

# **Rennyō: His Historical Significance and Contemporary Relevance**

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THE 500TH ANNIVERSARY OF Rennyō's death has opened a new page in the history of Shin Buddhism. Through modern studies, Shin's potential to provide meaning for people in all areas of life, and increased expectations among the members for positive direction in our confusing and challenging contemporary world, have focussed attention on Rennyō (1415–1499), who also confronted a turbulent and chaotic world. The renewal of interest in Rennyō has centered on his personality and leadership qualities, which enabled him to establish the languishing Hongwanji as the foremost Buddhist sect of his age. The great transformation in the fortunes of the Hongwanji that he brought about gave rise to such titles as Restorer, Renovator, Innovator, and Second Founder. But more than creating a socially, politically and religiously powerful institution, Rennyō laid the basis for a personal spirituality which has sustained the movement into modern times when in the competition of faiths, it has declined seriously. What is needed is a revival of the determination, commitment, and creative spirit of Rennyō, which can revitalize the movement and offer a needed vigorous spiritual challenge to modern people universally.

It is the purpose of this essay to suggest in a summary fashion aspects of his life and work which highlight Rennyō's contemporary significance and overcome the historical gap of five hundred years between him and ourselves. It is hoped that this study will inspire people in their search for hope and faith in our turbulent world as he did in his.

## **I. THE HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF RENNYO**

When Rennyō appeared on the stage of history in the fifteenth century, the small, struggling Shin Buddhist Hongwanji branch was in deep trouble. Yet, by the beginning of the twentieth century it could boast a membership that was almost one-third the population of Japan.<sup>1</sup>

This astonishing success story is due to the energy and dedication of Hongwanji's eighth Abbot, Rennyō Shōnin. Though overshadowed since the Meiji period (1868–1912) by the figure of Shinran, Shin Buddhism's founder, Rennyō was a complex, multidimensional individual. He was at one and the same time a religious leader, a builder of temples, an organizer, a politician, and a writer of poignant letters. He stood at the apex of the Hongwanji hierarchy. Yet, he remained a plainspoken man of the people. He was a missionary, a pastor, a friend, as well as a spiritual teacher. He was also an earthy man, outliving four of his five wives and fathering twenty-seven children. In each of his roles, Rennyō was above all a humane person, never losing his human touch. Though not a scholar like Shinran, he conveyed the spirit and essence of Shin Buddhism through the simplicity of his teaching, capturing the hearts of hosts of people during his lifetime, and giving them a sense of the value of their own lives.

Rennyō claimed to be no more than a transmitter of the truth that Shinran had uncovered. Acquainted with grief, humbled by his background, he was affectionately called Rennyō-san by ordinary people and, unlike Shinran, soon became the subject of popular anecdotes. As restorer of Shin Buddhism, he was like a fresh spring wind bringing an awareness of new growth. He was above all the right man at the right time in the history of Hongwanji, giving the tradition a focus and energy that made it the leading sect in Japanese Buddhism.

The 500th anniversary of Rennyō's life has provided the occasion for a rethinking and re-evaluation of his life and teachings by all Hongwanji temples and members around the world, in Japan, North and South America, and Europe. His life is being celebrated and studied by some as a source and inspiration for the revitalization of Shin Buddhism in a stressful time, not entirely dissimilar from his own.

Despite the importance of Rennyō traditionally within the Hongwanji, according to inquiries made by Itsuki Hiroyuki, a noted author, Rennyō is generally not as well known as are the great monks Saichō (767–822) of Tendai, Kūkai (774–835) of Shingon in the Heian period (794–1185), Hōnen (1133–1212), Shinran (1173–1262), Ippen (1239–1289), Dōgen (1200–1253), Eisai (1141–1215), and Nichiren (1222–1282) in the Kamakura period (1185–1333), or the later Ikkyū (1394–1481) in the Muromachi period (1338–1573) and Enkū (1632–1695) in the Tokugawa period (1603–1867). Most have heard Rennyō's name, but know nothing of his life and activities.

Itsuki points out that intellectuals generally disfavor Rennyō, because he appears to be a professional priest, while Shinran declared that he was neither a priest nor a layperson. Rennyō appeals more to business people, politicians and those who work among the masses, as well as

ordinary people who are still much influenced by Rennyo's pastoral letters (*Gobunshō*, or *Ofumi*).<sup>2</sup>

Itsuki notes that since the death of Rennyo five hundred years ago there are even today many who feel intimate or familiar with "Rennyo-san" while in contrast they revere and respect Shinran Shōnin.<sup>3</sup> He writes that when people hear the name Shinran, they may straighten their collar or alter their posture, naturally assuming an attitude of devotion. However, when they hear Rennyo, their faces relax, and they have a peaceful expression as though they are blown on by a spring wind.<sup>4</sup>

Rennyo, as the Eighth Abbot descended from Shinran, has long been known as the Restorer or Second Founder of Shin Buddhism. Today he is being called an Innovator. These titles are more than metaphors. They have real, historical substance, indicating the contributions Rennyo made to rescue Hongwanji from its long plunge into poverty and isolation. The title Second Founder acknowledges Rennyo's reinterpretation of Shinran's teaching. In dedicating himself consciously to the renewal of Hongwanji, he laid the foundation for the future religious and social unfolding of Shin Buddhism. Although five hundred years have passed since his leadership, his influence extends to the present day, raising a real question whether Shin Buddhism is more reflective of Rennyo than Shinran. Rennyo himself believed that he was returning to Shinran as the spiritual source for Shin Buddhism, while correcting misunderstandings of the teaching that occurred in what he called the "middle period" between Shinran and himself.

Although admired as an innovator by many today, Rennyo is controversial for having set the pattern for teaching and organization that has been severely criticized in modern times as authoritarian and feudalistic. These reproaches largely resulted from the momentous events surrounding Japan's defeat in World War II.

