

BOOK REVIEWS

Rennyō and the Roots of Modern Japanese Buddhism. Mark L. Blum and Shin'ya Yasutomi eds. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005. 320 pages. \$60.00 cloth, ISBN 0-19-513275-0.

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In Japanese history, Rennyō (1415–99), the so-called “Second Founder” of the organized Jōdo Shinshū tradition, is one of the most important figures of all times, the subject of enormous amounts of appreciation in Japanese religious experience. Despite this fact, in the English-language world, with the exception of a very useful biography of Rennyō and translation of his letters by Minor and Ann Rogers (1991), and in addition a scattered (but important) selection of researches by various other scholars, relatively little focused attention has been given to him.

This book aims to address some of that gap in awareness. It is based on a 1998 conference held by the Nihon Indogaku Bukkyōgaku Gakkai (Japanese Association of Indian and Buddhist Studies) which coincided with the 500th memorial anniversary of Rennyō (an event marked by a surge of interest in him within Japan itself) and which resulted in a Japanese volume called *Rennyō no sekai* (The World of Rennyō). The present English volume consists of selections from the conference material and contains ten contributions originally written in the Japanese language (here translated into English) plus seven contributions originally written in English. (As a representation of the Japanese literature, however, this is only the tip of the iceberg, as by editor Blum's reckoning for example more than sixty Japanese books on Rennyō have been published since 1997.) The articles are divided into three sections: one on history, another on doctrinal studies, and the last on comparative religion. The editorship itself was bi-national, with Yasutomi Shin'ya of Otani University and Mark L. Blum of the State University of New York at Albany.

Blum has provided a very useful introduction in which he reviews progress in the study of Rennyō outside of Japan and summarizes the themes of the various chapters. In Japanese scholarship, while Rennyō's accomplishments in building up the Honganji institution in a time of tremendous turmoil have always been clear, the nature of his personality and doctrinal position have been more variously interpreted. Blum's own special appreciation is for Rennyō's multisidedness: he seems to have been a rare personality who was both magnetically charismatic and a great practical institutional organizer.

In order, the book's chapters focusing on history are as follows:

First, there is an excellent compact biography of Rennyō by Yasutomi, which presents Rennyō, following a more or less standard interpretation, as a reformer who taught an open, personal religious doctrine which eschewed *genzeriyaku* (this-worldly or magical benefits) and which was faithful to Shinran in reviving the original spirit of the Buddhist path. Yasutomi emphasizes Rennyō's ability to overcome extraordinary challenges of political and social instability during his lifetime despite starting from an exceedingly small Honganji institution, which was at first completely marginalized. Religiously, Yasutomi focuses on certain crucial revisions which Rennyō made to religious customs and practices in Shin Buddhism, such as leveling the seating in the temple, emphasizing the *myōgō* scroll as the object of religious worship, refining the use of pastoral letters (*ofumi*), encouraging the formation of local congregational meetings (*kō*), and standardizing the chanting ritual.

Next, an article by Kuroda Toshio (famous for his analysis of the Kamakura period's establishment Buddhism as *kenmitsu taisei*) which places Rennyō within Kuroda's own historical model of the transition from the previous age of Buddhism to that of Rennyō's period. One central factor in the transition was the awakening of the populace as a result of the breakdown of the earlier Heian-Kamakura social and political order. A second, even more important factor was the collapsed state of the older Buddhist institutions, which created space for the newer Buddhist movements which included Shin. A third factor was a kind of proto-modern transformation of consciousness, in which sensibility moved from a simpler, older world to a newer world in which the dominant virtues even among the non-elite became "diligence, intelligence, and secular sophistication" (p. 40). Rennyō quite consciously adapted to this situation, becoming "a new type of intellectual leader ideally suited to guide the new type of Japanese commoner" (p. 41). It is in that respect that he especially resembles Luther or Calvin. Kuroda argues that for Rennyō, the Realm of Buddha Dharma (*buppō*) meant specifically the Honganji temple community, which he understood should coexist non-conflictually with the secular order though on a different level of experience. The emergence of the *ikkō-ikki*, which became so problematic for Rennyō, was both an expression and a distortion of this seeking for an ideal community. However, Kuroda sees the genuine community ideal of Shin Buddhism as becoming quite lost during the *ikkō-ikki* period and indeed throughout the subsequent Shin history. (The reader might feel that this approach by Kuroda is contradictory because it does not fit with his own idea of the independent new commoners who emerged under Rennyō. It would seem that the Shinshū of the sixteenth century and later must have been more layered and complex than such a "corruption model" suggests.)

