

Rennyō Shōnin & His Model for Propagation in the Modern World

The following is from the JSCC History of Jōdo Shinshū section. As always, I strongly encourage anyone who is interested in learning more about Buddhism and our Jōdo Shinshū traditions to sign up for the JSCC. Please note that this example is simply my response to the question posed by the course and not the only answer to this question.

Question: Rennyō Shōnin is sometimes described as the “Second Founder” because of his great success in developing the Hongwanji organization. What was it that made his endeavors successful? Is there anything that we can learn from him to support our contemporary propagation of Jōdo Shinshū?

John’s Response:

There are four major factors that made Rennyō Shōnin’s endeavors in development of the Hongwanji organization successful. The first factor is the media through which Rennyō provided direct communication to the monto, followers of Jōdo Shinshū who often formed small dojo as congregational locations. In conjunction with this distribution media, Rennyō dealt honestly and directly with misinterpretation of the dharma. The second factor is Rennyō’s sensitivity to the social influence of the Jōdo Shinshū teachings on its followers and their actions in response those teachings. The third factor is Ōmi Prefecture’s position as a commercial and communication center of Japan during this period. The fourth factor is the organizational structure that Rennyō strengthened throughout the Hongwanji system of temples.

There are two primary media through which Rennyō chose to propagate the Jōdo Shinshū teachings. The first was through the use of ofumi or letters that presented the essentials of Shinran’s teachings in a concise and easily understood manner. Often the ofumi addressed questions that followers had. The ofumi were to be read aloud at gatherings of the various monto so the teachings could be disseminated to all followers. Use of ofumi gave Rennyō a consistent way with which to communicate with Jōdo Shinshū followers. Rennyō maintained a consistent message throughout the hundreds of ofumi issued. The ofumi focused on two primary areas in which followers needed clarification. One was a clear explanation of shinjin as the essence of Jōdo Shinshū doctrine and the other was direct condemnation of heretical beliefs and practices. The primary issue requiring resolution was recitation of the nembutsu without faith or more specifically with a lack of focus on shinjin. Through the use of direct communication in language which was easily understood, Rennyō was able to propagate the dharma and squelch heretical practices and those who sought personal gain through false representation of the teachings. The second media through which Rennyō chose to propagate the Jōdo Shinshū teachings was through the issuance of honzon, central objects of worship for use in temples and dojo. The honzon were intended to provide both a validation of that temple or dojo directly from the hōshū and also to provide a focused area in which to conduct daily services thereby strengthening the position of Jōdo Shinshū practices in followers’ daily lives.

Rennyō had a clear understanding of the political realities of the Hongwanji’s position in society. While he was striving to spread the teachings as widely as possible, he was aware of those followers with shallow faith and of their provocation towards outside political and religious authority. This situation caused Rennyō to issue a set of eleven “rules of conduct” in 1473. While this first use of regulations may seem different than the teachings of Shinran, there is precedent of lists of probation dating back to 1285.

“Item: There must be no denigration of the various kami and buddhas and bodhisattvas.

Item: There must be no slander of other teachings and other sects.

- Item: There must be no criticism of other sects in [terms of] our sect's practices
 - Item: Although taboos are meaningless in relation to the Buddha-dharma, they must be strictly observed in the presence of [those of] other sects and in public.
 - Item: It is impermissible, in the presence of others, to praise Buddha-dharma arbitrarily, in terms not transmitted within this sect.
 - Item: As people of the nenbutsu, you must be fully obedient to the provincial military governors and local land stewards and not slight them.
 - Item: Those who are uninformed must not blatantly extol our sect's teaching, trusting to their own interpretations, in the presence of [those of] other sects.
 - Item: Those who are not yet of settled mind (*anjin*) are not to praise the way of faith (*shinjin*) on hearsay.
 - Item: There must be no consumption of fish or fowl at nenbutsu meetings.
 - Item: One loses oneself in drink; there must be no drinking on days on which there are nenbutsu gatherings.
 - Item: In the nenbutsu community, heedless gambling must stop.
- Those who disobey these eleven articles are to be strictly excluded from the community.”¹

We can see from these regulations, that Rennyo was addressing both the lack of understanding regarding shinjin and the friction created with other faiths and political authorities. As the number of Shinshu followers grew, so did the prestige associated with being among its membership. This prestige led to arrogance and other behaviors that caused friction with other sects. Also, misinterpretation of the concept of all sentient beings being assured birth in the Pure Land led some to believe that societal hierarchy had no meaning and used this to justify defying local authorities. Rennyo worked to correct these misconceptions by issuing additional ofumi in alignment with the eleven regulations.

