

# 31 Rennyo: *Letters of Saint Rennyo* (1474/75/76)

Introduced by Christoph Kleine

## Introduction

Rennyo Kenju 蓮如兼壽 (1415–1499), the author of the letters printed below in English translation, was the eighth head abbot (*hosshu* 法主) of the Honganji, which, under his leadership, became the unchallenged centre of the Jōdo Shin School of Pure Land Buddhism, to this day the largest Buddhist denomination in Japan. Within the Shinshū tradition, Rennyo is regarded as the second founder of the school, and his status is almost equal to that of its founder, Shinran. Rennyo concentrated his missionary activity in the central provinces, which made him a target of the monks of Enryakuji on Mt Hiei, who considered these areas their own preserve, and thus destroyed the Honganji in 1465. Rennyo sought temporary refuge in various locations; in 1471, he moved his base to Yoshizaki (in what is now Fukui Prefecture). During the years that followed Rennyo disseminated a great number of *ofumi*, or “epistles,” in which he set forth his interpretation of Shinran’s teaching of salvation through faith in the Buddha Amida. He also used his letters to attack various heresies within Shinshū.

One of Rennyo’s central concerns was to discourage the followers of the Honganji from acting subversively. Invoking the authority of the Honganji, believers in the doctrinal tradition of Shinran – then commonly known as the “sect of the single-minded” (*ikkōshū* 一向宗) – were involved in various uprisings known to history as *ikkō ikki* 一向一揆 (Ikkō uprisings). This had earned the Shinshū a reputation for lawlessness and insubordination.

To counteract this, Rennyo exhorted his followers to observe the paradigm of the interdependence of Buddha Dharma and ruler’s law. Following Zonkaku’s interpretation of this paradigm (see above), Rennyo emphasised the distinction between public behaviour and inner faith. Inwardly, the believers should follow the teachings of Shinran, and believe in the grace of Amida; outwardly, they should obey the laws of the worldly rulers, and show gratitude for the blessings granted by the authorities. This ideal of a profoundly pious but also law-abiding, diligent, and modest person was subsequently propagated within the Shinshū until the late nineteenth century.

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## Bibliographical Information

Rennyo. Rennyo Shōnin ofumi 蓮如上人御文 [Letters of Saint Rennyo]. In *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 大正新脩大藏經, edited by Takakusu Junjirō 高楠順次郎, and Watanabe Kaikyoku 渡邊海旭. Tokyo: Taishō Issaikyō Kankōkai, 1924–1934 [1474–1477], vol. 83, no. 2668, (A) 781b05–b22; (B) 783c12–22; (C) 793a13–21; (D) 793c23–794a24; (E) 794a25–c03.

Page numbers given in square brackets refer to this edition.

The translation adopted here can be found in:

Ann T. and Minor L. Rogers. *Tannishō; Rennyo Shōnin Ofumi: Passages Deploring Deviations of Faith; the Letters of Rennyo*. BDK English Tripiṭaka 105–II, 106–I. Berkeley, CA: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 1996; (A) 66–67; (B) 72; (C) 94–95; (D) 96–97; (E) 97–98.

I have slightly amended the translation for the sake of terminological consistency; I have added Japanese terms in square brackets.

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## Translation Adopted from Ann T. and Minor L. Rogers

[A] If there are any of you who have heard the meaning of our tradition's true faith in the otherpower [of the Buddha Amida] [*tariki shinjin* 他力信心] and become decisively settled, you must store the truth of that true faith in the bottom of your hearts; do not talk about it with those of other sects or others [not of our tradition]. Furthermore, you must not praise it openly [in the presence of such people] on byways and main roads and in the villages where you live. Next, do not slight the provincial military governors and local land stewards, claiming that you have attained true faith; meet your public obligations [*kōji* 公事] in full without fail. Further, do not belittle the various kami and buddhas and bodhisattvas, for they are all encompassed within the six characters “*na-mu-a-mi-da-butsu* 南無阿彌陀佛.”<sup>1</sup> Besides this, in particular,

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I CK: That is, the formula “Homage to the Buddha Amida,” the repetition of which is the central practice of the Japanese Pure Land school, which is commonly referred to as “Buddha recollection” (*nen-butsu* 念佛). According to Rennyo's holistic interpretation of the *nenbutsu*, Amida Buddha's name is the container of everything – so there is, on the one hand, no need to do anything else other than to faithfully recite it, and on the other, no need to cite any other buddhas, bodhisattvas, or gods, because they all partake in the inconceivable name of Amida.

take the ruler's laws [*ōbō*] as your outer aspect, store true faith in [Amida's] other-power deep in your hearts, and take [the] secular [principles of] humanity and justice [*seken no jingi* 世間ノ仁義]<sup>II</sup> as essential. Bear in mind that these are the rules of conduct that have been established within our tradition.

