

Rennyō the Restorer

KANEKO DAIEI

I. THE LIFE OF RENNYO

THE GREAT WORK Rennyō Shōnin (1415–1499) achieved during his lifetime was the restoration of Shinshū. Through it he brought the Shin teaching to the people, a mission he undertook not only to bring prosperity to the Honganji lineage, but also to spread the spirit of the Founder, Shinran Shōnin (1173–1262), throughout the land. It is for this reason he is revered as the reincarnation of the Founder.

The motive for his revival of Shin goes back to an episode in childhood. Born in 1415, Ōei 22.2.25, during the reign of Emperor Shōkō, his father Zonnyō Shōnin (1396–1457) was the seventh abbot of the Honganji lineage. The name of his mother, though, is not recorded.¹

* This is a translation of the first section of Kaneko Daiei's "Renshi no chūkō," the eighth chapter of his *Shinshū no kyōgi to sono rekishi* [Shin Doctrine and Its History; 1915]; compiled in his Collected Works, supplementary volume 3, pp. 311–317. We wish to thank Kaneko Hiroshi Sensei for permission to publish it here. We also wish to thank Kaji Yōichi for editing the translation. Annotation has been provided by the translator.

¹ As one editor notes, that his mother's name is not recorded—surprising to us, perhaps—may in fact reflect the prevailing custom of the time. Rennyō's mother was apparently forced to leave upon the marriage of his father to a woman of social standing, which his mother, a commoner, was not. The loss of his mother had a significant impact on his life, and may in part explain his strong sympathy for the ordinary people.

The *Rennyō Shōnin itoku-ki*,² or "The Legacy of Rennyō Shōnin," says:

On the 8th day, twelfth month, Ōei 27 [1420], his mother summoned him to her and divulged to the six-year-old her never-revealed wish for his future: that he see to the revival of the lineage [to which he was rightful heir]. This she conveyed in the warmest of tones. Shortly after this, she left the temple and was never heard from again.³

These words of instruction were etched into the heart of the child and later became the source of inspiration for the great work he would achieve in his lifetime.

It was not until he was fifteen that Rennyō first grasped the significance of his mother's words. The *Legacy* says:

It was in his fifteenth year that he first took the revival of Shin to heart. It grieved him to think how past generations had let the teaching waste away, and his thoughts dwelt constantly on how he would in his lifetime bring the lineage of the Founder to the attention of people everywhere and thus revive the school.⁴

What first fueled his efforts was the decline of the Honganji. In a society increasingly under Ashikaga rule, a period when Buddhism held no sway among religions in general, it was not surprising that the fortunes of the Honganji declined. To make matters worse, from the time of the

² The *Rennyō Shōnin Itoku-ki*, or *Itoku-ki* (hereafter cited as the *Legacy*), is one of the earliest biographies of Rennyō. Published during the early Tokugawa period, in 1674, its highly literary narrative spawned numerous other Rennyō biographies, such as the Katata Honpuku-ji related *Rennyō shōnin gyōjō ki* (1716). It remained standard Shinshū reading material up until the nineteenth century, and was included in the *Shinshū hōyō* (Nishi Hongwanji, 1765) and the *Shinshū kana shōgyō* (Higashi Honganji, 1812), the forerunner of the *Shinshū shōgyō zensho* (1941). It has now been eclipsed from Shinshū awareness, in part because it is no longer included in the *Shinshu seiten* used by followers. For a recent version, see Mori Ryūkichi et al., eds., *Shinshū shiryō shūsei*, II.791–802 (1983).

³ *Shinshū shiryō shūsei*, II.791–792. For an English study, see also Minor L. Rogers and Ann T. Rogers, *Rennyō, the Second Founder of Shin Buddhism* (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1991), pp. 47–48, a good source of information on Rennyō.

⁴ *Shinshū shiryō shūsei*, II.792.

third abbot Kakunyo (1270–1351) the school seems to have lost the call; fossilizing around rituals, the tradition slowly began to deteriorate. Seeing these things with his own eyes Rennyo became acutely aware of the mission that lay ahead of him.

The years of religious study were fraught with difficulties for Rennyo. First and foremost he had to eke out an existence for himself. The *Rennyo shōnin go-ichidai kikigaki*, or “Record of Sayings from Rennyo’s Life,”⁵ tells us there were times when “he had nothing to eat for two or three days,” times when “the only thing he had to wear were scraps of paper,” times when “he had to pack up all the children to take them somewhere [they could get fed].” Indeed, “many a sad story was woven out of these dire circumstances.” As we can well imagine the life he led had little to celebrate.

