

# ***Rennyō and the Renaissance of Contemporary Shin Buddhism, Part 2***

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## **Introduction**

In our previous lecture I summarized important aspects of Rennyō's life which were the basis for his effort and success in revitalizing the Hongwanji and creating a major, powerful religious movement in medieval Japan. I have suggested that he offers clues for the renaissance of contemporary Shin Buddhism. Hongwanji in Japan has called his commemoration a time for innovation which expresses the spirit of Rennyō. The slogan for our Hawaii Hongwanji mission is "Live together, work together, in the spirit of Rennyō."

In this lecture we shall inquire more directly into what we can learn from the spirit of Rennyō and his innovative propagational activities. Both Shinran and Rennyō each responded to issues of their own time and circumstance. Differences in their personalities and historical situation show that, while there is a basic unity in their thought, Rennyō adjusted Shinran's fundamental insights to make them more accessible and understandable to the ordinary person of his day. Shinran unintentionally created a more individually oriented movement.

His teaching reflects his inward, introspective and subjective, as well as more scholarly or philosophical character. Shinran speaks pointedly of his religious experience and his personal weaknesses or limitations. He clearly rejected the idea that he was a teacher or had disciples, though they honored him. Rennyō, on the other hand, inherited the movement which Shinran inspired. It had already become institutionalized through the efforts of previous Abbots. He was concerned with the fortunes of the community in his time and for the future. His personality was more outgoing. He tells little about his own religious change or development. Rennyō consciously accepted the role of teacher or leader of an emerging movement. He had to deal with the problems of religious power and authority that accompanied his status. Further, his position as a teacher must be considered in the light of his enormous influence for which there is little comparison among other medieval teachers.

## **I. Perspective on Shinran's Teaching**

The foundation of Rennyō's work is Shinran's teaching. Suffice it to say that Shinran emphasized absolute Other-Power in all aspects of religious faith and activity. No matter how evil a person may be, he/she is never beyond the embrace of Amida. Shinran had a vision of Amida Buddha's all-encompassing compassion and wisdom in which every feature of religious life is grounded in Amida Buddha's Vows. Also the assurance we have of final enlightenment also liberates us from the many religious fears and superstition common to Japanese society.

Shinran's teaching involves a transformation of the self-striving mind to the mind of reliance and trust on the Vow. Shinran calls it the "turning of the mind" (eshin) or the one moment of entrusting (shinjin-ichinen). All efforts subsequent to that moment are responses of gratitude and commitment, supremely expressed in reciting namu-amida-butsu. The sense of oneness with Amida Buddha, experienced through trust in Shinran's thought, never overwhelms the awareness of our evils. Rather, it prevents presumption or taking Amida's embrace for granted. While conducing to a deep humility, Shinran's faith gives rise to a strong religious commitment and self-concept as a person who has been embraced by Amida Buddha, never to be abandoned.

## **II. The Fundamental Character of Rennyō's Teaching**

Rennyō shared Shinran's vision of Amida's all-encompassing compassion and wisdom, but he believed that it manifested itself in the world through the Hongwanji tradition. Rennyō, being born within an already existing institutional system, assumed that it faithfully transmitted the truth of Amida's Vow as interpreted by Shinran. Also he tried to simplify the more complex teaching of Shinran, holding to the principle that in teaching, you select 100 from a 1000 things that might be given and from 100, you choose 10. Finally from the 10 you select one. As a consequence of his approach to teaching and propagation, there were differences in emphases from Shinran.

Rennyō's experiences of the deaths of his wives and several children, as well as the violence of the age, made him keenly aware of the impermanence, unpredictability and violence in life. In view of the brevity of life and depth of our evil, the afterlife is of the greatest importance for Rennyō (goshō-no-ichidaiji), in contrast to Shinran's stress on the reception of faith and assurance of rebirth in this life. Rennyō draws a clear distinction between this world and the next. The human realm is a place of uncertainty. The land of utmost bliss is one of eternity and should be the object of our aspiration and the decisive settling of mind.

The principle of karma is also strongly upheld and emphasized by Rennyō as the basis for encountering the teaching. The teaching is not to be discussed with anyone whose past good karmic conditions have not matured. Rennyō used the idea to restrain disciples inclined to boast about their faith and ridicule others. The process of deliverance is outlined by Rennyō in five conditions, which must be present in order for a person to attain truly settled faith.

