

# ***Letters of Rennyo: The Essence of Shin Buddhism***

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## **Introduction**

It is a great honor for me to be back to the IBA as a speaker since I gave the last talk here at Tsukiji Hongwanji in July 2007. The topic that I have chosen for the talk this time is "Letters of Rennyo." The reason why I have chosen this topic is because the "Letters of Rennyo" reflect the core of the teachings of Shinran, who we consider is the founder of "Jodo Shinshu" ("The True Teaching of the Pure Land Way," which is more popularly known as "Shin Buddhism" in the West). Thus, I firmly believe that it is important for us to familiarize ourselves with this scripture in order to better understand the essential teachings of Shinran.

The "Letters of Rennyo" are often read, together with *Shoshinge* ("Hymn of True Shinjin and the Nembutsu"), not only in our daily worship but also in the services of Jodo Shinshu to praise the virtue of Amida Buddha, and therefore, those two texts are placed at most of the family altars of Shin followers.

The life of Shinran is relatively well known since the "Godensho," the earliest biography of Shinran written by Kakunyo (the third head priest of the Hongwanji), is read during the annual memorial service (called *Ho-on-ko*) for Shinran at most of the Shin Buddhist temples. On the other hand, the life of Rennyo is not so well known as compared with that of Shinran, even among Shin followers. Let me start with a brief description of the life of Rennyo (1415-1499) as the historical background behind his Letters and then put focus on characteristics of the teachings of Rennyo as expounded in these Letters.

## **Rennyo's Life**

Rennyo was born in Kyoto on February 25, 1415, the eldest son of Zonnyo, the seventh head priest of the Hongwanji. It was 152 years after the death of Shinran (1173-1263) amid the turbulent era of medieval Japan in the Muromachi period. While the Hongwanji is now the largest Buddhist institution in Japan, it was too small to be known to the public when Rennyo was born. It is said that the years under the four predecessors of Rennyo, who are Zennyō (1333-1389), Shakunyo (1350-1393), Gyonyo (1376-1440), and Zonnyo (1396-1457), were the dark era for the Hongwanji. This means that the Hongwanji was in the state of decline and much diminished at the time of Rennyo's birth.

There is no reliable information on the woman who gave birth to Rennyo. The birth mother of Rennyo, who is said to have been a maid servant to the mother of Zonnyo, left the Hongwanji for an unknown destination when Rennyo was six years old. This is because Zonnyo, the father of Rennyo, officially married a woman called Nyoen, so that Rennyo's mother could no longer stay with the Hongwanji. According to the records of Rennyo's life called "Itokuki," the mother spoke to her six-year-old child, revealing what was in her heart: "It is my wish that during the life of this child, he will restore the tradition of Master Shinran." With such words, she departed for an unknown destination on the 28th day of December 1420. Obviously, Rennyo took his mother's wish as his lifetime goal to achieve. It was indeed a big tragedy for Rennyo to have been separated from his birth mother at such an early stage of his life. Rennyo continued looking for his mother throughout the rest of his life, but he gained no success in these desperate efforts.

As a result of this sad event, Rennyo was raised by his stepmother Nyoen and experienced hard times being abused by the stepmother, especially, after she gave birth to her own son called Ogen (who was 19 years younger than Rennyo) and three daughters. As mentioned in the "Goichidai Kikigaki" (the compilation of thoughts and statements attributed to Master Rennyo), Rennyo recalled his childhood and confessed that his early years of life were filled with pains and sorrows associated with those domestic affairs.

Despite the difficulties associated with the abuse by the stepmother in an extremely poor living environment during his early years of life, Rennyo was committed to restoring the teachings of Shinran as per the last words of his birth mother when he was 15.