Third is a comparison of Shinran and Rennyō as leaders of Shin Buddhist culture contributed by Stanley Weinstein, who views Rennyō's contribution as both continuity and change. In many ways Rennyō was the antithesis of Shinran. Rennyō

inherited, rather than discovered, the *tarikī* teaching, and was imbued with the consciousness of a family lineage. His organizational orientation and public prominence were the opposite of Shinran's. As for doctrine, postwar scholarship has questioned the accuracy or at least consistency of Rennyo's rendition of Shinran's thought, and this remains a difficult and perhaps irresolvable issue.

Following this is a study of Rennyo's attitudes towards women by Otani University sociologist Matsumura Naoko. Twenty-eight of Rennyo's eighty letters refer to women (some *ofumi* are directed to both men and women, others to women specifically), but the language expresses inconsistent attitudes: on one hand men and women are equal; on the other hand women's bad karma (five obstacles and three submissions) and the terrible karma of the truly evil person (ten transgressions and five grave offenses) are spoken of as synonymous, and women cannot be saved in the condition of their evil karma (which is worse than men's karma). Matsumura suggests understanding the apparent contradiction, especially, of course, the negative language about women, in two ways. First, the attitudes of general society at that time need to be recognized: because of social conditions and indoctrination, most women regarded themselves negatively. Second, doctrinally women could be seen as the extreme case of suffering which particularly proved the point of Amida's vow (thus the Buddhist historian Kasahara Kazuo argued that *nyonin shōki*, the idea that women are the special objects of Amida's compassion, is a derivation of the general *akunin shōki* concept; or, similarly, as Ikeda Yūkai has argued, women represented all sentient beings, i.e., the three terms—"women," "evil persons," and "all of us human beings together"—are equivalent).

In any case, it is not controversial that Rennyo's commitment to women was very strong and effective. Why this is true is often explained in terms of his personal life story (childhood separation from his mother, antagonism towards his stepmother, separations from his own children due to early poverty, deaths of four wives and seven daughters) as well as his rich social milieu. Matsumura at this point in her article uses some examples from *kyōgen* plays as evidence for the position of women in Rennyo's time; e.g., marriage was indeed patrilocal, but the woman's economic role in the farm household was absolutely essential and recognized as such; situationally, *kyōgen* often played ironically on the contrast between the formal social superiority of men and the actual personal and intellectual superiority of women; and strong marital bonds between women and men are depicted.

Matsumura also notes evidence from contemporary shrine practices, according to which along with male *miyaza*, there were independent women's groups (*nyōbōza*, *onnaza*) which were similarly expressions of economic prosperity; and there is a great deal of evidence for women's activity in marketing, shopkeeping, and craft production. Yet, these facts did not overturn the overall social patriarchalism.

She sees Buddhism's legacy for women as ambivalent because it often tended to reinforce ideas of bad karma, social inferiority, physical pollution (as in the

Ketsubonkyō, or Blood Bowl Sutra), and the special suffering fated for women due to motherhood. However, it is thought that Rennyo was acutely conscious of all these conditions. A special organizational contribution of Rennyo to women was the encouragement of women's groups (*kō*, discussion groups) composed of women in ordinary household life; these became special liberative spaces for them, and Matsumura suggests they are analogous to the consciousness-raising groups associated with modern women's movements.

To modern eyes, Rennyo's teaching seems to lack any sense of social reform or activism, and even to reinforce the negativity surrounding women, but Matsumura suggests that applying such modernist expectations to the past may produce an anachronistic reading of Rennyo.

The lives and circumstances of Rennyo's wives and daughters tend to reflect his ambiguous combination of idealism and pragmatism; four of his five wives came from powerful managerial families; but he also (allegedly) arranged to place one of his daughters as a concubine in the household of Shogun Ashikaga Yoshimasa for political reasons. That final aspect of Rennyo's relations with women encapsulates his overall ambiguity: his life's work was to create an effective organization that fit the society of his day (which meant patriarchal authority and hereditary succession), yet in the interests of spreading a religious teaching about equality, liberation and subjectivity.