First there is the unfolding of good karma from the past. Second there is the meeting with a good teacher. Third is receiving Amida's light; fourth is attaining faith, and fifth, saying the name of the Buddha.

We can view these five elements as a simultaneous moment in which we have the good fortune to encounter a teacher who opens for us the truth concerning our spiritual condition and the truth of the teaching. In that moment we attain trust in the Vow, reject sundry practices and recite namu-amida-butsu in gratitude. It is altogether the one moment of entrusting and attainment of truly settled faith. According to Rennyō, faith is fundamental and is the source of Nembutsu.

Faith "is granted by Amida Tathagata...this is not faith generated by the practitioner, ...it is Amida Tathagata's Other-Power faith. The term shinjin is taken by Rennyō to be Amida's Other-Power true mind which displaces the believer's mind of self-striving. An alternative term for faith is anjin or yasuki kokoro which for Rennyō has essentially the same meaning as shinjin, but with emphasis on the aspect of the peace or tranquility that attends reception of faith. As a result, the recitation of the name is for gratitude only, because it flows out from the trusting mind. It is important to note that external appearances or the varying outward conditions, status or roles of people in life have no relevance in attaining trust.

Further, on attaining the settled mind, one carries on a normal life, whether it is as a hunter, fisherman or tradesman. After faith or settled mind is established, nothing is taboo, though one keeps "firmly to ourselves the teaching transmitted in our tradition and not giving any outward sign of it; those who do this are said to be people of discretion." Settled faith means also to honor the laws of the state and fulfill public obligations. The relation of Buddhism and the state or society is a key issue in Rennyō's thought, but it must be viewed in the light of his historical situation. Essentially he promoted the idea we have in the West of "rendering unto Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God (Buddha) what is God's (Buddha)."

Rennyō interprets the terms *namu* and *amida butsu* in the *Nembutsu* to emphasize the oneness of the mind of the person of settled faith and the Buddha. It is the action of the Tathagata that creates the oneness of the Buddha mind and ordinary mind, guaranteeing the ultimate enlightenment of the person of faith. The *namu-amida-butsu* is the verbal, symbolic expression of the reality of that oneness when it is recited in trust and gratitude. With respect to religious life, the hallmark of Rennyō's teaching is his emphasis that the *Nembutsu* is only for gratitude, arising spontaneously from the settled mind of faith. He rails against the perfunctory, mechanical, conformist recitation of the name without understanding its essential meaning.

In order to encourage his followers to be respectful of other religions, Rennyō exalts Amida Buddha as the Original teacher and Original Buddha of all buddhas and gods. That is, he is the superior and supreme expression of Buddhahood which includes all other gods and Buddhas within himself. They appear as *upaya* or compassionate means to lead people to the Buddha-dharma. Shinran's and Rennyō's approach to faith are similar in being subjective and requiring a definite turn of the mind in trust in Amida's Vows.

It is expressed in grateful recitation of the *Nembutsu*. There is a common emphasis in both teachers on the absolute Other-Power foundation of deliverance. They understand that Amida is a power within the heart and mind of the person, bringing about a spiritual transformation, as well as it is enshrined as the essence of the *Nembutsu* itself. Rennyō's term *anjin* or *yasuki kokoro* or settled mind, however, appears within an institutional setting of community and obligatory observances, as well as a variety of rules or guidelines which he instituted to deal with problems in his movement.

An important feature of expressing one's settled faith is grateful recitation of *Nembutsu*, while keeping one's eye on the goal of rebirth in the Pure Land. The communal character of faith is expressed through obeying the regulations which Rennyō sets down as a means of avoiding conflicts and obstacles to the teaching in the general community.

### **III. Rennyō's Mission of Propagation and Education**

What ultimately gives Rennyō's life significance is his work of propagation and education which enabled Hongwanji to become the principal leader of Shin Buddhism. Through his expositions of the teaching he made Shinran's teaching comprehensible to the masses. Without his consistent efforts, it is clear that Shinran's highly personal and subtle teaching would have remained obscure to the ordinary person, though Shinran himself became the object of veneration.