Rennyo was ordained as a Shin Buddhist priest at Shoren-in, a branch temple of the Tendai sect in Kyoto, at the age of 17. There is no record of Rennyo's having studied the Buddha Dharma at Mount Hiei as Shinran did. Thus, Rennyo must have studied almost by himself the scriptures of Jodo Shinshu by making hand-written copies of Shinran's writings, such as, "Passages on the Pure Land Way," "Three Volumes of Japanese Hymns," "Gutoku's Notes," "Lamp for the Latter Ages," and many other Shin Buddhist texts, including those written by Kakunyo (1270-1351) and his son Zonkaku (1290-1373), under the direction of his father Zonnyo, in order to understand the teaching of Jodo Shinshu correctly and yet deeply. It is Rennyo who thoroughly studied the "Kyogyoshinsho" (the complete title of which is "A Collection of Passages Revealing the True Teaching, Practice, and Realization of the Pure Land Way"), a major work by Shinran, as he copied this magnum opus at least six or seven times in his life. Also, it is Rennyo who discovered "Tannisho" ("A Record in Lament of Divergences").

The exact timing of Rennyo's marriage is not known. In view of the fact that his first son Junnyo was born in 1442, Rennyo is believed to have married a woman called Nyoryo when he was 28. This is rather a late marriage in the 15th century of Japan. Rennyo's first son Junnyo was born in the same year as Rennyo's first marriage. Nyoryo died, leaving seven children, when Rennyo was 41 years old.

When Zonnyo died, Rennyo succeeded to the position of the head priest of the Hongwanji at the age of 43 in 1457 based on the strong recommendations from Nyojo, the brother of Zonnyo (Rennyo's uncle). There was a struggle on the succession of the head priest of the Hongwanji after Zonnyo as Ogen, the son of Rennyo's stepmother, was believed to have assumed the position of the head priest of the Hongwanji. Out of fury over the defeat in this struggle, Rennyo's stepmother and her son Ogen took away from the Hongwanji all the assets that could be sold when they left. As a result, Rennyo had to start from scratch his work as the eighth head priest of the Hongwanji.

In addition to the extreme poverty Rennyo faced at the time of his succession as the eighth head priest of the Hongwanji, he experienced separations from his loved ones, i.e., wives and children who all died of sickness, one after another, throughout his 85 years of life. As a result, Rennyo married five women, fathering 13 sons and 14 daughters till the end of his life. It is natural that we often find a Buddhist term "impermanence" in Rennyo's writings because of a series of sad events that occurred in his life.

What saddened Rennyo most was the death of his eldest son, Junnyo, as he was brilliant and expected to succeed Rennyo as the ninth head priest of the Hongwanji. Junnyo died at the age of 42 after a long illness. Because of the death of his eldest son, Junnyo, Rennyo asked his fifth son, Jitsunyo, to succeed him as the ninth head priest of the Hongwanji. However, Jitsunyo was reluctant to take over the responsibilities from Rennyo due to the lack of confidence to do so. Rennyo severely scolded Jitsunyo and told him to thoroughly

study his Letters, stating that the teaching of Jodo Shinshu could not be found anywhere else but the Letters he wrote.

Anyway, the first half of Rennyo's life prior to his assuming the position of the eighth head priest of the Hongwanji can be called the preparation period for writing Letters in the second half of his life.

## Letters

Letters are used as a means of propagation in many religions. In Christianity, for example, many letters written by the apostles of Jesus Christ are contained in the New Testament. In Japanese Buddhism, Nichiren wrote many letters to his disciples, and Shinran also wrote letters in his late years to his followers (43 of which are compiled as "The Letters of Shinran" called "Goshosoku") in response to the questions from them mainly on doctrinal issues. Rennyo copied 22 letters out of those 43 letters when he was 33 and must have already made up his mind to write letters at this point by employing the same method of propagation that Shinran utilized.

Rennyo's Letters are called "Ofumi" (which literally means letters with an honorific affix) in Higashi Hongwanji and "Gobunsho" in Nishi Hongwanji, respectively. "Ofumi" is appropriate to call these Letters as Rennyo himself calls his Letters "fumi." In Nishi Hongwanji, however, the Letters began to be called "Gobunsho" at the time of the 14th head priest Jakunyo (1651-1725) because the lay followers in those days did not pay high respect to the Letters by simply calling them "fumi" without honor.

There are 266 "Letters of Rennyo" in existence. The first Letter was written when Rennyo was 47 years old, and the last one was written only four months before Rennyo died at the age of 84. Out of these many "Letters," 85 were selected by one of Rennyo's grandson Ennyo under the guidance of Jitsunyo, the ninth head priest of the Hongwanji (Ennyo's father), as those 85 Letters contain the important teachings of Jodo Shinshu. Included in those 85 Letters, four are called "Summer Letters" and the remaining one called "Gozokusho" (the abstract of the life of Shinran). These five Letters were taken out of the 85 Letters and the remaining 80 Letters were compiled and edited in five fascicles as "Jonai Gobunsho." Ennyo is said to have died right after he finished this work at the age of 32.

