

# Rennyō and His Daughter, Kengyoku

A Lecture by  
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## THE LECTURE

*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. (Rennyō’s Letter On Kengyoku-ni)*

GOOD AFTERNOON. TODAY, I would like to speak to you about a person by the name of Kengyoku-ni (1448–1472), who was the second daughter of Rennyō Shōnin (1415–1499). Kengyoku died at the very young age of twenty-five years, on the fourteenth day of the eighth month in the year 1472. At the time, Rennyō was fifty-eight years old. Shortly after Kengyoku’s death, Rennyō wrote a letter in which he remembers his daughter and relates to his followers the events of her life—a life that had enabled him to realize true joy in the Dharma. Today, I would like to base my talk to you on this letter.

After beginning his letter with the words above, Rennyō then continues with this passage,

Kengyoku-ni was a nun, who served originally as a servant at a Zen temple, but before long she became a follower of the Jōkein lineage. Yet, drawn by inconceivable conditions from the past, she came to realize, in recent days, the *shinjin* of our tradition.

Here Rennyō relates how his daughter Kengyoku was placed in the care of a Zen temple at a very early age. There she was raised as a servant to the priests. Later she was taken in by a temple of the Jōkein lineage of the Jōdo school, where she grew to adulthood. Through innumerable causes and conditions, however, she was able to return to Hongwanji and then realize *shinjin* as set forth in the Jōdo Shinshū. In this brief passage, Rennyō reveals his feelings about this daughter, with whom he had had very little connection and who had had to endure considerable hardships during her youth.

At the time when Rennyō was born Hongwanji was known as Ōtani Hongwanji. Located near what is now the Chionin temple in Kyōto, it was unimaginably small when we compare it to the Nishi or Higashi Hongwanji temples of today. Moreover, it was not an independent temple of the Jōdo Shinshū. In fact, Hongwanji was a minor temple affiliated with the Tendai school of Buddhism. It was very meager in resources and beset with troubles. That was the state of Hongwanji at the time. Yet, through Rennyō's efforts during his eighty-five years of life, this poor, miniscule Hongwanji would go from almost nothing to become the most prominent religious institution in all of Japan. Rennyō would develop this sangha on the foundation of the teachings of Shinran (1173–1262) so that it could propagate those teachings throughout the land. But, the road leading to that end was filled with troubles and turmoil.

Rennyō became the Head Priest of Hongwanji when his father Zonnyō (1396–1457) passed away. Rennyō was forty-three years old at the time. We can see that he had to wait many years before he became the Head Priest. As its leader, how would he set out to guide Hongwanji? What kind of Hongwanji should he try to build? Throughout his long years of waiting these were the kinds of questions that he must have constantly pondered.

Certainly, during the time of both Hōnen (1133–1212) and Shinran, Hongwanji could not possibly have even existed as a temple, let alone as one called "Hongwanji." Their teaching was too different from the traditional ways of thinking in Buddhism. That is why the *nembutsu* movement of Hōnen and Shinran was the target of continuous suppression by the authorities. Essentially, Jōdo Shinshū and its teachings had

no rights under the law. If its teachings were to spread, therefore, its existence and its headquarters would somehow have to receive official recognition from the authorities. This occurred just one hundred years before Rennyō, at the time of Kakunyo (1270–1351).

Kakunyo, the great-grandson of Shinran, affixed the name “Hongwanji” to this small temple and arranged for it to become affiliated with the Tendai school. The Hongwanji temple was located within the grounds of a temple called Ōtanidera. That temple was under the control of another temple called Myōkōin, which in turn was affiliated with the temple Shōrenin, which was one of the *monzeki* temples in the Tendai school. A *monzeki* was a very special temple at which only persons of the highest social classes—emperors, aristocrats, or others in the ruling classes—would be able to enter the priesthood. The next rank of temples directly under the Shōrenin *monzeki* temple were referred to as *inge* temples. Hongwanji was affiliated with the *inge* temple Myōkōin and, through it, with the Tendai school as a whole. In this way, Hongwanji came to be officially recognized as a temple by the authorities.