The Abbots prior to Rennyō engaged in propagation activities, yet Hongwanji remained a small segment of the Shin movement. Traditionally there have been ten branches of which the Hongwanji was one. In the controversy centering on Rennyō's acceptance as Abbot, his uncle, Nyojo argued on his behalf that Rennyō had lifelong dedication, and he participated intimately in Zonnyō's work of copying texts for followers, as well as occasionally representing his father in relations with disciples.

When Rennyō became Abbot, it was clearly the combination of Rennyō's personality, his abilities and activities, the times and the character of his teaching that brought about the momentous change in the fortunes of the Hongwanji. He was the right man in the right place at the right time. Rennyō's activities included copying texts, writing objects of worship in the form of name-scrolls, granting Dharma-names, undertaking teaching tours, establishing temples, and writing letters, as well as frequent interviews and meetings with individual disciples.

These endeavors all aimed to secure the relationship of Rennyō and the Hongwanji with the followers on a deeply personal level. While not all these undertakings were original with

him, he made the most skillful and greatest use of the various methods. He also was perceptive in seeing how social dynamics worked in Japanese society when he developed the system of Ko or small, voluntary associations and described how propagation should proceed. We might say that Rennyo's propagation and education depended on personal relations, communication-publication through copying texts or writing letters, etc., and social insight.

### **Copying texts**

In order to instruct followers in an age before printing, it was necessary to copy texts meticulously. Copying was a form of publication in a pre-technological age. The various texts which were copied demonstrate how serious Shinran and his successors were in responding to the desires of their followers for understanding the Dharma. In Shin Buddhism the work of copying texts began as early as Shinran who reproduced various Pure Land works requested by his disciples.

Together with composing his own original writings, Shinran copied a variety of Pure Land texts which he thought were useful to understand his teaching. The fourth Abbot Zennyō is noted for annotating a pictorial biography of Shinran and making a 17 volume copy of the *Kyogyoshinsho* in Japanese translation. He also copied the words of Zonkaku (Zonkaku-hōgo). There is a record of some 14 texts copied by Gyonyō, sixth Abbot, Zonnyō, the seventh Abbot, and Kukaku, a brother of Zonnyō. Zonnyō also initiated the copying of Shinran's hymns (*wasan*), as well as selecting out the *Shoshin-ge* separately from the *Kyogyoshinsho*. He focused attention on that passage because it presented the basic principles of Shin Buddhism in a condensed form. Rennyo later wrote a synopsis of the text known as *Shoshin-ge-tai*.

He also published the *Shoshin-ge* and the *wasan* collections in block print at Yoshizaki in 1473. The block printing of texts made for wider distribution of texts and enabled the wide use of the *Shoshin-ge* and *wasan* in services in temples or at home. Even before he became Abbot, Rennyo made copies of texts for disciples who often received them when they came to study in Kyoto. At times, He substituted for his father in making and signing these texts himself. In all, we are told that there are existing some 40 texts copied by Rennyo. The meticulous work of copying texts undoubtedly contributed to Rennyo's study and absorption of the teaching which underlay his thought in his letters, his major mode of communication.

### **Teaching Tours**

From the time of Kakunyo, Abbots made tours around regions where Shinshu congregations were located. Rennyo also undertook tours to spread and strengthen the teaching. Before he became Abbot, he went to the Kanto region, following the example of other Abbots who visited the sacred sites of Shinran's life at least once in their lifetime. Rennyo, however, traveled three times to Kanto. After he became Abbot, he immediately focused on Omi where there were many followers. He also went to Mikawa and Settsu, as well as the northern provinces known as Hokuriku.

Rennyo's activities and his success in drawing adherents eventually caught the attention of the forces of Mount Hiei who attacked Hongwanji in 1466. It was probably no accident that Rennyo selected Yoshizaki in the Hokuriku area for his base since, the Hongwanji had had a long association with the region because of the travels of the various former Abbots.

By 1471 when Rennyo moved to Yoshizaki, there were as many as 119 temples known in the Echizen, Kaga and Etchu regions. With his arrival in Yoshizaki the number of temples expanded significantly as members and temples of other sects turned to Rennyo. James Dobbins indicates: "Rennyo's presence in Yoshizaki created a mysterious and powerful chemistry that sparked an unprecedented religious awakening in the region." There was an

increase of 49 temples in Inami county in Echizen alone, five times what it had been in the previous two hundred years. Twenty of the 49 temples were originally Tendai. Similar developments took place in other regions near Kyoto, in Omi, Tokai, Chugoku and Kansai.