For him to pursue studies, “so as not to waste money on lamp oil he would get some burnt wood⁶ [to use as a source of light] before he’d begin reading the sacred teachings; at other times he’d wait till the moonlight was bright enough before he would begin to read the scriptures.” It was literally through reading by the light of fireflies⁷ that he achieved what he did.

The second difficulty he faced was the lack of a proper teacher. Ever since his seventeenth year when he was ordained, he had the desire to study. Teachers were available from other lineages, but the problem was there was none who could instruct him in the finer points of Shin doctrine, and so he had to teach himself. He read the *Kyōgyōshinshō*⁸

⁵ A representative collection of sayings by Rennyo compiled for early historical documents, this work has long enjoyed a vogue among Shin followers for the insights it provides into Rennyo’s life and thought. It was included in the 1765 *Shinshū hōyō* and the 1812 *Shinshū kana shōgyō*. It is also available in the *Shinshū seiten* and in *Taishō daizōkyō* vol. 83. Numerous studies have been done on it since the Tokugawa period, and there are several English translations by various parties.

⁶ *kyō no kuroki*, literally, “black wood from the city,” refers to blackened firewood from a bonfire.

⁷ A reference to the story of Ch’e-yin 車胤 Sha’in in the *Chin annals* who had to struggle to get an education, even reading by the light of fireflies at night. The allusion appears in the *Itoku-ki*, at *Shinshū shiryō shūsei*, II.792. The use of literary references from Chinese classics would indicate the high literacy level of the composers, as well as that of the audience for whom it was intended.

⁸ The popular title of Shinran’s main work, a treatise written in *kambun*, or classical Chinese.

diligently, thumbing through it so often he managed to rub a hole in the cover, and tried to understand its meaning by going through the explanations set down by Kakunyo and others as well as the various sacred teachings.

Third among his difficulties was the immediate circumstances [of the Honganji]. The *Legacy* says:

At that time, only a few understood the distinctive [doctrine] of our lineage and there was only a vague sense of it being different from those of other establishments and schools. As a result, [it made him] always uneasy around people and inclined to shun the world. Even when reading through the sacred teachings, he would do so furtively, away from the prying eyes of others; at times, just to examine a few pages, he would use the lantern light spilling through a crack in the wall; at other times, on clear nights when the moon had ascended the blue expanse of sky, he would peruse a manuscript and apply himself to the master's commentary.⁹

We can gather from this account that Rennyo's education [in Shin doctrine] took place away from the eyes of others. In the account handed down, it is said he took this course of action to avoid conflict with the ways and doctrines of other sects and lineages, but his actions can well be explained in large part by his complicated domestic situation.¹⁰

In these trying circumstances he underwent spiritual training and sought to live a religious life; turning his thoughts inwardly, as a matter of course he arrived at an understanding of the awakening of faith that *tariki*, or other power, brings about;¹¹ directing his thoughts to the external world, he realized that the fundamental cause for the breakdown of the [Shin] tradition was the failure to spread its doctrine.

What seems to have driven this awareness home was his first tours of the northeastern regions. In Bunnan 4.5 (1447), Rennyo, then in his

⁹ *Shinshū shiryō shūsei*, II.792.

¹⁰ Rennyo's father's marriage created a politically charged atmosphere on the home front. Years later Rennyo's stepmother would seek to make her own son the next head of the Honganji lineage.

¹¹ *Tariki shinjin* points to the essential Shin experience: achieving the one moment of faithful mind mediated by the working of other power, that is, the Vow of Amida Buddha.

33rd year, went to the Kantō (eastern) area, and in Hōtoku 1 (1449), to the Hokuriku (northern) area. The purpose of these journeys was of course propagation, combined with a pilgrimage to sites sacred to the memory of Shinran. But what Rennyo must have discovered with his own eyes and ears was that the followers were largely ignorant of the Founder's basic message; instead, mistaken interpretations and superstitions were rampant, these to an alarming degree. The lifeblood of a religion lies in the beliefs it inculcates in its followers. Yet he witnessed that the beliefs they held drew them ever deeper into evil paths. The question loomed how to put the tradition back on its feet again. This became a pressing concern for Rennyo, and so with the wish to restore the Shin tradition he came into the cause he would devote his entire life.

