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RENNYO SHŌNIN, 1415–1499

The eighth heir to the Honganji lineage, Rennyo Shōnin brought the Jōdo Shinshū school out from obscurity to the forefront of change in Japanese history. Contemplating the human condition, Rennyo explained the principal teachings of his school in plain language, a knack that soon won him numerous followers among the ordinary people in rural areas. In a letter to followers written in winter 1477, he includes three *waka* poems he composed for the occasion:

The mind that even once relies on Amida:
that mind is in accord with the true dharma.

When, deeply burdened with evil karma,
we come to rely profoundly on the Tathagata,
by the power of the dharma, we will go to the West.

When our minds are settled in the path
of hearing the Dharma,
let us simply say, "Namu amida butsu."

(Rogers & Rogers trans.)

The present painting on silk, commissioned in the 17th century, portrays Rennyo in a pose so striking it was once thought to be a self-portrait. In the upper portion of the scroll (not shown) is a four-line inscription from *Passages on the Pure Land Way*:

Necessarily, then: We will reach the dawn
of supreme, pure shinjin,
Whereupon the clouds of birth-and-death
in the three realms of existence will clear;
Then the pure, unhindered radiance will be luminous,
And the true body of the dharma-realm of oneness
will become manifest. (Hirota trans.)

This text by Shinran (1173–1262) and its commentary, *Essentials of the Pure Land* (1324), by Zonkaku (1290–1373), third generation leader of the Honganji lineage, were carefully studied by Rennyo in his early years. Later, while employing the rhetoric of Pure Land Buddhism, the mature Rennyo would emphasize the importance of attaining the determination of Pure Land birth in ordinary life.

Courtesy Higashi Honganji, Kyoto