

Rennyō the Restorer

PART 2

KANEKO DAIEI

THE HALLMARK OF RENNYŌ'S TEACHING

There is a one-volume commentary that Rennyō wrote on Shinran's *Shōshinge* [Song of True Faith] called *Shōshinge taii*,¹ which he composed at the request of Zenju.² The best record of the message he propagated, however, is not in this document, but in his *Ofumi*, or Letters.³ These Letters contain the very breath with which he spread the Dharma. Compiled into their present form by his grandson Ennyō Kō'nyū, the entire set comprises five collections of eighty letters. The first four collections contain fifty-eight letters selected mainly from the Yoshizaki period to the Ōsaka period. Written to followers, all of them are clearly dated. The remaining twenty-two letters, these undated, are words of instruction cast in lucid terms on the theme of *tarikī anjin*, the

* This is a translation of part two of "Renshi no chūkō" [Rennyō the Restorer], in the author's *Shinshū no kyōgi to sono rekishi* [Shinshū doctrine and its history], in the third supplementary volume of his *Collected Works*, pp. 317-322. We wish to thank Kaji Yōichi for editing the translation and Kaneko Hiroshi Sensei for permission to publish it here. Subsection titles and annotation have been supplied by the translator.

¹ *Shōshinge taii*. For a translation, see Kenneth K. Tanaka, trans., "A Translation of Rennyō Shōnin's *Shōshinge Tai'i*: A Commentary on Shinran Shōnin's *Verses on True Shinjin*," in *The Rennyō Shōnin Reader* (Kyoto: The Institute of Jodo Shinshu Studies and The Hongwanji International Center, 1998), pp. 91-109.

² Zenju (1399-1488), also known as Dōsai, was a loyal supporter who rallied followers for Rennyō. In some accounts he is given a key role in the success of Rennyō's propagation efforts in the Kinai.

³ For an English translation of the official collection of the Letters, see Rogers and Rogers, *Rennyō the Second Founder* (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1992). There is also an unofficial collection called *Jogai ofumi* that has gone largely unstudied.

peace of mind effected by other power. In addition to the Letters, there is the *Ryogemon*, a declaration Rennyō made to deal with dissident elements at Yoshizaki. This also enables us to learn of some of the essential points that Rennyō stressed in his propagation.

Holding to Amida

When we look at the message he sought to spread in his Letters, it is of course no different in spirit from that of our Founder, Shinran Shōnin. It is also evident that the style of propagation he used owes much to Kakunyo Shōnin. But there is one innovation he makes that we cannot fail to notice and that is his emphasis on *nenji no gi*, or "holding to Amida." Rennyō urges we hold to Amida when we say the Name of the Buddha and implore [him] to save us in the life to come. This places *anjin*, or "peace of mind," at the hub of the Shin teaching. In *Goichidaiki kikigaki* it says,

[Shinran] Shōnin taught that *tanomu ichi'nen*, or the act of "imploring with singleness of thought" is the essential key [to salvation]. As a result this so-called act of imploring was accepted perfunctorily by all succeeding generations [of Shin leaders], but they never enlightened us as to what object this act of imploring was to be directed. Fortunately for us, our honored leader of two generations past Rennyō composed numerous Letters during his lifetime that clarified that our putting aside useless practices and seeking salvation in the life to come was already consummated in the act of imploring Amida with singleness of thought. This is one reason he is known as Rennyō the Restorer.⁴

Further, in the *Itoku ki* it says,

To take refuge in one moment [of focused practice and faith] (*ichi'nen kimyo no kotowari*) is a veritable truth which we

⁴ *Goichidaiki kikigaki* presents considerable difficulties for the modern reader unfamiliar with the grammar and lexicon of the time. For a rough translation of this particular passage (No. 188), see Yamamoto Kōshō, trans., *The Words of St. Rennyō: Complete Translations of the Rennyōshōnin-Goichidaiki-Kikigaki and the Anjinketsujōshō* (Ube City, Yamaguchi-ken: Karinbunko, 1968), pp. 68-69.

have endeavored to achieve since the time of our Founder Shinran Shōnin, but it was not [until Rennyo] that it was couched in terms of our “holding to Amida” (*nenji no gi*) in that one moment of invocation.⁵

These passages lead us to conclude that *nenji no gi*, or holding to Amida in that one moment [of practice and faith], is the crowning achievement of Rennyo’s efforts to propagate Shin and can truly be said to be the hallmark of his teaching.

It goes without saying that *shinjin*, or “the awakening of faith,” is axial to the Shin teaching. This awakening of faith is to accept without a shred of doubt the Name derived from the Original Vow. The word “*shinjin*” does nothing for us as long as it remains mere letters on the page. But when we come into contact with the dynamic Will giving expression to that word, we have no choice but to take refuge with singleness of heart (*isshin kimyo*).

