

# ***Rennyō the Restorer***

**by Kaneko Daiei; W.S. Yokoyama, trans.**

*(This is a draft translation of the first section of Kaneko Daiei, "Renshi no chuko", the eighth chapter of his Shinshu no kyōgi to sono rekishi [Shin Doctrine and Its History; 1915]; compiled in his Collected Works, supplementary volume 3, pp. 311-17.)*

## **The Life of Rennyō**

The great work Rennyō Shōnin (1415-99) achieved during his lifetime was the restoration of Shinshū. Through it he brought the Shin teaching to the people, a mission he took on not only to bring prosperity to the Hōganji lineage, but also to have the spirit of the Founder, Shinran Shōnin (1173-1262), spread throughout the land. And it is for this reason he is revered as the reincarnation of the Founder.

The reason he sought the revival of Shin goes back to an episode in childhood. Born in 1415, Oe 22.2.25, during the reign of Emperor Shōkō, his father Zōnyō Shōnin (1396-1457) was the seventh abbot of the Hōganji lineage. His mother, though, is unknown, and not even her name is recorded. The Rennyō Shōnin itoku-ki, or "A Record of Rennyō Shōnin's Achievements" says: "On the 8th day, twelfth month, Oe 27 [1420], his mother summoned him to her and divulged to the six-year-old her fervent wish for his future: that he see to the revival of the lineage [to which he was rightful heir]. This she conveyed in a way that left a firm impression on him. Shortly after this, she left the temple and was never heard from again." Those words of instruction etched into the heart of the child later became the source of inspiration for the great work he would achieve in his lifetime.

It was not until he was fifteen that Rennyō first grasped the significance of his mother's words. The Itoku-ki says: "It was in his fifteenth year that he first took the revival of Shin to heart. It grieved him to think of how past generations had let the teaching waste away, and his thoughts dwelt constantly on how he would in his lifetime bring the distinctive lineage of the Founder to the attention of people everywhere and thus revive the school." What first fueled his thoughts was the dire straits the Hōganji had fallen.

In a world gone mad under Ashikaga rule, a period when Buddhism held no sway among religions in general, it was not surprising that the fortunes of the Hōganji had declined. To make matters worse, from the time of the third abbot Kakunyo (1270-1351) the school seems to have lost the call and fossilized around rituals; the tradition slowly began to deteriorate. Seeing these things with his own eyes, Rennyō became acutely aware of the immense task that lay before him. The years of religious study were fraught with difficulties for Rennyō.

First and foremost he had to eke out an existence for himself. The Rennyō shōnin go-ichidai kikigaki, or A Record of Rennyō's Life," says there were times "the dinner service did not make the rounds for two or three days." "the only thing we had to eat were scraps of paper" "we had to pack up the children to the countryside [where they could get fed]."; Indeed, "many a sad story was woven out of these dire circumstances."

The life he led had little to celebrate. For him to pursue studies "so as not to waste lamp oil I devised a routine whereby I'd wait till dawn when the black hills of the city would at last be outlined in light before I'd take up the sacred teachings to read; at other times I'd wait till the moonlight was bright enough before I'd delight in the scriptures." Truly it was through burning the midnight oil\* that he achieved what he did. The second difficulty he faced was the lack of a proper teacher.

Ever since his seventeenth year when he was ordained, he had the desire to study. Teachers were available from other lineages, but the problem was there was none who could instruct him in the fine points of Shin doctrine, and so he had to educate himself. He read the Kyogyoshinsho diligently, thumbing through it so often he managed to rub a hole in the cover, and tried to understand its meaning by going through the explanations set down by Kakunyo and others as well as the various sacred teachings.

Third among his difficulties was the immediate circumstances [of the Honganji]. The Itokuki says: "At that time, only a few understood the distinctiveness of our lineage and there was only a vague sense of it being different from those of other establishments and schools. As a result, [it made him] always uneasy around people and inclined to shun the world. Even when reading through the sacred teachings, he would do so furtively, away from the prying eyes of others; at times, just to examine a few pages, he would use the lantern light spilling through a crack in the wall; at other times, on clear nights when the moon had ascended the blue expanse of sky, he would pull a manuscript [from his sleeve] and apply himself to the master's commentary."