Next, a study by Kinryū Shizuka presenting information about Shin Buddhism contained in documents written by European Catholic Jesuit missionaries in the latter part of the sixteenth century. Despite their limitations and inherent interpretive problems, such documents provide the only information about the religious scene in Japan by outside observers. What Kinryū finds especially interesting are various hints about the prevalence of folkish or *mikyō*-oriented practices in certain Shin lineages (Bukkōji, Kōshōji) which did not exercise the same tendency to purism as the mainstream Honganji. Kinryū suggests that while the missionaries might have been confused about subtle doctrinal differences between Shinran and other forms of Jōdo thought, it is probable that many contemporary Japanese themselves were also confused. Apart from that, the Jesuit observers thought the *ikkō-shū* followers were very devout, were mostly farmers, and that the Sengoku-period head priest, Kennyo (1543–92), was profoundly respected.

Seventh, a detailed analysis by Kusano Kenshi of the background of the famous attack by armed forces from Mount Hiei on Rennyo's temple in Kyoto in 1465 (the so-called Kanshō Persecution), which eventually drove Rennyo northwards and stimulated the great proselytizing phase of his life. In spite of a long tradition of study, a conclusive explanation for this event has never been established. Kusano, through detailed work, finds the key in the nexus of mid-fifteenth century social and political transformations and the ideological trends of Rennyo's thought. His argument is distinguished by a close reading of the formal documents (e.g., the *Eizan*

chōjō) produced in connection with the incident, especially by the Mt. Hiei attackers. The Hiei accusations focused on the crimes of establishing a subversive independent religious authority (“sect”) and of spreading the teachings among common and ignorant people in ways that created clashes with local customs such as *kami* worship.

Eighth, an argument by Minamoto Ryōen that Rennyo’s thought had already anticipated the so-called lay saints or rare followers (*myōkōnin*) of the Shin tradition, who became most familiar later in the Tokugawa period. The intellectual issue in Rennyo is somewhat technical and involves his way of interpreting the Nenbutsu, but in any case his teaching encouraged certain intensely spiritual personalities in his time. Among these the most famous is Akao no Dōshu, who became the subject of a great body of storytelling in traditional Shin.

And finally, last in the historical section, an evaluation by Mark Blum of Rennyo’s use of religious icons as a means of communication. The long course of the Buddhist tradition had given rise to both iconic and aniconic visual forms. In his distinctive adaptation of the *myōgō*, formed against a rich background repertoire of possibilities, Rennyo succeeded (sometimes by rather violent action) in establishing a visual representation that marked out the independent communal uniqueness of the Honganji. This essay contains a remarkable detailed review of what is known about Shinran’s, Rennyo’s, and the early Shin movement’s ideas and practices regarding visual representation. Blum argues that visual tradition began with much flexibility and only later developed a sense of orthodoxy. The reason was institutional, as the re-energized Honganji became consolidated at the end of Rennyo’s life.

The chapters which focus on doctrinal studies are as follows:

First, an examination of the exact meaning of the Shin Buddhist term, *ōjō* (Birth in the Pure Land), by Terakawa Shunshō, especially dealing with whether it refers to a kind of Buddhist satori (*shinjin*) during biological life, or to perfect nirvana after death, or perhaps somewhat ambiguously to both. This remains one of the thorny issues in traditional doctrine; Terakawa takes the position that *ōjō*, correctly understood, collapses together both “past” and “future,” both imperfect and perfect states of satori. In this context, despite ambiguities in some of Rennyo’s teachings about “afterlife,” Terakawa argues that Rennyo’s basic understanding agrees with Shinran’s.

