

Rennyō's Letter on Kengyoku-ni

**Introduction and
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THE *LETTERS OF RENNYO* (*Gobunshō*, or *Ofumi*) formed the centerpiece of his propagational efforts throughout his life. Although the total number of letters that he wrote during his career is unknown, as many as two hundred fifty-two letters have been identified as those penned by Rennyō. Two hundred eleven letters were compiled by Ennyō (1491–1521) during the tenure of Jitsunyo, the ninth Head Priest of Hongwanji. Ennyō selected eighty letters from among them and compiled them as the *Letters in the Five Fascicle Collection* (*Gojō no Gobunshō*). In addition, four letters written by Rennyō during the last summer of his life have been collected as the *Letters of Summers* (*Ge no Gobunshō*). The final letter that has been included with those above is the *Gozokushō*, which is Rennyō's short biographical sketch of Shinran. A translation of these eighty-five letters can be found in *Shinshū Seiten* compiled by Tri-State Buddhist Temples.¹ A recent translation of the *Letters in the Five Fascicle Collection* has been presented with a detailed exposition of Rennyō's life and thought in *Rennyō: The Second Founder of Shin Buddhism* by Minor L. and Ann T. Rogers.²

The remainder constitute the letters outside of the *Five Fascicle Collection*, called *Jōgai no Gobunshō*. Thus far very few of them have been translated into English. Rennyō's letter "On Kengyoku-ni" is included with this group of letters and it now appears in English for the first time. Many of Rennyō's letters are doctrinal tracts, often presenting detailed expositions of the essence of Shin doctrine. Others contain his admonitions to his followers to refrain from improper behavior. In that respect, "On Kengyoku-ni" is somewhat different from his other letters, for in it Rennyō writes movingly of the life and death of his second daughter, Kengyoku (1448–1472). The letter is also unusual in the fact that it represents a rare instance in which Rennyō talks at length about a member of his family. However, what this letter holds in common with most of Rennyō's letters is his fervent urging to his followers that they entrust themselves completely to the salvific reality of Amida Buddha's Primal Vow.

In the letter, Rennyo describes the hardships that Kengyoku had to endure throughout her young life. Sent off as a child to be a servant in a Zen temple, she later became a nun of the Jōkein lineage of the Jōdo school. Later she returned to Hongwanji to care for her step-mother, who had taken ill. Despite her best efforts, however, her mother, and two sisters died within a short time. Shortly thereafter, Kengyoku was summoned to join Rennyo at Yoshizaki in the northern regions. There, Rennyo relates, she realized *shinjin*, the heart and mind of complete reliance on Amida's Vow, which brought about the settlement of her birth. Soon thereafter, she passed away at the young age of twenty-five.

The letter then goes on to describe the contents of a dream that took place after her funeral. The dreamer (probably Rennyo) watches as a golden buddha appears out of the ashes of Kengyoku's cremated remains. The buddha suddenly changes into a butterfly and flies away into the western sky. According to the letter, this vision is evidence of her attainment of birth in Amida's Pure Land. The letter then concludes with Rennyo's heart-felt admission that Kengyoku is a good teacher who could guide him and all persons to realize *shinjin* and say the *nembutsu* in gratitude.

Interestingly, three essays in this journal make reference to this letter. Tomoyasu Hayashi states that Rennyo's experience of loss had a great impact on his views on impermanence.³ Particularly, the deaths of his second wife and four daughters in a short period of time deepened his concern about and understanding of the transiency of life. Akira Ōmine focuses on Rennyo's use of the word *tamashii* or, spirit.⁴ He concludes that Rennyo did not equate that notion with the concept of a substantial soul. Instead, in the letter the word indicates Rennyo's grief over the loss of his daughter and a reaffirmation of the primacy of *shinjin*. Finally, Jitsuen Kakehashi takes the relationship between Rennyo and Kengyoku as the focal point of his lecture.⁵ He offers insight into the events of her life and the meaning that her death held for Rennyo. Kakehashi concludes with the observation that the bond between Rennyo and Kengyoku represented the ideal relationship for followers of the Shin Buddhist path, as they taught and guided each other to the settlement of their birth.