We can gather from this account that Rennyo's education [in Shin doctrine] took place away from the eyes of others. It is sometimes said he took this course of action to avoid conflict with the ways and doctrines of other sects and lineages, but his actions can well be explained in large part by his complicated domestic situation. In these trying circumstances he underwent spiritual training and sought to live a religious life; turning his thoughts inward, as a matter of course he arrived at an understanding of the awakening of faith that tariki brings about (tariki shinjin); directing his thoughts to the external world, he realized that the fundamental cause for the breakdown of the [Shin] tradition was its failure to spread its doctrine of the path of religious life.

What seems to have driven this awareness home was his first tours of the northern and eastern regions. In Bunnan 4.5 (1447), Rennyo, then in his 33rd year, went to the Kanto (eastern) area, and in Hotoku 1 (1449), to the Hokuriku (northern) area. The purpose of these journeys was of course propagation, combined with a pilgrimage to sites sacred to the memory of Shinran. But what Rennyo discovered with his own eyes and ears was that the followers were largely ignorant of the Founder's basic message; instead, mistaken interpretations and superstitions had grown rampant, these to an alarming degree.

As the lifeblood of a religion lies in the beliefs it inculcates in its followers---beliefs that keep them from taking up evil paths---the problem of how to put the tradition back on its feet again thus became a pressing concern for Rennyo. And so with the wish to restore the Shin tradition back to life, he came into the cause he would end up devoting his entire life. Now, to compare Rennyo with Kakunyo, Kakunyo's contribution was the clarification of the Shin doctrinal principles vis-a-vis the Jodo-shu, the Pure Land Buddhist sect founded by Honen (1133-1212).

By contrast, Rennyo addressed the ordinary beliefs people held in those days. It was from this dimension that he was able to achieve his great work of propagating the Shin teaching. The kind of people Rennyo focused on were the ones who had suffered the misfortune of being displaced by the wars that ravaged the land and had no homes to return. And so when Rennyo speaks of the impermanence of human life as he often does in his Ofumi, or "Letters"; this is not merely the rhetoric of Buddhist propagation. He was speaking to people who lived in a world of constant danger; one skirmish with a raiding party could turn the scene into a battlefield seething with warriors; for those who greeted the dawn, indeed, there was no guarantee they would survive till the the end of the day.

The sentiments Rennyo expressed in his letters were thus directed to those who found themselves in this critical situation. To these people who had nowhere to turn, Rennyo

instructed them to take to heart the promise of Amida's Vow; it was in this way he imparted them the courage to endure. In Choroku 1 (1457), Rennyo, in his 43rd year, succeeded to the eighth abbotship of the Honganji lineage after the demise of his father. Rennyo's stepmother opted to have her own son Ogen (1433-1503) assume the abbotship, but Rennyo's uncle Shomitsu-in Sen'yu (1412-1460) interceded and, making a decision he felt clearly reflected the wishes of the deceased, appointed Rennyo the next abbot.

After this, Rennyo was in an even better position to devote himself to the restoration of Shin. The magnitude of the project being what it was, it is only to be expected he would meet with stiff opposition from other schools and lineages. The persecutions and at times outright confrontations this brought on involved Rennyo in one struggle after another, with the result there was nowhere he could take haven permanently, and throughout his life he was forced to move constantly from place to place.

His life may thus be divided into the following periods: 1465, the burning of the Honganji; 1471, the building of Yoshizaki; 1475, the propagation in Settsu and Kanai; 1480, the main temple at Yamashina; and 1496, the establishment of Osaka. The burning of the Otani Honganji took place in Kansho 6.1 (1465), when Rennyo was in his 51st year. This deed was effected by monastics on Mount Hiei who justified the attack on the grounds that the Shin followers of the Mugeko-ryu, or Unimpeded Light lineage, had, they claimed, spoken disparagingly of the various dharma teachings and schools, and had belittled other gods and buddhas by their words and deeds.

