

Rennyō's View of the Salvation of Women: Overcoming the Five Obstacles and Three Subordinations

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Introduction

The issue of women and religion is a pressing one, particularly in western countries where the women's liberation movement has been highly influential in arousing consciousness of the gender discrimination that is pervasive in most societies. All the great religions have emerged from patriarchal and androcentric cultures. Consequently, the position and role of women in Buddhism historically is of significance for evaluating the relevance of Buddhism for modern people. In this essay we will look closely at the life and teachings of Rennyō Shōnin (1415-1499), the eighth abbot or lineal successor of Shinran (1173-1262), the founder of the Jōdo Shinshū. His approach to the question of the salvation of women is a barometer of the potential of Shin Buddhism to relate to contemporary issues in society.

Rennyō is sometimes called the Restorer of Shinshū or the Second Founder. More than Shinran himself, Rennyō emphasized the issue of the salvation of women, placing it at the forefront of his teaching. In comparison to other religious teachers an unusual awareness of women runs through his letters. They were a notable element in his personal life and constituency.

According to Mori Ryukichi, the prominence of the issue of the salvation of women in Rennyō's letters derived from the fact that at that time women played a major role in manual labor. With the changing character of the villages Rennyō saw the loss of their ancient and traditional spiritual role in religious functions of the home involved with preserving the fire and making sake. This realization of change led him to make women an important focus in his mission to revitalize the Honganji. [1]

Under Rennyō's leadership Shin Buddhism developed into a major religious institution of medieval Japan by promoting the way of salvation for all people through trust in Amida's unconditional compassion. He claimed that this was a more accessible and adequate way of salvation for all people, but it was particularly so for women, in contrast to that provided by other schools of Buddhism. In numerous letters he stressed the singularity of the unconditional and universal compassion of Amida Buddha, which does not distinguish male and female, while also highlighting the negative attitude of general Buddhism toward the salvation of women.

With his clear and forthright teaching, Rennyō's popularity grew to such an extent that great throngs of priests and lay people, men and women, journeyed to Yoshizaki from the various provinces. Because of the large numbers of pilgrims, he questioned their motivation and eventually even prohibited people from coming. Particularly, Rennyō continued to hold a great attraction for women. In one of his letters he recalls a report about some "women of distinction" who were drawn to his center at Yoshizaki, because of its great popularity among priests and lay people. These women especially desired to hear the teaching because they "suffer the bodily existence of women, wretched with the burden of deep and heavy evil karma." They found the teaching "suited to (their) innate capacity" and declared their trust in Amida (Gobunsho I-7). [2]

Unlike Shinran and other scholarly founders or teachers in Buddhism, Rennyō did not write complex treatises or commentaries. Rather, he addressed his followers in ordinary language in the form of letters as his major means of communication and propagation. These letters are our primary source for understanding his views. Their wide circulation and esteem have established them as authoritative and sacred in Shin Buddhist tradition. They are significant, therefore, for the consideration of the salvation of women in Buddhism.

In order to put Rennyō's thought into context and perspective, as well as to make clear his distinctive contribution, this essay will briefly survey Buddhist tradition and the Pure Land and Shin teaching which lie in the background of his teaching.

I. The View of Women in Buddhist Tradition: A Summary Perspective

Opinion has been divided among students of Buddhism as to whether it teaches the equality of men and women or whether it honors men and slights women. There is no unified viewpoint among the vast quantity of Buddhist texts. While it is said that Gautama Buddha taught the equality of all people and rejected the idea of a superior class or caste, there are many instances where it is taught that women are subordinate to men or have impediments and are viewed as inferior to men.

A. Early Buddhism

In early Buddhist texts, it is clear that women could gain nirvāna equally with men. An early saying states:

Whoever has such a vehicle, whether a woman or a man,
Shall indeed, by means of that vehicle,
Come to Nirvāna. [3]

However, when it came to establishing an order of nuns, there are traditions which indicate that the Buddha at first refused the pleas of his aunt and foster-mother, Mahāprajāpati, to permit the entry of women into the order, because it would bring about its eventual decline. However, Gautama finally gave in to her request. It is to be noted that the issue did not hinge on the spiritual capacity of the women but on the possibility of corruption of the order, resulting from the interaction of men and women. Nonetheless, the historicity of this account has been questioned.

Once women were admitted, the number of disciplinary rules which women had to follow were enlarged from about 250 for men to 348 for women, of which, eight, attributed to the Buddha, maintained male dominance. The historicity of these eight rules has also been questioned, but their effect was to subordinate women in later Buddhist history. Possibly the rules were intended to protect the nuns, as well as subordinate them to the monks.

Evidence for misogyny can be found in early traditions such as the statement ascribed to Buddha that "womenfolk are uncontrollable...envious...greedy...weak in wisdom...A woman's heart is haunted by stinginess...jealousy...sensuality." (Anguttaranikāya iv. 8, 10). [4] Rita Gross suggests that the negative attitudes towards women were occasioned partly by the exigencies of celibacy, requiring avoidance of temptation, as well as stereo-typical views of women in ancient Indian society. [5]

B. Mahāyāna Buddhism

When Mahāyāna Buddhism emerged there appears to have been a stronger effort to challenge the abilities of women, by asserting their inferiority. Further, the spiritual goal was not just to attain nirvāna as affirmed in the earlier tradition, but now also to attain enlightenment or Buddhahood. The idea that a Buddha could only be male came to be widely accepted. As the figure of the Buddha became more divinized and mythological, the Indian concept of the 32 major marks of a great man and 80 minor marks were applied to Buddha. One of these 32 marks was the possession of the male genital organ, described as recessed as in a horse or hidden in a sheath. Consequently, to become a Buddha one clearly had to be a male. [6]

In addition, probably around the first century B.C.E., under the influence of Hindu culture and its patriarchal orientation, symbolized by the symbol of the Mahâpurusha, the Great Man, the belief took deep root that women were spiritually limited and could not attain to the highest spiritual status because of the nature of their bodies. A woman could not become a Brahmâ god, Indra, [7] Chakravartin (Great Wheel-rolling King), King of demons, or a Buddha. These became known as the five obstacles or limitations that women faced.

Important here is the fact that according to this formulation, a woman-as-woman could not attain Buddhahood. In addition, the Indian Laws of Manu and also traditional Confucianism stipulated that a woman must observe three subordinations, to father, husband and sons. These relationships are the mark of women's dependency in society and hence, her inability to act on her own.

There are numerous statements throughout Mahâyâna Buddhist literature expressing negative and misogynistic disapproval of women as impediments to the practice of monks. Some texts hold that being born female is the result of bad karma and that they are generally spiritually inferior to men. [8]

The denigration of women appears in numerous Mahâyâna texts which stress the danger of women for the spiritual progress of monks. Although the Nirvâna Sûtra is best known for its assertion that all beings possess Buddha nature, it also declares that all the passions of the men in the three thousand worlds altogether are equivalent to the karmic obstacles [to becoming a Buddha] of one woman. Further, it states that a woman is the great king of demons, completely devouring all men. In the present age, they are [like] entangling shackles and in the afterlife they are vengeful enemies. According to the Shinjikangyô, even though the eyes of all the Buddhas of the three ages fall and decay on the great earth, all the women in the dharmadhâtu (cosmos) eternally have no aspiration to attain Buddhahood. The Yûten-ôkyô depicts women as one of the most evil difficulties. Binding men, she drags them into the gates of retribution.

The Hoshaku-kyô states that if a man looks on a woman once, he loses completely his eye of virtue. Even though one may look on a great snake, one should not look on a woman. The Agon-kyô says that if a man looks on a woman even once, he will be bound by the karma of the three evil paths eternally; how much more if he violates (the precept of sexual chastity), he will surely fall into eternal hell. According to the Chido-ron, though the cool breeze has no color, still one can grasp it. Even though a pit viper contains poison, one can touch it. One can face an enemy holding a sword and still win. (However,) it is difficult to prevent a woman robber from injuring a man. Finally, the Yuishiki-ron states that a woman is a messenger of hell. She eternally cuts the seed of Buddhahood. Outwardly, her face resembles a bodhisattva but inwardly her mind is like a yaksha (a demon). [9] From these few indications, we can readily see that women were regarded as threats to the spiritual life of monks. As a result of such negative attitudes women were to be despised and avoided.

Despite the widespread currency of the concepts of five obstacles, the three subordinations and generally negative evaluations of women, some positive views of women also appear in Mahâyâna sûtras. The earliest expressions of women attaining Buddhahood are found in the Lotus Sûtra, the Larger Pure Land Sûtra and the Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 Lines, based on the idea of transformation from female to male. [see discussion below]. The Vimalakîrti Sûtra depicts a conversation between Sâriputra and a female deity in which she transforms him to a female, taking his form. The implication of the story, based on the teaching of emptiness, is that external, physical forms are part of the world of delusion. Potentiality for enlightenment is not determined by whether one is physically male or female. The Queen Srîmâlâ Sûtra narrates a conversation between the Buddha and the Queen. After she expounds the Dharma to the Buddha, he indicates his pleasure with her understanding of the teaching and her profound wisdom and enlightenment.

