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Zen Terror in Prewar Japan: Portrait of an Assassin

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Foreword by James Mark Shields

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Foreword

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It has been just over two decades since the publication of Brian Victoria's *Zen at War* (1997). Rarely has an academic publication had such an impact, and one that, let me be clear, went well beyond the realm of scholarly debate—though it did inspire plenty of that, too. More than one of Japanese Buddhism's venerable (and frequently inscrutable) institutions was compelled to respond to the charges brought by Victoria, and more often than not, the response was a recognition of the validity of his claims and admission of their own complicity in the nationalism and militarism of early to mid-twentieth-century Japan. On a personal level, I am fairly sure I was not the only young scholar whose eyes were opened by *Zen at War*, as well as by the subsequent *Zen War Stories* (2002), to the ways that modern forms of Buddhism, and not only Zen, could be used as political ideology, often to deleterious effect. My own intellectual path shifted from a vague interest in comparative religious ethics to the history and analysis of Buddhist political movements in Japan from the Meiji Restoration of 1868 to the present. Victoria's books challenged me in particular to wonder about the other side of the coin: i.e., those (fewer) Buddhists who *resisted* the dominant economic and political ideologies of the twentieth century.

In *Zen Terror in Prewar Japan*, Victoria turns his attention to the involvement of Zen Buddhism in the volatile politics of the Taishō and early Shōwa periods, including the decades leading up to and the years immediately following the Second World War. Whereas *Zen at War* aimed at a comprehensive overview, this book focuses on one man, Inoue Nisshō (1887–1967), a fascinating and colorful figure who, despite his own personal and professional struggles, managed to hobnob in high circles and, according to Victoria, may be seen as a central player in the destabilization of early twentieth-century Japanese democracy. Indeed, given Inoue's involvement in various key events in the tumultuous decades leading up to the end of the war, it is a surprise that no one has written a full-length study of his life in English before now—perhaps

this can be attributed to the rather dismissive evaluations of Inoue's competence noted by postwar commentators. Here, Victoria effectively uses Inoue as a means to raise deeper questions regarding the interconnections of Buddhism, Zen, war, violence, terror, and the fragility of democracy in 1920s–1930s Japan.

To provide the reader with some additional context, I will briefly reflect on the life and work of Inoue Nisshō in relation to my own research and publications over the past decade, in which I have attempted to understand the lives, actions, and ideas of the (decidedly few) Japanese Buddhist individuals and groups that challenged the sociopolitical and economic winds of the first three decades of the twentieth century. Perhaps the most significant of these figures was Seno'o Girō (1890–1961), an exact contemporary who functions as Inoue's religious and political *doppelgänger*, or alter ego. A young man of late Meiji inspired by various streams of competing ideas—including Buddhism—Seno'o entered the Nichiren sect priesthood at the age of twenty-six, but he soon became involved in the Nichirenist (J., *Nichirenshugi*) movement established several decades previously by Tanaka Chigaku (1861–1939). While rooted in the teachings of sect founder Nichiren (1222–1282), Tanaka sought in his lay-oriented movement a more socially and politically engaged form of Buddhist practice, one that was also highly skeptical of the institution of monasticism.

By the 1890s, under Tanaka's charismatic leadership, Nichirenism had taken on a profoundly nationalistic hue, combining elements of Nichiren's ideas on protecting the nation with the emerging imperialist or *kokutai* ideology now associated with "State Shinto." Seno'o turned his attention to the work of another significant teacher in the Nichirenist movement, Honda Nisshō (1867–1931), who had recently published his own interpretation of the classic Mahāyāna Buddhist text known as the *Lotus Sutra* (which has influenced virtually every East Asian Buddhist sect, including Zen). Though less overtly political than Tanaka in his quest for "world unification" (J., *sekai tōitsu*) under the *Lotus Sutra*, Honda looked for a unification of all Buddhist sects and, also like Tanaka, questioned the traditional division between monastic and lay Buddhism. Finally, he sought a solution to the deepening class rifts (and social unrest) occasioned by the unbridled capitalism of the age. These ideas appealed to Seno'o. He began to attend weekly meetings of Honda's Tōitsudan (Unification Group, founded in 1896) and, after an encouraging meeting with Honda in May 1918, dedicated himself to working for Nichirenist ideals as a layman under Honda's mentorship.

At this point, however, hints of dissatisfaction with his chosen course, and specifically with the more overtly conservative and nationalist ideals and practices of the Nichirenist movement, were beginning to surface. One historical event that had a lasting effect on Seno'o's thought—and played no small role in instigating his turn toward left-wing politics—was the Great Kantō earthquake of September 1, 1923. This double tragedy of a massive quake and ensuing fire, which devastated the city of Tokyo and caused the death of over 140,000 Japanese, drove home for Seno'o the Buddhist doctrine of impermanence and the brute reality of (material) suffering in this world. At about the same time, Seno'o began to entertain serious

doubts about the justice of the capitalist system, and he began to consider socialism as a practical foundation for his thoughts on social and religious reform. This turn seems to have been prompted by his increasing contact (and sympathy) with both tenant farmers and factory workers. Although Seno'o's turn to Marxist socialism represented a move away from the specific right-wing political leanings of Nichirenism, it could also be understood as a differential extension of the shared insights of Tanaka and Honda (and Inoue, despite his Zen leanings) with regard to the fusion of religion and politics.

The divergent trajectories of Seno'o and Inoue from the 1920s are perhaps best encapsulated in their respective interpretations of the East Asian Buddhist phrase, *issatsu tashō*—literally, "kill one to save the many," with textual origins in the *Yogācārabhūmi* and *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra*. Whereas Inoue appears to have understood this in a literal sense, by which it could act as justification for the assassinations carried out by his Blood Oath Corps, Seno'o understood the phrase metaphorically, as a spiritual admonition to overcome one's own weakness and ignorance in order to more fully serve society. (This is strikingly reminiscent of the contemporary discussion within Islam over divergent interpretations of the term *jihad*.) In short, while Seno'o interpreted the phrase as a derivative of the classic Buddhist precept against the taking of life, Inoue understood it in terms of the classical Mahāyāna (and *Lotus Sutra*) teaching of *upaya* or "skillful means" and thus as grounds for breaking even the most fundamental precepts in times of great urgency. To add a layer of tragic irony to this contrast, when Seno'o was arrested and charged with treason in December 1936, a central aspect of the state's "evidence" against him was his frequent use of *issatsu tashō*—which, no doubt due to the 1932 Blood Oath Corps Incident, was interpreted by the state police as a "terrorist" catchphrase.

Zen Terror in Prewar Japan makes a nice "bookend" to the author's earlier works, *Zen at War* (1997) and *Zen War Stories* (2002). Just as these two works opened up important issues that extend well beyond Japanese or Buddhist Studies, so too does *Zen Terror in Prewar Japan.* This book is primarily about the impact of certain elements of Zen Buddhist thought (as an "enabling mechanism") on "right-wing" violence in Japan in the decades leading up to the Second World War. Secondarily, it provides a detailed account of the life and work of Inoue Nisshō, a central, if largely unrecognized player in several key movements and events of the period. This book fills an important gap in our understanding of the period between the 1920s and 1940s by outlining the links between "right-wing" organizations, political elites, and certain religious ideas. Though firmly rooted in historical analysis, *Zen Terror in Prewar Japan* is much more than simply an autobiography or even a historical study. Rather, it should be read as a work of engaged, Buddhist criticism.