The monastics singled out the Honganji as the gathering place of these dissidents and so they vented their anger on them in this way. But the monastics had other, more palpable reasons to find displeasure with this Pure Land school. Rennyo had emerged as a powerful contender by successfully proselytizing the Kinai. This was highlighted by his conducting a large scale memorial service for Shinran on the 200th anniversary of his death in Kansho 2 (1461).

It was this event combined with other factors that caused resentment on Mount Hiei, and so precipitated the violence. The loss of the Honganji in Kyoto forced Rennyo to move to Otsu in neighboring Omi province (present Shiga prefecture). The move is significant, for the province is where Rennyo would establish his first group of loyal followers among the people of Kanegamori, and it was here that he first began to develop his particular style of propagation.

In Onin 2 (1468), in his 54th year, he made a combined tour of the eastern and northern regions, returning the following year to Otsu, where he began construction of the Kensho-ji, a temple south of Miidera that would house a treasured statue of Shinran. In a Letter he writes: "There shall be no disparaging the various dharma teachings and schools. All of them are the Buddha's exposition, and as long as a person practices in accordance with them, there is sure to be benefit" (see Rogers & Rogers, p. 176).

Here, taking a lesson from the destruction of the Honganji, Rennyo seeks to admonish any undisciplined elements among his following. The establishment of Yoshizaki took place in Bunmei 3 (1471), when Rennyo was in his 57th year. In his Letters he writes: Around the beginning of the fourth month of the third year of Bunmei, I just slipped away, without any settled plan, from our place near Miidera's southern branch temple at Otsu, in the Shiga district of Omi province, and travelled through various parts of Echizen and Kaga.

Then, as this site -- Yoshizaki, in the Hosorogi district of [Echizen] province -- was particularly appealing, we made a clearing on the mountain, which for many years had been the habitat of wild beasts, and beginning on the 27th day of the seventh month, we put up a building that might be called a temple. With the passage of time from yesterday to today

and so on, three years have elapsed with the seasonal changes" (Rogers and Rogers, pp. 71, 157; slightly adapted). This letter alludes to the fact that, after the destruction of the Otani Honganji, Rennyo went into seclusion for a period in Omi province, but that continued pressure by monastics on Mount Hiei forced his move to the northern regions. When the bosha, or priest's quarters, were being built in Yoshizaki, Rennyo's propagation activities in Echizen, Kaga and Etchu attracted crowds of followers.

The work at Yoshizaki was speeded along by the deep alliance Rennyo made with military governor Asakura Toshikage, who took advantage of the mountainous terrain of the site to make it strategically sound. The four years that Rennyo spent at Yoshizaki were significant, for during that time he laid the groundwork for the Shin religion in the Hokuriku area that prospers to this day. The years he lived and proselytized in Yoshizaki were not without complications.

It was within the sphere of influence of the heterodox teachings such as the hitsuji bomon, or secret teachings, flourishing in nearby Echizen. Moreover, the followers of the Takada-ha, one of the ten denominations of Shin, had an ongoing feud with those belonging to the Honganji, and there were rabble-rousers who sought to work it to their political advantage. Monastic centers of other schools and traditions such as the Hyosen-ji and Hogen-ji, which functioned as mini-Mount Hieis [as far as wielding secular power]. Rennyo stood in the midst of all this.

To defuse the situation, he set down regulations that were to be followed religiously by his followers: he admonished them, while speaking out against heterodoxies within Shin, not to speak disparagingly of the various other schools; he cautioned them not to draw undue attention to themselves; for a period he even forbid assemblies at Yoshizaki, saying this was a place of religious practice, not a place to jockey for political advantage. Even in his Letters, this would be the period when he produced the most; that is, the forty items in his Letters from I.1 to IV.10 were all written during this four-year period.