In the contemporary re-evaluation of Rennyo, many now see him as a thinker who grasped the popular mind and brought hope to the ordinary person. In the recent past, he has been viewed as merely an organizer, cleverly employing his many children to construct an ecclesiastical institution. However, he is now recognized as struggling to control a burgeoning movement whose followers sometimes used the teaching to justify their anti-social attitudes and actions, such as refusing to pay taxes or ridiculing other religions.

Thus, there are among modern scholars a variety of views about Rennyo. What is most productive now is to gain insights and learn from his experience in order to assist the renewal of Shin Buddhism in the twenty-first century. As a person of the fifteenth century, we must view Rennyo in that context, recognizing the differences between his era's challenges, the problems he confronted in his effort to revive the ailing

Shin sect, and those of today. At his birth, conditions were abysmal in Hongwanji, and from his early youth, Rennyo resolved to restore the teaching. His aim and dedication was to proclaim Shinran's vision of Amida's boundless, unconditional compassion for all people. Our focus today must take into account that with all this, Rennyo remains a man of the fifteenth century.

From our viewpoint five hundred years after his remarkable achievements, we see the choices that Rennyo made may have had undesirable implications for the future. How could he have known that? What mattered then—and still matters—is that he adapted the teaching to meet the needs of the people he led and nurtured. Of course, he differs in points of emphasis from Shinran who lived in the thirteenth century. These must be recognized. Rennyo had no intention to distort the teaching. Rather, in his mind he faithfully followed Shinran, as Shinran believed he followed Hōnen and transmitted the teaching in a manner that would be most effective in enabling ordinary people to understand and take it into their lives.

The tremendous growth of Shin Buddhism during his lifetime must be credited to his insight that whatever the merits of the previous Abbots, just copying texts or making official tours did not reach the people effectively. Those Rennyo met were naturally and sincerely convinced of his spiritual authenticity, and that his character manifested his convictions. By this means, he attracted a great following, all of whom were devoted to him.

Rennyo's popularity in Japan is such that one legend about him has been made into a *kyōgen* drama which illustrates, perhaps, something of Rennyo's popularity, spiritual influence, and attraction for women. At the same time, it reveals the conflict of the old religion and the new religion. The story is called *yome odoshi no men* which means roughly "bride-scaring mask." Tourists also call it *nikuzuki no men* or "mask with flesh attached."

The legend relates that a mother-in-law became very jealous of the devotion her son and daughter-in-law had toward Rennyo. Every night after work they would both go to Yoshizaki. In an age when the women would have been left at home to do chores and the men went out, the story suggests something about Rennyo, when the husband and wife both go to Yoshizaki. The mother-in-law resented being left behind. One night when they went to Yoshizaki, she put on a demon mask and hid behind a tree on the path. The wife was walking out in front, when the mother jumped out, shouting she was a messenger of the deity of Hakusan.

The "spirit" criticized the couple for always visiting Rennyo, neglecting their work and the mother-in-law. The frightened woman fled home.

The husband's turn was next and while the mother waited for him, she thought to take off the mask, but could not get it off. It ate into her face. She cried out and when the son came, he asked why the mask covered the mother's face. She told him everything, and he took his mother to Yoshizaki where Rennyō was residing. When she heard his teaching, she was grateful and began to recite nembutsu. Suddenly, the mask mysteriously fell off, but some of her flesh, which had been torn when she earlier tried to force the mask off, stuck to it, giving rise to the name "the mask with flesh attached."<sup>5</sup>

In Japan, the popular familiarity with Rennyō comes also from such stories told about Rennyō and his contemporary Ikkyū, the famous eccentric Zen monk-poet, and himself the subject of popular legend. One of these stories relates that on one occasion, when Rennyō was building the Yamashina Hongwanji Temple in Kyoto, Ikkyū came and seated himself over some trees that were going to be used in the construction, putting some grass over his head. Some people working in the construction became nervous since Ikkyū refused to move from his place. They went to Rennyō to complain about it. After explaining the situation, Rennyō told them to just give some tea to Ikkyū and he would leave. They gave him tea whereupon he immediately left the site. Everybody was wondering what happened, when Rennyō explained: "The *kanji* for tea is made from three parts: grass on top, a person in the middle and tree on the bottom. This was just the way that Ikkyū asked for tea."

On another occasion, in Kyoto there was a very famous pine tree called Very Tortuous Pine (*nanamagari no matsu*). Ikkyū put up a sign in front of the pine tree which announced: "I am going to give one *kan* (8.33 pounds) of gold to the person who can see this pine tree in a straight way." Everybody tried to see how such a twisted tree could be seen straight. Some people thought that maybe from some angle the tree could be seen as straight. After some time, someone told Rennyō about the sign. Without seeing the tree, he said that he knew the answer and asked for the one *kan* of gold. Ikkyū cautioned that on the reverse side of the board there was a warning: "This is not valid for Rennyō." Some people asked Rennyō the answer and he replied: "The answer is very simple. The way to see this tree straight is to recognize that it is twisted."

Again, Ikkyū created the following *kōan* (Zen riddle-like question) for Rennyō: "Amida has no mercy since Amida only saves those who say His Name." (In Japanese: *Amida ni wa makoto no jihi wa nakarikeri, tanomu shujō nomi tasukeru*). Rennyō answered the *kōan* with a poem: "There is no heart far from Amida, but a bowl of water covered cannot reflect the moon" (*Amida ni wa hedatsuru kokoro wa nakededomo futa aru mizu ni tsuki wa yadoraji*).

One may imagine this exchange arising in friendly banter between two friends. Yet, it captures two approaches to Pure Land teaching as it

evolved from Hōnen and his emphasis on the sole practice of nembutsu. Ikkyū sees the exclusivistic, discriminating feature of the practice, confronting the world. Rennyō, however, points to the universal, inclusive character of Amida Buddha that underlies the practice. The one views nembutsu from the outside, while the other experiences it from the inside. According to Rennyō, Amida, like the moon, always shines everywhere equally, but one's mind and heart may be closed. They both highlight the paradoxical nature of the teaching, which is particular and universal.