In describing the effects of the Omi Prefecture on the propagation of Jodo Shinshu, it is important to discuss the geographic, political, and socio-economic factors that drove such propagation. The example for this discussion will be the Katada Monto. With its location on the western shore of Lake Biwa and its proximity to Kyoto, Katada was both a port for transportation from Lake Biwa and vital link in the land routes to Kyoto. In addition to its location, Katada was able to operate autonomously under the protection of Enryakuji Temple, as long as good relations were maintained with those in power on Mt. Hiei. The political stability allowed the growth of a new class of Japanese, those whose professions were in commerce or the trades. Since this new class was breaking out of the traditional hierarchies of Japan, it is natural they would seek other avenues to validate their new position in society. Jodo Shinshu, with its doctrine of all sentient beings, no matter their professions, having the ability to become ensured of birth in the Pure Land, appealed to this new class. As a result, the commerce and tradesmen class became a strong part of the Jodo Shinshu community.

“Arriving in Katada from Mikami, Hoju's grandfather, Zendo, secured from Enryakuji monopoly rights for the dyeing business in Omi, and his patent is still preserved in Katada's Hompukuji. Under the heading “Monthly leaders of Nembutsu (services) at Hompukuji,” the Hompukuji atogaki lists representatives

¹ Rogers, Minor L. & Rogers, Ann T. (1991). “Rennyo— The Second Founder of Shin Buddhism”, Asian Humanities Press. p.86

of the twelve organizational units (kumi) that made up the Katada Monto, together with their professions. These include two oil merchants, a bucket-maker, a maltster, and a ship-builder.”²

The increasing affluence of this new class of Japanese also increased their mobility and as commerce spread across Japan, so did the Jodo Shinshu teachings. As the strength and number of Jodo Shinshu followers grew, so did the attention from Enryakuji. In concluding this discussion of the importance of Omi Prefecture in the propagation of Jodo Shinshu, it must be noted that Enryakuji attempted to suppress Jodo Shinshu teachings. Forces of warrior monks were sent to destroy the Hongwanji. After several clashes between forces from Enryakuji and Jodo Shinshu monto, a settlement was worked out in which Hongwanji became a branch temple of Enryakuji’s Saito Kitatani Shogyo-bo and Hompukuji of Toto Kitatani Kkuon-bo. Regular financial duties were connected with these relationships. That the Hongwanji was able to withstand these attacks and the contributions of the Katada Monto towards the eventual indemnification costs are both evident of the importance establishment of the Hongwanji in the Omi Prefecture for not only the propagation of Jodo Shinshu, but also its survival in the face of attack.

Shinran thought of Jodo Shu as a fellowship of equals rather than an organization with hierarchical form. This is evident from the following verse of the Tannisho, “For myself, I do not even have a single disciple. For if I brought people to say the nembutsu through my own efforts, then they might be my disciples. But it is indeed preposterous to call persons “my disciples” when they say the nembutsu having received the working of Amida.”³ Despite Shinran’s stated position as a student of Honen, an organizational form evolved over time prior to systemic organization by Rennyo. At the top level was Hongwanji with leading branch temples immediately below it as mediators of Jodo Shinshu to the provinces. Below these leading branch temples were other temples and dojo, ranked according to size and position. Finally, below these were ko, or small sanghas, that were the grassroots level of Jodo Shinshu. The control of this structure was maintained by actions such as the granting of honzon and jigo (temple status) by Hongwanji. However, the rapid growth of Jodo Shinshu experienced during Rennyo’s time was unprecedented and had a disruptive effect on the existing Hongwanji system. In order to deal with this growth, Rennyo employed two tactics: first, a strengthening of Hongwanji’s direct control over the priests in the leading branch temples and second, imparting direct influence onto the temples, dojo and ko at the lower levels of the organizational structure. A major factor in the strengthening of Hongwanji’s direct control of the leading branch temples was Rennyo’s use of the Hongwanji’s immediate bloodline. Since Rennyo had as many as twenty-seven children, he was able to place them in leading branch temples as well as having them establish new temples. Though use of the Hongwanji bloodlines had been used from the time of Shinran’s death, Rennyo was the first to fully exploit and organize the use. Rennyo established the Ikkeshu, a Hongwanji family council, to consolidate Hongwanji authority and project it directly into the provinces. The original members of the Ikkeshu were Rennyo’s sons and elder grandsons. The Ikkeshu were responsible to act on behalf of Hongwanji in the province by exercising powers such as the granting of being a “direct follower” and of excommunication. As a method of centralizing control, the Ikkeshu was effective at bringing Hongwanji authority directly to the provinces. In a similar manner, Rennyo knew he must have

² Solomon, Michael (1997). “Rennyo and The Rise of The Honganji – Shin Buddhism & Society in Medieval Japan”, Pure Land Publications, Los Angeles. p.100-101

³ “The Collected Works of Shinran” p. 664

an interest in bringing direct influence of the Hongwanji to the ko. At the grassroots level, successful propagation and influence of the ko meant success in reaching the masses. Furthermore, since Hongwanji relied on financial support from individual members rather than sponsorship from large estates, it was essential for the future of Jodo Shinshu to be successful with the ko. The ko's main function was to allow members to meet and, with the guidance of a senior member, clarify and reaffirm their faith. Rennyō felt that through the medium of the ko's discussions, the faith of a few could have a wide influence. This is consistent with Rennyō's position on proselytization.

