



The Answer

真言宗
浄土宗



Q @ A for Shinshu Buddhists

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This issue will feature: "Jodo Shinshu: Shin Buddhism in Medieval Japan." The author is James C. Dobbins. This is a text book used for studies at IBS & GTU.

What is Rennyo's Legacy?

Rennyo's most obvious accomplishment during his stewardship of the Honganji was the transformation of the Shinshu from a secondary religious movement into a formidable Buddhist school in Japan. The vast number of peasants joining its ranks, during an era of struggle for autonomous control of their villages, made it a power to be reckoned with both socially and politically. Throughout most of the sixteenth century the Honganji wielded authority and influence on a par with the greatest political forces of Japan. Even when the temple was partitioned into Nishi Honganji & Higashi Honganji at the beginning of the 17th century and its followers divided into 2 independent branches, both remained awesome powers simply because of the enormous number of temples and adherents affiliated with each. In short, the Shinshu has been one of Japan's dominant schools of Buddhism, dwarfing most of its rivals, from Rennyo's time down through the present.

With size came social acceptance and respectability. The groundwork for these too was laid by Rennyo. Prior to his time the Shinshu lingered on the margins of social acceptance. Shinran's idealization of the evil person as the primary object of Amida's salvation had long been associated with the licensed evil heresy, and Shinshu adherents themselves were repeatedly implicated in a variety of antisocial activities—from denigrating Shinto kami and the deities of other Buddhist schools to fomenting peasant uprisings

(*ikkū*). Rennyo's *okite*, or rules of conduct, helped bring structure and discipline to unrestrained Shinshu groups. In the context of the Honganji's massive new temple organization, they functioned as hallowed rules around which believers could order their lives. Though the old stereotype of Shinshu adherents as troublemakers in society did not disappear altogether, by and large the Shinshu received the acceptance and approbation enjoyed by other schools of Buddhism.

Shinran's teachings contain various elements that put Shin Buddhism into conflict with the prevailing norms of Japanese society. Some of them, such as his views of Shinto kami, had to be tempered before the Shinshu could be tolerated. One element, however, that Rennyo and his predecessors never compromised on was the marriage of Shinshu clergy. In Honen's day such a breach of Buddhist tradition was regarded as licensed evil. Outside criticism, however, diminished over the years, in part because of widespread laxity in other schools of Buddhism also. It is noteworthy, for example, that among the charges listed in Mt. Hiei's letter of 1465 justifying its destruction of the Honganji, the accusation of priest' marrying is not included. It seems that the Shinshu had gradually won social acceptance for its ways. This acceptance was formalized in the *Shoshu jin hatto* ("Laws for Temples of All Schools") promulgated by the Tokugawa government in the seventeenth century. One regulation in them states that clerics are not allowed to house women in their quarters but that "exceptions could be made for those priests who customarily take a wife." This proviso was added specifically to accommodate the Shinshu. Eventually all established schools of Buddhism in Japan permitted the marriage of

clergy, diverging from established Buddhist practices in other parts of Asia. The Shinshu's example no doubt provoked this revolutionary change.

Perhaps the least visible but most consequential achievement of Rennyo's was his synthesis of Shin doctrine. Rennyo was without question heir to Shinran's ideas, but he recast them in a popular religious idiom and wedded them to concepts derived from religious movements outside the Shin Tradition. His teachings represent the culmination of a long process of doctrinal development initiated by Shinran, extended by Kakunyo and Zonkaku, and inherited by himself. In Rennyo's writings Shin teachings take on a configuration that has emerged as the doctrinal norm for the Shinshu. None of the doctrinal development principles in the Shinshu's *anjin rondai* ("Points of Faith") originated after his time. They are traceable to the major Shin thinkers from Shinran to Rennyo. Hence, Rennyo's ideas stand at the terminal point in the evolution of Shin orthodoxy. Just as Rennyo's Honganji set the pattern for the Shinshu's institutional structure, likewise his teachings fixed the contours for Shin orthodoxy.

Perhaps the greatest testimony to Rennyo's impact on Shin doctrine is the short creed known as the *Ryogemon* ("Statement of Conviction"):

"We abandon all indiscriminate religious practices and undertakings (zogyo zasshu) and all mind of self-assertion (jiriki no kokoro), and we rely with singleness of heart on the Tathagata Amida in that matter of utmost importance to us now-to please save us in our next life.

We rejoice in knowing that our birth in the Pure Land is assured and our salvation established from the moment we

rely on (the Buddha) with even a single *nembutsu* (*ichinen*), and that whenever we utter the Buddha's name thereafter it is an expression of gratitude and indebtedness to him.

We gratefully acknowledge that for us to hear and understand this truth we are indebted to our founder and master for appearing in the world and to successive generations of religious teachers in our tradition for their profound encouragement.

We shall henceforth abide by our established rules (*okite*) as long as we shall live."