However, it could not just be a Tendai temple in name only; it also had to act like one. As a Tendai temple, its continued existence would be permitted only if it engaged in various Tendai rituals. For that reason, Hongwanji housed many objects of worship and scriptures from the Tendai school. Certainly, Hongwanji was actually a Jōdo Shinshū temple. In a Jōdo Shinshū temple the image of Amida Buddha ought to be enshrined as the central object of reverence. It should also focus on Shinran Shōnin and his teaching of Amida’s salvation. This teaching should be clearly reflected in the temple adornments. Yet, in Hongwanji this was not the case. Instead, Hongwanji contained various objects and scriptures used in the many Tendai rituals.

When Rennyō became the Head Priest, he declared that these Tendai objects and scriptures were not in accord with Shinran’s teaching, which urged us to abandon self-powered practices and simply entrust in the Buddha’s Primal Vow. Therefore, Rennyō burned the objects of worship and scriptures used in Tendai rituals. He used them as kindling and as firewood to heat his bath. Now, that was a pretty harsh thing to do. Perhaps he might have thought about burning them without telling people what he was doing. But he just couldn’t do that. Burning these objects was his way of expressing his resolution, “We will not go back! No matter what may happen, we won’t go back!” In order to declare this resolution, Rennyō burned the objects and scriptures that did not accord with the Shinshū teachings. This is the kind of person that he was.

On this point, there is a very interesting story regarding a portrait containing the images of Zennyō (1333–1389), the Fourth Head Priest

of Hongwanji and Shakunyo (1350–1393), the Fifth Head Priest. The custom in Hongwanji was to hang up the portrait on the days commemorating the anniversary of their deaths. On one such day, Rennyō took out the portrait in order to hang it up. However, upon viewing it, he decided to burn the portrait instead. Now, this was a portrait of his ancestors, his predecessors as Head Priest. Yet, they were portrayed as wearing the robes of Tendai priests. The portrait portrayed them in a form that did not comport with Shinran's teaching and, for that reason, Rennyō decided to burn them up. But, after stopping to think about it for a while, Rennyō eventually changed his mind. Instead of burning the portrait, he rolled it back up and on the top of the scroll he wrote the words, "Good and Bad." Then, he placed the portrait back into storage.

What this seems to indicate is that Rennyō must have realized that Hongwanji had been able to survive by disguising itself as a Tendai temple. His predecessors had lived during the "winter" of the Hongwanji history, when that was the only way to ensure that the Shinshū teachings would be able to continue. His ancestors had struggled to spread the teachings even as they disguised themselves as Tendai priests. As he reflected upon the difficulties that his ancestors had to endure in the most difficult of times, he realized that he could not just burn up their portraits as something "bad." To do so would not honor their memory. Yet, at the same time, he couldn't let others imitate their style of attire. So, he wrote "Good and Bad" on the portraits and then put them away. This episode has been passed on to us.

Until then Hongwanji had not been a temple that had sought to explain the teachings to common people. Rather, it was centered on priests who were more interested in carrying out scriptural transmission than in explaining the Dharma to the masses. For Rennyō, however, the essence of Shinran's teaching of Jōdo Shinshū was that he lived together with all common people. By putting on aristocratic airs, placing oneself apart on some highborn level and behaving like a member of the nobility, one would be completely unable to spread the teaching of Shinran. Rennyō therefore resolved to build a Hongwanji in which he would be able to realize a profound sense of the teachings of Jōdo Shinshū together with the common people, with all people together.

Following his succession at the age of forty-three years, Rennyō left things the way they were for a short time. However, he soon began to engage in a full-scale reformation of Hongwanji. For him, moreover, this also involved a thoroughgoing self-reformation. I believe that he probably began to undertake a full-scale reformation of his own thinking and even his physical constitution in 1461, when he was forty-seven years old. That year, during which Hongwanji would observe the 200th year memorial service for Shinran Shōnin, would mark the beginning of Rennyō's definitive reformation of Hongwanji as well. He resolved that,

with the observance of Shinran's 200th year memorial, he would make Hongwanji into the temple of Shinran Shōnin, where members would gather to hear the teachings of Shinran. If this were not to happen, he believed, then there would be no reason for Hongwanji to exist. This is why he began the reformation.