To point out what *kimyo*, or “taking refuge,” means, Shinran in marginalia defines it as “to put your trust in [him], to implore [him]”; that is, what he calls *shinjin* would have to mean imploring Amida with singleness of heart. However, we can look to Shinran only so far for a clarification. It was due Rennyo’s efforts that this basic notion underwent a further development and came to be expressed in the only way he could conceive: as the imploring of Amida with singleness of thought. That is, it is Amida who should be the object of our imploring.

It is due especially to Rennyo that the formulation to implore the Buddha, saying, “Amida, save me in the life to come,” came to earn the high regard it did. Through the development of *nenji no gi*, or holding [to Amida] in one thought, the fundamental qualities of *tariki shinjin*, or the awakening of faith generated by Other Power, were clarified to a further degree. As we embrace this hallmark of Rennyo’s teaching, we should deeply appreciate the implications it holds for us.

⁵ *Rennyo shōnin itoku ki* is a sixteenth century biography of Rennyo; for an annotated translation of the first chapter, where this citation appears, see “The Legacy of Rennyo Shōnin: *Rennyo Shōnin Itoku-ki*,” Part 1, in *Eastern Buddhist* XXXI, 2 [1998].

The unity of seeker and Dharma

If we gave thought to the matter, we would find that the self we think we know is only apparitional; the real self is something we know nothing of. For this reason, we float through life in dream; we deceive ourselves, thinking it our fate to paddle about, never reaching solid ground. Clinging to wife and child out of attachment to dear life, we strive to extend our life as long as possible. We add to the larder our aspersions to wisdom and good; we want to believe that we harbor deep in ourselves the light of inner convictions to see us through bad times.

But religion challenges our notions, saying, *Be yourself, throw down that mask, reflect on who you really are.* For those who truly wish to live, this is what must be done: admit the vanity of your knowledge and deeds, and confront the darkness and ignorance of your own soul. Own up to the fact that in an ever-changing world we are merely life forms that bear within ourselves the terrible seed of our own demise. When it comes our time to confront this ultimate source of despair, there is no turning to wife or children or worldly possessions for consolation. At this final impasse we learn the truth that man, born alone, dies alone.

Forced to face the darkness of our own soul, there is one thing this miserable portrait of self elicits from us: the desire to be saved. With our entire being focused toward that one purpose we implore the powers that be, "Buddha, save me," and we stand ready to give everything—all our worldly possessions—if only the Buddha would "Save me in the life to come."

Rennyō taught that "with the thought of holding fast to the sleeve of this Buddha Amida, we [should] entrust ourselves [to him] to save us"⁶—words describing a direct encounter [with the Buddha]. Answering our thought of "Buddha, save me" is the Buddha's immediate assurance, "Count on me to save you." In Shinran's words,

For within the one thought-moment of taking refuge—
NAMU—there is aspiration for birth and directing of virtue.
This, then, is the thought that Amida Tathāgata directs to or-

⁶ *Letters 2-13*; trans., Rogers & Rogers, 189-190.

dinary beings.⁷

The cry of "Buddha, help me" of one in distress issues spontaneously when one comes in direct contact with Other Power. Our cry for help and the Buddha's promise to save us may seem worlds apart, but that's only when things are seen at a remove, in the way scholars view matters when absorbed in the study of religious concepts. A truly religious sentiment stirs the moment the life of the soul awakens unto itself. This event occurs when the seeker's cry of "Save me" is in complete rapport with the salvific Buddha's "I'm coming." Our call for help is the other side of the loving thoughts the Buddha directs toward us. Rennyō thus spoke constantly of the unity of seeker and Dharma (*kihō ittai*),⁸ and of the unity of Buddha and the ordinary being (*butsubon ittai*).

Further, he advocated that the expression of our will to be saved by imploring Amida seen in the words "Buddha, save me," is concomitant with the expression of the Buddha's will to save us, seen in "Call on me." Therefore, Rennyō would say that the Buddha's saying, "Call on me and surely you will be saved," is not issued as a condition of salvation, but rather that it is an expression of the Will of that salvific force. The phrase "Count on me" entirely expresses the intent with which the true Buddha issues the vow [to save all beings].

[This intent of the vow] is the summation of the entire life force of the Tathāgata Buddha. When the intent of the vow emerges in the world space of an ordinary being, it takes the form of the single thought of "Save me." Whether we are speaking of Tathāgata Buddha or ordinary beings, the life force that energizes them is one and the same. When we call on this selfsame life force, the ripples of our pleas reach the other side; when we implore to be saved, the salvific force

⁷ *Letters* 5-5; trans., Rogers & Rogers, 245.

