

# ***Rennyō and the Renaissance of Contemporary Shin Buddhism, Part 1***

**by Rev. Dr. Alfred Bloom**

## **Introduction**

Good evening everyone. It is my great privilege and pleasure to speak to you in this seminar. As you may be aware, in 1998 the Honpa Hongwanji and Otani branches of Shin Buddhism will commemorate the 500th anniversary of the death of Rennyō, the eighth Abbot, who lived 1415-1499. Despite his importance within the traditional Hongwanjis, Rennyō is not as well known by the general public as other great monks in Japanese Buddhist history such as Kūkai whom we know as Daishi-san, Honen, Shinran, Dogen and Nichiren who began major sects. Consequently, in the time we have together, I want to introduce Rennyō to you because I believe that by knowing and understanding him better, we may find some clues for the renaissance of Shin Buddhism in our time.



You may wonder why he is so important. Rennyō is known as the Restorer or Second founder of Shin Buddhism, because he revitalized the Hongwanji, then an obscure temple under the control of the Tendai sect. He enabled it to become a major independent and powerful religious and social force in Japan. Rennyō, as a young man, consciously dedicated himself to the revival of the Hongwanji which had languished for a long period in poverty and isolation. However, modern emphasis on Shinran, the founder of Shin Buddhist tradition, has caused people to think that he brought about the flourishing of the teaching. This view has overshadowed Rennyō's actual role in putting Shin Buddhism on the map in medieval Japan, as indicated in these titles. Rennyō, however, has not been so highly admired among intellectuals and scholars because he appears to be a professional priest, while Shinran declared that he was neither a priest nor a layperson. Nevertheless, Rennyō appeals more to practical business people, politicians and those who work among the masses because of his ability to sense the mind of the people, his organizing capacity and realistic nature. His combination of qualities led to his great success in spreading Shin Buddhism throughout medieval Japan and making it the largest denomination of Buddhism.

## **I. Rennyō's Popular Image**

According to some observers, there is a difference in the way people feel concerning Rennyō and Shinran. 500 years after his death Rennyō is thought of more intimately or familiarly as "Rennyō-san". In contrast, people deeply revere and respect Shinran Shonin. When they hear his name, Shinran, they naturally assume an attitude of devotion. However, when they hear Rennyō, their faces relax, and they have a peaceful expression as though they are blown on by a spring wind. Further, popular legends have grown up around Rennyō which indicate his closeness to people and his attraction for them. One of the most famous is a story which has been made into a humorous type of drama called kyogen. It is titled: yome-odoshi-no men or bride-scaring mask. It is also called niku-zuki-no-men or mask with flesh attached.

According to the story, a couple were devoted to Rennyō and Shin teaching and they constantly attended the temple to receive instruction. However, the wife, in particular, was subjected to the jealousy and wrath of her mother-in-law who tried to prevent the daughter

from going to the temple by putting on a demon mask to frighten her when she went to the temple. When the wife was confronted by the demon who threatened to devour her, she held fast to her faith, without moving and saying nembutsu in gassho. She countered that the demon should not eat a person of faith. The wife represents the ideal woman follower who has personally chosen her faith, perhaps in face of family opposition, and who overcomes problems through nembutsu. However, when the mother tried later to get the mask off, she could not remove it. The daughter took her to Rennyo and upon hearing the teaching the mask dropped off. The play became very popular in Yoshizaki and the northern provinces where Shin Buddhism flourished, because it reflected problems in society and also the Shin ideal that faith transformed the mother's attitudes, enabling the family to live together harmoniously.

The story reflects a conflict between the old, traditional religion that was threatened by Rennyo's popularity and the devotion he attracted. It always posed the danger of persecution for the movement. It also shows the transforming power of the teaching in which the ego-centric jealousy of the mother-in-law, represented by the mask, dropped away when she met Rennyo and the teaching. Rennyo attracted many women to Yoshizaki because he had a positive message of deliverance for them through Amida Buddha's Vow. Other examples of the popular character of Rennyo appear in stories told about Rennyo and Ikkyu.