C. Japanese Buddhism

In order to provide an historical background for Pure Land Buddhist teaching on the salvation of women in the Pure Land thought in Japan, we shall summarize the position of women in Japanese Buddhism prior to the emergence of the Kamakura teachers and particularly Hōnen, Shinran, Zonkaku and Rennyo in the Pure Land tradition. Consideration of these developments is important to deal with the criticism of Kasahara Kazuo by scholars. Kasahara, in his work, *Nyonin-ōjō-shisō-no-keifu* [10], emphasizes the achievements of the Kamakura teachers to the neglect of earlier precedents of the mention of salvation of women, while clarifying the contribution of Rennyo in particular.

In the case of Japan, women appear to have been among the first Buddhist clergy, [11] and early functioned in the official national temples (*kokubun-ji*, *kokubun-niji*) on an equal basis. However, changes in the status of nuns took place between the 7th and the 9th centuries as their position declined. According to Taira Masayuki, the discrimination against women began from the ninth century. He attributes this to the patriarchalism of the earlier *ritsuryō* state (centralized government based on legal codes) which took root among the aristocracy and brought about the decline in the political status of women. As a result of various changes in society, there was an increase in superstitious beliefs in evil spirits (*goryō*) and magical practices such as exorcism, yin-yang divination, geomancy, astrology and tantric rites accompanied by an increase in the consciousness of pollution among the nobility who were centered in the capital, Heiankyo (Kyoto), where corrupt monks and animal slaughterers appeared. [12] There was a political connection in protecting imperial authority from disasters and calamities.

The female menstrual cycle and the physiology of pregnancy stimulated a greater awareness of pollution. These temporary periods of pollution were defined as defilement and later joined with the idea that being a woman was the result of evil karma. The Buddhist expression of discrimination toward women, represented by the concept of the five obstacles as a symbol of the evil karma of women, combined with the periods of temporary pollution of women. Consequently, the existence of woman came to be viewed as a source of pollution and the basis for their exclusion from sacred precincts such as Mount Hiei, the Shingon monastery on Kōyasan, Kinpusan, Kasagi-dera and Tōdaiji. [13]

The social background of this development, according to Taira, is to be found in mountain worship and the urbanization that accompanied the establishment of Kyoto. The towns were vulnerable to nature and the spread of epidemics. To try to mitigate these problems, healers and shamans subjected themselves to the ferocity of nature on behalf of the townspeople. The shamans and healers had to be pure and master magical power within the purity of nature in order to thus protect the community from catastrophe. With the growth of this concept the maintenance of purity required the exclusion of women from such important sanctuaries, a practice peculiar to Japan. [14]

According to Matsuo Kenji, however, Kasahara Kazuo in his study of the relationship between the old Buddhism and Kamakura Buddhism on the issue of the salvation of women overlooked the deliverance of women taught by monks who retired from the world such as Myōe (1173-1232) and Neo-shingon Vinaya monks such as Eison (1201-1290). Eison gave bodhisattva precepts to women for their salvation. For example, he gave the precepts to the widow of a former official of Settsu, Jō-amidabutsu who donated a copy of the canon to Saidaiji.

The Neo-shingon Vinaya monks recognized the rebirth of women and constructed an ordination platform at Hokkedera which permitted them to become regular nuns. This possibility was open to all women believers. [15] In Eison's community, through the ritual of *denbō-kanjō* (The Dharma-transmission *abhiseka* [a type of baptism through sprinkling water based on the *Dainichi Sūtra*]), women were cleansed of the five obstacles and could become recognized as bodhisattvas and Buddhas on the eight-petal lotus seat, symbolic of

Mount Sumeru in Buddhist mythology. However, those who underwent this process were the elite among the elite.

The review of Eison is intended to show that the popular Buddhist teachers such as Hōnen, Shinran, Nichiren and Dōgen were not alone in their concern for the deliverance of women. Nevertheless, it does appear that the popular teachers of Kamakura are significant in bringing the message of deliverance to ordinary women who were unable to participate in the elaborate ceremonies of the monasteries which were redoubts of the aristocracy generally. In the Kamakura period, the teachers presupposed the teaching of five obstacles and the sinfulness of women. However, women could attain rebirth in the Pure Land and eventually Buddhahood through transformation to a male, based on the Lotus or the Pure Land Sūtras. However, it was not merely a doctrinal problem for them, but they taught with the aim of saving ordinary women in society. Something more simple and direct was required.

II. The Salvation of Women in Pure Land Tradition

According to Rita Gross, "the most famous and important solution to the problem of female birth is found in the Sukhāvātīvyūha Sūtra [Larger Pure Land Sūtra], in connection with Amitābha's Pure Land." In the Pure Land Sūtras, however, we are told that there are no women in the Pure Land which is a natural outcome of the fact that going to the Pure Land was in order to gain enlightenment and Buddhahood which women could not attain as women.

Some scholars suggest that the principle of transformation of women into men as a prerequisite for birth into the Pure Land was a means to reconcile the views of those who held to the equality of men and women in gaining enlightenment and those who maintained that there are only men in the Pure Land. Transformation was viewed as a way to compensate for the idea of the five obstacles and allow women in some way to become Buddhas. This solution permeated Buddhism. However, Minamoto Junko calls this attaining Buddhahood with conditions or conditional Buddhahood and therefore, discriminatory. [16]

Accordingly, the Dai-amida-kyō and the 35th Vow of Amida Buddha in the Larger Pure Land Sūtra [Daimuryōjūkyō] declares that for a woman to gain birth in the Pure Land, she must despise her female body and transform to a male before rebirth in the Pure Land can take place. The 35th Vow of Amida Buddha in the Larger Pure Land Sūtra reads:

(35) May I not gain possession of perfect awakening if, once I have attained buddhahood, any woman in the measureless, inconceivable world systems of all the buddhas in the ten regions of the universe, hears my name in this life and single-mindedly, with joy, with confidence and gladness resolves to attain awakening, and despises her female body, and still, when her present life comes to an end, she is again reborn as a woman. [17]

In chapter 12 of the Lotus Sūtra, we find a graphic description of the transformation of the Nāga Princess as a result of her faith in Sakyamuni's teaching. She immediately became a Buddha, much to the consternation and opposition of the older monks, by acquiring male genitalia and going to her Buddha-land. Those monks invoked the five obstacles as the reason she should not have become a Buddha. A similar incident occurs in the Perfection of Wisdom Sūtra concerning the prediction of buddhahood for the Goddess of the Ganges, though it not instantaneous as in the case of the Lotus Sūtra. [18]

Although the sūtras and the Vow appear to place a low evaluation on the feminine and femininity, requiring it to be abandoned, later teachers maintained that women were also embraced within the compassion of the Buddha and could gain rebirth into the Pure Land.

Among Pure Land teachers who are prominent in Shinran's Pure Land lineage, Vasubandhu in his Jōdoron indicates that there are no women in the Pure Land. [19] It is possible to interpret his statement to mean that, within the Mahāyāna gate, all who enter are ultimately equal, since no distinctions such as man-woman, etc., are made there and the Land, being the perfection of Amida Buddha's Vow to save all sentient beings, is therefore one of "overall and undivided equality." However, the texts state that only women must despise their female form and be transformed. The natural reading of the sūtra text and Vasubandhu's statements would seem to indicate that women cannot enter the Pure Land as women, and therefore their rebirth is conditional.

It is with Shan-tao, however, that the Buddhahood of women is clearly engaged in Pure Land tradition. In the Kannenbōmon Shan-tao quotes the 35th Vow and states that women who recite the Buddha's name, will at the end of their lives transform from female bodies to male. Taken by the hand by the Buddha and aided by bodhisattvas, they will sit on jewelled lotuses and be reborn as Buddhas. If women do not depend on the Vow power of the Buddha's Name, they cannot through countless aeons attain the transformation of their female bodies. From Shan-tao's viewpoint, it is wrong to deny that women can attain rebirth in the Pure Land, since the Buddha and his Vows are the highest promotive condition. [20]

Hōnen generally followed the teaching of Shan-tao, quoting this passage in his writing Muryōjūkyō-shaku, and also proposed the deliverance of women. [21] In this text he discusses the five obstacles and the various sacred precincts in Japan which exclude women. He points out that women are excluded from the five divine realms, described as the five obstacles. How can women give rise to the thought of the Pure Land of the Recompense Buddha? Women are despised in all sūtras and treatises, and they are prohibited everywhere. He laments how sad it is that even though women have two feet and eyes, they cannot worship in such sacred places as Mount Hiei, Mount Kōya, Mount Kimpu or Tōdaiji. He concludes with Shan-tao's affirmation that women will be delivered through their recitation of nembutsu, transformation to male, and reception into the Pure Land by the Buddha. [22]

While the Muryōjūkyō-shaku is the major text of Hōnen that addresses the issue of women in any detail, we find some references in his Words to Zenshōbō [23] and the Nembutsu-ōjō-yōgi-shū. [24] To Zenshōbō he writes that if one recites the nembutsu through life, they will surely be born into the Pure Land as they are. We are what we are in this world because of past karma. We cannot change that. A woman cannot become a man, even if she desires it. A wise person is wise; a fool, a fool. Amida made his Vow for all beings in the universe (jippō-shujō). This passage suggests that everyone who devotes to the nembutsu are accepted as they are by Amida without discrimination.