⁸ *Ki-hō ittai* is a term from the *Anjinketsujōshō*, a work by an unknown hand. Although it is undated, it is thought to postdate Shinran since he never cites the work. The *Anjinketsujōshō* is important to Rennyō and he frequently mentions it in his *Letters*. In 1708, however, a Shinshū shūgaku scholar named Ekū discussed it as a Seizan-ha work. This compromised its centrality as a Shinshū work and it has since been ushered to the sidelines until its fate is decided. For a translation, see Dennis Hirota, trans., "On Attaining the Settled Mind: *Anjinketsujōshō*," in *Eastern Buddhist* 23-2 (1990): 106-121, and 24-1 (1991): 81-96.

gushes forth [as if from the very ground on which we stand].⁹ It is *here* that we have proof that Namu Amidabutsu is nothing other than the unity of seeker and Dharma (*ki-hō ittai*).

The act of taking refuge

In this connection, Rennyo always advocated *nenji no gi*, or holding to Amida, in terms of understanding Namu Amidabutsu. One key emphasis in his teaching was, "Realizing faith means . . . understanding what NAMU-AMIDA-BUTSU is."¹⁰ Thus, he relied on Shan-tao's explanation of the six-character Name (NA-MU-A-MI-DA-BUTSU), but interpreted it rather freely. To wit,

In our tradition the meaning of settled mind is wholly expressed by six characters, NA-MU-A-MI-DA-BUTSU. That is, when we take refuge—NAMU—Amida Buddha immediately saves us. Hence the two characters na-mu mean "taking refuge." "Taking refuge" signifies the mind of sentient beings who abandon the sundry practices and steadfastly entrust themselves to Amida Buddha to save them, [bringing them to buddhahood] in the afterlife. [The four characters A-MI-DA-BUTSU] express the mind of Amida Tathāgata who, fully knowing sentient beings, saves them without exception.

Accordingly, since Amida Buddha saves beings who entrust themselves—NAMU—we know that the import of the six characters NA-MU-A-MI-DA-BUTSU is precisely that all of us sentient beings are equally saved. Hence our realization of Other-Power faith is itself expressed by the six characters NA-MU-A-MI-DA-BUTSU. We should recognize, therefore, that all the scriptures have the sole intent of bringing us to entrust ourselves to the six characters NA-MU-A-MI-DA-BUTSU.¹¹

⁹ The influence of Soga Ryōjin (1875–1971) on the author is particularly evident in this passage, where the imagery of spiritual energy gushing forth from the ground is used. It derives from the earthsprung bodhisattva in the Lotus Sutra that Soga also noticed in Nichiren. Soga has a long early study on Nichiren; see volume two of his *Collected Works*.

¹⁰ *Letters* 5–5; trans., Rogers & Rogers, 245.

¹¹ *Letters* 5–9; trans., Rogers & Rogers, 249; slightly adapted.

From this example alone, we can see that Rennyo put emphasis especially on the two characters NA-MU of the six-character Name. [The act of taking refuge signified by] the two characters NA-MU thus lies at the heart of *nenji no gi*, or holding to Amida.

Scholars have long since discussed this aspect of Rennyo's message in terms of [a progression from] A) *niji-soku-shiji* (two equals four characters), to B) *niji-soku-rokuji* (two equals six characters), and finally to C) *rokuji-soku-rokuji* (six equals six characters). In the seeker's one thought of taking refuge, the conditions for Amida's Buddhahood are brought to fulfillment (two equals four). Accordingly, the seeker's thought of NA-MU is not simply NA-MU, but the entire Namu Amidabutsu turned over to the seeker by the Tathāgata Buddha (two equals six). [In the end,] the seeker and the Dharma are one in Namu Amidabutsu (six equals six).

The summons of the Tathāgata

Namu Amidabutsu is thus the true source of our strength; it is the true intent of the vow made by the Tathagata Buddha.

Amida Tatāgata has declared that he will unfailingly save those sentient beings who single-heartedly rely on him—ordinary beings in the last age and people like ourselves, burdened with evil karma, however deep the evil may be.¹²

This passage is revealing of how Rennyo's understanding of the Eighteenth Vow; it also highlights his thinking on the significance of the six-character Name.

The summons of the Tathāgata calls to us, its resonance rising up through the depths of the soul to reach the very ground on which we stand. The voice may be so faint as to be barely audible, and though its roots are strong and run deep, it is possible for a person to pay it no heed. On the other hand, it is possible that the summons we want to ignore is a strong one. In that case, we are only deceiving ourselves if we pass our lives turning a deaf ear to that inner call. Or, rather, it is *because* we hear the call of Amida's summons that we are stricken with remorse that our life full of bad karma makes it impossible to leave off the spurious life we are now living [to start anew].

¹² *Letters 4-9*; trans., Rogers & Rogers, 234.