Next, a study by Kaku Takeshi of how twentieth-century interest in Rennyo was revived in the context of modern reformist thought led by Soga Ryōjin (1875–1971) in the Ōtani branch of Shinshū. During the Tokugawa period, doctrinal thinking in this branch, although largely focused on Rennyo’s *ofumi*, had become rigid and authoritarian. After the Meiji Ishin, the Ōtani organization initially emphasized a single particular aspect of Rennyo’s thought, its distinction of state law and Buddhist law (*ōbō* and *buppō*); this separation was incorporated into Ōtani’s apologetic teachings about the submissive loyalty its members should have towards the state. In

reaction, Soga, one of the modern reformers in the line of Kiyozawa Manshi, led his attack on the direction of post-Meiji Shinshū with a reformulation of the dominant view of Rennyo. Against the Tokugawa inheritance, Soga stressed the accessibility and existential depth of Rennyo's original teachings. However, Soga was a sharply controversial figure, who was at one point ejected from Otani University although later he was reincorporated into it again.

Third, a treatment by Alfred Bloom of how in the postwar period's Honganji institution, Rennyo still offers inspiration for progressive transformation. Rennyo's mission and historical position contrasted with Shinran's, but the former's enabling of a mass communication of the latter's ideas is of the greatest importance.

Fourth, an argument by Ikeda Yūtai that the language and thought in Rennyo's letters are actually closely related to the thought of Shinran's famous oral record the *Tannishō*. Recent epigraphic evidence suggests that Rennyo studied the *Tannishō* throughout his life, and the *ofumi* display a particular interest in the rectification of erroneous understandings of Shinran.

Finally, an account by Yasutomi of a very famous folk story associated with Rennyo, the tale of the "flesh-adhering mask." The tale, which originated during Rennyo's stay at Yoshizaki, involves the both comic and scary punishment of a woman who attempted to stop her daughter-in-law from going to hear Rennyo preach. It afterwards evolved into a full narrative which reflected the characteristic spiritual struggles of women and which became the basis for both *nō* and *kyōgen* plays which were used to teach about Shin Buddhism.

The last three chapters focus on comparative religious perspectives.

First is a comparison by Katō Chiken of the lives and religious thinking of Rennyo and Martin Luther. Katō argues that Rennyo's presentation of Shinran's teaching as focusing on an "afterlife" was not so much a distortion as an addition to make something of the tradition accessible to more people. In any case the Shin notion of faith has points of similarity with Luther's thought, and both Rennyo and Luther were fundamentally concerned about faith and community.

Second, an appreciation by William LaFleur of Rennyo's expression of religious joy. LaFleur suggests that such expression is linked to the religious shift towards openness and unhiddenness which are so characteristic of Rennyo's teaching.

Finally, an analysis by Ruben Habito relating Rennyo's inspiration and the challenges of Honganji as an international Buddhist organization today. Shinran's and Rennyo's legacies should be seen as starting-points for the future, especially in terms of how Buddhism should relate to the world of the Otherness of different religious traditions, how it should relate to the state, and what its contribution to an understanding of the present world should be. However, Habito points out that Shinran and Rennyo had differing attitudes to these problems, leaving the later Shin tradition with many ambivalencies. But Roman Catholic Christianity too has struggled inconclusively with similar issues. Habito argues that the only way to deal with

BOOK REVIEWS

such challenges is to continue engaging the Other in encounter and dialogue. As he writes, “In short, the translation and contextualization of the core message of Pure Land Buddhism in our age calls for this engagement in creative encounters and dialogue with members of other religious traditions, which may open new horizons in understanding the implications of this core message for the wider human community” (p. 224). Upon close examination, however, it appears that Habito is not talking about a newly accessible form of Pure Land propagation, but mainly rather about religious dialogue in the more conservative sense of “self-definition through exploration of the Other” (although he does briefly mention the potential of mutual transformation on p. 224).

What does this volume as a whole convey? Each of its many topics involving Rennyō is familiar—at least in Japanese Pure Land Buddhist studies circles—but in each case the contributor has managed to bring out some new information or insights. Regarding the Japanese-language studies in particular, it is obvious that at their best they reflect a deep traditional absorption in the materials (religious, historical, literary) that is very difficult for any foreign scholar to attain. The volume provides a massive amount of sheer information. The chapters convey the density of the subject of Rennyō. A crucial message transmitted is the sheer multidimensionality needed to grasp the man—his effects on Japanese tradition need to be understood from a whole spectrum of standpoints including Buddhology, religious institutional history, socio-political history, women’s history, folk-syncretic Japanese religiosity, communications theory, and folkloric and folk art culture. Furthermore, each of these dimensions has to be analyzed sometimes from pre-modern interpretive viewpoints, and sometimes from modern interpretive viewpoints. Like other religious geniuses, Rennyō’s productivity was multiple, and reflecting this plurality the essays in the volume present many more interpretive issues than can be touched on even in a longish review.