[B] You must never slight the provincial military governors and local land stewards, saying that you are a person who reveres the Buddha's Law [*buppō*] and has attained faith [*shinjin* 信心]. Meet your public obligations in full without fail.

People who comply with the above exemplify the conduct of nenbutsu practitioners in whom faith has been awakened [*shinjin hottoku* 信心發得] and who aspire to [birth in the Pure Land in] the afterlife. They are, in other words, ones who faithfully abide by the Buddha's Law [*buppō*] and the ruler's law [*ōbō*].

[C] People who gather from this and other provinces should, therefore, first of all, be fully aware of the significance of the regulations established by the founding Master [Shinran]. He said, "Even if you are called a 'cow thief,' do not act in such a way that you are seen as a follower of the Buddha's Law or as an aspirant for [liberation in] the afterlife." Besides this, he also carefully stipulated that we should observe [the secular Confucian principles of] humanity [*jin* 仁], justice [*gi* 義], propriety [*rei* 禮], wisdom [*chi* 智], and trustworthiness [*shin* 信]; that we should honor the ruler's law [*ōbō*]; and that, deep within, we should take true faith in the other-power [of Amida Buddha], established by the [Buddha's] Primal Vow [to save all sentient beings] [*hongan tariki no shinjin* 本願他力ノ信心], as fundamental.

[D] When we consider presenting our tradition's true faith in [Amida Buddha's salvific] other-power [*tariki shinjin* 他力信心], we must first distinguish between the people who have accumulated good [karma] in the past and those who have not accumulated good [karma] in the past. For, however long ago a person may have listed his name as a participant in this [tradition], it will be difficult for one who lacks good [karma] accumulated in the past to attain true faith [*shinjin*]. Indeed, faith [*shin* 信] will of itself be decisively settled [*ketsujō* 決定] in the person for whom accumulated good [karma] has unfolded. [p. 793/794] And so, when we discuss the two [kinds of] practices – correct [*shō* 正] and sundry [*zō* 雜] – in the presence of people who have not accumulated good [karma] in the past, this may lay the foundation for slander, contrary to what one would expect. To teach extensively in the presence of worldly people [*seken no hito* 世間ノヒト] without understanding this principle [*dōri* 道理] of the presence or absence of good [karma] accumulated in the past is in total opposition to our tradition's rules of conduct. Hence the *Larger Sutra*<sup>III</sup> says, "If a person lacks roots of good, he will not be able to hear this sutra"<sup>IV</sup> and "To hear this sutra and to

II CK: Humanity/humaneness and justice/righteousness are regarded as the two cardinal virtues among the "five unchangeable [virtues]" (*gojō* 五常) of Confucianism, when it comes to governance and statecraft.

III CK: *Daikyō* 大經; i.e. the principle scripture of the Pure Land tradition; full title: *Bussetsu muryōju kyō* 佛說無量壽經 (T 12, no. 360).

IV CK: For the original passage see T 12, no. 360, p. 273a28.

sustain faith [*shingyō* 信樂] are the most difficult of all difficulties; nothing surpasses these difficulties.”<sup>V</sup> Also, Shandao 善導 [613–681]<sup>VI</sup> states [in his *Commentary to the Sūtra on Visualising the Buddha of Immeasurable Life*]<sup>VII</sup>:

If a person has already practiced this Dharma at one time in the past and is able to hear it again now, he will immediately realize joy. [T 37, no. 1753, p. 264a07–8]

In any case, it is clear, according to the sutras and commentaries, that everything depends on good [karma] accumulated in the past. Thus we understand that we should watch over people in whom there is good from the past and transmit the Dharma of our tradition to them. We must be fully aware of the significance of this and then instruct others.

In particular, first of all, take the ruler’s law as fundamental [*ōbō wo mote hon to shi* 王法ヲモテ本トシ] and, giving priority to [the secular Confucian principles of] humanity [*jin* 仁] and justice [*gi* 義], follow the generally accepted worldly customs [*seken tsūto no gi* 世間通途ノ儀]; deep within your heart [*naishin* 内心], maintain the settled mind of our tradition [*tōryū anjin* 當流安心]; and outwardly [*gaisō* 外相] conduct yourself in such a way that the transmission of the Dharma you have received will not be evident to those of other sects and other schools. This distinguishes the person who fully knows our tradition’s right teaching, which is true and real [*tōryū shinjitsu no shōgi* 當流眞實ノ正義].