However, if, hearing that call (*monshin*), we open ourselves to that summons, this is sheerly the emergence of that one thought of imploring the Buddha to save us. It is rare that salvation comes knocking on our door. Yet, this marks the determination of our birth in the Pure Land by the salvific force of the Buddha. This is the proof of future birth in the midst of our activities in ordinary life (*heizei gōjō*), and we need not wait in anticipation for the Buddha to appear to us in a vision on our deathbed (*raigo*). As a consequence Rennyō taught,

The nenbutsu, saying the Name of the Buddha, should then be understood as the nenbutsu of grateful return for Amida's benevolence, through which the Tathāgata has established our birth.¹³

Correcting odd notions

This simple and uncomplicated message worked like magic to slake the spiritual thirst of people then. The truth is, though, Rennyō also had to expend much effort to correct the odd notions (*igi*) and popular misunderstandings of that age. In his Letters we find references to odd notions such as the settled mind of ten kalpas (*jū-kō anjin*), secret practices requiring no buddha worship (*ogamazu hiji*), relying on your teacher to work out your salvation (*zenchishiki danomi*), joining the community sheerly for one's own benefit (*ichiyaku hōmon*), chanting as the true cause of salvation (*shōmyō shōin*), believing that the amount of donation is determinative of salvation (*sebutsu danomi*), and so on. To deal with them he would point out just exactly how they are mistaken, or he would set down in writing how these views are absurd and should be thrown out.

It seems that these odd notions were a transference of the doctrine of human perfectibility (*shōdōmon*) to Shin doctrine. Joining the community sheerly for one's own benefit (*ichiyaku hōmon*) would seem to be one such example. Others represent the influx of variant streams of Pure Land Buddhism into Shin Buddhism. Chanting as the true cause of salvation (*shōmyō shōin*) is an example. In those days, the final voicing while facing the west was thought to hold great merit for the dying practitioner and was popular not only in the Jōdoshū but also in certain

¹³ *Letters* 5-10; trans., Rogers & Rogers, 249.

Shin circles where chanting the nembutsu in this setting was thought to be determinative of salvation. Further, during his travels in Kaga and Echigo (present day Ishikawa and Niigata prefectures) the most prevalent of such groups he encountered in the community were those who followed secret practices (*hiji*). All of the various odd notions can be said to derive from the followers of such secret practices. Rennyō had to deal with them severely and declared, “[These] are certainly not the Buddha-dharma; they are deplorable, outer [non-Buddhist] teachings. Relying on them is futile; it creates karma through which one sinks for a long time into the hell of incessant pain.”¹⁴

Regulations

In addition, in his Letters, he set down *okite*, or special regulations, that he had to institute on certain occasions. One such case is known as the *Rokujō no ofumi*, or Six Item Letter.

- Item: Do not make light of shrines.
- Item: Do not make light of the buddhas, bodhisattvas, or temples [enshrining deities].
- Item: Do not slander other sects or other teachings.
- Item: Do not slight the provincial military governors or local land stewards.
- Item: The interpretation of the Buddha-dharma in this province is wrong; therefore, turn to the right teaching.
- Item: Other-Power faith as established in our tradition must be decisively settled deep in our hearts and minds.¹⁵

In the final two items Rennyō urges the correct pursuit of *shinjin* and cautions that *anjin*, or settled mind, will be realized only after unorthodox notions have been dispensed with. He comments further on the fourth item, saying that “[in regard to the provincial military governors and local land stewards], deal carefully with fixed yearly tributes and payments to officials and, besides that, take [the principles of] humanity and justice as fundamental.”¹⁶ This he issued as an injunction

¹⁴ *Letters* 2–14; trans., Rogers & Rogers, 190–191.

¹⁵ *Letters* 3–10; trans., Rogers & Rogers, 209.

¹⁶ *Letters* 3–10; trans., Rogers & Rogers, 211.

to those who called themselves Buddhists yet whose behavior went beyond normative social bounds. The third item was intended as a warning to undisciplined elements who, while taking up the shield of dedicated nembutsu practice, made light of the gods and buddhas of other traditions. There are in any age those who will fail to act discreetly in the religious setting, but their numbers swell especially during times of social disturbance and war. As can well be imagined, the unruly elements of his community who transgressed in word and deed were numerous, and it was no easy matter for Rennyo to keep them in line.

It is only natural that these regulations set down at a certain time and place should be adopted as perennial guidelines for the Shin tradition. Rennyo not only formulated rules of conduct for followers in society at large, he was also constantly concerned with how individual followers interacted with one another and advised them accordingly. Numerous entries in *Goichidaiki kikigaki* contain examples of such advice. As we let his words serve as mottoes for daily life and as we pursue lives of self-reflection, we should be inspired by the legacy of Rennyo who himself stood in awe of the invisible working [of the Buddha] in life.

TRANSLATED BY W. S. YOKOYAMA