It was also in 1461 that Rennyō would write the first of his *Letters*. Briefly written with language that was easy to understand, the *Letters* were produced so that anybody would be able to understand Shinran's teaching, or the salvific heart of Amida Buddha. Moreover, most of the people whom he encountered during this time were unable to read. Thus, he intended his *Letters* not so much to be read, but to be heard. In this way, anyone would be able to learn of Amida Buddha's salvation and Shinran's teaching simply by listening to passages that were easy to understand. This is why Rennyō's first letter was written in 1461, to mark the 200th year memorial service for Shinran.

In this way Rennyō intended to make Hongwanji into a temple that would accord with Shinran's teaching. Furthermore, he wanted Hongwanji to be a temple where people could go to worship and see the Jōdo Shinshū teachings with their own eyes. He sought to create a Hongwanji in which they could see the image of Amida Buddha enshrined in the very center of the temple and observe the content of Shinran's faith. When people would go to worship in the main hall of the temple, he wanted them to be able to see the teaching transmitted to them by the Founding Master Shinran and the seven Pure Land Masters: that we are saved by this Buddha, Amida, who liberates all beings, protecting and guiding all of us throughout life.

In this way, he gradually went about reforming Hongwanji. He brought it down from its lofty position and made it into a Hongwanji in which everyone could join their hands together and hear the Dharma. As a result, people quickly began to gather in greater and greater numbers at Hongwanji. In addition, this was just before the beginning of the Ōnin War (1467–1477). People were already without any spiritual foundation in this time of terrible conflict and tragedy. As I mentioned earlier, there was a widespread famine in 1462. In the city of Kyōto alone the bodies of some 82,000 persons who had starved to death were thrown into the Kamo River where they dammed up the waters of the river. That is how terrible the famine was at that time.

In the midst of all of this, Rennyō delivered his teaching and encouragement to all of those people who had lost their personal support and their spiritual foundation. He taught the people that, even though they might have been abandoned by all around them, Amida Buddha would never abandon them. That Buddha was here with them now. Even though they might have been abandoned by the government, the authorities and everyone else, Amida would never abandon them. So he

encouraged them to entrust themselves to Amida Buddha and live in the way made possible by the Buddha's Vow. As a result, Rennyo's teachings spread throughout the land. However, the priests of the Tendai school were greatly angered by all of this.

Rennyo's efforts were attracting growing numbers of people to Hongwanji. In addition, he committed the radical act of burning and destroying the Tendai objects and scriptures that were located in Hongwanji. When all of this came to attention of the priests of the Tendai school, they decided to get rid of Hongwanji. The year was 1465, when Rennyo was fifty-one years old. The Tendai school issued a resolution that Hongwanji would no longer be recognized as a Tendai temple. As a result, they decided to destroy it. The forces from Mt. Hiei attacked it twice, once in the first month and again in the third month of that year. They completely destroyed it until nothing remained. Prohibited from returning to Kyoto, Rennyo had to flee for safety. But, even as he did, he began to brace himself to face the situation. Certainly, if he were not ready to do so, then no true reformation would come about and his would not become a religion that could be shared with the common people.

Present day Shiga prefecture was known long ago as Gōshū or Ōmi province. The people in that area around Lake Biwa were devoted to Rennyo and so they offered him protection. He took refuge in a small practice-hall led by a person by the name of Dōsai (1399–1488). This was in a place located on the eastern shore of Lake Biwa called Kanegamori, which is the present day city of Moriyama. Soon after, Rennyo's presence was discovered by Mt. Hiei, which then sent three hundred fifty soldiers there to kill him. Rennyo got word of their plans ahead of time, however, and so again he was able to escape. Hiding the wooden image of Shinran beneath his robes, he enlisted the aid of some able members and escaped to Akanoi. Although his life was saved at that time, later the community at Akanoi was destroyed.

For the next one to two years, Rennyo found protection with followers of Hongwanji in a place called Katada. But unfortunately, Mt. Hiei and its allies in Sakamoto soon found that that Rennyo was living there and so they sent armed soldiers down to attack him. During the assault the entire city of Katada was burned to the ground. Rennyo was able to escape by ship across Lake Biwa and found refuge in the Miidera temple in Ōtsu. Again his life was saved, but because he was constantly being hounded and forced to run, he could find no sanctuary.

