism.

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