NOTES

1. Tri-State Buddhist Temples, comp., *Shinshū Seiten: Jōdo Shin Buddhist Teaching* (San Francisco: Buddhist Churches of America, 1978), pp. 269–390. See also Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii, comp., *The Shinshu Seiten: The Holy Scripture of Shinshu* (1955: repr. Honolulu: Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii, 1961), pp. 287–298.
2. Minor L. and Ann T. Rogers, *Rennyō: The Second Founder of Shin Buddhism* (Berkeley, Calif.: Asian Humanities Press, 1991), pp. 137–259.
3. Tomoyasu Hayashi, “The Ideal of Impermanence in Rennyō’s Letters,” *The Pacific World*, Third Series 1 (1999): pp. 31–46.
4. Akira Ōmine, “The Idea of *Tamashii* in Buddhism: Who is the ‘Self’?,” *The Pacific World*, Third Series 1 (1999): pp. 47–60.
5. Jitsuen Kakehashi, “Rennyō and His Daughter, Kengyoku,” *The Pacific World*, Third Series 1 (1999): pp. 61–75.

On Kengyoku-ni¹

As I quietly consider this matter, I think that it must be true when we say that the basis of a person's character can be found in one's name. Thus, Kengyoku was the name of a person who has just passed away and realized birth. Her name means "to see a gem." What kind of gem? The name Kengyoku means to behold the wondrous truth of suchness and dharma-nature—the "wish-fulfilling gem" (*nyoi hōju*).²

Kengyoku-ni was a nun, who served originally as a servant (*katsujiki*)³ at a Zen temple, but before long she became a follower of the Jōkein lineage.⁴ Yet, drawn by inconceivable conditions from the past, she came to realize, in recent days, the *shinjin* of our tradition. Here is the reason why. On the fifth day of the twelfth month of the second year of Bunmei (1470) the woman who had been her aunt⁵ passed away. Then, even as she was deeply mourning that loss, her older sister's life⁶ came to an end on the sixth day of the second month of the third year of Bunmei (1471). Her grief was boundless, and, as a result, she herself became incurably ill. Perhaps, in the end, we must say that her illness arose out of her grief and she was never able to recover. On the tenth day of the fifth month of this year (1472) she was confined to her sick bed, and after ninety-four days she passed away.⁷

Throughout her illness she would speak of the unlimited joy she felt over having been able to abandon the "peace of mind" taught in the Jōkein lineage, which she had held until then, and become established in the "settled mind" of our tradition.⁸ On the day before her life came to an end, particularly, she spoke over and over again of the establishment of her settled mind and of her deep appreciation for the efforts of those who had nursed her for so many days. Besides that, she reflected on all of the things that she had come to know during her life. Finally, toward the end of the hour of the dragon (9 A.M.), in the morning of the fourteenth day of the eighth month, lying with her head to the north and facing the west, she attained birth.

Her outward appearance and complexion had led those who cared for her to think, as would anyone, that somehow she would become well again if they would do all that they possibly could for her. But, human life is limited, and so it was unavoidable that she would be summoned by the winds of impermanence and pass away as she did. There was no one who could reflect again upon her life and not be moved to heart-felt tears.

Truly, it can also be said that the deceased was a person in whom the karma of past good deeds (*shukuzen*)⁹ had emerged. The reason for this

must be that she had been able to encounter the inconceivable power of Amida Tathagata's Vow, which is a powerful condition for the attainment of her birth. Indeed, it is also not insignificant that tens of thousands of people attended her funeral service for the very reason that she had travelled to this place in the northern provinces¹⁰ and here attained birth.

Toward the dawn of the night of her cremation on the fifteenth day of the eighth month, a certain person¹¹ here experienced a wondrous vision about her in a dream. In his dream he could see the funeral grounds where her body had vanished in the smoke of cremation, and there, arising out of the white ashes and bones that remained, he could observe three blue lotus blossoms. Within the blossoms he could see a golden Buddha, only one-inch tall, which sent forth rays of light. As he watched, it instantly turned into a butterfly and disappeared from sight. He thereupon awoke from his dream.

This vision was a manifestation of the gem of suchness and dharmature found in her name, Kengyoku. She became a butterfly and disappeared from sight. This indicates without question that her spirit has been transformed into a butterfly,¹² which has gone into the sky of dharma-nature, to the world of ultimate bliss—the city of nirvana.

Also, the fact that a funeral could even have taken place at this temple was because the deceased had realized birth. In particular, there had been a downpour of rain just prior to the cremation. Yet, at the time of the cremation, the sky had cleared, and the moon was pure and bright. Purple clouds stretched across the sky and were reflected in five colors upon the full moon. Everyone could observe this. I truly feel that this must have been an auspicious sign, which allowed us to know that the deceased had assuredly attained birth in the Land of Ultimate Bliss.