In the Nembutsu-ōjō-yōgi-shū, Hōnen compares Amida's path of salvation with others offered in such text as the Lotus and Nirvāna Sūtras. He declares that Amida's Vow is for people of the last age. It does not consider whether one is a woman or how much passion or evil deeds one has done. Amida intended it for all beings abandoned by other Buddhas. If everyone, good or evil, male or female recites nembutsu, all will be born into the Pure Land, ten out of ten, one hundred out of one hundred. The Buddha does not distinguish those with the five major sins, or whether one is a woman or an icchantika (a person with no potentiality for Buddhahood). He will not reproach a woman with five obstacles and three subordinations who practices nembutsu. It is through the power of the nembutsu that the good or evil are saved. With five thoughts, the five obstacles are erased; with three thoughts, the three subordinations are abolished and with one thought they are welcomed by the Buddha (raikō/raigō). This last statement implies all are equal and that women as women can be born into the Pure Land. Transformation is not necessary. [25]

We can observe Hōnen's respect for women in his response to a letter from the wife of Taishi Tarō Sanehide. Hōnen explains to her in detail the way of deliverance through the recitation of Amida's name with faith. According to him, there is no superior or efficacious

way for all people, men or women, to gain rebirth in the Pure Land. Hōnen esteemed and recognized her intelligence by giving such a thorough exposition of the teaching.

There is also the legendary account of Hōnen's compassionate dealing with a prostitute whom he encountered on the way to exile. The story reflects the compassionate attitude of the Pure Land School toward women entrapped in difficult life conditions. In the story Hōnen advocated that, if possible, the woman should give up her profession, but if that were not possible, she should entrust herself to the nembutsu for her ultimate deliverance. The reference to the deliverance of women nuns in the famous Ichimaikishōmon, written shortly before his death, stresses the simple practice of nembutsu, using the simple faith of a woman as a model.

Hōnen was clearly influenced by the stipulation of the 35th Vow concerning women and Shan-tao's teaching in the Kannenbōmon. He held out the hope that, through devotion to the nembutsu, all people, men and women, will be met by a host of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas who accompany them to the Pure Land where they inevitably become Buddhas. There is also the hint that women as women enter the Pure Land.

III. The View of Women in Shin Buddhist Tradition

Shinran had a great respect for women, particularly his wife Eshin-ni. This was implied in his vision-dream where he was told that Kannon, the Bodhisattva of Compassion, would transform to a woman and be his helpmate in his work of propagating the teaching of the Primal Vow.

Minamoto Junko points out that Shinran's view of the salvation of women is not broadly speaking different from his view of humanity in general. He does not distinguish men and women in his writings. [26] Nevertheless, he mentions the five obstacles and the transformation of women, based on the 35th Vow, noting its meaning in the Jōdo-wasan:

So profound is Amida's great compassion
that, manifesting inconceivable Buddha-wisdom,
He established the Vow of transformation into men,
Thereby vowing to enable women to attain Buddhahood. [27]

As Minamoto points out, Shinran tersely indicates that this is the meaning of the Vow. It does not mean he accepted it in principle, since his notation is similar in character to those made for the 19th and 20th Vows (verses #61 and #64 respectively) which he considered represented the self-power perspective in Buddhism. In verse #58 he designated the 18th Vow as the Primal Vow which was his main principle. Shinran does not specially focus on the issue of women's rebirth, though he employs the term jōbutsu, becoming Buddha, rather than simply ōjō, or rebirth, in connection with the 35th Vow, signifying that women, like men, become Buddhas.

Shinran appears to assume the traditional view in his Hymns of the Pure Land Masters (Kōsō-wasan) where he states:

If women did not entrust themselves to Amida's Name and Vow,
They would never become free of the five obstructions,
Even though they passed through myriad of kalpas;
How, then, would their existence as women be transformed?

This verse carries forward Shan-tao's thought, highlighting the transformation of the female into male, though making no mention of despising her body or the meeting with the Buddha who accompanies the person to the Pure Land, an idea current in Pure Land thought (raikō/raigō) but set aside by Shinran. [28]

In his Nyūshutsu-nimon-geju [29] Shinran summarizes Vasubandhu's statements in the Jōdoron that women, disabled and people of the two vehicles (srāvakas and pratyekabuddhas) are said not to receive birth into the Pure Land. However, according to Shinran, they are not so cast aside. Rather, they are saved through the perfection of the karmic power of Dharmākara's great Vow, and embraced by the virtuous power of the enlightened Dharma-king Amida. The Tathāgata's saintly host are produced from the blossoms of the true enlightenment of Bodhisattva Dharmākara. While all these beings originally have been classified according to their degrees of virtue, in the Pure Land there is no difference of higher or lower. For all alike there is no other way than the nembutsu. Like the Tzu and Sheng rivers (in present day Shan-tung province), they become one taste entering the sea.

In the Kyōgyōshinshō, Volume on the Transformed Buddha-land, Shinran quotes a passage from the Sun-Matrix-Sūtra (Nichizōkyō). [30] This passage recounts the story of a māra (demon) woman who raised aspiration for enlightenment (bodhi mind) as a result of her past good roots. She announces to her father that the Tathāgata has opened the way to nirvāna and she desires to be like the Buddha in liberating all sentient beings from their sufferings. The story indicates that 500 māra women, including her sisters and other relatives, followed her with the certitude that they would attain supreme enlightenment.

This passage shows that women, even māra women, are equally embraced by the Dharma. Hence, Shinran in such instances affirms the complete equality of women in attaining liberation. [31] In the Faith Volume, he quotes at length the Nirvāna Sūtra, relating the story of the evil king Ajātasatru. The Buddha declares that his words are the highest truth and through the various teachings, men and women, young and old, all alike, gain the highest truth, nirvāna. [32]

These passages, quoted by Shinran, suggest that there is no discrimination in the attainment of Buddhahood, and no mention is made of the transformation to male. Perhaps with these passages in mind, Shinran maintained there is no distinction between male and female in the great sea of faith:

In reflecting on the ocean of great shinjin, I realize that there is no discrimination between noble and humble or black-robed monks and white-clothed laity, no differentiation between man and woman, old and young. The amount of evil one has committed is not considered, the duration of any performance of religious practices is of no concern...It is simply shinjin that is inconceivable, inexplicable and indescribable. It is like the medicine that eradicates all poisons. The medicine of the Tathāgata's Vow destroys the poisons of our wisdom and foolishness. [33]

Fukuhara Rengetsu points out that Shinran, based on the Nirvāna Sūtra, refers to the principle that all beings possess Buddha-nature in the Kyōgyōshinshō: once in the Practice volume, three times in the Faith volume, and four times in the True Buddha-land volume. The term Buddha-nature appears some 43 times, signifying that for Shinran the Pure Land tradition, as well as the Saintly Path tradition viewed women as equal to men. Further, the term "all beings of the universe" of the 18th Vow and "all beings" in the Fulfillment text of the Vow imply the equality of men and women in salvation. [34]

We may conclude that while Shinran recognized the traditional view of women in Pure Land teaching, he also employed passages which express a broader perspective, leaving aside the stipulation concerning the transformation of women and making clear the complete equality and nondiscrimination of women in deliverance. Despite Shinran's historically conditioned acceptance of the 35th Vow in the Kamakura period, Minamoto holds that his essential message was to overcome the discrimination of women within the feudal society. Shinran recognized the discrimination as discrimination. However, in the logic of faith, he transcended it in his effort to fulfill the ideal of universal salvation intended by Pure Land teaching.

Zonkaku (1290-1373), the son of the third abbot Kakunyo (1270-1351) of the Honganji, devoted a short text on the rebirth of women, the Nyonin-ōjō-kikigaki [35] [Notes on the Rebirth of Women] in which he discusses the perceived disparity between the 18th Vow of Amida Buddha and the 35th Vow. According to the 18th Vow, the path of deliverance is all-inclusive, because it refers to all beings (jippō shujō). However, the 35th Vow especially declares the deliverance of women. Why should a special Vow be needed for women who are covered by the 18th Vow? Zonkaku responds to this issue, indicating that the 18th Vow is all-inclusive because of the Buddha's boundless compassion. Nevertheless, because women have many obstacles and are deeply defiled, the 35th Vow was necessary to make clear their inclusion.

When questioned about proof for this deep defilement, Zonkaku appeals to various sutras and treatises which denigrate the character of women. These references have been summarized above by Prof. Kasahara. If women hear such criticisms, they would be humbled and lose hope for their deliverance. Therefore, the 35th Vow was needed. They should loathe their deep defilements, and even though they do not commit great sins openly, through their constant thoughts and actions, they produce evil karma. They are always the cause of evil. He describes how morning and evening they sit in front of mirrors putting on make up and perfuming their clothing. Their thoughts are in bondage to desire and they indulge in envy. Smoothing their hair and adorning themselves, they are agents of transmigration and the source of samsāra. If they do not change and practice the Buddha-dharma, how can they escape evil paths? It is said that wherever there are women, there is hell. How much more they have the five obstacles and three subordinations!

