

Kujo Takeko : A Modern Buddhist Woman*

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Lady Kujo Takeko

A number of exceptional and capable women have appeared in the course of Shin Buddhist history. At its inception during the life of Shinran (1173-1262), Eshin-ni, Shinran's wife, and Kakushin-ni, Shinran's daughter are quite well-known for their roles in assisting him.

In the case of Eshin-ni, her letters, discovered in 1921, show her a competent and strong woman. While she regarded her husband as an embodiment of the Bodhisattva of compassion, he also understood his wife in the same manner. They gave each other mutual support as he taught and she raised a family of (according to one genealogy) seven children.

Kakushin-ni was Shinran's youngest daughter and his nurse in his final days. She is credited with establishing Shinran's mausoleum in Kyoto which became the focal point for early Shin pilgrimage and devotion. She had great influence on the further development of the Shin movement.

In modern times the most outstanding woman leader in the Nishi Hongwanji branch of Jodo Shinshu has been Baroness Lady Kujo Takeko (1887-1928). Kujo Takeko was born as the sixth child and youngest daughter of the Abbot Myonyo (Ohtani Koson), 21st Abbot of the Kyoto Nishi Hongwanji (Honpa Hongwanji) and Matsubara Fujiko. It is said she was her father's favorite child, though her mother remains obscure, not being mentioned in Takeko's writings.

Setting out on a trip before her birth, Abbot Myonyo chose the name Takeko. The term *Take* suggests warrior-samurai virtue, perhaps indicating his hope that she would be "pure in heart and exquisite of mind, of integrity of soul, and compassion, and self abnegation." It is not recorded what his choice would have been had it been a boy. She was considered one of the three most beautiful women of her time.

Her early education in a respectable, conservative school brought her into contact with rich and poor students with whom she fit in wearing an ordinary cotton kimono, not at all snobbish. Despite her short attendance and being a child of nobility, she gained a feeling for the ordinary person which guided her later social work projects. Her later aristocratic education was taken over by tutors in the temple where she learned many traditional arts such as tea ceremony, koto, Buddhism and languages such as French. Though she was nostalgic for her friends she made in her early schooling, she enjoyed her studies. She was an intelligent and apt student.

During her growing up, the role of Takeko's mother is unclear. Her mother was the daughter of a physician and said to have been a beauty in her youth. However, because of the nature of life in the head temple, little is known of her. She lived apart from her daughter, though she expressed her care in ways consonant with the lifestyle of the temple. After Abbot

Myonyo died and a marriage was later arranged for Takeko, she undertook to educate her in a wife's duties.

In 1903, Takeko's beloved father died and she came into the care of her successor brother Kozui (Abbot Kyonyo). In 1909, at the age of 22/23, through her sister-in-law Kazuko, whom she loved very much, she entered into an arranged marriage with Baron Kujo Yoshimasa, Kazuko's brother. He worked in the Specie Bank of Yokohama (Yokohama Shoukin Ginkou). After their marriage they moved to the Kujo mansion in Tokyo and later went to England where Yoshimasa attended Cambridge University as an overseas student. He was later assigned to the branch bank in London. However, Takeko returned to Japan after one year.

Subsequently, she waited patiently for her husband who was absent for 10 years, working in a foreign country. While there are suggestions that the beautiful, well-educated Takeko may have been unhappy in the marriage, there is no indication of it in her writings which, however, express her loneliness. They had no children.

Kujo Takeko gained a reputation as a representative poet of the early 20th century. She was a student of the noted poet Sasaki Nobutsuna (1872-1963). In 1920, she published a collection of poems 金鈴 (きんれい *kinrei*), which straightforwardly related her sentiments on the strict upbringing of young women in upper class families, unstained by the world. In 1925, her play *Fall in Rakuohoku* (洛北(らくほく *Rakuohoku*, *North Kyoto*) was performed. Under Sasaki's tutelage she also published collections of poetry: *Kunzen* (薫染 *Fragrant Influences*, published 1928) and *Shirokujaku* (白孔雀 *White Peacock*, published posthumously 1930). This was an autobiographical play.

Takeko's public life began in the context of the Russo-Japanese war in 1904. At this time she, together with her sister-in-law Kazuko, founded the Buddhist Women's Association. It was a groundbreaking effort since both women had been sheltered within the temple and women generally were not active in society in leadership ways. Nevertheless, this was a period of great change in Japan. Kazuko traveled and made speeches, while Takeko ran the office. Eventually there were branches of the women's organization throughout the nation and later in temples in North America. Initially they sent comfort packages to soldiers at the front and helped families who had lost or injured sons.