[E] Followers of our tradition [*tōryū monto* 當流門徒] – both those in whom the settled mind is already established [*anjin ketsujō* 安心決定]<sup>VIII</sup> and those [whose faith is] yet to be established but who seek to attain the settled mind – must bear in mind the following points: First of all, outwardly take the ruler’s law [*ōbō* 王法] as fundamental; do not hold any of the kami, buddhas, or bodhisattvas in contempt; do not slander other sects or other teachings. Do not slight the provincial military governors [*shugo* 守護] or local landowners [*jitō* 地頭], but meet fixed yearly tributes and payments to officials in full. Besides that, take [the secular Confucian principles of] humanity and justice [*jingi* 仁義] as essential. Inwardly [*naishin* 内心], rely singleheartedly and steadfastly [*isshin ikkō* 一心一向] on Amida Tathāgata for [birth in the Pure Land in] the afterlife [*kōsei/gose* 後生] and give no thought to any of the sundry prac-

V CK: Cf. T 12, no. 360, p. 279a16–17.

VI CK: The Chinese Pure Land master Shandao was one of the most influential sources of inspiration for Hōnen 法然 (1133–1212), the founder of the Japanese Pure Land school, and his disciple Shinran, founder of the sub-branch of this tradition represented by Rennyo. Shandao was so important as a patriarch that, in the early days, the Japanese Pure Land school was often called “Shandao school” (*Zendōshū* 善導宗). Furthermore, according to tradition, Shandao appeared to Hōnen in a dream, to confirm that his understanding of the Buddhist teachings was correct, and to entitle him to propagate it in Japan.

VII CK: *Guan wuliangshoufo jing shu*, Jap. *Kan muryōjubutsu kyō sho* 觀無量壽佛經疏, a commentary by Shandao on the apocryphal, but nevertheless extremely influential, *Kan muryōjubutsu kyō* (T 12, no. 365).

VIII CK: This is a common term, mainly used within the Pure Land tradition, denoting a practitioner’s mind that is settled in the deep and sincere faith that they will be saved by Amida Buddha.

tices and miscellaneous good acts<sup>IX</sup>; when we entrust ourselves without a single thought of doubt, we will be born [*ōjō subeshi* 往生スヘシ] without fail in the true and real Pure Land of utmost bliss [*shinjitsu no gokuraku jōdo* 眞實ノ極樂淨土]. With this understanding, one is to be declared a nenbutsu follower [*nenbutsu gyōja* 念佛行者] who has realized true faith through Amida Tathāgata's other-power [*Amida nyorai no tariki no shinjin* 彌陀如來ノ他力ノ信心].

Having thus attained the true faith that is expressed through the nenbutsu [*nenbutsu no shinjin* 念佛ノ信心], we should then realize that, although we are wretched beings of deep evil karma who commit evil all our lives, when we once awaken true faith with the one thought-moment of taking refuge [in Amida] [*ichinen kimyō no shinjin* 一念歸命ノ信心], we are readily saved by the working of the Buddha's Vow [*hongan* 本願]. Then, deeply recognizing the graciousness of Amida Tathāgata's inconceivable, world-surpassing Primal Vow [*chōse no hongan* 超世ノ本願] – the strong cause [of birth] – we simply say the nenbutsu, sleeping or waking, in gratitude for the Buddha's benevolence [*butsu'on* 佛恩], and repay our indebtedness to Amida Tathāgata.

Nothing we know beyond this is of any use for the [attainment of birth in the] afterlife, but these days, people talk absurdly – as if something were lacking – about unknown, eccentric teachings that have not been transmitted [within our tradition]; thus they confuse others and debase the unsurpassed transmission of the Dharma. This is indeed a deplorable situation. We must think about it very carefully.

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IX CK: *Zōgyō zōzen* 雜行雜善; i.e. a common phrase in Pure Land Buddhism, referring to Buddhist practices and moral acts other than the invocation of Amida Buddha's name (*nenbutsu*). These are believed to simply distract the practitioner from calling upon the Buddha, which is the only practice that guarantees liberation from the cycle of birth and death.