Zonkaku relates the meaning of the five obstacles and the three submissions. In the words of Rakuten: "When born as a human being, do not become a woman. One's pleasure and suffering depend on other people." Also, not depending on their own mind, they appear to follow people throughout their lives. On account of transmigration through the twelve links and with the three submissions as the condition, they are not born in the Buddha lands of the 10 directions. Because of (their being) the source of the 108 passions and with the five obstacles as the cause, they are despised by the 80,000 sacred teachings.

In order to support the principle that women can attain rebirth in the Pure Land, despite these criticisms, Zonkaku depends heavily on Hōnen's work in the Daikyō-shaku (Muryōjūkyō-shaku [Interpretation of the Larger Pure Land Sūtra] which we discussed above. The compassionate heart of the Buddha in the 35th Vow, however, is to take away the suffering of women and give them bliss.

Zonkaku then calls attention to Shinran's wasans which interpret the Vow and declare that women attain the highest fruition of all-virtuous Buddhahood through the Vow of transforming their bodies. He narrates an incident in which Hōnen tells the women who came to visit him that they would have great difficulty in countless aeons to transform their female bodies and become Buddhas, if they do not go to the Pure Land relying on Amida's Vow. When they meet the Vow and recite the Name with trust, when their breath ceases and their eyes close, they will transform, leaving the defiled world and entering the Pure Land where they instantly attain rebirth in the land of peace and sustenance and forever receiving infinite bliss. This is the most joyful among the joyful, and it is said that those who heard him wept tears of joy.

The Larger Sūtra establishes the 35th Vow for the salvation of women; the Sūtra of Contemplation makes Queen Vaidehī the true object of deliverance and teaches the way to rebirth through recitation of the nembutsu. The Amida Sūtra addresses good men and women together as the persons of the nembutsu. Generally, even though the compassion of the Buddha is conferred on all sentient beings, he gives priority to women. The multitudes of the ten directions are the objects (ki) and conditions (en) of the Pure Land; women are fundamental (hon). Therefore, in India, China and in Japan, women who think on Amida

attain rebirth and become non-retrogressive Bodhisattvas. According to Zonkaku, there are untold numbers of biographical records (perhaps referring to the ancient stories of rebirth, *ôjô-den*). Therefore, people, who desire to change their bodies and surely attain the Buddha way, must earnestly trust in the Vow that transcends the world and recite the name of Amida.

We can observe that in order to promote Pure Land teaching Zonkaku employed traditional social stereotypes of women and their religious discrimination by major Buddhist institutions as a means to highlight the distinctiveness and primary function of the 35th Vow in ensuring their deliverance. Though he affirms the principle of transformation, Zonkaku shows that women have priority in the three Pure Land Sûtras, each of which affirms their rebirth.⁰ He ends his text with a plea that women should rely on the Primal Vow which transcends the world and singleheartedly recite the name of Amida Buddha. Zonkaku's thought is heavily dependent on Hônen. However, his conclusion is particularly important in stressing the primacy of women in the process of deliverance established by Amida, because it demonstrates the inclusiveness and truth of Pure Land way of deliverance through nembutsu.

IV. Rennyô and the Deliverance of Women

Rennyô also followed the lead of Zonkaku. However, Rennyô is distinctive for the frequency with which he mentions the salvation of women in his letters. Rennyô had a great many women in his following and he shows great sympathy for them, perhaps, as a consequence of the loss of his mother, deaths of four wives and the fact that he had 14 daughters, six of whom died at a young age.

The Muromachi period was characterized by a strict status system in society and the family. Absolute submission to superiors generally was the principle in the family, leaving women in a particularly subordinate position. However, the situation gradually changed together as the economy and production developed, leading to both the husband and the wife doing similar work. With greater economic independence there was a tendency for women naturally to participate in religious awakening and to seek to renew their minds.

This situation is reflected in the *kyôgen* story *Yome-odoshi-no-kimen* (Demon Mask for Threatening the Daughter-in-law) in which a bride who was devoted to Rennyô and Shin teaching attended the temple to receive instruction. However, she 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. However, the wife, when confronted by the demon who threatened to devour her, held fast to her faith, without moving and saying nembutsu in *gassho*. She countered that the demon should not eat a person of faith. She 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 Rennyô 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. [36]

When we come to consider Rennyô's view of the rebirth of women, we should note that he refers to women in various contexts in 58 letters out of 212 considered authentic. In the central collection of eighty letters fifteen letters take up the issue. Women are referred to in some term in forty three places. There are nine passages in which he refers to "women with five obstacles and three subordinations." [37] It is clear that in comparison to Zonkaku, despite his text devoted to this issue, and the brief mentions by Shinran, it was of greater interest and concern for Rennyô. In this section we will discuss the background of Rennyô's

life which might account for his engagement with this issue and the teaching which he offers.

A. The Background of Rennyo's Concern for Women

Rennyo's experiences with poverty and grief gave him a strong sense of connection with the common people in all walks of life and especially with women who formed a major element of his following. Here we shall survey important aspects of his life which undoubtedly shaped his attitudes and views. According to Ohtani Koichi, almost every turn of Rennyo's life reflects his memory and love for his mother. [38]

While Rennyo's father, Zonnyo, was twenty years old and as yet unmarried, Rennyo was born at the Otani Honganji in Kyoto in 1415. His mother was a nameless lowly servant woman. [According to Otani Koichi, she came from either Bingo or Harima in western Japan (now Okayama , Hiroshima areas)]. When the time finally came for Zonnyo to assume the abbacy, the family demanded that he marry a legal wife from a family of status. Consequently, he married Nyoen (d.1460) who was related to the Ebina family which served the Shogunate.

In what must have been a sorrowful, though quiet, parting, Rennyo's mother had a portrait of him drawn, known as the ka-no-ko-no-gohei, as a memento. It is said that Rennyo's later resolve to revitalize the Honganji was inspired by his mother, who reminded him that he was a descendant of Shinran as she left. Rennyo was only six years old at the time. Despite his later efforts to locate her, he was unsuccessful. In his enduring memory of his mother he designated the twenty-eighth day of the month as her memorial to mark the day when she departed.

Rennyo's relationship with his stepmother was difficult because she favored her own son, Ogen, as the successor to Zonnyo and tried to put Rennyo into foster care. [39] Rennyo, however, worked intimately with his father for many years and accompanied him on his preaching tours, as well as copying texts for followers. However, Zonnyo apparently did not write a will which specified Rennyo as his successor. Nyoen strove to have Ogen, her eldest son, selected. Rennyo finally secured the position through the recommendation of Zonnyo's younger brother Nyojō who asserted that because Rennyo had worked closely with Zonnyo in his teaching and copying texts for nineteen years, Rennyo should succeed him. His argument was successful whereupon Nyoen and Ogen left the Honganji. According to Ohtani Koichi, the influence of the memory of Rennyo's mother was an inspiration for his interest in the salvation of women. He relates an incident that took place when Rennyo was 35 years old on the seventh day of the seventh month, the day of the Tanabata festival when, according to legend, the Star Weaver-maiden (Vega in the Lyra constellation) and Star Herdsman (Altair in the Aquila constellation) meet once a year. Rennyo's uncle Nyojō suddenly recalled Rennyo's mother. In response, Rennyo composed a poem:

On the evening
The boy-star meets (his lover),
Alas, tear-soaked sleeves. (author's rendition)

The poem suggests that while the two lovers meet once a year, Rennyo is unable to meet his mother. On that occasion he copied Zonkaku's Nyonin-ōjō-kikigaki [Notes on the Rebirth of Women]. Further, the women of low degree that he later met in his travels coincided with the features of his mother, arousing strong sympathy for them. Perhaps, it is a reflection of the low status of his mother that Rennyo to cast aside any aristocratic tendencies that derived from his status as a descendant of Shinran.

Against the background of the experience of his mother, it is significant that Rennyo had five wives in succession, never resorting to a concubine. [40] However, he outlived four wives, and fathered 27 children of which 13 were male and 14 were female. Commenting on

the death of his third wife Nyoshō who died soon after the birth of her daughter Myōshō (1477-1500), Rennyo writes about her devotion to the teaching, her illness and the sorrow of those who knew her. "He closes his tribute to her by saying, 'She was gentle and patient, and the same with everyone she met.'" [41] In 1471 his first daughter Nyokei died at the age of 25. The fifth daughter Myōi, age 11, in the same year (1471). In 1472 his second daughter Kengyoku died at age 24, and in the same year Ryōnin at age six. His eldest son Junnyo died in 1483 at age 41, the seventh daughter Yūshin in 1490 at age 33. Sixth daughter Nyokū died at age 30 in 1492.