The readers as targeted by Rennyo in his writing Letters were unlettered housewives, especially, ones with small children. As those relatively young women were busy raising children, Rennyo tried hard to provide them with the teaching of Shinran in such a manner as to be easily understood, even by unlettered ones, through just hearing his Letters. The method of propagation that Rennyo employed in his Letters was to select a hundred essential points out of a thousand, ten out of a hundred, and one out of ten so that even unlettered people could understand the teaching of Shinran easily and yet correctly.

In the modern era of Japan, there were renowned intellectuals who were nembutsu practitioners, such as, Fukuzawa Yukichi (1834-1901), the founder of Keio University, and Nishida Kitaro (1870-1945), an internationally known philosopher. They were heavily influenced by their mothers, who were dedicated to the teaching of Jodo Shinshu through the Letters, in their childhood. Also, there are people called "Myokonin" ("persons of excellence") in Jodo Shinshu. Myokonin are those who are uneducated but lived their lives with a great joy in the embrace of the great compassion of Amida Buddha. Asahara Saichi is a typical example as is introduced in many of the writings by Dr. Daisetsu Suzuki, such as "Japanese Spirituality," "Mysticism," etc. Obviously, they are the product of the "Letters of Rennyo."

Rennyo told Shin followers to treat the Letters as the Dharma directly taught by Amida Buddha. I would now like to put focus on the key characteristics of Rennyo's teaching through his Letters.

The most important teaching given consistently throughout the "Letters of Rennyo" is that shinjin (true entrusting) is the true cause for birth in the Pure Land and saying the Name of Amida Buddha is an expression of gratitude for the great compassion of the Tathagata.

Rennyo bases this teaching on the following passages from the teaching of Nagarjuna in *Shoshinge* (Hymn of True Shinjin and the Nembutsu):

"He teaches that the moment one thinks on Amida's Primal Vow,  
'One is naturally brought to enter the stage of the definitely settled;  
Solely saying the Tathagata's Name constantly,  
One should respond with gratitude to the universal Vow of great compassion.'"

Also, Rennyo bases this teaching more directly on the following passages in "Tannisho," Chapter 14:

"For by virtue of being shone upon by Amida's light, we receive diamond-like shinjin when the one thought-moment of entrusting arises within us; hence, already in that instance Amida takes us into the stage of the truly settled, and when our lives end, all our blind passions and obstructions of evil being transformed, we are brought to realize insight into the non-origination of all existence. Thus, the nembutsu that we say throughout a lifetime with the thought, 'If it were not for this compassionate Vow, how could such wretched evildoers as ourselves gain emancipation from birth-and-death?' should be recognized as entirely the expression of our gratitude for the benevolence and our thankfulness for the virtuous working of the Tathagata's great compassion."

Shinjin is a true, real, and sincere mind (*makoto no kokoro*) of Amida Buddha. Amida, which symbolizes the process of interdependence, is derived from two Sanskrit terms, i.e., amitabha meaning infinite light and amitayus meaning eternal life, respectively. The content of Shinjin is two-fold, i.e., one being the great wisdom of Amida as symbolized by infinite light to see things as they really are and another the great compassion of the Tathagata as symbolized by eternal life to save all sentient beings unconditionally. Thus, shinjin is not the mind generated and/or nurtured by foolish beings like us but the mind of Amida given as a gift out of the Tathagata's great compassion to ignorant beings with blind passions in the form of "Namo Amida Butsu." This is called the shinjin of Other Power (true entrusting). When the shinjin of Other Power is received and accepted without any hindrance of doubt, foolish beings are brought to enter the stage of truly assured. In other words, the shinjin of Other Power is realized immediately upon receipt and acceptance of it by foolish beings without any calculations of Self Power. Thus, the shinjin of Other Power is the only and true cause for foolish beings to attain nirvana.