Stories concerning Shinran such as we find in the *Godenshō* are more serious and express points of doctrine. Here Rennyō is shown in a more light-hearted way to be on good terms with a monk of another sect, but also spiritually keen in responding easily to the questions put to him by the monk. These stories show that Rennyō was the equal of Zen monks who were prominent in religion and arts.

The ethnologist Yanagita Kunio (1875–1962), who diligently viewed the life of the Japanese with great insight, digging deeply into the Japanese mind, was not particularly friendly to Shin Buddhism. However, he indicated that the influence of Rennyō continues to live on in remembrances, customs, and practices that have become flesh and blood, and have been handed down unconsciously.<sup>6</sup> Rennyō established the style of worship in Shin Buddhism, such as the recitation of the *Shōshinge* (*Hymn of True Faith* written by Shinran in the *Kyōgyōshinshō*), *Amidakyō* and Shinran's *Wasan* or hymns. He emphasized the observance of *hōonkō*, the grateful commemoration of Shinran's death, which was first initiated by Kakunyo (1270–1351), the third abbot. His "Letter on White Ashes" (*Hakkotsu no Gobunshō*) became widely used in funerals.

In modern literature, we can observe the influence of Rennyō in the novel *Black Rain* (*Kuroi ame*) by Ibuse Masuji (1898–1993). The story concerns the devastation of Hiroshima and an occasion where no priest was available to perform services. A layperson is left with the obligation to perform a service for a dead fellow worker. He receives from a priest several texts to use in the service, including Rennyō's "White Ashes." The sutra and other scriptures were difficult to understand, but Rennyō's letter was "in gentler, homelier Japanese, in a beautiful language that struck home to the heart." After the service, others wanted to copy the letter. The response of the people was to Rennyō's letter, which caught the spirit of their tragedy and was easily understood.<sup>7</sup> In spite of the many questions that have been raised among scholars about his leadership and his teaching among scholars, Rennyō's widespread popular influence is enduring.

Particularly in the postwar period, there has been a rediscovery of Rennyō by scholars, which has been noted by Mori Ryūkichi, himself a

scholar of Shin history. He indicates that until a direct path to the study of Shinran had been opened in the beginning of this century, Shin Buddhists could only view Shinran through the filter of Rennyō. This has given rise to the question whether it is Shinran's sangha or Rennyō's, because the influence of Rennyō has been so great. In the pre-modern period, Rennyō was the symbol for the Shinshū kingdom and a feudal religious Order of which he was the leader. Because of such absolute authority, modern people, such as intellectuals, outside of Shin Buddhism withdrew and kept their distance from Rennyō.

In the postwar period a new historical scholarship, represented by a famous Buddhist scholar, Hattori Shisō, threw new light on Rennyō and gave fresh impetus to the study of medieval Buddhism. He employed little known textual records of a subsidiary medieval temple (*Honpukuji kyūki*) to set out the life of Rennyō, rather than just relying on his letters, despite their great value religiously and historically. Other important scholars were Kasahara Kazuo and Inoue Toshio, whose fundamental studies clarified Rennyō's historical character and released him from being merely a symbol for the sect. They restored his position as a historical person, overcoming his long held bad reputation. He even appeared in textbooks and historical novels.<sup>8</sup> Most recently, Rennyō has become the subject of the popular author Itsuki Hiroyuki, whom we mentioned previously. Through his novel, play, and various essays, Rennyō has gained new attractiveness, because he is portrayed as living resolutely and boldly in an age of turmoil.

In my own scholarly experience, I have encountered the low evaluation of Rennyō, because some of his policies contributed to the formation of the hereditary, ecclesiastical hierarchy in the Hongwanji centered on his family, which is unknown in the history of Buddhism. In addition, the collusion of Hongwanji and the state (*ōbō-buppō*) in promoting the nationalism that contributed to the onset of the recent war has focussed attention on Rennyō's statements concerning the relation of Buddhism and society which were used to justify such collaboration.

While Rennyō has been discounted as a scholar, his efforts in copying texts as an assistant of his father exposed him to the writings of Shinran in an intimate way. He absorbed the fundamental principles of Shinran, which he concentrated in his letters. He also closely studied Kakunyo, the third Abbot, and Zonkaku (1290–1373), Kakunyo's son, as well as the *Anjinketsujōshō*, a Pure Land text of the Seizan school of the Jōdoshū whose author is not certain, yet a favorite of Rennyō and influential in his thought.<sup>9</sup>

Rennyō's major writings were his letters, which total over two hundred. Later eighty of those letters were selected as a special collection by Ennyō (1491–1521), his grandson. These letters have now

become virtually scripture for Shin followers, while certain ones are read on special occasions. The most famous is "White Ashes" (*Hakkotsu no Gobunshō*), which as mentioned above is frequently used at Shin funerals.<sup>10</sup>

In recent religious studies, the recognition of letters, as personal communications, has grown with the observations that many great teachers have used letters to relate to their followers and share their teaching. Most notable are Hōnen, Shinran, Nichiren and outside of Buddhism, Paul in the Christian tradition. Rennyo's letters have come to be viewed as an important religious resource, because they contain insights and information, which reveal him to be a thoughtful and knowledgeable person. Though he had deeply studied Shinran's teaching, he was neither scholastic nor pedantic.

Inspired by the 500th year commemoration of his death, scholars have continued the effort to look more closely at Rennyo himself in his own historical context, rather than projecting on him the results of later developments in Hongwanji and Buddhism generally. That is, Buddhism in Japan, as a whole, was greatly influenced by the rise of feudalism and eventually imperial absolutism in Japanese history. While it has been easy to attribute these later developments as they are manifested in Hongwanji to Rennyo, more considered and critical study focuses on Rennyo's response to the problems of his own time in order to construct a more accurate image of the person.

Comparisons are frequently made between Shinran and Rennyo highlighting their differing religious and social perspectives, as well as personalities. Shinran unintentionally created a movement and was more individually oriented. His teaching reflects his inward, introspective and subjective, as well as more scholarly or philosophical character. He speaks pointedly of his religious experience and his personal weaknesses or limitations and clearly rejected the idea that he was a teacher or had disciples.