Ikkyu was a famous eccentric Zen monk-poet (1394-1481) and a contemporary and friend of Rennyo. Ikkyu himself has been the subject of popular legend and made popular some years ago in TV cartoons as little Ikkyu. On one occasion, when Rennyo was building the Yamashina Hongwanji Temple, Ikkyu came and seated himself over some trees that were going to be used in the construction and put some grass over his head. Some people working in the construction became nervous, since Ikkyu refused to move. They went to Rennyo to complain about it. After explaining the situation, Rennyo said to them just give some tea to Ikkyu, and he will leave. They gave him tea and he immediately left the construction. Everybody wondered what happened, when Rennyo explained: "The kanji (Chinese) character for Tea is made from three parts: Grass on top, a person in the middle and tree on the bottom. This was just Ikkyu's way of asking for tea".

On another occasion, in Kyoto there was a very famous pine Tree called Very Tortuous (or spiral) Pine (Nana magari no matsu). Ikkyu put up a sign just in front of the pine tree which announced: "I am going to give a great sum of gold to the person who can see this pine tree in a straight way". Everybody tried to see how could such a twisted tree be seen straight. Some people thought that from some angle the tree could be seen straight. After some time, someone told Rennyo about the sign. Rennyo, without seeing the tree, said that he knew the answer and asked for the gold. Ikkyu said that on the reverse side of the board there was a warning: "This is not valid for Rennyo". However, when they asked Rennyo for the answer he replied: "The answer is very simple. The way to see this tree straight is to recognize that it is twisted."

Again, Ikkyu sent the following koan (Zen riddle-like question) to Rennyo: "Amida has no mercy since Amida only saves who says His Name". (In Japanese: Amida ni wa makoto no jiji wa nakarikeri, tanomu shujou nomi tasukeru"). Rennyo answered the koan with a poem: "There is no heart far from Amida, but a covered bowl of water covered cannot reflect the moon" (Amida ni wa hedatsuru kokoro wa nakeredomo futa aru mizu ni tsuki wa yadoraji).

By contrast stories concerning Shinran such as we find in the Godensho are more serious and express points of doctrine. Through these popular stories, Rennyo is shown in a more light-hearted way to be on good terms with a monk of another sect, but also spiritually keen

in responding easily to the questions put to him by the monk. The stories show that Rennyō was the equal of Zen monks who were prominent in religion and arts.

According to the ethnologist, Yanagita Kunio, who diligently studied the life of the Japanese people, the influence of Rennyō continues to live in customs and practices which have been handed down unconsciously. It is perhaps not well known, but Rennyō initiated the use of the Shoshinge and Shinran's hymns (*wasan*), as well as the *Amidakyo*, into our services. He also encouraged the reading of his letters at meetings. He also stressed the importance of the *hoonko* service commemorating Shinran's death. Recently, Rennyō has become the subject of the famous and popular author Itsuki Hiroyuki, creating a Rennyō boom in Japan. Through his novel, play and various essays, Rennyō has gained new attractiveness in contemporary Japan, because he is portrayed as living resolutely and boldly in an age of turmoil. II.

## II. The Life of Rennyō

As we have indicated, when Rennyō was born, Hongwanji was in a state of decline. Observers noted that the shrine entertained few visitors and was virtually deserted. The disciples in the eastern region of Japan had opposed the third Abbot Kakunyo's efforts to establish Hongwanji as the central authority in Shin Buddhism by combining hereditary and spiritual lineages from Shinran. Consequently, they went their own way and established strong sanghas which attracted more followers than the Hongwanji. Three major branches were the Bukkoji-ha, Takata-ha and Sanmonto-ha. Because of this competition, Hongwanji suffered financially, as well as organizationally. Hongwanji suffered general decline, because it attempted to remain true to Shinran by rejecting practices which appeared to deviate from Shinran's teaching.