Among the Letters written by Rennyo, the most concise and yet most frequently read is the first Letter entitled "The Tradition of Shinran Shonin" (fascicle 5-10):

"What is taught in the tradition of Shinran Shonin is that the entrusting heart is essential. For when we abandon various practices and take refuge in Amida with singleness of heart, our birth in the Pure Land is settled by the Buddha through the inconceivable Vow-Power. The state we thus attain is described as 'with awakening of a single thought of entrusting, we join those who are in the stage of the truly settled.' Recitation of the nembutsu thereafter should be understood to be the

nembutsu as an expression of gratitude for the Tathagata's benevolence for settling our birth in the Pure Land. Humbly and respectfully."

Throughout the Letters, Rennyo puts "shinjin as the true cause for birth" first and "saying the Name as an expression of gratitude" after. These two cannot be separated from each other. Because shinjin is the true cause for birth, saying the Name is an expression of gratitude or vice versa. Simply saying the Name without shinjin is not the true cause for birth in the Pure Land. The reason why Rennyo stressed the importance of shinjin as the true cause for birth in the Pure Land was because simply saying the Name of Amida was believed to be the cause for salvation. Such a wrong view was so prevalent among the followers of the Pure Land tradition in those days as promoted by the Chinzei sect, a branch of "Jodoshu" founded by Honen (1133-1212), the teacher of Shinran. Also, prominent throughout the country in those days was the "Jishu," founded by Ippen, another branch of Honen's Jodoshu, that exerted strong influence on the followers of the Pure Land tradition, as a divergent view of Shinran's teaching. Rennyo flatly denied that saying the Name was the true cause for salvation and restored the teaching of Shinran stressing that shinjin was the only and true cause for birth in the Pure Land in Jodo Shinshu.

In his Letter entitled "The Great Sage, the World-honored One," for instance, Rennyo states:

"On the other hand, what people in the world generally conceive in their mind is that if only they recite 'Namo Amida Butsu' aloud, they will be born in the Land of Bliss. But this idea is completely groundless."

Another example is the Letter entitled "The Annual Memorial Observance for Shinran Shonin" that states:

"The popular belief held by the people of the world is that if they simply recite the nembutsu, they will be born in the land of bliss. But this idea is completely groundless."

As mentioned earlier, the teaching as given in all of those Letters consistently is that shinjin is the true cause for birth and saying the Name is an expression of gratitude. Such teaching can be further summarized as "with awakening of a single thought of entrusting, we join those who are in the stage of the truly settled" as is seen from the first Letter as quoted above. This is called *Heizeigoujou*, which means "settling the cause for birth in everyday life" as against *Rinjugoujou*, which means "expecting to see Amida come to welcome one at the time of death." In Jodo Shinshu, salvation takes place Here and Now for even foolish beings with blind passions once they receive and accept the shinjin of Other Power without any hindrance of doubt in the present life. There is no need to wait for the moment of death as salvation is effected in this life.

## Conclusion

If Rennyo were not born, then what would the Hongwanji look like today? Probably, the institution may have ceased to exist by now, or even if it exists, we would have had hard time looking for the place where the Hongwanji is located in Kyoto. No one has ever built such a large religious institution as the Hongwanji in such a short period of time as only 30 to 40 years as Rennyo did in the history of world religions.

In addition, even though the teaching of Shinran is magnificent, it would not be made accessible for ordinary people without Rennyo. The "Kyogyoshinsho," a major text written by Shinran, would have been subject to study only by a small group of academic circles

unless Rennyo appeared. Owing to the appearance of Rennyo, we could hear the teaching of Jodo Shinshu.

Rennyo clearly distinguished true religion from the magical superstitions that were prevalent in the 15th century of Japan (and even now). In other words, Rennyo taught us what a true religion is all about through his Letters based strictly on the teaching of Shinran. We are all indebted to Rennyo for his great contribution to the restoration of Shinran's teaching. What we should do, therefore, is to restore the teaching of Jodo Shinshu (that Rennyo transmitted to us through his entire life) in our contemporary society. That is the best way of our expressing appreciation for the great endeavor of Rennyo and the most meaningful way of our celebrating the 750th anniversary of the death of Shinran in 2011.

## **References**

"Collected Works of Shinran" and "Letters of Rennyo" by Hongwanji.