To compare Rennyo with Kakunyo, Kakunyo's contribution was the clarification of the Shin doctrinal principles vis-à-vis the Jōdo-shū, the Pure Land Buddhist sect founded by Hōnen (1133-1212). By contrast, Rennyo addressed the ordinary people of those days and regarded propagating the Shin teaching amongst them his life mission.

The kind of people Rennyo focussed on were the ones who had suffered the misfortune of being displaced by the wars that ravaged the land and had no homes to return. And so when Rennyo speaks of the impermanence of human life, as he often does in his *Ofumi*, or "Letters,"¹² this is not merely the rhetoric of Buddhist propagation. He was speaking to people who lived in a world of constant danger; one skirmish with a raiding party could turn the scene into a battlefield seething with warriors; for them, indeed, there was no guarantee they would survive till the end of the day. The sentiments Rennyo expressed in his letters were thus directed to those who found themselves in this critical situation. To these people who had nowhere to turn, Rennyo instructed them to take to heart the promise of Amida's Vow; this was the wish he held for them.

¹² The *Ofumi* fall into two categories: the official collection and the *jōgai*, or unofficial, collection. The official collection represents a selection made by his sons, and comprises 80 letters in five fascicles. These have been translated in Rogers and Rogers' *Rennyo*, pp. 142-159. They figure in certain official ceremonies where they are read aloud by the *dōshi* who leads the service. The unofficial collection comprises an almost equal number, and have gone largely unstudied.

In Chōroku 1 (1457), Rennyo, in his 43rd year, succeeded to the eighth abbotship of the Honganji lineage after the demise of his father. Rennyo's stepmother sought to have her own son Ōgen (1433-1503) succeed the abbotship, but Rennyo's uncle Shōmitsu-in Sen'yū (1412-1460) made a decision he felt clearly reflected the wishes of the deceased and appointed Rennyo the next abbot. After this, Rennyo was in an even better position to devote himself to the restoration of Shin.

The magnitude of the project being what it was, it was only to be expected he would meet with strong oppression from other schools and lineages. The persecutions and at times outright confrontations this brought on involved Rennyo in one struggle after another, with the result there was nowhere he could take haven permanently, and throughout his life he was forced to move constantly from place to place. His life may thus be divided into the following periods:

- 1465, the razing of the Honganji in Kyoto;
- 1471, the establishment of Yoshizaki;
- 1475, the propagation in Settsu and Kawachi;
- 1480, the establishment of the main temple at Yamashina; and
- 1496, the establishment of Osaka.

The burning of the Ōtani Honganji took place in Kanshō 6.1 (1465), when Rennyo was in his 51st year. This misdeed was perpetrated by monastics on Mount Hiei who justified their attack on the grounds that the Mugekō-ryū, or Unimpeded Light, lineage, as the Shin followers called themselves, had spoken disparagingly of the various other dharma teachings and schools, and had belittled other gods and buddhas by their words and deeds. The monastics of Mount Hiei regarded the Honganji as the instigator of these dissidents and so vented their anger on them in this way.

But the monastics had other, more palpable reasons to find displeasure with this Pure Land school. Rennyo had emerged as a powerful contender successfully proselytizing the people of the Kinai. This was highlighted by his conducting a large scale memorial service for Shinran on the 200th anniversary of his death in Kanshō 2 (1461). It was this event combined with other factors that made for envy on Mount Hiei, and so precipitated the violence.

The loss of the Honganji in Kyoto forced Rennyo to move to Ōtsu in neighboring Ōmi province (present Shiga prefecture). The province is

where Rennyo would make his first loyal follower, Zenjū (Dōsai; 1399–1488) of Kanegamori, and it was here that the Shin teachings would come to hold sway over the people.¹³

In Ōnin 2 (1468), in his 54th year, he again made a tour of the north-eastern regions, returning the following year to Ōtsu, where he established the Kenshō-ji, a temple south of Miidera that would house an image of Shinran.

In a letter he writes: “There shall be no disparaging the various dharma teachings and schools. All of them are the Buddha’s exposition, and as long as a person practices in accordance with them, there is sure to be benefit” (see Rogers & Rogers, p. 176). Here, taking a lesson from the destruction of the Honganji, Rennyo seeks to admonish any indiscreet elements among his following.