Rennyo, however, inherited a movement that had already become institutionalized. While speaking very little about his own spiritual experience, he consciously accepted the role of teacher or leader of an emerging movement and had to deal with the problems of religious power and authority that accompanied his status. He was concerned with the fortunes of the Shin community. He was more outgoing in his human relations. Further, his position as a teacher must be considered in the light of his enormous influence, for which there is little comparison among other medieval teachers.

Despite differences in personality and religious experience, Shinran's and Rennyo's approaches to faith are similar in being subjective or personal and requiring a definite turn of the mind in trust in Amida's Vows. It is expressed in the grateful recitation of the nembutsu. There



is a common emphasis in both teachers on the absolute Other-Power foundation of deliverance. They understand that Amida is a power within the heart and mind of the person, bringing about a spiritual transformation, as well as being enshrined as the essence of the nembutsu itself.

Rennyo's lowly origins as the son of a concubine and his experience of poverty gave him great sympathy with the ordinary person and made him easy to relate to. In the *Rennyo Shōnin goichidaiki kikigaki*, there is the notation:

(Rennyo) said: "Leaving aside social position and sitting together with everyone alike is like Shinran who said: 'All people within the four seas who have faith [shinjin] are brothers [and sisters].' I only ask that when we sit together that you raise your questions and acquire faith [shin]." <sup>11</sup>

It is said that rather than speaking from a platform or raised seat, Rennyo met people knee to knee and drank tea with them. In another instance, Rennyo halted the Tendai practice used in Shin temples of throwing thirty centimeter sticks at people in the audience from the speaker's elevated position when listeners were nodding off.<sup>12</sup> He did not put on airs and disliked a show of piety:

Rennyo Shōnin disliked wearing clothes without designs or patterns. He said that it made someone seem superior (or more religious). He also disdained wearing charcoal black robes. When someone came to him (dressed in this way) he exclaimed: "Here is a properly dressed, superior priest." Therefore, he said: "No, I am not superior; only Amida's Vow is superior."<sup>13</sup>

Briefly, Rennyo's personal style appears more open and democratic. The first letter in the authorized collection emphasizes the camaraderie of Shin Buddhism, noting Shinran's declaration that he did not have even one disciple. Rennyo wore plain gray robes and removed the preaching platform. He sat on the same level with his followers. He admonished his associates not to keep followers waiting and to serve them food and sake. When he visited followers who had little to offer him, he warmly ate the millet gruel that they ate and spent the night discussing religion with them.<sup>14</sup> He advocated that Noh plays be performed to put people at ease and to teach the buddhadharma anew when they have lost interest.<sup>15</sup>

Though Rennyo could be solicitous for the welfare of his followers, he was also critical. He castigated the behavior of the priests who sought greater spiritual and financial power over the members. He also censured the members for lacking proper religious motivation for their

participation and for the lack of discussion and understanding of the doctrine.

Rennyo is viewed as a teacher who gave consolation and hope to followers in tough times, not entirely unlike our own time. His historical background is the descent into war and chaos in what is known as the Warring States period of Japanese history. With the gradual collapse of the Ashikaga Shogunate, warlords vied for personal power and struggled to gain control over the country. Rennyo and the Hongwanji were caught in the midst of these struggles. In this context, Rennyo emphasized the otherworldly aspect of Pure Land thought and challenged people to take seriously their future destinies. In his time, the prospect of the Pure Land was a compassionate alternative to the sufferings and uncertainties of life in this world. Hence, he emphasized the “one great issue of the afterlife (*goshō no ichidaiji*).” In Rennyo’s time, the yearning for afterlife was a response to the terrors of life in an unpredictable world, whereas in our time of affluence, the issue is the meaning of existence. Today some who view this life as meaningless have gone so far as to take their own lives, believing they will find meaning in other spheres when they are free from their bodies and the material world.

Recent assessments of Rennyo by Western scholars, most notably Minor Lee Rogers, James C. Dobbins, and Michael Solomon<sup>16</sup> call attention to Rennyo’s central importance in the formation of Shin Buddhism into a major religious force in Japan. Rogers notes the ambiguous and controversial relation of Rennyo as a revered leader of the Shin sect and the problems of religious power that accompanied his historical role.<sup>17</sup> He is multifaceted, being “a Buddhist priest, charismatic religious leader, shrewd political strategist, igniter of literary imagination, friend for turbulent times, representative figure for Japanese spirituality.”<sup>18</sup> Dobbins views Rennyo as a rare individual who had a vision and seized the moment, addressing the needs of ordinary people and giving the clearest exposition of the teaching. He combined religious exhortation and social expediency.<sup>19</sup>

The complexity of Rennyo originates from his having to deal with the radical nature of Shin Buddhism in its relations with other traditions and the general society. In addition, popular rebellions called *ikkō ikki*, involved Hongwanji members, merchants, and peasants. These incidents had their roots in the liberating implications of Hōnen’s Pure Land doctrine, which permitted people to accept death positively, while devaluing political and traditional religious institutions that controlled the means of salvation.<sup>20</sup> During this time, Hongwanji itself became a power, while at the same time it was opposed by the established Buddhist orders such as Tendai. Rennyo himself only narrowly escaped death because of persecution. Under his leadership, Hongwanji became completely independent of the Tendai order.

In studying Rennyo, we have to distinguish the view within the Hongwanji, which exalts him as the faithful transmitter of Shinran's teaching, and the more critically oriented historical and social studies, which try to assess his role and position in the history of Japan, religiously and socially. In order to develop a proper understanding of Rennyo, it is necessary to provide a context in Japanese history and the history of Shin Buddhism prior to Rennyo in order to make clear the decisive role he played.