The Miidera temple was also of the same Tendai school as Mt. Hiei. However, Miidera had for years been a foe of Mt. Hiei, as well as its equal in terms of power and influence. In any event, it gave protection to Rennyo. However, he did not remain there for long. Leaving his wife and children at the temple for safekeeping, he continued to travel around the

area teaching Shinran's message to people who were seeking the Dharma. He continued to plant the seed of Amida Buddha's compassion within the heart of each person whom he met. However, the Ōmi province never did offer him a place of sanctuary.

Eventually, therefore, in 1471, when he was fifty-seven years old, Rennyo left his home and traveled to a place called Yoshizaki in northern provinces. Yoshizaki was in Echizen province, which is the present day Fukui prefecture. There, his career of dynamic propagational began. It lasted only a very brief period of time, some four years and five months from 1471 until he departed from Yoshizaki on the twenty-first day of the eighth month of 1475. But during that short period Rennyo spread the Jōdo Shinshū teachings throughout a vast region, stretching throughout what is now Fukui, Ishikawa, Toyama, Niigata, and Nagano prefectures, then up on to the Tōhoku area. In a short span of four and one-half years, Rennyo was able to spread the teachings throughout the entire circle of the northern provinces of Japan. We can sense the power and intensity of Rennyo's propagational efforts from this.

At the time when Rennyo advanced up into the northern provinces, Hongwanji had already been obliterated. Further, although he had escaped to Ōmi province, it could provide no sanctuary for him. Hence, there was nowhere for him to return to. His retreat had been cut off and his back was against a wall. But, that was not the reason why he went to Yoshizaki.

The actual situation was that in the final month of the previous year (1470), Rennyo's second wife had passed away. Shortly thereafter, on the first day of the second month of 1471, his fifth daughter died at the age of twelve. Then, on the sixth day of that same month, a scant five days later, his eldest daughter died at the age of twenty-eight. In the space of three months he lost his wife and two daughters. All this when there was no place for him in the world. It was in the midst of this condition that Rennyo decided to make his advance into the northern provinces. He was just like a wild boar, a wounded wild boar. Thus, as Rennyo went off to the northern regions, he was prepared to die. Not knowing whether he would live or die, he departed for the northern provinces with utmost determination. This is the reason why he would be able to transmit the teachings with such power and intensity.

The number of people who would come to receive Rennyo's teaching and be inspired by his faith grew like a ball of fire, thus spreading the teachings like wildfire. Most of the people who accepted Rennyo's teaching were lay believers. Many of those would then become priests and come to lead small practice-halls. The number of people like this grew like wildfire, as they spread the Jōdo Shinshū teaching throughout the northern provinces.

Yet, even in the midst of this, Rennyo's personal tragedies did not end. In 1472, he lost two more daughters to death. First, a daughter who was six years old died on the sixth day of the eighth month and then on the fourteenth day of that same month his second daughter, who was twenty-five years old, also passed away. And so, within a very short, two year span of time, he lost one wife and four daughters to death. An ordinary person wouldn't be able to remain standing after such tragedy. Perhaps most of us would just give up in defeat. But, faced with this hopeless situation, Rennyo did not succumb to those tragedies. Instead he had the power to overcome his grief and go out to teach others the way to live. He was able to overcome the tragedies in his life and turn them into the motivation for his tremendous propagational efforts. What carried him forward, I believe, was the spirit of self-reformation and reformation of the sangha, which he had developed early on. With it he was able to focus all of his energies on building a new Hongwanji centered on the temple in Yoshizaki.

Yoshizaki was on the border between Echizen and Kaga provinces, present-day Ishikawa and Fukui prefectures. It was located on a peninsula within a small lake that was very near the Japan Sea. On the peninsula was Mt. Yoshizaki, which was actually a small hill about thirty meters high. Although not high, this hill formed steep, impassable cliffs on three sides of the peninsula, which were surrounded by water. Yoshizaki lay at a strategic point along water and land routes of commerce and transport. One could cross the waterway and continue travelling on to the Japan Sea. Near the base of the peninsula stretched a public highway leading to the northern regions. The peak of the mountain was flattened and on the top of it Rennyo built a small temple with a long main hall. At that spot, it was like being inside a stronghold. Yoshizaki in fact came to take on the appearance of a castle or a small fortress. In this way, during a time of military and political conflict Rennyo was able to establish a stronghold for his Hongwanji followers where they could come to hear the Dharma with peace of mind and without any need to fear being robbed or attacked.