“There are three people we want to convert to Shinshu first of all. These are the priest [bozu], the elder [toshiyori], and the headman [otona]. If only these three are made the foundation of Buddhism [i.e., Shinshu] everywhere, the remaining masses will all be won over and [our] religion will flourish.”⁴

While Rennyō emphasized the power of this medium, at the same time he was aware of the consequences of the informality of the ko. Often the ko would degenerate into social gatherings and as such, Rennyō issued ofumi to directly address such instances.

“Although monthly meetings [yoriai] have been held widely since long ago, [nowadays] they have nothing to do with Faith. Particularly in recent years people return home after simply eating and drinking. This goes against the true intent of Buddhism.”⁵

Rennyō felt the importance of directly communicating the need for the ko to remain focused on the dharma that he would address his directives to specific ko when necessary.

“In recent years the membership of Choshoji was seriously misunderstood the essence of Buddhism. This is above all because there are [within the ko] groups called zaju, who sit on a high platform and even drink from their sake cups ahead of ordinary people. They consider themselves superior and are looked up to by the others, who believe that this [social distinction] is truly the basis of Buddhism. All this has nothing to do with salvation; it is simply a matter of worldly position.”⁶

In contrast to this, Rennyō also sent direct communication to those ko which fulfilled their annual levy (*nengudai*) and yearly pledged money (*mainen yakusoku no kane*).

“To the Sixth-of-the-Month Ko:

The annual pledge of the Sixth-of-the-Month Ko has been duly received. Many thanks. Now Faith should be firmly established. All members should be informed that without exception those who cast off irrelevant practices and appeal to Amida with all their heart will surely be helped by him and will be reborn in paradise; and they should be led to recite Nembutsu. Amen. - Rennyō”⁷

Such a “receipt”, which voiced a direct expression of thanks from the Hossu, became prized possessions of a ko. Through the use of the forms of communications described above, both to admonish and thank the ko, Rennyō established direct and effective relationships with the ko in

⁴ Solomon, Michael (1997). “Rennyō and The Rise of The Honganji – Shin Buddhism & Society in Medieval Japan”, Pure Land Publications, Los Angeles. p.184

⁵ Solomon, Michael (1997). “Rennyō and The Rise of The Honganji – Shin Buddhism & Society in Medieval Japan”, Pure Land Publications, Los Angeles. p.209

⁶ Solomon, Michael (1997). “Rennyō and The Rise of The Honganji – Shin Buddhism & Society in Medieval Japan”, Pure Land Publications, Los Angeles. p.210-211

⁷ Solomon, Michael (1997). “Rennyō and The Rise of The Honganji – Shin Buddhism & Society in Medieval Japan”, Pure Land Publications, Los Angeles. p.212

ways that made them feel immediate connections with the prestige of the Hongwanji and the Hossu.

With regard to contemporary propagation of Jodo Shinshu, the key is to follow the model set by Rennyo and to apply contemporary equivalents. For the first major factor of Rennyo's success, the proper choice of a communication medium, application of expanded internet presence should be examined. With the use of the internet continuing to grow, it is a logical contemporary extension Rennyo's use of ofumi. For the second factor, a sensitivity to the social influence of Jodo Shinshu teachings, realization that the prevalent perceptions of Buddhism today, especially in North America, are of other forms of Buddhist practice. This means that propagation of Jodo Shinshu needs to be based on an educational platform that recognizes the existing starting point. In North America, there are stereotypical perceptions of Buddhism that are not consistent with the teaching of Jodo Shinshu. Rather than begin the teaching of Jodo Shinshu with the belief that the student is a blank slate, Jodo Shinshu education in North America needs to be built upon a student who is entering the classroom with preconceived notions of what Buddhism is. For the third factor, finding a location that is a commercial and communications center, the focus again comes back to the use of the internet. Since the internet is an ever increasing medium for communication, an increased presence of Jodo Shinshu teachings will reach a wider audience than currently can be achieved via the overseas missions of the Hongwanji. Also, the potential to become engaged with more individuals who have the means to financially support the propagation of Jodo Shinshu is increased with an increased presence on the internet. Finally, for the fourth factor, the organizational structure, more centralized control is required. For example, the Buddhist Churches of America is organized with minimal permanent staff at its headquarters. A National Board that turns over its leadership on a regular basis handles the majority of the management. By design, this management structure cannot consistently support long term programs. Without an increased amount of centralized control and the appropriate level of staffing to support it, BCA headquarters cannot manage long term programs to propagate Jodo Shinshu teachings across the continental United States. A management study of applying the model set by Rennyo in a contemporary context is required to determine the specific details, but with the foundation of the equivalents cited, many positive changes could be implemented to better propagate Jodo Shinshu.