We must also look closely at his life and his family. He is remarkable because of the difficulties of his childhood, the problem of his becoming abbot and his family life, which involved five wives in succession and the birth of twenty-seven children, consisting of thirteen sons and fourteen daughters. There were the problems of persecution, and there was the work of propagation and instruction to which he devoted himself. His letters, as the primary resource, highlight his effort to revitalize the Shin movement, by giving correct teaching, while also creatively interpreting its meaning for the people of his time. The letters reflect internal problems of the Shin community, spiritually and socially. The role of the Hongwanji and Rennyo in the *ikkō ikki*, or peasant uprisings is an important area of concern for modern scholars.

We have only hinted at important facets of Rennyo's life and work in order to stimulate a deeper appreciation and realistic assessment of his achievements in Shin history. In this way we can also receive inspiration to develop the teaching in our own age, both maintaining its proper understanding, while also adapting it to the needs of our contemporary society. We shall now turn to what we may learn from Rennyo's endeavors for our own day.

## II. THE CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE OF RENNYO

In our previous section, we summarized aspects of Rennyo's life that were the basis for his success in revitalizing the Hongwanji and creating a major, powerful religious movement in medieval Japan. Sifting through the evidence of his thought and activities, we can discover clues for the renaissance of contemporary Shin Buddhism, emphasizing his progressive character. Above all, it is important that the spirit of Rennyo be the guiding force of the Shin sangha.

### A. Rennyo's Perspective on Faith and Religious Experience

As we have earlier pointed out, both Shinran and Rennyo each responded to issues of their own time and circumstance. There is a basic unity in their thought, despite differences in their personalities and

historical situation. While sharing Shinran's personal vision of Amida's all-encompassing compassion and wisdom, Rennyo adjusted Shinran's fundamental insights to make them more accessible and understandable to the ordinary person of his day. He simplified the more complex teaching of Shinran, holding to the principle of emphasizing only the most essential principles. Further, being born within an already existing institutional system, Rennyo believed that the teachings were made manifest in the world by means of the Hongwanji tradition.<sup>21</sup>

Rennyo's experiences of the deaths of his wives and several children, as well as the violence of the age, made him keenly aware of the impermanence, unpredictability, and violence in life.<sup>22</sup> In view of the brevity of life and depth of our evil<sup>23</sup>, the afterlife is of the greatest importance (*goshō no ichidaiji*), in contrast to Shinran's stress on the reception of faith and assurance of rebirth in this life.<sup>24</sup> Rennyo draws a clear distinction between this world and the next, and it is the next that should be the object of our aspiration and the decisive settling of mind.

While Rennyo upholds strongly the principle of karma as the basis for encountering the teaching, religious experience is a total process for him. This process is outlined in five conditions, which must be present in order for a person to attain truly settled faith. First, there is the unfolding of good karma from the past. Second, there is the meeting with a good teacher.<sup>25</sup> Third is receiving Amida's light; fourth is attaining faith, and fifth, saying the name of the Buddha.<sup>26</sup> However, these five elements comprise a simultaneous moment in which we have the good fortune to encounter a teacher who clarifies the truth concerning our spiritual condition and awakens confidence in the truth of the teaching. It is the one moment of entrusting and attaining of truly settled faith.

According to Rennyo, faith is fundamental<sup>27</sup> and is the source of nembutsu.<sup>28</sup> Faith "is granted by Amida Tathāgata . . . this is not faith generated by the practitioner, . . . it is Amida Tathāgata's Other-Power faith."<sup>29</sup> The term *shinjin* is taken by Rennyo to be Amida's Other-Power true mind which displaces the believer's mind of self-striving.<sup>30</sup> An alternative term for faith is *anjin* or *yasuki kokoro*, which has essentially the same meaning as *shinjin*, but with emphasis on the aspect of the peace, or tranquillity that attends reception of faith.<sup>31</sup>

Through the reception of *shinjin/anjin* the believer is embraced within the Buddha mind in a spiritual union, confirmed by faith and expressed in the teaching of the unity of the being and the Buddha (*kīhō ittai*), derived from the *Anjinketsujōshō*. Rennyo interprets the terms *namu* and *amida butsu* in the nembutsu to emphasize the oneness of the mind of the person of settled faith and the Buddha. It is the action of the Tathāgata that creates the oneness of the Buddha mind and ordinary mind, guaranteeing the ultimate enlightenment of the person of faith.<sup>32</sup> The name *namu-amida-butsu* is the verbal, symbolic expression of the

reality of that oneness when it is recited in trust and gratitude.<sup>33</sup> The recitation of the name is only for gratitude, arising spontaneously from the settled mind of faith.<sup>34</sup>

It is important to note that external appearances, or the varying outward conditions, status or roles of people in life, have no relevance in attaining trust. Further, on attaining the settled mind, one carries on a normal life, whether it is as a hunter, fisherman, or tradesman.<sup>35</sup> Settled faith means also to honor the laws of the state and fulfill public obligations.<sup>36</sup> The relation of Buddhism and the state or society is an important issue in Rennyō's thought, but it must be viewed in the light of his historical situation. Essentially he promoted the idea we have in the New Testament of "rendering unto Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God [Buddha] what is God's [Buddha's]." (Matt. 15:15-22.)

In order to encourage his followers to be respectful of other religions, Rennyō exalts Amida Buddha as the Original Teacher and Original Buddha of all buddhas and gods.<sup>37</sup> That is, he is the superior<sup>38</sup> and supreme expression of buddhahood which includes all other gods and buddhas within himself. They appear as *upāya* or compassionate means to lead people to the buddhadharma.

Both Shinran and Rennyō had to confront the problem of discipline among the members. Shinran, living in Kyoto and at a great distance from his followers in Eastern Japan, exhorted proper behavior on their part without developing specific rules. Rennyō, however, in an institutional context attempted to exert more control over the Shin community. In his view the term *anjin* or settled mind carried with it the responsibility to follow the obligatory observances, which he set down as a means of avoiding conflicts and obstacles to the teaching in the general community.