A letter written by Rennyo describes the circumstances surrounding his journey to Yoshizaki. According to that letter, without knowing why, he suddenly left his lodgings in the southern quarter of Miidera in Ōtsu and traveled around through various parts of Echizen and Kaga. However, since the site at Yoshizaki seemed so engaging he decided to build a temple on that spot. Since then two or three years had passed. Just by reading these words, one might think that Rennyo had gone to Yoshizaki in a rather carefree or even care-less manner. In actuality, however, he was not careless about it at all. Instead, he worked out his plans meticulously and he arrived at Yoshizaki only after he had a careful grasp of all of the facts about it.



Four years before Rennyō went to Yoshizaki a conflict known as the Ōnin War had erupted. The war began as a struggle for power between two camps, those of the eastern army and the western army. Through its course it came to engulf all of Japan. The war went on for ten years in Kyōto, eventually leaving the city as burned out ruins. The conflict gradually spread further into the many provinces as well. In the province of Echizen, where Yoshizaki was located, there was an on-going seven-year battle between the forces of Asakura and the Kai forces. This culminated with the overthrow of the provincial military governor. In the neighboring Kaga province a power struggle between two brothers, Togashi Masachika (d. 1488) and Togashi Kōchiyo widened into a battle over the entire province. It was precisely into the middle of all of this that Rennyō went to Yoshizaki. He plunged into the fray just like a soldier of war and so, he entered the area only after he had first laid the groundwork with the provincial authorities, gathered all of the information that he could and made preparations accordingly.

Rennyō resolved to go to the northern provinces even at the risk of his own life in order to propagate the teaching of Shinran to all of the people there. However, as I mentioned before, he was without a wife at that time. Thus, after he built the temple at Yoshizaki, he had his second daughter Kengyoku come to join him there to serve Hongwanji in place of his wife. But soon after her arrival she became ill. These are the circumstances that Rennyō relates in his letter about her.

According to his letter, almost immediately after she was born, Kengyoku was placed in the custody of a Zen temple. Shortly thereafter she was placed in the care of a temple in the Jōkein lineage of the Jōdo school, and she later became a nun in that tradition. However, through innumerable causes and conditions she was able to return to Hongwanji, where she was able to receive *shinjin* in accordance with Jōdo Shinshū. As I mentioned earlier Kengyoku apparently did not have a close relationship with her father, Rennyō. The letter describes how the child must have endured a great deal of hardship as she was shuffled from temple to temple during her early years.

The temple of the Jōkein lineage that the letter makes reference to was actually the Shōjuan temple in Yoshida. Rennyō's aunt lived at this temple as a nun of that lineage and it was this temple to which Kengyoku was entrusted. The Jōkein lineage was the most important stream within the Jōdo school. One of Hōnen's disciples was a person by the name of Shōkō-bō Ben'a (Benchō, 1162–1236), who was a contemporary of Shinran. Shōkō-bō Ben'a had a disciple by the name of Ryōchū (1199–1287), who in turn had a disciple named Rai'a Nenkū (d. 1297). Rai'a established a branch within the Jōdo school in Kyōto that was called the Ichijō-ryū. He had disciple by the name of Kō'a Shōken (1265–1345), who was a great scholar and who is said to have built a temple called

Shōjōkein. A great many people from the aristocratic and samurai classes gathered to worship at Shōjōkein, which was the central temple in the Jōdo school at that time. That temple was also referred to as Jōkein.