For those unfamiliar with Japanese academic writing, the essays translated from the Japanese provide excellent examples for English readers of the way Japanese scholars structure articles—which is not always as straightforward as expected in English. However, the English translations are in almost every place smooth and readable. As a reference for academic purposes, the volume is also richly useful because it has been completed with a Japanese character glossary and an extensive bibliography, including a great many Japanese-language works.

Although the points are not especially well consolidated for the volume as a whole, what does emerge piece-by-piece from the essays are the qualities in the Rennyō tradition which made it so overwhelmingly persuasive to large numbers of pre-modern Japanese members: the spiritual equality of women, the resistance to authority rooted in local grass-roots organizations, the attractiveness of Honganji membership (even in its feudal mode) as a powerful alternative to other forms of social authority in pre-modern Japan, the promise of an everyday liberative

mysticism available even to ordinary people, the deep continuity with Shinran's thought despite Rennyō's shifts in emphasis, and the wonderfully adapted effectiveness of Rennyō's communication skills.

A question can be raised about the title of the book, which suggests a theme which is not quite completely developed in it. In what sense exactly did Rennyō form the roots of modern Japanese Buddhism? This is an issue which many other interpreters of Shin Buddhism have skirted. Was Shin really meaningfully "modern" in the past? Or is its apparent "modernity" just a rhetorical product of post-Meiji selective emphasis? (A recent work which focuses attention on this issue is James C. Dobbins, *Letters of the Nun Eshinni: Images of Pure Land Buddhism in Medieval Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004). Blum touches upon the question on p. 12 where he notes there is little to suggest that Rennyō's world "should be considered even a pre-modern stage of Japanese history."

Indeed, if we look at Rennyō from a twentieth-century Westernized intellectual perspective, of course Rennyō was not a product of scientific, rationalist education. On the other hand, the *tarikū* teaching, as developed by Shinran and refracted through Rennyō, certainly had its own core of reformist integrity, which for example did eschew magic. That core of purism has always coexisted with less rigorous receptions of the teaching throughout the history of the tradition.

Moreover, if we look at modernity institutionally, then we find (as Blum notes on p. 12) the most suggestive sense in which Rennyō was a pioneer of the "modern." He brought together local, regional and national forces, and initiated standardizations of religious behaviors such as study retreats, funerals, fund-raising, support for women, or networking in ways that generated a general prototype for all later Japanese religions.

What if anything does the book suggest about the direction in which the Jōdo Shinshū sector of Japanese religious studies or (more generally) Japanese Buddhist studies should proceed in the English-speaking world? To address this question, we might take up a hint introduced by Ruben Habito in the final essay in the volume. Habito addresses a long-standing problem of Honganji: although it is in fact an international organization, and is now indisputably part of the global religious scene, its leadership has been inadequately concerned with translation and contextualization of the tradition for a trans-Japanese audience. Following up this hint, we might ask if this volume is a good example of translation and contextualization—either for the purposes of communicating to a general non-academic readership of any kind, or for the purposes of an academic audience beyond the narrow field of Japanese Buddhist studies specialization?

This individual reader's reaction is that in terms of Habito's ambitious goals—which imply reaching a broad readership (either non-academic, or perhaps academic but non-specialized)—this volume will be a success, but a limited one. *Rennyō and the Roots of Modern Japanese Buddhism* is not an introductory volume, nor one that

can be expected to be accessible even to academic readers outside of this field. The reader notices in the essays a certain amount of reference to a global intellectual context—for example, to Luther, Dostoyevsky, Roman Catholicism. However, basically the volume remains—as has been usually (and naturally) the case with Shin up to this point in history—situated firmly within a Japanese discourse which requires considerable prior experience to penetrate. Even references to Buddhism outside of Japan are few, so the volume lacks even that kind of contextualization for English-language readers. The English renditions of Shin doctrinal language in it are also as hard to understand as ever. This is not the fault of the compilers, since current best practice in doctrinal translation is represented here, but it is not clear if any major new advance in conquering Habito's challenge has been accomplished.