From this brief survey, we can see that Rennyō, like Shinran, was concerned for the personal character of faith and its expression in a deep conviction of Amida's compassion. However, Rennyō consolidated the growing Shin community by establishing principles that are more specific for daily living and human relations.

### B. Rennyō's Mission of Propagation and Education

What ultimately gives Rennyō's life significance is his work of propagation and education, which enabled Hongwanji to become the principal leader of Shin Buddhism. Without his consistent efforts to make the teaching more comprehensible to the ordinary person, it is clear that Shinran's highly personal and subtle teaching would have remained obscure and veiled in history.

The Abbots before Rennyō engaged in propagation activities, yet Hongwanji remained a small segment of the larger Shin movement.

Traditionally there were ten branches of which the Hongwanji was but one. It opposed the flourishing Bukkōji and Takada branches, which employed popular practices, viewed by Hongwanji leaders as inconsistent with Shinran's teaching. Lacking in popular appeal, the Hongwanji became impoverished and isolated.

The controversy centering on Rennyo's acceptance as Abbot revolved about the ability of the contenders to revive the fortunes of the Hongwanji. Rennyo's uncle, Nyōjō (1412–1460), convinced family members that Rennyo, rather than Ōgen (1433–1503), son of the legitimate wife of Zonnyo (1396–1457), was more eminently qualified because of his intimate relation to his father and closer relations to the followers.<sup>39</sup> When Rennyo finally became Abbot, it was clearly the combination of Rennyo's personality, his abilities and activities, the times and the character of his teaching that brought about the momentous change in the fortunes of the Hongwanji. He was the right man in the right place at the right time.

Rennyo's activities continued his father's efforts, which included copying texts, writing objects of worship in the form of name-scrolls, granting Dharma-names, undertaking teaching tours, establishing temples, and writing letters, as well as frequent interviews and meetings with individual disciples. These endeavors all aimed to secure the relationship of Rennyo and the Hongwanji with the followers on a deeply personal level. He was also perceptive in seeing how social dynamics worked in Japanese society when he developed the system of *kō*, or small, voluntary associations for religious nurture, and described how propagation should proceed. We might say that Rennyo's propagation and education depended on personal relations, communication-publication through copying texts or writing letters, etc., and social insight.

We may not all share Rennyo's combination of personal traits that contributed greatly to his enormous influence. Nevertheless, we can benefit from the specific strategies he employed in his work of propagation and education which are the basis of his historical and religious importance.

Though Shinran had established the precedent of writing letters to respond to doctrinal questions from disciples, Rennyo's letters were central to his project as a vital means for presenting the essentials of Shin Buddhism in clear and concise language. In comparison to Shinran's scholarly texts such as the *Kyōgyōshinshō*, they could be heard by all followers and were easily copied. Rennyo's letters number over two hundred. However, eighty were selected by Ennyo (1491-1521), Rennyo's grandson, directed by his father, Jitsunyo (1458–1525) the ninth Abbot. These have become virtually sacred text for Shin Buddhists. Most famous among all of them is the "Letter on White Ashes," discussed above.<sup>40</sup> This letter contributed to Rennyo's popularity, it touched the

hearts of people with the reality of impermanence, and the importance of faith and gratitude in spiritual life.

Rennyo made gratitude a central feature of Shin Buddhism. A general accounting of his letters indicates that in the collection of eighty letters forty-nine close with specific exhortations to gratitude, while in others it is implied. Through his insistence, the expression of gratitude became the distinctive approach of Shin Buddhism to practice and religious reflection.

With his father, he made many hand-written copies of Shinran's text for various disciples. This was an extremely laborious method. However, both Rennyo and his father promoted block printing and dissemination of Shinran's *Shōshinge* and *Sanjō-wasan* (three collections of hymns) which were more understandable for those who read or sang them. Here he used, as it were, the latest technology to make materials widely available to the members. Encouraging the use of these texts in personal devotion at home, Rennyo contributed to the deepening of the personal commitment of members to the teaching, as well as the development of literacy among the people.

Rennyo laid the basis for a strong, stable ecclesiastical system by the appointment of his sons to strategic temples and the marriage of his daughters to important clergy. The formation of an inner circle of sons to consult and carry on the teaching made for a broad base of leadership and contributed to the doctrinal integrity of the movement. It is remarkable that after his passing, the unity of the family was maintained.

While establishing the foundation for future Shinshū organization, Rennyo also encouraged grass roots association and activity of a more personal and democratic nature. As the social-religious foundation of Shin Buddhism, the *kō*, (local, voluntary cells in the villages) provided an intimate context to nurture the inward reality of faith. Through the development of the *kō*, groups of disciples met on a monthly basis to discuss the faith (*yoriai dangō*). Here a lively sense of community and commitment were nourished.

Since the *kō* might coincide with the village, in time religious and political aspects overlapped as is evident in the peasant *ikkō ikki* uprisings. One important characteristic, however, is that the *kō* could transcend its simply local character through its connection with the broad movement of Shin Buddhism. This was the basis for the enormous power that Shin Buddhism came to hold in medieval society. This power led to its struggle with Oda Nobunaga (1534–1582), and eventual division under the Tokugawa.

We can see that the meetings of the *kō* or temples provided opportunity for members to interact and discuss their faith in a more personal way. The dissemination of the *Shōshinge* and *Wasan* suggests that part of the meeting involved the devotional chanting of these texts, while

members and clergy then discussed the teaching. Rennyo also wrote numerous letters marking the anniversary of Shinran's death in which he commented on the meaning of the teaching. The letters were to be read at the services.<sup>41</sup> The meetings were clearly also a social occasion, though Rennyo desired that the religious purpose be constantly maintained.<sup>42</sup> For him the spirituality of the movement was uppermost. In his overall perspective he recognized that the prosperity of the movement does not lie in the prestige of great numbers, but whether people have faith, and the flourishing of the right sole practice comes about through the will of the disciples who follow.<sup>43</sup>

In the educational process, Rennyo was also very perceptive. He understood the essential role of the teacher, though not in an authoritarian fashion like the other competing Shin Buddhist movements of his time. He realized that faith does not arise in a vacuum, but there must be a teacher who interacts with the seeker to evoke faith and give it stability (*Gobunshō*, II-11). The teacher is to deal with questions and doubts about the teaching and never to suppress the disciple's inquiry.