Early records highlight Rennyō's poverty. We learn that he was unable to purchase lamp-oil, and sometimes read books by moonlight. Firewood was scarce so that at times he had to bathe in cold water. It is said that on occasion he did not eat for two or three days. Rennyō even did his children's laundry. (Jitsugo-ki, Rogers, pp. 49-50) Rennyō, however, worked closely with his father Zonnyō. He received ordination at Shorenin, the temple belonging to the Tendai sect which had administrative control over the Hongwanji. He also studied Buddhism with Keikaku, a cousin of his father, who was also the abbot of the Daijō-in at Kofukuji in the Hosso Buddhist tradition in Nara. Rennyō seriously studied the teachings of Shinran, as well as the writings of Kakunyo (1270-1351) and Zonkaku (1290-1373). He inherited Kakunyo's vision of Shin Buddhism centralized under the leadership of Hongwanji. At age 14 or 15 he reputedly made the resolution to work for the revitalization of Hongwanji, traditionally thought to be based on his mother's request when she left Hongwanji.

While in his mind, Rennyō had set his path for the future, there were obstacles to overcome. The initial one was to become the Abbot and succeed his father Zonnyō. Rennyō had been born of a nameless servant concubine before his father had become Abbot. With the prospective accession of Zonnyō as seventh Abbot, it was necessary for him to have a legal wife. Rennyō's stepmother was Nyoen, a member of the Ebina family, a warrior family of the Kanto area, which served the Muromachi Shogunate. Rennyō's mother was, therefore, excluded because of her low status, and she had to leave Otani, giving up Rennyō at the age of six years. Rennyō later made a search for his mother whom he missed deeply, but with no success. He designated the 28th day of the month as her memorial day, because that is the day she disappeared from his life. After the departure of his mother, Rennyō was then raised by his step-mother who also gave birth to four daughters and two sons. She despised Rennyō and strove to have her own son Ogen become the eighth Abbot. Perhaps ironically her mean treatment inspired Rennyō to concentrate on his work.

A suggestion of the intensity of his studies may be gained from a notation in the Renjunki; "[Rennyō] pored over the scriptures, reading the Kyōgyōshinshō and the Rokuyōshō continually and the Anjin-ketsujo-shō to such an extent that he wore out three copies. He also questioned Master Zōnyō in detail about the tradition's fundamental teachings." Rennyō himself married at age 28, while still dependent on his father at Otani. Living at Otani, he was prolific in developing his family, fathering six children before his father died, and he became Abbot. In his lifetime, he would have five wives and produce 27 children. The issue of the Abbacy came to the fore when Zōnyō passed away in 1457.

It had been the custom for the head of the sect to designate his successor by writing a letter of transfer. However, Zōnyō apparently did not leave such a letter making the transfer clear. Initially, the family agreed that Ogen would be the legitimate heir, being the eldest son of the legal wife Nyoen. However, an uncle of Rennyō, Nyojo (1412-1460), intervened as the sole opposition to Ogen's appointment. He argued that in reality Zōnyō desired and groomed Rennyō to be the Abbot. He pointed to Rennyō's activities in copying and presenting texts to disciples, often in place of Zōnyō. The practice of copying and conferring texts was a distinctive feature of Zōnyō's endeavors to spread Shinshū. Presentations of texts and scrolls strengthened the relationship of the head temple and the branch groups. Rennyō had worked with Zōnyō for 19 years in these efforts and accompanied his father on numerous propagation tours. There presently exist some 40 text-copies made by Rennyō which are witness to his serious involvement. Copying such texts and discussing their contents with his father also contributed to Rennyō's education. Ogen, on his part, was 25 years old with no such record. Nyojo, the youngest brother of Zōnyō, was three years older than Rennyō and had lived closely with him in Otani. He was able to observe Rennyō's work first hand. While another brother of Zōnyō, Kukaku supported Ogen, the family agreed with Nyojo and reversed their decision.

Rennyō was finally installed in 1457 as the eighth Abbot at the age of 43. Rennyō's family development is also an important aspect of his goal of revitalizing Hongwanji. He was, to say the least, productive. Scholars call attention to his remarkable energy evidenced by his five wives and 27 children. There were 13 sons and 14 daughters. However, with the exception of his eldest son, Junnyō, the earliest children were placed in foster care because of Rennyō's poverty. It is important to stress that his wives were in succession, perhaps reflecting a reaction to his mother's situation. She had been a concubine, abandoned in the interests of the family. Rennyō never took a concubine. Time does not permit going into detail about his family. However, four of his wives preceded him in death.