The establishment of Yoshizaki took place in Bunmei 3 (1471), when Rennyo was in his 57th year. In one of his letters he writes:

Around the beginning of the fourth month of the third year of Bunmei, I just slipped away, without any settled plan, from our place near Miidera’s southern branch temple at Ōtsu, in the Shiga district of Ōmi province, and travelled through various parts of Echizen and Kaga. Then, as this site—Yoshizaki,¹⁴ in the Hosorogi district of [Echizen] province—was particularly appealing, we made a clearing on the mountain, which for many years had been the habitat of wild beasts, and beginning on the 27th day of the seventh month, we put up a building that might be called a temple. (Rogers and Rogers, pp. 71, 157)

This letter alludes to the fact that, after the destruction of the Ōtani Honganji, Rennyo went into seclusion for a period in Ōmi province, but that continued pressure by Mount Hiei monastics forced his remove to the northern regions. When the *bōsha*, or priest’s quarters,

¹³ Kanegamori is on the eastern shore of Lake Biwa. Rennyo also had loyal followings on the western shore, at temples such as the Katata Honpuku-ji in Ōtsu.

¹⁴ Yoshizaki is on the northern edge of present Fukui prefecture. Closely associated with Rennyo’s name, a waka praising the Shiogoshi pines in Yoshizaki attributed to Saigyō in Bashō’s *Oku no hosomichi* (1694) is claimed by Shin followers to be Rennyo’s.

were being built in Yoshizaki, Rennyo's propagation activities in Echizen, Kaga and Etchu attracted crowds of followers. The work at Yoshizaki was speeded along by the deep alliance Rennyo made with military governor Asakura Toshikage. The situation being what it was, the temple was built on a mountainous site in Yoshizaki. The four years that Rennyo spent at Yoshizaki were significant, for during that time he laid the groundwork for the Shin religion in the Hokuriku area that prospers to this day.

The years he lived and proselytized in Yoshizaki were not without complications. It was within the sphere of influence of the heterodox practices such as the *hiji hōmon*, or secret teachings, and so on, flourishing in nearby Echizen. Moreover, the followers of the Takada-ha, one of the ten denominations of Shin, had an ongoing feud with those belonging to the Honganji, and there were rabblers who sought to work it to their political advantage. Other centers, such as the Hyōsen-ji and Hōgen-ji, functioned as mini-Mount Hiei as far as wielding secular power.

Rennyo stood in the midst of this. To defuse the situation, he set down regulations that were to be followed religiously by his followers: he admonished them, while speaking out against heterodoxies within Shin, not to speak disparagingly of the various other schools; he cautioned them not to draw undue attention to themselves; for a period he even forbid assemblies at Yoshizaki, saying this was a place of religious practice, not a place to jockey for political advantage.

As regards his Letters, this was the period he produced the most; that is, the forty items in Letters I.1 to IV.10 were all written during this four-year period. In these letters Rennyo set down *okite*, or regulations, which prescribed how followers were to behave with regard to other sects and in society; in them he also set down explanations of the true meaning of the Shin doctrine in terms that the followers could relate to, as well as instructions for daily religious life. In Bunmei 5 (1473) he issued a woodblock edition of Shinran's *Shōshinge* and *Sanjō wasan*,¹⁵ a significant event as it set the form for the services Shin followers would conduct morning and evening from that time on.

¹⁵ *Shōshinge*, or Song of True Faith, and *Sanjō wasan*, the collection of Shinran's hymns in Japanese. In part, they present in verse form the spiritual lineage of Jōdo Shinshū as conceived by Shinran. Rennyo's printing of these works gave tangible form

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However, in the following year, Bunmei 6.3.28 (1474), at six P.M., a fire broke out at lodgings near the south gate that grew out of control and eventually burned down the entire Yoshizaki complex. The story of how Honkō-bo Ryōken gave his life to save the copy of Shinran's manuscript goes back to this time.¹⁶ The following month, Rennyo moved to temporary quarters, and then went on a pilgrimage to nearby provinces, before returning to Yoshizaki once again. When military governor Togashi Masachika and Shimotsuma Hōgen fanned the embers of lingering feud between Takada-ha and Honganji followers into a full-blown disturbance, Rennyo gave up all plans to rebuild at Yoshizaki, and in Bunmei 7.8 (1475) left for good. It was an inevitable decision.

