

**Spring 2022 Lecture Series:**  
**Progressive and Radical Buddhist Experiments in Modern Japan**  
**James Mark Shields (Bucknell University)**

**Lecture #2: The New Buddhist Fellowship (1900–1916)**

W 2/23 at 7:00 PM Eastern, 6:00 PM Central, 4:00 PM Pacific (R 2/24 at 9:00 AM Japan Time)

This lecture will focus on the New Buddhist Fellowship (*shin bukk'yō dōshikai* 新仏教同志会), a self-consciously modern lay Buddhist movement spearheaded by a dozen young scholars and activists that flourished in the final decade of the Meiji era (1868–1912). Building on the work of the previous generation of Buddhist Enlightenment figures such as Inoue Enryō, Kiyozawa Manshi, and Murakami Senshō, the New Buddhists were intent on reframing Buddhism as a modern, pan-sectarian lay practice directed at both individual transformation and social reform. This talk examines the work of four prominent New Buddhists—Furukawa Rōsen (1871–1899), Sakaino Kōyō (1871–1933), Watanabe Kaikyoku (1872–1933), and Takashima Beihō (1875–1949)—with particular focus on the various ways in which they conceived and effectively reconfigured Buddhism (and religion) to suit the needs of modern Japan. Rather than merely extending the work of the Buddhist Enlightenment that came before them, these New Buddhists created a new form of “socially-active Buddhism” (*shakaiteki bukk'yō*) rooted in a pantheistic metaphysics and borrowing heavily from Unitarian theology and social ethics. In practice, this frequently led to a “collapsing” of categories, so that the distinctions between social activism, religion, ethics and politics were effectively dissolved. In addition, however, these thinkers attempted to ground their New Buddhist vision within traditional Mahāyāna Buddhist doctrine, in part to justify their self-description as “Buddhists” (which was often under suspicion). Finally, I situate the New Buddhist Fellowship in relation to the broader Buddhist Enlightenment as well as later modernist and progressive movements that followed. While the “success” of the New Buddhists is open to debate, their struggles to create a socially relevant and engaged form of Buddhism continue to resonate in the early twenty-first century, and provide useful models (or warnings) for contemporary engaged Buddhism.