In these letters Rennyo set down okite, or regulations, which prescribed how followers were to behave with regard to other sects and in society; in them he also set down explanations of the true meaning of the Shin doctrine in terms followers could relate to. In Bunmei 5 (1473) he issued a woodblock edition of Shinran's Shoshinge and Sanjo wasan, a significant event as it set the form for the services Shin followers would conduct morning and evening from that time on. However, in the following year, Bunmei 6.3.28 (1474), at six p.m., a fire broke out at lodgings near the south gate that grew out of control and eventually burned down the entire Yoshizaki complex.

The story of how Honko-bo Ryoken gave his life to save the copy of Shinran's manuscript goes back to this time. The following month, Rennyo moved into temporary quarters, and then went on a pilgrimage to nearby provinces, before returning to Yoshizaki once again. When military governor Togashi and Shimotsuma Hogen fanned the ongoing feud between Takada-ha and Honganji followers into a disturbance, Rennyo gave up all plans to rebuild at Yoshizaki, and in Bunmei 7.8 (1475) left it for good. It was an inevitable decision.

Leaving Yoshizaki, he took a skiff to Obama, in Wakasa province, and then by way of Tamba and Settsu entered into Kawachi province, where he began construction of the Kozen-ji temple at Deguchi in Matsuda ward. After this, for the next two or three years he sojourned in Settsu, Kawachi, and Izumi, building temples and preaching. Among the temples he established are: Kozen-ji, Deguchi, Kawachi province, installing Kojun (1474-1497) as resident minister; Kyogyo-ji; Shinsho-in,\* Kai-no-ura, Izumi, with Shinsho-ji Josen as resident minister. While he built temples and preached wherever he went, he never failed to appoint someone to the stewardship of the temple -- a shrewd policy on the part of Rennyo.

In Bunmei 9.10 (1477), the good people of Kanegamori proposed the main temple be built at Yamashina, in the Uji ward of Yamashiro province. At the beginning of the following year, Rennyo went to inspect the site and agreed to the plan. Building a thatched hut and other provisional living quarters, the building work was begun in Bunmei 11 (1479) and continued until 12.8, when the Founder's Hall was completed. Next, the Main Hall was begun, and finished in Bunmei 14 (1482).

And so it was not until eighteen years after the destruction of the Otani Honganji that Rennyo at last was able to rebuild the main temple. It is recorded that the Main Hall was 3-gen square and the Image Hall was 5-gen square. One can well imagine the joy Rennyo and his disciples felt when the halls were finally built. In another sense, we could also say that he had laid the groundwork for these halls by his 18 years of roving and preaching. Having earlier handed over the responsibilities for the temple to his eldest son Junnyo (1442-1483) in Onin 2 (1468), with the latter's death in 1483 Rennyo was obliged to resume the ministership of the temple once again.

In Entoku 1 (1489), Rennyo, in his 75th year, handed over the ministership to his eighth child, Jitsunyo (1458-1525), and himself opted for retirement under the name Shinsho-in. At that time he wrote: "As for me, at last I can retire from this world, and now I shall immerse myself leisurely in samadhi on Buddha-dharma." In Meio 5.9 (1496), when Rennyo was in his 82nd year, the boshu, or priest's quarters, at Osaka in Settsu province were begun, and late in life he let himself be moved there.

Around the summer of Meio 7 (1498), however, he began to feel ill, and sensing the time had come when he would never rise again from bed, he urged others to realize their faith, saying, "All I long for, morning and evening, is that there will be a decisive settling of faith for everyone while I am still alive. Although this does indeed depend on good from the past, there is never a moment when it is not on my mind" (Rogers & Rogers, 240). In Meio 8.2 (1499) he returned to Yamashina. Though gravely ill, he spoke to his family and disciples, urging them to always remember their gratitude to the Buddha and the Founder, and to be respectful of those unknown forces in life. Then on the 25th day of the third month he passed from this world.

For his words and deeds see the Rennyo Shonin goichidai kikigaki sho [A Record of Rennyo's Life], and for an account of his achievements the Rennyo Shonin itoku-ki. The former was recorded by his son Rengo (1468-1543) and his disciple Kuzen and others, and compiled by his son Jitsugo (1492-1584). The latter is a selection made by Rengo and recorded by Jitsugo. For those interested in Rennyo, these two works are a must.