Jōkein was the largest and the most powerful temple in the Jōdo school of the time. Within that lineage there also existed a temple for nuns that was called Shōjuan in Yoshida. The head of that temple was Rennyo's aunt, a nun by the name of Kenshū-ni. One of her disciples was a nun by the name of Kenzui-ni, who was in fact Rennyo's younger sister. It was into their care that his daughter Kengyoku was entrusted. Thus, for Kengyoku, this was not such a lonely assignment, for although she was in the custody of Jōkein, she was really under the care of her great-aunt and aunt. Particularly, her great-aunt Kenshū-ni lovingly raised Kengyoku as if she were her own child. This was where she grew to maturity. This was also where she became a nun of the Jōdo school, receiving the name Kengyoku. There she learned the teachings and was said to have realized the faith of the Jōdo school. Eventually, however, we are told that she returned to Hongwanji and realized *shinjin* in accord with the teachings of Jōdo Shinshū. That is, it can be said that Kengyoku underwent a conversion from the *shinjin* of the Jōdo school to that of Jōdo Shinshū.

Why did this conversion take place within Kengyoku-ni? Rennyo writes about in this way in his letter.

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 aunt passed away. Then, even as she was deeply mourning that loss, her older sister's life 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.

Kengyoku was residing at Shōjuan in Yoshida when her stepmother, Renyū, became ill. Renyū was Rennyo's second wife. She was also the younger sister of his first wife, Nyoryō (d. 1455). Kengyoku was born to Nyoryō and so Rennyo's second wife was also Kengyoku's aunt. That is why Rennyo uses the phrase, "the woman who had been her aunt." Kengyoku's aunt, Renyū, thus became her stepmother. Anyway, Renyū became ill, leaving a number of small children who were in need of care. Kengyoku returned from Jōkein to Hongwanji in order to nurse her ill stepmother and take care of the children.

However, as you will recall, shortly before that Hongwanji had been destroyed by Mt. Hiei's assault. There had been nowhere to settle down in Ōmi province until, finally, Miidera offered to give protection to Rennyo and his family. There Rennyo was able to construct a place

where the wooden image of Shinran Shōnin could be enshrined. On the grounds of the temple he also built a very small residence for his wife and children. That was the place to which Kengyoku returned in order to look after the children and attend to their mother.

All Buddhist monks and nuns during that time were trained in the medical arts. Without exception they had great knowledge of medical treatment and medications. Kengyoku must have been skilled in the medical arts and so she was called to nurse her very ill stepmother. But, unfortunately, on the fifth day of the twelfth month of that year (1470) Renyū passed away. She had been very fond of Kengyoku and had thought of her like one of her own children. Kengyoku cared deeply about her stepmother as well and so, when Renyū died, Kengyoku suffered in anguish.

And there was no end to her anguish. On the first day of the second month of the following year (1471), Kengyoku's six year old sister died. Then, five days later on the 6th day of that month, her twenty-eight year old older sister also passed away. She had also been nursing this sister during the time that she had been attending to her stepmother. Having lost her mother and two sisters in a very short time, Kengyoku fell into the depths of sorrow. Yet this terrible anguish also became the condition that allowed her to be able to hear her father Rennyō's teaching and to become a person settled in *shinjin*.

As the letter states, "her grief was boundless." The sadness that she felt as members of her family passed away, one after another must have been overwhelming. At the same time, all of the time and all of the effort she spent in caring for her stepmother and sisters must have left her exhausted. As a result, Kengyoku herself became ill. But, she was not able to rest and care for herself. Rennyō was going to make his advance up to Yoshizaki and she as well had to go there to help her father. The reason was that Hongwanji had to respond to both men and women. In particular, many women would go to worship at Hongwanji. Traditionally, the job of the wife of the Head Priest was to present the teachings in a manner appropriate for women and to entertain visitors. At the time, however, Rennyō was without a wife and so Kengyoku went to join him in Yoshizaki in place of her mother, or that is, to serve in place of Rennyō's wife. She went to Yoshizaki to talk with the many people who would go there to worship.

As a result, Kengyoku's illness continued to worsen. Perhaps it was due to the accumulation of her grief. In any event, instead of getting better, her illness progressed. She made it through the winter and then the spring. When summer arrived in the fifth month of that year, she became bedridden and was confined to her sickbed for some ninety-four days. Finally, on the fourteenth day of the eighth month of that year she passed away. Kengyoku was twenty-five years old.

However, the letter goes on to state,

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.