As a confessional statement the *Ryogemon* embodies the crux of the Shin teachings: faith, gratitude, reverence for Shinran, and rules of conduct. The surprising thing about the creed is that it does not contain the word *shinjin*, or faith, even though that is the most important concept in Shinran's writings. Instead, the terminology used to convey the idea of faith is that of "relying on the Buddha to please save me." When closely examined, the *Ryogemon's* contents reveal it to be none other than the words of Rennyo extracted from his letters. Though the creed is not used as extensively today as it has been in past centuries, its promulgation as a normative statement of belief reflects the lasting influence of Rennyo's teachings on Shin doctrine. Whenever believers recite the creed nowadays, as is done at the annual Hoonko memorial service or during Shinshu ordination ceremonies (*tokudo*), they are borrowing Rennyo's words to express the nature of their own faith. His articulation of the content of faith has thus been preserved as a model expression of Shin orthodoxy.

If you read Vol. 3 Issue 8, you know that I have a conflict with Mr. Dobbins' interpretation or translation of the *Ryogemon*. The issue at hand is the phrase "please save me." This was written in that issue:

"The Jokein (Jodo Shu) 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!'"

Further in Jitsuen Kakehashi's book, Bearer of the Light: The Life and Thought of Ren-

nyo this is written:

"In the Third Chapter of the Words of the Master, as heard and recorded by Kuzen (Kuzen Kikigaki), it states, 'Seeking to appease the Buddha by reciting the Name for the sake of the Buddha's benevolence is like seeking to purchase a thing. That is self-power. Reciting the name means saying 'Thank you! Thank you for saving me!'

For instance, we may declare that saying the Name is a response in gratitude for the Buddha's benevolence. Yet, if we believe that we are able to 'repay the favor' by giving our recitations to the Buddha, we are revealing a mind engaged in business-like calculations. This is the *nembutsu* of self-power to which we have attached contractual terms.

In contrast, Rennyo states that the meaning of saying the Names is simply to say that we are truly grateful for having been saved."

I feel that the importance of what Rennyo Shonin did for the Hongwanji should be known and Mr. Dobbins does a great job in this. However, as in all works, there are disagreements in interpretations, I wanted to make sure that you received what I feel is a better translation and understanding of intent by Rennyo Shonin.

What is meant by Entrusting?

This answer is found in this excerpt from Jitsuen Kakehashi's book, Bearer of the Light: The Life and Thought of Rennyo, pages 132 and 133.

Hence, the tradition of giving expression to *shinjin* of the Primal Vow through the word "entrusting" has existed since the time of Shinran. It was Rennyo, however, who went on to transmit the essence of *shinjin* to the common people by selecting "entrusting" as the central expression for *shinjin*, and by then articulating it in ordinary language through such phrases as "entrusting ourselves to Amida."

However, Rennyo went even further than that. With expressions such as "single-heartedly entrust in Amida to save us in the life to come," and "Amida, please save me" (*tasuketamae*), he brought to even greater clarity the content of the mind that entrusts. In the Words of the Master Rennyo, 188, his son, Jitsugo's words are recorded as follows:

The most important matter in the tradition of the Master Shinran is the one thought-moment of entrusting. For this reason, succeeding generations of leaders

have spoken of "entrusting." Yet, people did not know exactly how to entrust. Therefore, during the days of the former-former head priest (Rennyo), he wrote in his letters to clarify for us that, discarding all sundry practices, we should entrust ourselves single-heartedly to Amida Buddha to save us in the life to come (*gosho tasuketamae*). Thus, he is the Master who restored the tradition.

In the one thought-moment of entrusting in the Other Power of the Primal Vow, we receive the benefit of being embraced, never to be abandoned, and are made to dwell in the ranks of truly settled beings, who will realize enlightenment upon attaining birth. This is "the essential meaning of the teaching of the Master Shinran and his tradition." For that reason, generations of teachers had been endeavoring to impart the teachings, using the centrally important expression of "entrusting." However, followers did not know precisely how they should entrust. Rennyo brought *shinjin* as taught by Shinran fully back to life by stating clearly that we should "discard all sundry practices and entrust ourselves single-heartedly to Amida Buddha to save us in the life to come." This is the reason we call Rennyo, "the Master who restored the tradition of the Founding Master, Shinran."

A Final Thought:

The Jodo Shinshu creed is called the *Ryogemon* (attributed to Rennyo Shonin). This translated version is by Hisao Inagaki, Professor Emeritus, Ryukoku University. This information is from Vol. 1 Issue 4.

"Having abandoned the mind of self-power to perform various practices and miscellaneous acts, I have entrusted myself to Amida Tathagata with singleness of heart recognizing that he has resolved my crucial after-life problem once and for all.

I understand that at the moment such entrusting Faith arises in me, my deliverance from Samsara is settled with the assurance of birth in the Pure Land, and joyfully accept that recitation of the *Nembutsu* which follows is to express my indebtedness to Amida.

How grateful I am that I have come to this understanding through the benevolence of the founder, Shinran Shonin, who appeared in this country and of the masters of the succeeding generations who have guided me with deep compassion!

From now on, I will abide by the rules of conduct all my life." Namo Amida Butsu