The death of Kengyoku, particularly, had a great impact on Rennyo. This daughter was one of his early children whom he put in foster care because of his poverty. She initially was sent to a Zen temple during the time of Rennyo's dependency where, as a child, she served as a katsujiki, announcing mealtimes. Later she entered the Shōju-an, a Jōdo-shū temple, in Yoshida where she practiced under her great-aunt Kenshū, a nun in the Jōke-in tradition, as did her sister Juson, the third daughter. Before Kengyoku died, however, she returned to the Shin teaching of her father and attained deep faith. He was overjoyed that she had attained settled faith in her last days. [42]

Rennyo was greatly pained by her death but yet rejoiced in her trust in Amida's Vow. He related 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 Rennyo who had the dream. [43] In the same letter he also describes a mysterious event when she was being cremated. It rained just before the cremation. At the time, everyone there saw a five color cloud which moved over the moon and was a good omen that she had attained rebirth in the Pure Land. Rennyo declares that in her death and rebirth Kengyoku was a Zenchishiki, a good teacher, showing that men and women alike will by all means attain rebirth, when they reach the one moment of settled faith and recite the nembutsu completely in gratitude for the Buddha's benevolence.

The loss of his mother, an unsympathetic stepmother, the loss of four wives and several daughters, as well as the care for his children by others made necessary by his poverty, would certainly have been a sufficient basis for Rennyo's reflection and interest in the deliverance of women. Also many women were among these devotees who travelled to his center at Yoshizaki in the northern province of Echizen.

B. Doctrinal Foundation of Rennyo's Thought on the Salvation of Women

Rennyo's approach to salvation follows the general line of Shinran. Accordingly, through Amida's supreme Vows all beings are saved equally (Gobunsho II-8). Amida Buddha, through his Vows, designed to save all beings, those with the ten evils, five grave sins, dharma-slanderers and the icchantika who lack the seed of Buddhahood. (III-1) There are no sins surpassing these (Jōgai-gobunsho, 26). [44] However, if such people convert, they will all be saved.

In Gobunsho letter II-4 Rennyo declares that the Vow was made for those people of the last age of the defiled world who do evil, are not good and whose evils are deep and weighty. In interpreting settled faith, however, Rennyo indicates that it does not require learning or wisdom and does not discriminate between male or female, noble or humble, an equality reminiscent of Shinran's delineation in the passage on the Great Sea of Faith in the Kyōgyōshinshō. It requires only that we recognize that we are "wretched beings of deep evil karma." (Gobunsho II:13).

Among the evil, immoral people who are objects of the Vow there are those who are lost day and night through wretched evil karma whom Rennyo associates with merchants, public service, and hunters. It is for these people that Amida made his Vows (Gobunsho I-3). The

Vow does not require that they purify of their blind passions and thoughts. Only firm faith in Amida's Vows is necessary. In *Jōgai-gobunsho* 3, Rennyō says that it makes no differences whether a duck's legs are short or a crane's are long; one is saved in whatever condition of life one is in. [45] This accords with Shinran's view in *Yuishinshō-mon'i*. [46] These passages recognize the various occupations as objects of Amida's Vows and differ in characters from other categorizations, perhaps reflecting the social evaluations of that age. Passages which emphasize those with deep sins and heavy karma, do not specify what those sins are as they are in the other formulations. Rather, they are forms of expression and the content is probably the same. We may say that they refer to the human condition as a whole. Shinran also uses such generalized descriptions although Rennyō differs from Shinran at times in giving more specific, concrete description of the human condition.

Within the context of the universal salvation pledged by Amida's Vows, Rennyō specially mentioned women as the object of salvation in response to those Buddhist institutions which, as we have seen above, excluded women from participation or even their presence in places certain monasteries.

Rennyō may also have been influenced by the priority of the salvation of women indicated in the *Anjin-ketsujōshō* which he read and studied intensively. In the closing section of that text a parable is given in which a village headman buried treasure in a muddy field in order to protect his only daughter from being robbed of it by the king and ministers of the country after he died. When they failed to find the treasure and left, the daughter recovered it and went into business, becoming richer than she had been previously. The retrieval of the treasure is likened to practicing the *nembutsu* and confirmed faith which enables a person to attain birth in the Pure Land immediately. Wrapping the treasure in garbage and placing it in the mud refers to defiled common mortals and impure, evil women who are the true objects of the Buddha's salvation. Here men and women are seen on the same level.

C. Women as the Objects of Amida's Vows

Among Rennyō's numerous mentions of the salvation of women, *Gobunsho* letters I:10, II:1, IV:10, V:3, V:7, V:14, V:17, V:20 specifically take up the issue. Letters in the *Jōgai-gobunsho* collection are 88, 90, 102, 103. In his teaching, interest in the salvation of women is comparatively high in contrast to Shinran who wrote in a more general vein, referring to all beings or those not blessed in society. From the standpoint of Buddhism, Shinran was concerned with people as objects of propagation. Rennyō's interest in the salvation of women is likewise an outgrowth of Shinran's perspective. However, Rennyō made them a special object of his attention. Rennyō often refers to women in his many letters, as well as addressing the wives (*naihō*) [47] of the priests resident in *Yoshizaki*. At times he employs the technical designation drawn from Buddhist tradition: "women with five obstacles and three subordinations" together with the phrase "five major sins and ten evils." As parallel references, the latter phrase appears to describe men or *bombu*, that is, common ordinary people. While Rennyō appears to distinguish between men and women with specific definitions, *Gobunsho* letter II-8 emphasizes the fact that all people, whatever their condition, are equally saved through Amida's Vow. From the standpoint of deliverance there is no real distinction to be made between male and female. Consequently, the phrases are used to depict the profound evilness of both men and women and perhaps to amplify the deep defilements of women particularly in view of the traditional understanding of women in Buddhism.

Rennyō comments on the story of *Dharmākara Bodhisattva* and the Primal Vow in the Larger *Sūtra* in his *Shōshinge-taii*, stating that "When we speak of Amida as *Dharmākara* in the distant past, he contemplated and revealed the easy dharma and vowed to guide both those sinners with the ten evils, and five grave sins and women who have five obstacles and three subordinations, none being left out, bringing them all to rebirth in the Pure Land." [48] Despite the great evil of men and women, they are equally the concern of Amida

Buddha. It is only through Other Power faith that they can be reborn in the Pure Land. (Gobunsho V-15).

Rennyō's most common designation for women as the object of salvation is the formula "five obstacles and three subordinations". Together with those people who commit the ten evils and five major sins, they are people who do evils or lack good in the last age (mappō) and are embraced only by Amida's Vow. It is also interesting that women replace the designations of dharma-slanderers and icchantika who lack seeds of Buddhahood in alternative passages which list the objects of Amida's salvation. By traditional Buddhist definition, women as women, as well as icchantika lack the potentiality to become Buddha. This substitution suggests that women possess the deepest sins. Nevertheless, women are in the same position as men with respect to Amida's Vows.

In his own characterization of women, Rennyō indicates that women exceed men in their defilement, and they are liable to fall into eternal hell (Jōgai-gobunsho 27 [49]; Gobunsho V-7). He writes: "We must realize that unbeknownst to others, all women have deep evil karma; whether of noble or humble birth, they are wretched beings..." (Gobunsho V-14; Jōgai-gobunsho, 102). [50] Even though a woman may have a sincere mind, she is full of doubts (Gobunsho II:1). It is difficult to rid oneself of abominable thoughts. [51]

He calls particular attention to the worldliness of women who are concerned with their families to the exclusion of spiritual matters. Women make an excuse of their children and grandchildren. Being occupied so much only with this life, they do not give any attention to the fact that they will be drowned in the evil three paths and eight difficulties, though they know the uncertainties of youth and old age. It is wretched and foolish to follow the world, living vainly, according to Rennyō (Gobunsho II:1).

Rennyō indicates that women who singleheartedly and earnestly take refuge in Amida's Vow should give up mixed practices and praying to other gods. They can only be saved through Amida Buddha (Gobunsho IV:10). They are to consider themselves as evil persons who trust in the wondrous Buddha-wisdom of the Primal Vow made for such superficial women, described in another edition of the letter as people who deeply doubt and think abominable things and are devoted to children and prosperity. [52] They are to trust Amida Buddha singleheartedly, reciting the nembutsu in gratitude. With settled faith, these women are assured of their rebirth into the Pure Land and their becoming a Buddha.

The Buddhas of the universe, however, do not have the aim to make women Buddhas and they have abandoned them. Amida alone has such a purpose (Gobunsho V:7). The 35th Vow was made expressly for such women (Gobunsho I:10). Rennyō made it clear that the universality of the 18th Vow included men and women as the objects of the Vow. However, women are not merely evil beings, but exceed men in sinfulness. For such women who have no way of salvation in this latter age, Amida especially made the 35th Vow, according to Rennyō, with the thought: "If I do not save women, which of the other buddhas will save them?" (Gobunsho V:20). Women knowing "that they are evil and worthless beings...should be deeply moved to turn and enter [the mind of] the Tathāgata. Then they will realize that their entrusting [of themselves] and their mindfulness [of Amida] are both brought about through Amida Tathāgata's compassionate means." (Gobunsho II:1). Rennyō does not say directly that women are the true object of Amida's Vow (nyōnin-shōki as against akunin-shōki), but his expression implies it.