His third wife, Nyōshō, is a very interesting person with characteristics very similar to his birth-mother in not having a substantial family background. Her connection to Hongwanji is filled with drama. In 1467 when she was 19, the flames of the Onin war (1467-1477) smashed her dreams for the future. She escaped the conflagration with just the clothes she was wearing, jostled about and fleeing with her mother in the crowd of refugees. The mother and daughter had no place to stay. All temples were closed to them. However, they found refuge at the Hongwanji. The Hongwanji was very small but it teemed with activity.

Rennyō had become abbot and began a vigorous propagation effort. Nyōshō now made her home in a corner of the Hongwanji. Since there was not enough help for the bustling activities in Hongwanji, she was soon given various chores at which she worked diligently. She tended Rennyō's young children who were born within a year of each other. She was very useful and became a part of Rennyō's family. Nyōshō was then 23 and Rennyō already had 17 children. When Rennyō's wife Rennyū's died in 1470, Nyōshō earnestly fulfilled her wifely role, although she had frail health. After Rennyō left Kyoto and went north to establish his center in Yoshizaki, Nyōshō accompanied him there. She died in 1478 at the age of 31, having given birth only to a daughter. Rennyō commented on her death soon after the birth of her daughter Myōshō (1477-1500). He spoke of her health, her devotion to

the teaching and the sorrow of those about her. "He closes his tribute to her by saying, 'She was gentle and patient, and the same with everyone she met.'" Rennyō then married his fourth wife, Shunyo, when he was over 70. She gave birth to two children, passing away in 1486. At age 72 Rennyō married his fifth and last wife Renno (1465-1518) who bore him seven children. She was 22 years old, a very young woman at the time.

Scholars have mused over Rennyō's motivation for marrying into fairly substantial families and creating such a large family. Large families were not exceptional in that age when infant mortality or short life span was a constant threat. In any case, there appears to be love in his marriages, and he was deeply moved when his wives or children passed away. Seven of his children died at a young age. The most interesting details concern his second daughter Kengyoku whom he described as a gem of truth. She died in 1472 at age 25 at Yoshizaki. Because of Rennyō's early poverty, this daughter initially had been nurtured as a foster child, serving in a Zen temple where she became a follower. She practiced in Shōju-an in Yoshida under Kenshū-zenni, who was a sister of Zonnyō, as did her sister Juson, Rennyō's third daughter. She later moved to a Jōdo-shū temple. Before Kengyoku died, she returned to the faith of her father. He was overjoyed that she had attained settled faith in her last days. Rennyō was greatly pained by her death. He relates in a letter written shortly after her death that one of the mourners had a dream in which he saw three lotus flowers emerge from the smoke of cremation and among the flowers was a small golden Buddha from which light shone. It soon became a butterfly and disappeared. This was the form of Kengyoku going to Pure Land-Nirvana. The dream ended. It has been suggested that it was really Rennyō who had the dream.

A daughter Nyokei died in 1471 at about 25 years of age. In the same year as Kengyoku, a daughter Yushin passed away at age 27 in 1490, while the sixth daughter Nyoku died at age 30 in 1492. Important for the future of Hongwanji were Rennyō's sons. Junnyō his eldest was born in 1442. In 1466 he declined to be designated the successor to Rennyō, but was appointed as caretaker of Shinran's image in Otani. (It was later removed to Omi, Katada, consequent on the destruction of the shrine at Otani by Hiei forces in 1467.) Junnyō apparently had a drinking problem and ill health. He died at the age of 42. During his lifetime he was a representative for Rennyō with the Shōgunate in Kyoto. He worked earnestly on behalf of the Hongwanji. In place of Junnyō, Rennyō later selected Jitsunyo, his fifth son, as his successor. Other sons were placed in important temples in order to strengthen the centralization of Hongwanji. In addition, daughters were strategically married in the interest of Hongwanji.

An important figure among the sons is Jitsugo, tenth son. He is famous for the Jitsugo-kyūki which presents a record of Rennyō's life. Rennyō chose five sons as a core council. These five signed the last testament of Rennyō. Jitsunyo was to govern with the assistance of these brothers. In effect, the large family provided the basis for the firm control of the movement within the lineage of Shinran. However, as Rogers points out, this system of kinship ties in a hierarchical structure made for a strong organization, but also for a more authoritarian leadership as later history would prove.