Though Takeko was just 18, she developed strong leadership abilities similar to her father who faced crises during his tenure as Abbot. It was said that "had she only been born a boy Takeko would have made a fitting 'pillar of the nation.'" She combined masculine strength with feminine beauty.

In 1920, she founded the Kyoto Women's College, as well become the head of the United Buddhist Womens Association (Fujinkai). Although of noble status, Takeko engaged in social welfare work in Tokyo slums and the cause of women. She was greatly revered by Nishi Hongwanji women.

On the occasion of the great Tokyo earthquake in September 1923, she undertook activities to aid the seriously injured and the orphaned. The Tsukiji Hongwanji, which was her home, was completely destroyed (but it was rebuilt). At that time, she established the Asoka Hospital in Tokyo, which remains to this day and preserves her memory.

The Sanskrit term *Asoka* means *Without Sorrow*. The *Asoka* tree is sacred in India and Sri Lanka and believed to be the tree under which the Buddha was born in Lumbini garden. It is a flowering tree with yellow blossoms which turn red.

The name of the tree and its association with Buddhism undoubtedly reflect Takeko's aspiration to relieve the suffering of all people through Buddhism. Her popular volume *Muyuge, Flowers Without Sorrow*, published in 1927, inspired by this aspiration, contains her reflections on life and reality. She directed that all royalties coming from the publication of the book be given to the hospital.

The Hawaii Hongwanji's English Gatha (hymn) book contains some of her poems such as *Gassho no Uta (Song of Gassho; Praises of the Buddha*, fourth edition, 1990. pp.50-51.) The most famous is *Seiya* in Japanese (p.138). The English version is "Splendor of an Evening Sky" (p.156) which poignantly expresses her loneliness against the backdrop of the vast universe. Yet, it also attests to her faith.

Splendor of an evening sky,
Who can ever fathom its timeless mystery?
Million eyes, when sparkling bright
 In the sable sky,
Touch my heart, my lonely heart with serenity.

More than all the countless sands
Ganges river holds
Are the infinite Buddhas who fill this universe,
Ever watchful over us, Throughout day and night.
Hearing this, my lonely heart,
Fills with lasting peace.

In 1928, Takeko passed away with blood poisoning at the age of 41/42. Her memorial day (February 7) is called *Kisaragi* (如月忌). She was interred in the Wadabori Mausoleum in Sugunami-ku, which belongs to Nishi Hongwanji's Tsukiji temple.

It has been pointed out that Takeko's significance is her strong faith in Other-Power and the Nembutsu, united with her dedication to social outreach and participation in society. She is an example for all to follow. Her insight on egoism and spirituality is reflected in the following quotation:

"It is human sentiment to rejoice in good and hate evil. If we do not reflect and despise evil, there will never be a time when we are saved from evil. We must promote good. However, no one should take pride in their own good. On the contrary, if we are not brought to tears for our own evils by the evils of others, we may also be unaware that the fires of evil are always burning within our own selves. Those unable to reflect on their own evil are apt to be proud of their petty good deeds. From the standpoint of companions (御同朋 (*ondoubou*) on the Path [to enlightenment], the good and the evil person alike are intimate friends of seekers after truth. Rather than just affirming good itself, by also acknowledging evil, we cannot fail to reflect deeply within ourselves.¹

Also two stone monuments record her insights. At Tsukiji Honganji:

Drawn by the power of Great Things;
Ah, how unsteady are my steps.

At the West Tower on Mount Hiei:

In a nest of wagtails in the corner of the latticework
in a Mountain Hall,
Three chicks cry, waiting for their mother.²

Like Shinran in earlier centuries, Kujo Takeko had a broad spiritual outlook, viewing the wonder of the universe. At the same time, she was aware of the very evil that inhabits our own minds and gives Shin Buddhism its distinctive character. She was also an independent spirit and provides a modern example of a spiritually-grounded, independent woman.

Notes:

* I have greatly relied on various Internet sources, and the excellent biography of Mr. Kengi Hamada: *The Life of Baroness Takeko Kujo*. Honolulu: Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii, 1962. 26 pp.

¹ (悪の内観[*Introspection on Evil*] 無憂華Muyuge; http://buddhism-rc.ryukoku.ac.jp/ja/exhibition_ja/20060612-20060804_001_003_004_ja.html 【黄金の言葉—先人の心に学ぶ— その4】

² I am grateful to Dr. Tsuneichi Takeshita for these translations.