Until she returned to Hongwanji she had only received the Jōkein lineage’s teaching in regard to *shinjin*. According to that teaching, we must continue to say the *nembutsu* until we die. We say the *nembutsu* while petitioning to the Buddha, “Amida! Please save me!” If at the moment of death our mind is calm and our life ends while we are saying the *nembutsu*, then Buddha will come to welcome us and will escort us to the Pure Land. If at the last instant of death, our minds are not at peace, or we forget to recite the *nembutsu*, or we become so ill that we cannot say the *nembutsu*, then we will not attain birth, even though we may have recited the *nembutsu* continuously before then. Therefore, we will not realize birth—we will not be saved—unless we continuously engage in the strict practice of saying the *nembutsu* until the very last instant of life. We must practice and maintain a calmness of mind in anticipation of the moment of death when the Buddha will come to welcome us into the Pure Land.

Kengyoku had heard nothing but this teaching of the Jōdo school until she heard her father speak of the Jōdo Shinshū teaching. She heard Rennyo teach his followers that we realize salvation in the instant that we entrust in the Buddha. When we entrust ourselves to Amida Buddha we follow the instructions of the Buddha who says to us, “Entrust in me just as you are, no matter how deep your karmic sins may be and even though your deluded passions may rage furiously. I will save you without fail!” In the instant that we entrust ourselves to Amida with the thought, “If that is how it is to be, then save me,” we realize the Buddha’s salvation. From then on, we will be protected by the Buddha for as long as we may live. When the time comes for us to die, the manner in which we die is of no concern. During her final days, Kengyoku spoke over and over again of this. When the time would come for her to die, she would be able to die. She was able to live and die with a peaceful mind for she had been able to hear of Amida Buddha who would bring about her birth in the Pure Land.

As human beings, our lives are burdened with deep karmic sins. Throughout our many experiences we commit a variety of sins. How we live in this world cannot be described simply or clearly. When something happens, its occurrence is often nothing other than a mystery. Thus, to live means that we must carry around an assortment of questions. We must carry dark shadows about on our backs. That is the nature of

human life. However, even though we carry the shadows about on our backs, by facing the light, the shadows may remain on our backs but they will no longer hinder us from truly living. If, on the contrary, we turn our backs on the light and face our own shadows, we will quickly become terrified of the darkness. As long as we are intimidated by the shadows of our own hearts, then we will never be able to shine brightly within the light.

But when we put the shadows to our backs and face the light—when we direct ourselves to the words of the Buddha who says, “Entrust in me. I will save you without fail!”—in that instant we are enveloped by the Buddha just as we are, still possessed of shadows. When we truly understand this realm, we will turn our backs on the shadows and face the light. This is the kind of human life that we will be able to live. This is human life that is enveloped by the Buddha. We live while calling out in gratitude to the Buddha, “Amida, thank you for saving me!” This is what Rennyō taught. The *nembutsu* is not a request to the Buddha to “Please save me.” Rather, it is our expression of gratitude, “Thank you for saving me, Amida!” With it develops a mind of endless gratitude.

Rennyō relates that in the midst of her illness Kengyoku constantly spoke of her life in this way. She did not know how or when she would die because of her illness. But she no longer had to worry about what might happen to her, for she was alive—enveloped in the light with the Buddha and protected by the Buddha. I believe that, for Rennyō, the joy that his daughter realized was perhaps his greatest salvation. It was the salvation of his own human heart. Kengyoku had encountered much hardship throughout her young life. She was then separated one after another from all of the people to whom she was close. Finally, she met with death at the young age of twenty-five. If she had asked of Rennyō, “Why do I have to die so young?” his grief would probably have been unspeakable. However, what she said to him in essence was, “Thanks to you, father, I have been able to live a life that is truly significant and profound. Now I will leave before you and go the world of the Buddha.” Perhaps hearing these as her final words, I believe that Rennyō would have realized profound joy—profound joy in the midst of sorrow.

Many things occur in our human lives. But, whatever difficulties or sadness that we may have experienced, if we can look upon our lives as being rare and wondrous events, then we truly will have lived. If we are able to realize this realm of gratitude, in which we are able to live—and die—in *gasshō*, then what else could we need? Why were we born into this world? What will become of us after we die? These are things that we will never understand. How foolish it would be for us to live our lives burdened by such thoughts, for they are vain and fruitless, the stuff of our ignorant minds.