Shin Buddhism is more than simple faith in a practice that promises some future benefit, such as the self-power *nembutsu*, which conduces to an externality of religion or a quantitative calculation of benefits. Shin Buddhism is a religion of personal experience, becoming aware of Amida's unconditional compassion at work in our lives. Through discussion and interaction with the teacher, a clarity and confidence is reached such that one is assured of rebirth in the Pure Land (*shōjōju*) and lives by that assurance. It is to attain the confirmation and conviction of one's faith indicated in the terms: *shinjin ichinen* (*shinjin* of one thought-moment), *ichinen hokki heizei gōjō* (the karmic cause of birth is fulfilled in ordinary life), or *anjin ketsujō* (attainment of the settled mind). It is not a practice to do, but a faith to live by. D. T. Suzuki (1870–1966) translated the term *gyō* (normally translated as “practice”) in the *Kyōgyōshinshō* as “living” which approaches the holistic perspective of the Shin understanding of faith.

As a strategy for propagation, Rennyo spoke the language of the people. This is demonstrated by his adoption of the term *tanomu*, which was widely used by other Jōdo schools. Rennyo gave it the Shinshū meaning of relying or trusting in the Vow of Amida Buddha, rather than pleading for salvation as in the term *tasuke tamae to tanomu*. He often employed the term *anjin* in place of *shinjin* because it was also widely used in Pure Land circles. However, he gave clear Shinshū meaning to these terms.

Rennyo made many tours of the countryside to spread the teaching. This gave him wide exposure to the living conditions of the people. He also suggested that to propagate Shin Buddhism effectively one must approach the three most important people in a village, the priest, the



elder, and the headman. Apart from the hierarchical character of this social order, what is important here is Rennyō's sensitivity to the changing nature of the society in which he lived and his shrewdness in recognizing its usefulness. Though in our more individualistic age, this strategy would have little effect, the principle underlying his recommendation is that we must understand the society we are living in and be able to address important segments of society in a way that will attract their interest and support.

Rennyō is notable in his time for his sensitivity to the spiritual welfare of women, inspired perhaps by his concern for his wives and numerous daughters, as well as the women who participated in his movement. He refers to the spiritual status of women in fifty-eight of the two hundred twelve letters that are considered authentic. Contrasting Shin Buddhism with other Buddhist traditions, Rennyō stressed that the salvation of women was a primary concern for Amida Buddha. This is significant because the religious status of women in traditional Buddhism was lower than the status of men.<sup>44</sup> Though Rennyō declares the spiritual equality of women, he does not make clear their social equality. This remains a task for our contemporary sangha.

## CONCLUSION

Like Rennyō, we must be able to adapt the teaching to meet the needs of ordinary people, as well as to make clear its challenge for people in all walks of life and segments of society. The pressing issues of contemporary society cannot be ignored by religious faith. The life and teachings of Rennyō, forged in a turbulent age, offer insight and guidance for searching people today and inspire hope for life now, as well as hereafter. We have observed many aspects of Rennyō's activities and style that brought Shin Buddhism to its highest level in the medieval period.

It is important to note here, in distinction to other Buddhist traditions which place a high emphasis on practice, that the nembutsu taught in Shin Buddhism is "neither a practice nor a good deed," aiming at attaining enlightenment or some type of benefit. Life and living in its totality is "practice" and not merely those activities regarded as "religious." The principles of the unity of beings and dharma (*kihō ittai*) and the interrelation of the spiritual truth and secular truth (*shinzoku nitai*) imply that our lives are to manifest the highest truth; that we live with self reflection, seeing ourselves in the mirror of the Dharma. The characteristics of such a life, then as now, are comradeship, communication, critique, commitment or deep religious motivation and understanding. These are the keys to the future for Shin Buddhism.

## NOTES

1. See Galen Amstutz, *Interpreting Amida: History and Orientalism in the Study of Pure Land Buddhism* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1997), p. 141, note 2: "If Honganji had about 10 million members in 1875, it included about 30 percent of the Japanese population (1875 national figure: 34,338,000)."
2. Itsuki Hiroyuki, *Rennyō: Sei zoku guyū no ningenzō* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1994), pp. 2–5.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 6–8, 15.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 137–140
6. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
7. Minor Lee Rogers and Ann T. Rogers, *Rennyō: The Second Founder of Shin Buddhism* (Berkeley, Calif.: Asian Humanities Press, 1991), pp. 342–343.
8. Mori Ryūichi, *Rennyō* (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1969), pp. 3–4.
9. James C. Dobbins, *Jōdo Shinshū: Shin Buddhism in Medieval Japan*, (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1989), pp. 106–107.
10. This eloquent letter, according to scholars, borrowed images and phrases from other texts such as the *Mujōkōshiki* by the Retired Emperor Gotoba (1180–1239) when he was exiled to Oki after the Jōkyū rebellion in 1222. This text was quoted by Zonkaku in his *Zonkaku hōgo*. See Sugi Shirō, *Gobunshō kōwa* (1933; reprint, Kyoto: Nagata Bunshōdo, 1993), pp. 386–388; Inagi Sen'e, *Gobunshō-gaiyō* (1983; reprint, Kyoto: Hyakkaen, 1995), pp. 502–513.
11. *Rennyō shōnin goichidaiki kikigaki*, no. 40, in *Shinshū shōgyō zensho*, vol. 3 (Kyoto: Ōyagi Kōbundō, 1941), p. 543. Author's translation. For alternative translation, see Kosho Yamamoto, *The Words of St. Rennyō* (Yamaguchi, Japan: The Karin Bunko, 1968), p. 21.
12. Jōdo Shinshū Kyōgaku Kenkyūsho, ed., *Rennyō Shōnin: Sono oshie to shōgai ni manabu* (Kyoto: Honganji Shuppansha, 1995), p. 79.
13. *Rennyō shōnin goichidaiki kikigaki*, no. 167, in *Shinshū shōgyō zensho*, vol. 3, pp. 571–572. Author's translation. For alternative translation, see Yamamoto, *Words of St. Rennyō*, p. 61.
14. Ira Michael Solomon, "Rennyō and the Rise of Honganji in Muromachi Japan," (Ph. D. diss., Columbia University, 1972), pp. 187–188. Revised edition published as Michael Solomon, *Rennyō and the Rise of Honganji: Shin Buddhism and Society in Medieval Japan* (Los Angeles: Pure Land Publications, 1997).