### **Objects of worship**

Shinran's original object of worship was the name Jinjippo-mugeko-nyorai which means the Tathagata of Universal Unimpeded Light. He granted Name scrolls to leading disciples for their dojo. In addition to the Name, pictorial representations of Amida were also made. This practice was later followed by Kakunyo, Zonkaku and succeeding Abbots. Zonnyo's diary indicates that he made various types of scrolls at the request of his disciples. Rennyō gave out so many Name scrolls that he gained the reputation for having written the Name more times than any person in history. Some extant scrolls were written with gold paint. It was a sign of the growing prosperity and influence of Hongwanji. Ten are listed from 1460 to 1465. The Osaka-gobo or Ishiyama temple where Rennyō finally retired was financed almost entirely through writing Name scrolls.

### **Dharma names and Temple-names**

Another way in which relations with disciples was strengthened was the bestowal of Dharma names. These names began to be conferred when followers came to the Hongwanji to study. Rennyō followed the precedent set by Zonnyō, and there are numerous names written in his own hand existing. Temple-names indicated the status of a community as a temple based on its affiliation with the Hongwanji. They marked the transformation of a dojo to a temple and permitted the members to enshrine an image of Amida rather than a name-scroll.

### **Letter writing**

Perhaps the most striking aspect of Rennyō's activities in education and propagation was his letter writing. However, there were also precedents in Shin Buddhism for this mode of communication. Shinran himself wrote numerous letters dealing with doctrinal questions, disputes among his followers and persecution. While there is record that Shinran wrote ninety letters, there are presently 43 existing. Rennyō's letters number over two hundred. However, 85 were selected out by Ennyō (1491-1521), Rennyō's grandson, directed by his father, Jitsunyo the ninth Abbot. These have become virtually sacred text for Shin Buddhists.

Most famous among all of them is the Hakkotsu no Gobunsho or Letter on White Ashes which is used extensively in funeral services. Among these only 11 are originals, the remainder are copies made by others. Rennyō did not write complex doctrinal analyses such as we find in the Kyogyoshinsho, leading modern scholars to underestimate him as a scholar or thinker. Nevertheless, the letters were his chosen method to communicate the insights of Shin Buddhism in comprehensible, clear language that the members of the temples could appreciate.

Undoubtedly they contributed to his popularity, because such letters as the White Ashes touched the hearts of people with the reality of impermanence and the importance of faith and gratitude in spiritual life. Rennyō made gratitude a central feature of Shin Buddhism. A general accounting of his letters indicates that in the collection of 85 letters 49 conclude with specific exhortations to gratitude, while in others it is implied. He concluded his letters by urging his followers to recite the Nembutsu with gratitude. This became the distinctive approach of Shin Buddhism to practice and religious reflection.

Rennyō demonstrated his sensitivity to women who played a great role in his life by referring to women in some 58 letters out of 212 considered authentic. Contrasting Shin

Buddhism with other Buddhist traditions, Rennyo stressed that the salvation of women was a primary concern for Amida Buddha. This is significant because the religious status of women in traditional Buddhism was lower than men. Though Rennyo declares the spiritual equality of women, he does not make clear their social equality.

This remains a task for our contemporary sangha. In almost all his letters Rennyo emphasizes the human condition, Other-power faith, recitation of the Nembutsu, and importance of the afterlife. He sets forth rules for social behavior in response to the anti-social attitudes of some followers who used the Shin experience of spiritual liberation to ridicule and denounce other religions and even oppose secular authority. Addressing contemporary issues confronting the community, Rennyo's letters defined the content of faith

### **Method of propagation**

The great expansion of Shin Buddhism under the leadership of Rennyo resulted not only from the resonance of his ideas and personality with the people of the time, but also because he understood how society worked. As Dobbins points out, Rennyo benefited in the spread of Shin Buddhism from the formation of independent, self-governing villages that attended the end of the manorial economic system. Rennyo's method of propagation consisted of approaching the three most prominent people in any village, the priest, the elder and the village headman. He maintained that "If these three will lay the basis for Buddhism in their respective places, then all the people below them will conform to the teachings and Buddhism will flourish."

