



The Answer

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Q @ A for Shinshu Buddhists

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This issue will quote passages from "Bearer of the Light: The Life and Thoughts of Rennyo" published by Pure Land Publications, Los Angeles, California. The author is Jitsuen Kakehashi, Wajo and Kangaku of Hongwanji. This is a wonderful book and if you have a copy, please read it.

Who is Kengyoku-ni?

"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, *Kenyoku* 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."

Kengyoku-ni was a nun, who served originally as a servant at a Zen temple, but before long she became a follower of the Jokein lineage (The Jokein lineage was one of the most important branches of the Jodo [Pure Land] school that had been established by Honen). Yet, drawn by inconceivable conditions from the past, she came to realize, in recent days, the *shinjin* of our tradition (Jodo Shinshu). Here is the reason why. On the 5th day of the 12th month of the 2nd 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 3rd year of *Bunmei* (1471). Her grief was boundless, and, as a result, she herself became incurably ill. Perhaps, in the end, we must say that her illness arose out of her grief and she was never able to recover. On the 10th day of the 5th month of this year (1472) she was confined to her sick bed, and after

ninety-four days she passed away.

Throughout the illness she would speak of the unlimited joy she felt over having been able to abandon the "peace of mind" taught in the Jokein lineage, which she had held until then, and become established in the "settled mind" of our tradition. 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, towards the end of the hour of the dragon, in the morning of the 14th day of the 8th month, lying with her head to the north and facing the west, she attained birth...

...Thus it is that everyone should reflect on this nun, *Kengyoku-ni*, and on her birth. We should understand that she is truly our good teacher (*zenjishiki*). If people - all men and women - should, as a result, become settled in *shinjin* in the one-thought moment of taking refuge and say the *nembutsu* to respond in gratitude for the Buddha's benevolence, then surely her life will have become a condition for our going to be born in the Pure Land of the one Buddha.

Why is she important?

This answer is reflected in the quote in the answer to the first question, as written by Rennyo Shonin. It is further answered in this abbreviated excerpt from a lecture presented by Kakehashi Wajo at the Gardena Buddhist Temple on September 28, 1997. The lecture is translated by Rev. David Matsumoto and appears in full in the *Pacific World: Journal of the Institute*

of Buddhist Studies, 3rd series, Fall 1999.

This afternoon I would like to speak to you about a person by the name of *Kengyoku-ni*, who was the second daughter of Rennyo. *Kengyoku-ni* died at the very young age of twenty-five, on the 14th day of the 8th month in the year 1472. At the time, Rennyo was 58 years old. Shortly after *Kengyoku-ni's* death, Rennyo wrote a letter, which begins with the words above (see quote first question). He, then goes on to remember his daughter and relate 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 talk with you about this letter.

In 1471, when he was 57 years old, Rennyo left his home and traveled up to a place called Yoshizaki in the northern provinces. There his dynamic propagation career began. It lasted some 4 years and 5 months. He departed Yoshizaki on the 21st day of the 8th month of 1475. Rennyo was able to spread the teachings throughout the entire northern provinces of Japan. We can sense the power and intensity of Rennyo's propagational efforts from this.

The actual situation for him was that Hongwanji was obliterated at the time and he had no real sanctuary in 1471, thus he left for the northern provinces. Yoshizaki was in the northern province of Echizen. In the final month of the previous year (1470), Rennyo's 2nd wife had passed away. Shortly thereafter, on the 1st day of the 2nd month of 1471, his 5th daughter died at the age of 12. Then, on the 6th day of the same month, a scant 5 days later, his eldest daughter died at the age of 28. In the span of 3 months he lost his wife and 2 daughters,

All this when there was not 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.

Even in the midst of this, however, Rennyo's personal tragedies did not end. In 1472, he lost 2 more daughters to death. First, a daughter who was 6 years old died on the 6th day of 8th month and then on the 14th day of the that same month his second daughter, who was 25 years old, also passed away. And so, within a very short 2 year span of time, he lost one wife and 4 daughters to death. An ordinary person wouldn't be able to remain standing after such tragedy. Yet, faced with this hopeless situation, Rennyo did not succumb to the 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 tragedy in his life and turn it into the motivation for his tremendous propagational efforts.