What a source of anxiety it would be if we had to wait until the moment of death to know whether or not the Buddha would really come

to welcome us to the Pure Land. The life of *nembutsu* is one in which we live our lives together with the Buddha, so that we are constantly protected by the Buddha. No matter what troubles might occur and no matter what incidents might arise, we are protected by the Tathāgata and are given the wisdom and power to overcome all of them. This is the world that Kengyoku teaches us about.

The letter then goes on to say,

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, 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.

Even on the day before her death Kengyoku wanted more than anything else to hear the Dharma. She expressed her joy over being enveloped within the light of Amida Buddha and her gratitude for being able to return to the Pure Land. She expressed her appreciation to all those who had been caring for her and spoke of many other things. Then, at around nine o'clock in the morning of the fourteenth day of the eighth month, she quietly drew her last breath, and returned to the Pure Land.

The funeral for Kengyoku took place on the fifteenth day of the month. Even in that very remote countryside, tens of thousands of people gathered during her funeral. They probably knew Kengyoku and had gotten an unforgettable impression when they had met her. Most likely she was a very beautiful person. Moreover, she was also a person who had undergone a religious conversion. Thus, it must have been clear that she had realized *shinjin*. Having met her even once, she must have left an unforgettable impression on them and so tens of thousands of people gathered at Yoshizaki when they heard of her death. It is doubtful that so many people would have come out to attend the funeral of a Shogun. Yet, the letter states that they came out to bid farewell to Kengyoku. For Rennyō, this was a wondrous event. As he states,

Indeed, it is also not insignificant that tens of thousands of people attended her funeral service for the very reason that she had come out to this place in the northern provinces and here attained birth.

The letter then relates an interesting event. In the evening after the funeral on the fifteenth, a pyre had been lit for the cremation of Kengyoku's remains. What is presented in the letter next is a dream, which begins while the cremation is at its height and the bones are still

upright. In the dream, three blue lotus blossoms arise from out of the white bones and ashes that are lying on the cremation pyre. From between the lotus blossoms a shining gold buddha about three centimeters in height then fully appears. In an instant, the Buddha changes into a golden butterfly, which then flies up into the western sky and disappears. This is the dream that “a certain person” was said to have had. This “certain person,” I believe, refers to the author himself. This must have been Rennyō’s dream.

The butterfly as an image of death has been present in human history from ancient times up to the present. This is a very mystifying phenomenon. It was seen in Greek civilization. It also appeared the writings of Chinese masters from well over 2,000 years ago. In recent times Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, a well-known author in the area of terminal care and near-death experiences, has written that children who have had near-death experiences often report having had a dream in which they became a butterfly. There are apparently many cases like this. Amazingly, the children report that they were calmed by the image, which allowed them to accept their own death.

Perhaps this image of death as a butterfly is something that lies deeply within the human consciousness and at the foundation of humanity itself. In any event, for Rennyō the image of the shining, golden butterfly flying off into the western sky must have symbolized both the pain of losing his daughter Kengyoku to death and the thought of her attainment of birth in the Pure Land.

Finally, Rennyō concludes his letter by stating that those who knew Kengyoku should think of her as their good teacher. He urged them to realize the same *shinjin* that she had herself realized so that they too would become assured of their births in the Pure Land. Rennyō considered his own daughter to be his good teacher of the Dharma, or *zenjishiki*. Kengyoku, it is said, also thought of him as her good teacher. Here we can see a father and a daughter, even though they are separated by death, actually walking together on the same path to the Pure Land. Those who are born before should lead those come after them, while those who are born later should follow those who have gone on before. On this path they are guiding each other: each is the other’s teacher; each is the student of the other. This sense of being “fellow good teachers” on the path to the Pure Land is the true meaning of the phrase “fellow-practicers” (*dōgyō*). It is also the true meaning of parent and child, for in its most fundamental sense that relationship is not just of this world. Rennyō and his daughter, Kengyoku teach us that the *nembutsu* is the true expression of the eternal bond between parent and child.