Thus it is that everyone should reflect on this nun, Kengyoku, and on her birth. We should understand that she is truly our good teacher (*zenjishiki*).¹³ If people—all men and women—should, as a result, become settled in *shinjin* in the one-thought moment of taking refuge and say the *nembutsu* to respond in gratitude for the Buddha's benevolence, then surely her life will have become a condition for our going to be born in the Pure Land of that one Buddha.

Respectfully.

NOTES

1. This translation is based on the tenth letter located among the *Jōgai no Gobunshō* in *Shinshū shōgyō zensho*, vol. 5 (Kyoto: Ōyagi Kobundō, 1983), pp. 306–308.
2. A precious gem that was said to fulfill all of one's wishes. Known as *cintāmani* in Sanskrit, it was said to provide one with jewels, garments, or food, according to one's desires. Also, it was said to be able to ward off disaster, chase away evil and purify unclean water. In a more general sense, the mani gem was a symbol representing the Dharma or virtues of the Buddha.
3. This word refers to a young person who serves food to the priests of the temple. When she was just a child, Kengyoku had been placed in the care of a Zen temple by Rennyo. Kengyoku was born in 1448, prior to Rennyo's succession to the position of Head Priest of Hongwanji. During this period Hongwanji as a whole and Rennyo in particular faced severe financial hardships. As a result, Rennyo placed many of his children in the care of other temples.
4. Jōkein lineage was one of the most important branches of the Jōdo school that had been established by Hōnen. The Jōkein lineage was begun by Rai'a Nenkū (d. 1297), a disciple of Hōnen. It derives its name from the Shōjōkein temple in Kyōto. Shōjuan was a temple for nuns of the Jōkein order. It was at this temple that Kengyoku became a nun of the Jōdo school and studied its teachings.
5. This refers to Renyū, who was the younger sister of Nyoryō (d. 1455), Rennyo's first wife. After Nyoryō's death, Renyū became his second wife. Kengyoku's birth mother was Nyoryō. Thus, Renyū, the woman who had been Kengyoku's aunt became her step-mother. Rennyo asked Kengyoku to leave Shōjuan and return to Hongwanji in order to care for Renyū when she became ill.
6. This refers to Nyokei (b. 1446), Rennyo's eldest who died in the second month of 1471 at the age of twenty-seven. In actuality, another sister, Myōi (b. 1461) also died during the same month at the age of twelve.
7. Kengyoku died at Yoshizaki at the age of twenty-five in the eighth month of 1472. Just prior to her death, a third sister, Ryōnin, also passed away in the eighth month of 1472.
8. Although Rennyo uses the same word *anjin* in this letter, it has been translated in two ways, "peace of mind" and "settled mind," in this passage in order to reflect the differing interpretations of the word by the Jōkein lineage of the Jōdo school and by the Jōdo Shinshū. In the case of the Jōkein lineage, *anjin* represents the calmness of mind that one needs to have at the moment of death in order to gain the assurance of birth. In Shin Buddhism, *anjin* is the mind of complete trust in Amida Buddha, which brings about the

complete settlement of one's birth, even in the midst of daily life.

9. Good acts performed in and stored from the past. In Shin Buddhism the roots of good that have been stored from the past emerge (*kaihotsu*) in a way that allows a person to realize *shinjin*.

10. This refers to Yoshizaki, which was situated on the border between Echizen and Kaga provinces. In this rustic place Rennyō established a new base of operations for the Hongwanji's propagational activities throughout the northern regions. Kengyoku was summoned by Rennyō to join him at Yoshizaki. At that time Kengyoku was staying at Miidera in Ōmi province with Rennyō's children. Prior to that she had been a nun in Kyoto.

11. It is believed that this refers to Rennyō himself.

12. The word Rennyō uses is *tamashii*, which means spirit. This does not indicate a permanent, substantial soul. See Ōmine's discussion of this topic in this journal. Kakehashi's article in this journal suggests that the butterfly is a universal symbol of death. He also states that, for Rennyō, it represented Kengyoku's birth in Pure Land and attainment of enlightenment.

13. A good friend and teacher who teaches and guides beings to follow the Path of the Buddha. *Kalyāna-mitra* in Sanskrit. In *Letters* II-2, Rennyō states that meeting a good teacher is one of the five conditions that are necessary to attain birth.