Rennyō never characterizes women in the negative terms of earlier Buddhist texts, which suggest that women are full of envy or vain and obstacles to men on the path to enlightenment. Rather, he counsels women, that, despite their great evils, "they should not be concerned about the depth and weight of their evil karma," since it is through their faith and Other Power that they are delivered (Gobunsho V:15). Clearly, the institution of married clergy in Shin Buddhism where wives became helpmates rendered such descriptions inappropriate and useless.

We might, however, question why Rennyo distinguishes women apart from the general run of common mortals as beings with five obstacles and three subordinations, and describes them as exceeding men in sinfulness. Also why should the given social situation of three subordinations be a mark of the defilement or evil in women? The answer may be found in the context of patriarchal society. In such a society it was the general consensus of Buddhist tradition that birth as a woman was a misfortune and evidence of evil karma. It would take several lives for women to be reborn as men and from there to pursue the goal of enlightenment. Hence, women have additional obstacles to overcome in contrast to men.

Rennyo does not question these assumptions, but uses them adroitly to highlight the supremacy of the Primal Vow, without which there would be no hope for men or women who share equally the evils of existence. His use of traditional terminology may simply be a means of showing that he understands their peculiar problem in Buddhism. He believes that all are common ordinary people (*bombu*) standing in need of compassion, though women are the most clear illustration of Amida Buddha's capacity to save. He stresses that other Buddhas either do not have the power to save or have abandoned women. Rennyo could appeal to women's inner sense of fairness that Amida Buddha particularly worked on their behalf.

Rennyo, as other previous teachers, assumes the traditional view of the 35th Vow which was specifically made to relieve the doubts of women concerning their rebirth, but he only once refers to the idea of transformation from female to male, which is a major element of that Vow. [53] That he does not stress this concept could encourage women to believe that they were to be reborn as they are, and it is more likely, since Jōdo Shinshū does not hold to the idea of the Buddha coming to meet believers to welcome them to the Pure Land (*raikō/raigō*) which would require the transformation of women before their entry into the Pure Land. In the Sammonto tradition of Shin Buddhism taught by Nyodō (1253-1340), it is clearly stated that women enter the Pure Land as women. Nyodō writes:

The layman, even as a layman, can attain birth in the Pure Land if he chants [the *nembutsu*]; the woman, even as woman, will be ushered into the Pure Land (*raikō*) [sic] if she chants [the *nembutsu*]. Since no distinction whatsoever is made in it as to the purity or impurity of one's body, it is the practice [to be followed] whenever one is walking, standing, sitting or lying. [54]

Women who have attained *shinjin* are in the state of the company of the truly assured (*shōjōju*), destined for *nirvāna*, and have the position equal to enlightenment and to Maitreya. These are all conditions which Shinran declared were signs of the immediacy of the assurance of deliverance given in this life (later termed *heizei-gōjō*, signifying that the karma for rebirth is completed in this life) in the one moment of the arising of trust and negating the need for the welcome of the Buddha or *raikō/raigō* doctrine prominent in Pure Land teaching as the means of assuring rebirth in the Pure Land.

The message related above is essentially what Rennyo gave to all people he met, but when he takes special note of women, he suggests that he respects them greatly and particularly wished to encourage them. They are not obstacles, but objects of Buddha's compassion. He was more interested in offering hope and assurance than he was in denying women their femininity or existence as women.

Rennyo's most striking ideas relate to the relationship of the gods and Buddhas to the salvation of women. On the one hand, he indicates that in the age of *mappō*, the last age in the demise of the Dharma, the gods and Buddhas have no power to deliver evil men or women, while Amida Buddha's Vows are superior to them (*Gobunsho* V: 4, V: 7 III:5). On the other hand, he strikingly asserts several times that all the gods and Buddhas have abandoned women (*Gobunsho* I: 10, II: 8; V: 20). Amida Buddha's Vows alone liberate them.

The idea of abandonment by all the Buddhas is found in Hōnen's Nembutsu-ōjō-yōgi-shō. He states:

Amida Buddha established his Primal Vow to save us beings of the last days, so we ought to settle our birth at this time when the benefit of the Vow is at work. Do not think "I will not be saved because I am a woman", or "because I am a being filled with evil passions." We have met the Vow in which Amida Buddha originally promised to save us beings who are deeply sinful and whom all the Buddhas in the three time and ten directions have forsaken. [55]

The idea of forsaking or abandoning stems from the point that the Lotus and Nirvāna Sūtras were addressed to sravakas and bodhisattvas and not to bombu, the defiled beings of the last age. This turns around the traditional notion that sūtras such as the Lotus Sūtra were too difficult for ordinary people of the last age, taking their lack of application to such people as rejection.

While it is unclear whether Rennyo received the idea directly from Hōnen's writings, the abandonment by all Buddhas (except Amida) was reinforced by Zonkaku's text which he copied in 1449. In this text Zonkaku made it clear that all the 80,000 sūtras and treatises despise and reject women. In addition, there is the evidence, also indicated by Hōnen, that women could not enter or participate in the great monastic institutions. Rennyo drew the conclusion that the Buddhas represented in these texts and by the great monastic institutions had virtually rejected women from their supernal realms, as well as their earthly domains. This contrast heightened the primacy and ultimacy of Amida's Vows.

Nevertheless, the idea of such complete abandonment is contradictory to Shinran's assertions that we are enabled to encounter the Vow through the compassion of the Buddhas and gods. It is also a firm belief in Shin Buddhism that all the Buddhas of the ten directions praise Amida Buddha and his Vows (17th Vow). We have already seen that the Lotus Sūtra, the Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra, Vimalakīrti and Queen Srimālā Sūtras all suggest that women either have become Buddhas or have the potentiality to attain Buddhahood.

The idea of abandonment also conflicts with another idea which Rennyo mentions when he notes that all the Buddhas are included within Amida Buddha, the Primal Buddha (kuon-jitsujō, hambutsu). (Gobunsho II:8). In this passage the primacy of Amida is put in contrast with the Buddhas who reject women. However, as the fundamental teacher of all Buddhas, they, the Buddhas, are his disciples who should rejoice when sentient beings attain faith (Gobunsho II:9). The gods are manifestations of the Buddhas for the purpose of bringing people to deliverance. They are to be respected, even though not specifically worshipped (Gobunsho III:10). These Buddhas seek the deliverance of all beings and are entrusted with the protection of those with confirmed trust. [56] They express the compassion of Amida and are to be respected, rather than scorned or ridiculed. Both Shinran and Rennyo urged their followers not to ridicule the gods and Buddhas. [57]

Conclusion

In his own way, we may say that Rennyo enabled women to overcome the limitations and threats of the five obstacles by clearly and centrally including them within the vision of Amida's unconditional compassion. In this he gave a stronger expression to what previous Pure Land teachers had also declared by repeating it more often and more clearly in line with the character of Shinran's teaching of absolute Other Power.

Nevertheless, with respect to the three subordinations, some scholars point out, that though Hōnen, Shinran and Nichiren taught the attainment of Buddhahood by women, they did not raise the social status of women. [58] Rennyo would appear to be in a similar situation. Rather, the continual use of the negative images of women as deeply sinful, even more than men, tends to reinforce the social stereotypes of women as inferior beings, thereby not

enabling them to surmount their inferior status in society. They remained subordinated to the androcentric, patriarchal order and limited in leadership roles.

Rennyō did not completely liberate women from the three subordinations. [59] Women were still dependents. He did not discuss this issue apart from the five obstacles. Because the three subordinations, rooted in Confucian ethic, pertain to the role of women in this life in contrast to the hereafter, it would appear that Rennyō did not envision any radical change in society itself. Rather, he affirmed Confucian values such as humanity, justice, propriety, wisdom and sincerity or summarized as humanity and justice (*jin-gi*), as the ethical foundation of society. (Gobunsho II: 6, III: 10, III: 11). Evidence for this view can also be seen in Gobunsho II-9 in which Rennyō compares single-hearted and exclusive trust in Amida's Vow with loyalty to one master in human society. He adds the stipulation that a faithful woman will not take a second husband. However, Rennyō had five wives and no such restriction, reflecting the double standard that is common to patriarchal societies.

Buddhism, as history shows, was not immune to conforming to the social order in which it found itself. This conformity was reinforced in Shin Buddhism by Rennyō's exhortation to his followers to obey the principles of society in the royal dharma (*ôbô*), secular law, based in Confucianism, while nurturing the Buddha-dharma in their hearts in prospect of rebirth in the Pure Land.