Of course, it is not really the intention of the book to reach any kind of wide non-specialist audience. At the same time, it is still the case that though Shin Buddhism is large and relatively accessible in Japan (though foreigners should make no mistake, it is suffering a serious decline in perception in Japan itself), the perception of Shin outside of Japan, which is almost completely dependent on English, is still weak in spite of the efforts of several generations of scholarship and popularization. Since the present volume is aimed at an English audience, it might have benefited from a more consistent focus on just precisely the contextualization and translation problem pointed out by Habito.

To put the translation/contextualization question another way: those qualities in the Rennyō tradition which made it so overwhelmingly persuasive to large numbers of pre-modern Japanese people: what do they have to say or suggest to *us today*, i.e., to us in a global English-language environment who might be groping around for some approach to Buddhism which could be the most workable in twenty-first-century global society?

As a foreign participant-observer of Shin Buddhism, it is my experience that Shin in contemporary Japan has reached a kind of semi-dormant position of cultural stalemate based on a variety of overwhelming conditions that occurred in the twentieth century—the crucial challenge of Western contact, bad-faith treatment by Japanese political regimes, serious political mistakes in World War II, postwar population displacements, the reorientation of Japanese consciousness to mass consumer society, and so on. These factors are interesting to analyse objectively as a historian's project, but for practical religious purposes, as far as a foreign observer can see, in its present state the ongoing stalemate of Shin Buddhism in Japan is unlikely to produce anything of energetic interest to the global (i.e., English-language) community.

This implies that the only growth-oriented future for a Shin-type or *tarikī* Buddhism exists outside of Japan, on the global level, talking some kind of new global language. Certainly, Japanese Shin studies can be in their own way remarkably well informed, hybrid, and intellectually international, but nevertheless the kind of intellectual “internationalism,” which works effectively for an internal Japanese

audience, is still not quite tuned correctly for broader non-Japanese international audiences in English.

In short, this book, despite its great contribution, still lies on some kind of borderline between immersion in Japanese tradition and a broader global accessibility. It offers the ambiguous phenomenon of an excellent academic work—of relatively restricted accessibility—which happens to be about Japanese religious history’s greatest popularizer. To make Rennyō and his ideas as accessible to a global English-reading audience as they are to contemporary Japanese audiences interested in Buddhism, a number of further stages of contextualization and translation are going to be necessary. Unquestionably, however, this volume will serve as another invaluable stepping stone in that process.

Zen Classics: Formative Texts in the History of Zen Buddhism. Steven Heine and Dale S. Wright eds. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005. 296 pages. \$25 paper, ISBN 0-19-517526-3

BEN BROSE

Zen Classics is the latest offering from the editorial team of Steven Heine and Dale S. Wright. Continuing in the same vein as *The Kōan: Texts and Contexts in Zen Buddhism* (Oxford, 2000) and *The Zen Canon: Understanding the Classic Texts* (Oxford, 2004), *Zen Classics* collects essays from Buddhist scholars focusing on various aspects of Zen (Ch. Chan; Kor. Sōn) Buddhism. Readers of the previous volumes will recognize many of the same contributors here, although this collection moves deeper into Japanese Zen than either of the previous two. Of the eight essays, one deals with China, one with Korea, and the remaining six address issues pertinent to Japan. Each essay offers a detailed study of a text, or series of texts, providing rich insight into the historical development of the Zen tradition, but some readers may be misled by the title. This collection is not an attempt to systematically review the fundamental literature of the Zen tradition, but rather a contribution to our fundamental understanding of the nature of Zen literature itself.

Zen is often portrayed as a maverick school, fond of denigrating the sacred images and texts so central to the tradition. The radical, antinomian side of Zen that has so captured the imagination of the secular West is often said to be typified by the Hongzhou school. Indeed, iconoclastic dialogues and unconventional mental and physical pedagogy first appear in the discourse record (*yulu*) of Mazu and he has therefore been singled out as the originator of what has come to be seen as the “clas-