15. *Jitsugo kyūki*, no. 51, in Inaba Masamaru, *Rennyo shōnin gyōjitsu* (1928; reprint, Kyoto: Hōzōkan, 1990), no. 214, p. 83.

16. In addition to the other works by these authors cited elsewhere in this article, the reader may also be referred to Minor L. Rogers, “Rennyo’s *Ofumi* and the Shinshū in Pure Land Tradition” in James Foard, Michael Solomon and Richard K. Payne, eds., *The Pure Land Tradition: History and Development* (Berkeley Buddhist Studies Series, no. 3. Berkeley: Berkeley Buddhist Studies Series, 1996), pp. 429–461; Michael Solomon, “Honganji under Rennyo: The Development of Shinshū in Medieval Japan,” in Foard, Solomon and Payne, eds., *The Pure Land Tradition*, pp. 399–428; and James C. Dobbins, “The World-View of Rennyo and His Religion: A Study of ‘Sayings From the Life of Master Rennyo’ (*Rennyo Shōnin goichidai kikigaki*)” in *The Rennyo Shonin Reader* (Kyoto: Institute of Jodo Shinshu Studies, 1998), pp. 113–131.

17. Rogers and Rogers, *Rennyo*, pp. 79–84.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

19. Dobbins, *Jōdo Shinshū*, p. 132.

20. Soho Machida, *Renegade Monk: Hōnen and Japanese Pure Land Buddhism* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1999), pp. 7–9.

21. Rogers and Rogers, *Rennyo*, III-9.

22. *Ibid.*, pp. 76–77, note 19.

23. The ten transgressions are (1) destroying life, (2) stealing, (3) committing adultery, (4) lying, (5) uttering words that cause enmity, (6) uttering harsh words, (7) engaging in idle talk, (8) greed, (9) anger, (10) wrong views. The five grave offenses are (1) killing one’s mother, (2) killing one’s father, (3) killing an arhat, (4) causing blood to flow from the body of a Buddha, and (5) disrupting the harmony of the assembly of monks, causing schism or dissolution. (Rogers and Rogers, *Rennyo*, p. 147, n. 18, 19.) The five obstacles are that women cannot become deities like Brahma, Indra, Mara-kings, *cakravartin* or Buddha. The three submissions are submission to father, husband and eldest son.

24. Rogers and Rogers, *Rennyo*, I-10; V-2. Rennyo does not neglect the principle of entry into the company of the truly assured (*shōjōju*) taught by Shinran or the attainment of confirmed faith in this life (*anjin/shinjin ketsujō*). It is that his eye is more on the goal of that experience than we see in Shinran.

25. The role of the teacher is fundamental in light of the emphasis on hearing the name in the fulfillment text of the 18th Vow. Hearing requires that there be a teacher (Rogers and Rogers, *Rennyo*, I-15; III-6). An aspect of the process of hearing and settling faith is that it is promoted through discussion and the clarification of doubts. Rennyo states: “Even if you feel that you understand the significance of the Buddha-dharma—having listened through sliding doors or over a hedge—faith will be decisively settled [only] by your

repeatedly and carefully asking others about its meaning . . . . You should ask others, time after time, about what you have understood of faith, until Other-Power faith (*anjin*) is decisively settled. If you listen but once, there will surely be mistakes” (Rogers and Rogers, *Rennyō*, IV-7, 8, 12).

26. *Ibid.*, II-11.

27. *Ibid.*, V-10.

28. *Ibid.*, V-22.

29. *Ibid.*, V-12.

30. *Ibid.*, I-15; IV-6.

31. *Ibid.*, II-15.

32. *Ibid.*, II-10.

33. *Ibid.*, III-7.

34. *Ibid.*, I-1,2,5.

35. *Ibid.*, I-3; IV-1.

36. *Ibid.*, II-6; IV-1.

37. *Ibid.*, II-8.

38. *Ibid.*, V-5.

39. Rennyō’s birth mother had been a concubine to his father and the family required Zonnyō to take a legal wife when he succeeded to the abbacy. The stepmother treated Rennyō harshly and was determined that her son would become Abbot. At first she succeeded, but Nyojō persuaded the family to accept Rennyō on his merits.

40. English translations appear in the Buddhist Churches of America, *Shinshū Seiten: Jōdo Shin Buddhist Teaching* (San Francisco: Buddhist Churches of America, 1978), no. 78, p. 377; and in a recent translation by Rogers and Rogers in *Rennyō*, V-16.

41. Some anniversary letters are given in the collection of 85. Rogers and Rogers, *Rennyō*, III-9, III-11, V-11.

42. The *hōonkō* service was held on the twenty-eighth day of the eleventh month since the time of Kakunyo, the third Abbot, and for which he composed the *Hōonkō shiki* (*The Rite for the Meeting of Thanksgiving*) in 1294. The character for *kō* is the same for the type of meeting discussed here.

43. *Jitsugo kyūki*, no. 56 and 57, in Inaba Masamaru, *Rennyō Shōnin gyojitsu*, no. 221 and 222, p. 85.

44. See my essay “Rennyō’s View of the Salvation of Women: Overcoming the Five Obstacles and Three Subordinations,” in *The Rennyō Shōnin Reader* (Kyoto: Institute of Jōdo Shinshū Studies, 1998), pp. 5–33.