As an issue of religious authority, Rennyō had to assume the validity of the 18th and 35th Vows, as stated in the scripture. Although the principle of transformation of women to men is a major feature in the 35th Vow, Rennyō never clarifies this aspect, leaving it open as to how he may have viewed it. According to Yamasaki Ryumei [60], Rennyō took a broad view of the 18th and 35th Vows, employing the term *nyonin shôki*, which indicates the centrality of the salvation of women, as a short-cut expression. However, according to Yamasaki, the assertion that Amida made such superior and transcendent Vows in order that women can become Buddha, is not logically or directly connected with the idea that women as women enter the Pure Land. The statement of the 35th would make this clear. Further, the 21st Vow indicates that all Bodhisattvas in the Pure Land also have the 32 marks of a Great Man. Accordingly, there is room for doubt on this issue.

However, we can view this problem also from the popular perspective, since Shinran and his successors maintained the belief that we will meet our loved ones in the Pure Land as a nod to human feeling. Despite the technicalities of doctrine, religious traditions accommodate to human sentiment and hope. Consequently on the personal level, it is possible to envision women entering the Pure Land as they are as women.

Rennyō would seem to imply that settled faith, and the assurance of rebirth which attends it, leads to immediate Buddhahood as-one-is, in accord with Shinran's teaching in the volume on the True Buddha Land in the *Kyôgyôshinshô*. This volume teaches that the faithful attain nirvâna and Buddhahood immediately upon death. If women were saved with all their obstructions, that should mean that they are saved as women, beyond any distinction of men and women.

Shinran taught that everyone, man or woman, attains the state of truly settled in this life with true entrusting (*shinjin*), and immediate Buddhahood with no mention of transformation or being met by the Buddha. Further, in Shin Buddhism, the Pure Land is not a staging area for the eventual and sure attainment of Buddhahood by bodhisattvas who would then be male. Rather, in Shin Buddhism the rejection of the *raikô/raigô* teaching, which requires the transformation of women, means that the moment of death becomes the immediate attainment of nirvâna and Buddhahood itself with no separation of time. Further, such a view would also accord with the principle stated in the *Shôshinge* that we attain nirvâna without severing blind passion. We may conclude, therefore, that while Rennyō did not make entirely explicit women's rebirth in the Pure Land as women, it would be

consistent with Shin teaching and human sentiment to understand that death brings immediate Buddhahood without any special transformation required.

The attraction of women to Rennyo's teaching in such great numbers as history attests may not have been founded so much on doctrinal subtleties as on the inspiration and hope they received from his giving major attention to their plight and his clear and simple call to faith no matter what their condition, spiritually or socially. His affirmations contrast with the dismal prospect women faced in traditional Buddhism where, following the principle of karma, it may take aeons of rebirths before a woman would be reborn as a male and more aeons before the male would be reborn with the capacity to strive for enlightenment as a monk. Several lives might be required before the monk might attain nirvāna. Pure Land teaching offered a direct and immediate path for women, even with the principle of transformation. Rennyo's lack of stress on transformation could even be more engaging for women.

We should keep in mind that, east or west, there was in those days a more lively belief in the reality of the afterlife than modern people may have. Despite the fact that Rennyo does not deal with the three subordinations in this life or establish women as independent religious personalities, we can say that for the women he addressed, he overcame the traditional teaching of the limitations on the spiritual attainment of women, represented by their exclusion from Buddhahood in the concept of five obstacles. Grounded in Shin teaching, he opened wide the gates of hope and assurance of immediate Buddhahood upon their birth in the Pure Land for even the lowliest of women.

Addendum

I would like to express my deep gratitude and appreciation for their assistance in this study to Professor Chiba Joryu, Rev. Kakekashi Jitsuen, Professor Inagaki Hisao, and Professor Asaeda Zensho, Professor Toshi Arai and Mr. Shimazu Esho in Japan. Also my thanks to Rev. Toshio Murakami of the Buddhist Study Center in Honolulu and Rev. Ruth Tabrah. All errors are my own.

ENDNOTES

[1]... Mori Ryukichi, Rennyo. (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1979). p. 158, quoted in Yamasaki Ryumei. "Rennyo-ni-okeru-shinkō-kōzō no kenkyū 3," *Musashino Joshi Daigaku Kiyō*, #18, 1983. pp. 111, 11

[2]... References to Rennyo's letters, known as Gobunsho or O-fumi, are based on the translation by Minor Lee and Ann T. Rogers. *Rennyo: The Second Founder of Shin Buddhism*. Berkeley CA : Asian Humanities Press, 1991. There are two collections referred to as Jōnai-gobunsho and Jōgai-gobunsho. The former constitute the collection of 85 letters arranged in five fascicle, assembled by Rennyo's grandson, Ennyo (1491-1521) which became the authoritative compilation. He was supervised by his father Abbot Jitsunyo (1458-1525). The latter group of letters included the remainder of those not in the former, comprising 139 letters,

[3]... (S.I. 33) quoted in Nancy Schuster Barnes, "Buddhism," in Arvind Sharma, ed. *Women in World Religions* (Albany: State University of New York Press. 1987), p. 106. See *Majjhima-nikāya, Mahā-Vacchagotta-Sutta*, (M i, 492) in Lord Chalmers, *Further Dialogues of the Buddha*, Delhi , India : Sri Sat-Guru Publications, 1927, 1988), Vol. I, pp. 345-350. This text indicates that among the lay people following the Buddha there are hundreds of women who have achieved deliverance.

[4]... Rita Gross, *Buddhism after Patriarchy* (Albany: State University Press of New York, 1993), p. 42.

[5]... Rita Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy*, pp. 44-45. See also the detailed discussion of the positive and negative characteristics of women which were influenced by pre-Buddhist attitudes and which supported androcentrism in Buddhist thought in Rita Kloppenborg and Wouter J. Hanegraaff. *Female Stereotypes in Religious Traditions*, (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995). pp. 151-169.

[6]... Nancy Schuster Barnes, "Buddhism," p. 116. Iwamoto Yutaka, (*Bukkyô-to-Jôsei*. (Tokyo: Daisanbummeisha, 1980), *Regulus Library*. pp. 79-84, 186), discusses the possible origin of the theory of transformation against the background of the Devadatta order which held out for strict discipline and devalued women. Because they were influenced by Hindu custom and Jainism, they did not recognize nuns or the Buddhahood of women as women. Hence the notion of transformation developed. Without being male, women could not attain buddhahood.

[7]... Shoyo Taniguchi, *A Moral System Founded on Causal Conditionality (Paticcasamuppâda): Ethics from the Pâli Nikâya Textual Point of View* (unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, Graduate Theological Union, March 1996) p. 120. She notes that in the Sakka-panha Suttanta in the Dîgha-Nikâya, a lay woman became Sakka, King of Gods or Indra, while three monks became lower gods. (D. II 263 ff; *Dialogue II*, pp. 299 ff.)

[8]... Nancy Schuster Barnes, "Buddhism," p. 118.

[9]... These statements are found in Kasahara Kazuo. *Nyonin-ôjô-shisô-no-keifu*. (Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kobunkan, 1975), pp. 6-8. His account derives from Zonkaku, *Nyonin-ôjô-kikigaki*. *Shinshû-shôgyô-zensho*, (Kyoto: Kôkyôin, 1957) III, pp. 110-112. Hereafter SSZ

[10]... Kasahara, Kazuo. *Nyonin-ôjô-shisô-no-Keifu*, (Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kobunkan, 1975)

[11]... Zenshin and her disciples in the Nihongi account of early Buddhism. W. G. Aston, trans., *Nihongi: Chronicles of Japan from the Earliest Times to A. D. 697*, (Rutland Vermont: Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1972), p. 73, p. 101. Zenshin and her companions had been sent to Korea for study, returning in 590 (pp. 113, 118).

[12]... Taira Masayuki, *Nihon-chûsei-no-shakai-to-bukkyô*. (Tokyo: Kô Shobô, 1992), p. 411. Daigan and Alicia Matsunaga. *Foundation of Japanese Buddhism, I*. (Los Angeles: Buddhist Books International, 1974). pp. 209-210. Ienaga Saburo, ed. *Nihon Bukkyôshi, I*. (Kyoto: Hozokan, 1967). pp. 241-25

[13]... Zonkaku, *Nyonin-ôjô-kikigaki*. SSZ, III, pp.114-115.

[14]... Taira Masayuki, *Nihon-chûsei-shakai-to-bukkyô*, pp. 411-415.

[15]... Matsuo Kenji. *Kamakura-shin-bukkyô-no-seiritsu*. (Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kôbun-kan, 1991, 1988). p. 265.

[16]... Minamoto Junko. "Shinran-no-jôsei-kan," *Indogaku Bukkyôgaku Kenkyû*, 1976 (25-1, #49), pp. 146-14

[17]... Luis O Gomez. *Land of Bliss : The Paradise of the Buddha of Measureless Life*. (Honolulu and Kyoto: University of Hawai'i Press, Higashi Honganji Shinshû Otani-ha, 1996). p. 170. [From the Chinese version]. The term "renounce" is the word itou in Japanese and signifies despising, detest and hating the body. Women must give up their femininity in order to be reborn. Also Yamasaki Ryumei. "Rennyô-ni-okeru-shinkô-kôzô-no-kenkyû 3," *Musashino-jôshi-daigaku kiyô*, #18, 1983. p. 116. He gives various renditions of the Vow from other versions of the Sutra.