Leaving Yoshizaki, he went by boat to Obama, in Wakasa province (Fukui), and then by way of Tamba (Kyoto) and Settsu (Hyōgo) entered Kawachi province (Ōsaka), where he established the Kōzen-ji temple at Deguchi in Matsuda ward. After this, for the next two or three years he sojourned in Settsu (Hyōgo), Kawachi, and Izumi (Ōsaka), founding temples and preaching. Among the temples he established are the Kōzen-ji in Deguchi, Kawachi province, installing grandson Kōjun¹⁷ (1474–1497) as resident minister; the Kyōgyō-ji in Miyata, Settsu province; the Shinshō-in in Kai no ura, Izumi (Ōsaka), with Shinshō-ji Jōson as resident minister. While he established temples and preached wherever he went, he never failed to appoint someone to the stewardship of the temple after he retired from the position—a shrewd policy on the part of Rennyo to preserve the Shin teaching.

In Bunmei 9.10 (1477), Zenjū of Kanegamori proposed the main tem-

to Shin religious life, as they were chanted during the daily service by Shin followers. The next great spurt in Shin printing activity would not be until some two hundred years later, in the early Tokugawa period, when the stabilization of society made the publishing of Buddhist books possible, around the Genroku period, 1688–1703.

¹⁶ The story is that Ryōken died in the burning building, protecting one of Shinran's writings from the flames.

¹⁷ The son of Rennyo's eldest daughter Nyokei (1446–1471). Here we see an example of Rennyo's practice of placing his children and grandchildren in strategic temples, thus extending his temporal influence and ensuring the stability of his lineage in future generations. This program was enhanced by the fact Rennyo had twenty-eight children, the last of which was fathered in his eighties.

ple be built at Yamashina, in the Uji ward of Yamashiro province.¹⁸ At the beginning of the following year, Rennyo went to inspect the site and agreed to the plan. Building a thatched hut, he made it his provisional living quarters. The construction work was begun in Bunmei 11 (1479) and continued until 12.8 of the same era, when the Founder's Hall was completed. Next, the Main Hall was begun, and finished in Bunmei 14 (1482). Thus it was not until eighteen years after the destruction of the Ōtani Honganji that Rennyo at last was able to rebuild the main temple.

It is recorded that the Main Hall was 3-*ken* square and the Image Hall was 5-*ken* square.¹⁹ One can well imagine the joy Rennyo and his disciples felt when the halls were finally built. In another sense, we could also say that he had laid the groundwork for these halls by his eighteen years of roving and preaching.

Having earlier handed over the responsibilities for the temple to his eldest son Junnyo (1442-1483) in Ōnin 2 (1468), with the latter's death in 1483 Rennyo was obliged to resume the ministership of the temple once again. In Entoku 1 (1489), Rennyo, in his 75th year, handed over the position to his eighth child, Jitsunyo (1458-1525), and himself opted for retirement under the name of Shinshō-in. At that time he said: "As for me, at last I can retire from this world to immerse myself in the leisurely study of the Buddha-dharma."

In Meiō 5.9 (1496), when Rennyo was in his 82nd year, the *bōsha*, or priest's quarters, at Ōsaka in Settsu province were begun, and late in life he allowed himself be moved there. Around the summer of Meiō 7 (1498), however, he began to feel ill, and sensing the time had come when he would never rise from bed again, he urged others to consummate their faith:

This was all he longed for, morning and evening: "May there be a decisive settling of faith for everyone while I am still alive." Although this does indeed depend on the fruits of one's own past good deeds, there was never a moment when it was not on his mind. (Rogers & Rogers, 240; adapted).

In Meiō 8.2 (1499) he returned to Yamashina. Though gravely ill, he

¹⁸ Yamashina is located in a long valley between Kyoto city and Lake Biwa.

¹⁹ One *ken* is about six feet.

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spoke to his family and disciples, urging them to always remember their gratitude to the Buddha and the Founder, and to be respectful of the unseen forces of Buddha-dharma in one's life. Then on the 25th day of the third month he passed from this world.

For his words and deeds see the *Rennyō Shōnin goichidai kikigaki* [A Record of Sayings from Rennyō's Life], and for an account of his achievements the *Rennyō Shōnin itoku-ki* [The Legacy of Rennyō Shōnin]. The former was recorded by his son Rengo (1468–1543) and his disciple Kūzen and others, and compiled by his son Jitsugo (1492–1584). The latter is a selection made by Rengo and recorded by Jitsugo. For those interested in Rennyō, these two works are a must.

TRANSLATED BY W. S. YOKOYAMA