This strategy is known as the top-down principle, accepting the hierarchical structure of a village, and has been followed by all religions since ancient times. It presupposes a highly communal and kinship society in which leaders are recognized by all members as having status by virtue of their wisdom and qualities of leadership. Many of these leaders were formerly heads of large farm families in the earlier, declining myoshu-estate system. It was a natural extension of the family structure. In our more individualistic age, this strategy would have little effect. However, what is important here is Rennyo's sensitivity to the changing nature of the society in which he lived and his shrewdness in recognizing its usefulness.

Concurrent with Rennyo's strategy of reaching the leadership of the society, he also developed the ko which was a voluntary religious association for the nurture and development of personal faith. The term ko is an ancient Buddhist concept meaning discourse, preaching or lecture. In time it took on the meaning of a meeting for some religious purpose such as studying a text or undertaking a particular practice. In Shin Buddhism there have been Nembutsu-ko.

It is used in our Hoon-ko service. In our modern thinking, in this context, it would be like a cell, a sub-grouping of a larger body. We might call it a discussion group or informal fellowship. Though the ko might coincide with the village, it was really the social-religious foundation of Shin Buddhism. In time religious and political aspects overlapped as is evident in the peasant ikko-ikki uprisings. One important characteristic is that the local ko could transcend its simply local character through its connection with the broad movement of Shin Buddhism. This was the basis for the enormous power that Shin Buddhism came to hold in medieval society, leading to its struggle with Oda Nobunaga and its division under the Tokugawa. Members would open their homes for meetings which were called dojo.

The size of the ko varied from as few as six people, perhaps to thousands. They were supported by donations of members. The local ko were affiliated with the Hongwanji through the various levels of sub-temple relations. In terms of governance, Rennyo had to combine his democratic spirit with the necessity for more centralized control brought about

by the social and religious problems that arose within the ko. It was the major reason for locating his sons and daughters in major temples in order to maintain the loyalty of the members under their control.

We can gain some idea of the activities in the ko from Rennyo's letters where he indicates that the members meet monthly (the 28th of the month, which was Shinran's death day) in order to discuss their faith. Hoonko services to express gratitude for the teaching and commemorate Shinran's death were held annually for seven days. This observance was greatly stressed by Rennyo. However in his letters he notes that the faith was not always discussed at the meetings as it should be. He criticizes the members for turning the meetings into social occasions, forgetting their true purpose. He urges deep discussion and questioning in order to arrive at settled faith. Rennyo is very critical of the clergy who oversaw the fellowships. We can see that the meetings of the ko or temples provided opportunity for members to interact and discuss their faith in a more personal way.

The dissemination of the Shoshinge and Wasan suggests that part of the meeting involved the devotional chanting of these texts, while members and clergy then discussed the teaching. Rennyo also wrote numerous letters marking the anniversary of Shinran's death in which he commented on the meaning of the teaching. The letters were to be read at the services. The meetings were clearly also a social occasion, though Rennyo desired that the religious purpose be constantly maintained. For him the spirituality of the movement was uppermost. In his overall perspective he recognized that the prosperity of the movement does not lie in the prestige of great numbers, but whether people have faith, and the flourishing of the right sole practice comes about through the will of the disciples who follow.

### **Rennyo's personal style**

Briefly, Rennyo's personal style appears more open and democratic. The first letter in the authorized collection emphasizes the camaraderie of Shin Buddhism, noting Shinran's declaration that he did not have even one disciple. Rennyo wore plain gray robes and removed the preaching platform. He sat on the same level with his followers. It is said he sat knee to knee. He admonished his associates not to keep followers waiting and to serve them food and sake. He did not put on airs so that when he visited followers who had little to offer him, he warmly ate the millet gruel which they ate and spent the night discussing religion with them. He advocated noh plays be performed to put people at ease and to teach the Buddha-dharma anew when they have lost interest. Though Rennyo could be solicitous for the welfare of his followers, he was also critical. He castigated the behavior of the priests who sought more power over the members spiritually and financially. He also censured the members for lacking proper religious motivation for their participation and for the lack of discussion and understanding of the doctrine.

### **Conclusion**

We can see there are many dimensions in Rennyo's activities and style which brought Shin Buddhism to its highest level in the medieval period. The determination with which all the Abbots labored offers us suggestions for how we might strengthen Shin Buddhism in this age of turbulence and transition. Comradeship, communication, critique, commitment or deep religious motivation and understanding are the keys to the future.