Though some scholars may argue that there are no women in the Pure Land because it transcends sexual or any other distinction, the second Vow as in the Larger Amida Sūtra (Dai-amida-kyō) states that there are no wives or women in (Amida's) land and if they wish to be born there, they, then, become male. [SSZ, I, p.136]. This indicates a specific transformation.

[18]... Edward Conze, trans. e Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines and its Verse Summary, (Bollingen: Four Seasons Foundation, 1973), pp. 219-221.

[19]... David Matsumoto, trans., "Jōdoron: Discourse on the Pure Land." Pure Land. (n.s. 3, 1986): 98-120.

[20]... SSZ, I, pp. 635-637.

[21]... According to Taira Masayuki, Nihon-chūsei-no-shakai-to-bukkyō, pp. 427-428, indicates that this text is the only authentic text of Hōnen that mentions this issue, and that it is not proper to regard the theory of the salvation of women as a fundamental aspect of Hōnen's thought. It was a residue of the teaching on the salvation of women in the Kenmitsu Buddhism

[22]... SSZ, IV, pp. 275-279. See Showa-shinshū-hōnen-zenshū, (Tokyo: Heirakuji Shoten, rep. 1992). Sanbukyō-shaku, pp. 160-161. Discusses the obstacles for women and difficulty for them to become Buddha.

[23]... Ishii Kyodo, ed. Zenshōbō-ni-shimesu-kotoba. Hōnen-shōnin-zenshū. (Tokyo: Heirakuji Shoten, rep. 1992). pp.463-464.

[24]... Ishii Kyodo, ed. Hōnen-shōnin-zenshū. Nembutsu-ōjō-yōgi-shū. pp. 681-688.

[25]... Kagawa Takao, "Bukkyō-no-jōsei-kan," Indogaku-bukkyōgaku-kenkyū, 1975. (XXIII-2, #46), p. 546.

[26]... Minamoto Junko. "Shinran-no-jōsei-kan," Indogaku Bukkyōgaku Kenkyū, 1976 (XXV-1, #49), pp. 146-147.

[27]... Shin Buddhist Translation Series. Hymns of the Pure Land. (Kyoto: Hongwanji International Center, 1991). #60, p. 53.

[28]... Shin Buddhism Translation Series. Hymn of the Pure Land Masters: A Translation of Shinran's Kōsō-wasan, (Kyoto: Hongwanji International Center, 1992), p.51, #64.

[29]...SSZ, II, pp.480-481.

[30]... Shin Buddhism Translation Series. The True Teaching, Practice and Realization of the Pure Land Way. (Kyoto: Hongwanji International Center, 1990), IV, pp. 559-562.

[31]... This implication of the passage is not drawn by commentators. Yamabe Shugaku, Akanuma Chizen. Kyōgyōshinshō-kōgi. (Kyoto: Hōzōkan, 1953, rep. 1955). Keshindo-no-maki, III, pp.1477-1480, emphasize the fact that devotees of Buddha do not need to fear demons. It also shows that aeons of evil karma can be overcome through the resolve of bodhi mind and taking refuge in the Buddha. Hoshino Gempo. Kōge-kyōgyōshinshō. (Kyoto: Hōzōkan, 1995). Keshindo-no-maki, IV, pp. 2025-2037, indicates that this passage relates to Shinran's idea that those who take refuge in Amida are revered by demons and gods. It shows how Shinran overcame superstition through nembutsu. The implication that these women as women gained enlightenment and became Buddha does not seem to be perceived.

[32]... Shin Buddhism Translation Series. The True Teaching, Practice and Realization of the Pure Land Way , II, p. 302.

[33]... Shin Buddhism Translation Series, [The True Teaching, Practice and Realization of the Pure Land Way , II, pp. 249-250.

[34]... Fukuhara Rengetsu. "Gendai-shinshū-ni-okeru-jōsei-no-igi," Ryukoku Kyogaku. (June 1971, no. 6). p. 82.

[35]... SSZ, III, pp. 109-119.

[36]... Some traditional theory indicates that this event led Rennyo to write Gobunsho V-7, which deals with the five obstacles and three submission. See Sugi Shiro, Gobunsho-kōwa. (Kyoto: Nagata Bunshodo, 1993. pp. 335-336. In the text Rennyo-shōnin-goishshō-ki the story is associated with the passage in Rennyo's letter where he states that the evil of women exceeds that of men. (Shinshū- daijiten, III, pp. 1683-1684; See Rogers, Rennyo, V-7, pp. 247-248) In another version related by Itsuki Hiroshi, "Densho-ni-ikiru- Rennyo," NHK series #9, 1993, the mother intended to frighten both husband and wife who usually went together to Yoshimizu. However, for some reason the woman went ahead of the husband. The wife was frightened to death and fled home as fast as she could. When the husband came along, he found his mother struggling to get the mask off and he took his mother to Yoshizaki, where hearing the teaching of Rennyo, the mask dropped off as she recited nembutsu in spite of herself.

[37]... Yamasaki Ryumei. "Rennyo-ni-okeru-shinkō-kōzō-no-kenkyū part 3," Musashino-jōshi-daigaku-kiyō. (Vol 18, 1983). pp. 114-115.

[38]... Ohtani Koichi. "Haha-no-omokage-o-motomete," Shinran-to-Rennyo. (Tokyo: Asahi Shimbunsha, 1992), pp. 97-99.

[39]... Ohtani Koichi. "Haha-no-omokage-o-motomete," Shinran-to-Rennyo. p. 97.

[40]... Rogers. Rennyo, pp. 49-50, n.17. The wives were "Nyoryō, Renyū (a younger sister of Nyoryō) (d.1470), Nyoshō (1448-1478), Shūnyo (d. 1486), and Rennō (1465-1518)...

[41]... Minor Rogers. Rennyo, p. 107, n. 9. Rennyo-shōnin-ibun (hereafter RSI), Inaba Masamaru, ed. (Kyoto: Hōzōkan, 1972), #102, Bummei 10 (1478): 9,17, pp. 300-302.

[42]... See RSI, #16, pp. 82-86. Rogers, Rennyo, pp. 76-77, n. 19. Otani Chojun, Namu-amida-butsu-wa-ningen-o-kaerareru ka. (Tokyo: Hama no Shuppan, 1988), p. 80.

[43]... RSI, Letter #16, pp. 82-85.

[44]... SSZ. V, p.46.

[45]... SSZ, V, p. 289.

[46]... Shin Buddhism Translation Series. Notes on "Essentials of Faith Alone" (Kyoto: Honganji International Center, 1979), p.40; Tannishō, 13.

[47]... Rogers. Rennyo, pp. 160-161. RSI, #28, Bummei V:9, 11, pp. 111-114; #40, Bummei V:12, 8, pp. 135-141.

[48]... SSZ, III, p. 387.

[49]... SSZ. IV, pp. 334-334. For Gobunsho see Rogers. Rennyo, pp. 247-248, RSI, #175, n.d. pp. 474-475.

[50]... Rogers. Rennyō, p. 253. RSI, #143. (Meiō 7:3-), pp. 419-420. RSI, #43, pp. 150-153; For Jōgai-gobunsho, SSZ, V, pp. 449-450.

[51]... RSI. p. 136 #40.

[52]... RSI. p.139. #40, Bummei 5:12,8.

[53]... RSI, #17, 5:8, 28, pp. 86-87. See Kagawa Takao, "Bukkyō-no-jōsei-kan," Indogaku-bukkyōgaku-kenkyū, 1975. (XXIII-2, #46), p. 546-547. He notes that Nichiren and Dōgen also taught the rebirth of women directly without transformation.

[54]... James C. Dobbins. Jōdo Shinshū: Shin Buddhism in the Medieval Period. (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989). p. 127.

[55]... Showa-shinshū-hōnen-zenshū, p. 682. Also SSZ. IV, p. 590.

[56]... RSI, #54, Bummei 6:2,17, pp. 177-181.

[57]... Shin Buddhism Translation Series I, Letters of Shinran: A translation of Mattōshō, (Kyoto: Hongwanji International Center, 1978), #2, p. 25; SSZ, II, pp. 700-703. Shinran-shōnin-goshōsoku-shū IV. Kosho Yamamoto, The Private Letters of Shinran Shonin, (Tokyo: Okazakiya Shoten, 1956), pp. 63-64.

[58]... Taira Masayuki. Nihon-chūsei-no-shakai-to-bukkyō. p. 392.

[59]... Yamasaki Ryumei. "Rennyō-ni-okeru-shinkō-kōzō-no-kenkyū 3," p. 117. He indicates that it needs more inquiry to resolve the question whether Rennyō liberated women. Rather, Rennyō declared as a matter of fact that women especially should rely firmly on Amida Buddha for rebirth in the afterlife. We must recognize that Rennyō was concerned for the eternal world and not this transitory world.

[60]... Yamasaki, Ryumei. "Rennyō-ni-okeru-shinkō-kōzō-no-kenkyū 3, p. 118.