Rennyo resolved to go to the northern provinces in order to propagate the teaching of Shinran to all of the people there. However, he was without a wife at that time. Thus, after he built the temple at Yoshizaki, he had his 2nd daughter, *Kengyoku-ni*, 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 Rennyo relates in this letter:

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

Here Rennyo relates how his daughter *Kengyoku-ni* 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 Jokein lineage of the Jodo School, where

she became a nun. Through innumerable causes and conditions, she was able to return to Hongwanji and then realize *shinjin* as set forth in the Jodo Shinshu school. In this brief passage, Rennyo reveals his feeling about this daughter, with whom he had very little connections and who had to endure considerable hardships, as she was shuffled from temple to temple during her early years. However, as she grew older, she was transferred to Rennyo's aunt, *Kenshu-ni*, who headed a Jokein temple of nuns called Shojuan in Yoshida. There, Rennyo's younger sister, *Kenzui-ni* also a nun, was entrusted with the care of *Kengyoku-ni*. She was raised lovingly by her aunt and great aunt.

Kengyoku-ni learn the teachings and was said to have realized the faith of the Jodo School. Eventually, we are told that she returned to Hongwanji and realized *shinjin* in accordance with the teachings of Jodo Shinshu. Why did this conversion take place within *Kengyoku-ni*? Rennyo writes this:

"Here is the reason why. On the 5th day of 12th month of the 2nd year of Bunmei 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 6th day of the 2nd month of the 3rd year of Bunmei. Her grief was boundless, and, as a result, she herself became incurably ill."

Kengyoku-ni was residing at Shojuan when her stepmother, *Renyu*, became ill. *Renyu* was the younger sister of his 1st wife, *Nyoryo*. She was both aunt and stepmother to *Kengyoku-ni*, so when *Renyu* became ill, *Kengyoku-ni* returned to Hongwanji to nurse her ill stepmother and the children. Unfortunately, *Renyu* passed away on the 25th day of the 12th month of 1470. She had been very fond of *Kengyoku-ni* and thought of her as her own child. *Kengyoku-ni* cared very deeply about her stepmother and suffered in anguish after her death. The very next year as if to compound her suffering, her 6 year old sister died then her older sister 5 days later. *Kengyoku-ni* fell into the depths of sorrow. Yet, this terrible anguish also became the condition that allowed her to be able to hear her father Rennyo's teaching and to become a person settled in *shinjin*.

Kengyoku-ni became ill, yet she wasn't able to rest or care for herself. The reason was that Hongwanji had to respond to

both men and women who would go to worship at Hongwanji. The wife of the Head Priest was to present the teachings in a manner appropriate for women and to entertain visitors. As a result, *Kengyoku-ni*'s health continued to worsen. Finally on the 14th day of the 8th month of 1472, she passed away. Rennyo wrote this:

"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 Jokein lineage, which she had held until then, and become established in the "settled mind" of our tradition."

Kengyoku-ni had heard nothing but the Jokein lineage's teaching in regards to *shinjin*. According to that teaching, we must continue to say the *nembutsu* until we die. We say the *nembutsu* while petitioning 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 Pure Land. *Kengyoku-ni* had heard nothing but this teaching of the Jodo school until she heard her father speak of the Jodo Shinshu 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 the Amida Buddha, Amida 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!"

The Jokein teaching was that our saying of the *nembutsu* is essentially a request to the Buddha, "Amida, please save me!" Rennyo, however, criticized that notion. Instead, he said that when we hear the words of Amida that we will be saved, we entrust ourselves to Amida, with the thought, "If that is your intent, then please save me." Thus, our saying of the *nembutsu* means, "THANK YOU FOR SAVING ME." It does not mean, "Amida, please save me!"

When the time comes for us to die, the manner in which we die is of no concern. During her final days, *Kengyoku-ni* spoke of this over and over.

A Final Thought:

This is a very short version, please read the full version. Remember, Namo Amida Butsu means, "Thank you for saving me."