### **III. Rennyō's Religious Style**

Rennyō's appeal to people in hard times originates with his own experience of personal suffering. His experiences of humble birth, jealousy of his step-mother, controversy in becoming Abbot, poverty and experiences of impermanence humbled him and deepened his awareness of being just an ordinary person, a *bombu*. He endured the anxieties and uncertainties that are common to all people. Rennyō did not put on religious airs, but thought of himself more as one of the people. He was easy to relate to. In the Rennyō-goichidai-kikigaki (Notes on the Life of Rennyō), there is the notation: "The Shōnin said: 'I put aside my social status and sit with you all. Shinran Shōnin too said that in all the world

those with faith are brothers. So, I do as he said. Also, as I sit with you, you may ask me what is not clear to you and please gain faith..." It is said that rather than speaking from a platform or raised seat, Rennyo met people knee to knee and drank tea with them. In another instance, Rennyo halted the Tendai practice used in Shin temples of throwing small (30 centimeter) sticks at people in the audience from the speaker's elevated position when listeners were nodding off. Rennyo disliked any show of piety: "Rennyo Shonin hated putting on robes of plain unfigured cloth. He said this showed piousness outwardly. Also he hated putting on robes of black colour. When anyone appeared before him putting on a jet-black robe, he said; 'Here comes an honoured priest pious and rightly clad'. 'Oh, I am not pious.' 'Only Amita's Vow is beautiful.' He frequently quoted an exhortation attributed to Shinran that even though we may be accused of being cattle rustlers, we should not appear as otherworldly-looking people.

### **Conclusion**

As we have seen, Rennyo was made sensitive to human problems by a variety of struggles and misfortunes. Through his difficult life Rennyo became intensely aware of the adversities and impermanence of life that all people share. The loss of wives and daughters particularly inspired his reflection and interest in the deliverance of women who made up a large part of his following. Whatever motivation may lay behind his large family and its adversities, a remarkable feature of the family was its unity which was maintained after Rennyo's passing and provided the basis for a highly organized, centralized religious movement. It is a mark of Rennyo's genuine religiosity that he could inspire such loyalty in his children. It also differs from Shinran and Kakunyo who each ended in disowning their eldest sons. The context of Rennyo's career was also one of conflict and destruction brought on by peasant uprisings and a long period of provincial wars. The instability of the political and social situation increased the popularity of Rennyo's teaching, because he spoke directly to the problems of the ordinary person. Scholars have observed a direct connection between the onset of the Onin wars and the spread of Rennyo's influence. Rennyo is viewed as a teacher who gave consolation and hope to followers in such tough times, not entirely unlike our own time as Japan descended into war and chaos in what is known as the Warring States period of Japanese history.

With the gradual collapse of the Ashikaga Shogunate, warlords competed for personal power and struggled to gain control over the country. Rennyo and the Hongwanji were caught in the midst of these conflicts. In this context, Rennyo emphasized the otherworldly aspect of Pure Land thought and challenged people to take seriously their future destinies. In his time the prospect of Pure Land was a compassionate alternative to the sufferings and uncertainties of life in this world. Hence, he emphasized the "one great issue of the afterlife (goshō-no-ichidaiji). In this short time, I have not been able to discuss major events of his life chronologically from the destruction of the Otani shrine to the construction of his center in Yoshizaki and the later Yamashina temple, ending finally with his retirement and building the Ishiyama temple in what became the city of Osaka and the bastion of Shin Buddhism which took Nobunaga ten years to conquer.

Rather, I have given but a brief glimpse of Rennyo as a person, a husband, father, teacher and leader as the foundation for his enduring influence in the Hongwanji. In the words of Professors Minor Lee Rogers and Ann T. Rogers Rennyo "... is multifaceted, being "a Buddhist priest, charismatic religious leader, shrewd political strategist, igniter of literary imagination, friend for turbulent times, representative figure for Japanese spirituality." In our next presentation we shall look at some of his contributions to the development of the Hongwanji.