REVIEWS

Minor and Ann ROGERS, *Rennyo: The Second Founder of Shin Buddhism.* Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1991. xxi + 434 pages, chronology, bibliography, index. Hardcover US$75.00; paperback US$25.00. ISBN 0-89581-929-5, 0-89581-930-9.

I would like to preface this review with a tribute to Minor Rogers, whose untimely death in August 1991 took from us not only our most knowledgeable scholar of Rennyo in the U.S. but also a truly exemplary individual—or, in Shin Buddhist parlance, a *myōkōnin.* This book is his scholarly legacy to us, the culmination and distillation of more than twenty years of research.

Rogers produced this book in collaboration with his very able and talented wife, Ann, who was the translator of Rennyo's letters, occupying the middle section of the volume, as well as the author of other passages in the book. As a reflection of their collaboration, first-person plural pronouns are used whenever scholarly observations are made. The book is structured around the questions and assumptions that Minor Rogers articulated throughout his scholarly life, and anyone who has read his other writings will immediately detect his guiding voice. This work represents his most comprehensive exposition of how he saw Rennyo.

Two figures loom large in the development of Shin Buddhism: Shinran (1173–1262), the founder, and his descendent Rennyo (1415–1499), the so-called restorer. Shinran articulated the teachings around which the Shin movement coalesced, and Rennyo built it into a massive school of Buddhism centered at Hongan-ji. Shinran is ordinarily depicted as the sublime religious thinker whose teachings had a magnetic appeal, while Rennyo is portrayed as his faithful heir who restored those teachings to their rightful place after a period of decline. In Weberian terms, they might be classified as founder and organizer, respectively. But neither that classification nor the ordinary sectarian depiction of the two does justice to Rennyo's complexity and influence. Rogers chooses instead to call him the second founder, and the entire book is a sustained attempt to explicate what exactly Rennyo inherited from Shinran, what he contributed in his own right, and what his lasting impact has been.

The book is composed of an introductory chapter; a biography of Rennyo in three chapters; a translation of his most important writings, known as *The Letters* (*Gobunshō* 御文章); and a concluding section of four chapters on Rennyo's legacy. Though the book is formally about Rennyo, it actually touches on the entire scope of Shin Buddhist history as Rogers attempts to situate Rennyo in relation to his predecessors on the one hand, and amid the sweep of events after his time on the other. This is a book of multiple layers and dimensions, and parts of it may be baffling to the novice reader. What

we have in it is Rogers's scholarly reflections from decades of work, some inspired by his reading of Rennyo directly, others by the vast secondary literature on the subject, still others by his view of Shin Buddhism as a whole, and yet others by his perennial interest in the problem of being religious in a religiously plural world. Thus, under the rubric of studying Rennyo we see a much larger enterprise: an attempt to assess the course of Shin Buddhist history in both its triumphs and its failings.

The introductory chapter sets the stage for this larger story. In it Rogers observes that Shin traditionalists differ dramatically from secular historians in their portrayal of Rennyo. The former usually present him as the fulfiller of Shinran's dream to convey the liberating message of Amida Buddha's primal vow to the world. The latter tend to contrast him to Shinran, depicting him as a skillful leader determined to consolidate political and religious authority in the Hongan-ji. The problem of the true character of Rennyo extends to his teachings as well. Do they contain the same import as Shinran's, or are they fundamentally different? Rogers acknowledges some validity in each viewpoint and seeks to do justice to both. His basic argument is that there is an undeniable continuity between Shinran's and Rennyo's teachings, so that sectarian proponents who proclaim a common message are justified in doing so. But at the same time Rogers recognizes ways in which Rennyo recast and extended Shinran's ideas, thereby making his own teachings distinct.

The biography of Rennyo presented in the next section divides his life into three phases: his early training, his retreat at Yoshizaki, and his consolidation of the Shin school in his old age. This section is well grounded in (and occasionally dominated by) primary sources—specifically, Rennyo's letters and the accounts of sayings and occurrences in his life compiled by his children and grandchildren. It also draws judiciously from Japan's extensive secondary literature. As a youth Rennyo lived in modest circumstances at Hongan-ji and was initiated into the teachings of Shinran and others primarily by copying religious texts under the tutelage of his father. In 1465, soon after assuming the position of head priest, Rennyo was plunged into a crisis when militant religious partisans from Mt. Hiei's Enryaku-ji attacked and destroyed the Hongan-ji. Rennyo was sent fleeing into the provinces, and eventually took refuge in the remote hamlet of Yoshizaki along the Japan Sea in 1471. There, as warfare raged in Kyoto and spilled over into the countryside, Rennyo sought to consolidate Shin adherents under his leadership and to communicate effectively with them.

Historians generally see Rennyo's four-year stay in this region as the starting point of the *ikkō ikki* 一向一揆, leagues of Shin Buddhists who organized themselves politically and militarily and who ultimately took over Kaga Province for ninety years. Rogers goes beyond the *ikkō ikki* phenomenon to identify the Yoshizaki sojourn as the most creative period in Rennyo's religious thinking. In a steady stream of letters sent out to congregations and individuals he articulated his understanding of faith. He presented it not

only as a personal bonding with Amida Buddha, similar to Shinran's view, but also as devotion to the Hongan-ji and as the observance of social obligations. This explication of faith, linking introspective experience and social responsibility, became the orthodox interpretation for the Shin school from this period on.

Rennyo returned to the Kyoto region in 1475 and five years later orchestrated the building of an enormous and resplendent new Hongan-ji. This rebuilding of the temple, as well as the expansion of the Shin school to nationwide proportions, are the accomplishments for which he is best remembered. But Rogers is quick to emphasize that Rennyo's teachings were also a major contribution. They provided a religious pivot for this massive sectarian organization to revolve around. They were disseminated throughout the school via a stream of pastoral letters that continued up to Rennyo's death. In them, both the theme of a personal bonding with Amida—expressed in the doctrine of *kihō ittai* 機法一体, i.e., the unity in *nenbutsu* of the person and the Dharma—and the theme of social obligations (reflected in rules of conduct, or *okite*, which all Shin adherents should follow) are stressed repeatedly, just as they were in the Yoshizaki period. Rogers does a particularly good job at demonstrating how this socially grounded faith translated into a communal religious experience each year at the *hōonkō* 報恩講, the weeklong commemoration of Shinran's death at Hongan-ji attended by multitudes of adherents. A number of Rennyo's letters were drafted as brief sermons to be read specifically on those occasions. When Rennyo died in 1499, his primary legacy from a religious standpoint was this great corpus of letters, which stood as the authoritative interpretation of Shinran's teachings for the Shin school.

The middle section of the book is in some respects the heart of the work. It provides a full English translation of the *Gobunshō*, entitled *The Letters*. This important collection was originally compiled within decades of Rennyo's death by one of his grandsons, Ennyo (1491–1521). Out of hundreds of letters, eighty were singled out because of their religious content, arranged more or less in chronological order, and edited into a five-fascicle work. To sit down and read the entire collection can be a bit tedious because of the considerable repetition among the letters. But if read separately, so as to savor their meaning, they are much more powerful. Each letter, after all, was written as a distinct and independent message.

What always strikes me when I read the letters is how different they are in form and tone from Shinran's writings. Shinran's doctrinal works are dense and sometimes unintelligible to the ordinary reader. They are laden with scriptural quotations and abstract religious categories. Even his letters, which are the most accessible of his writings, frequently soar into the doctrinal stratosphere. Rennyo's letters, by contrast, are warm, solicitous, and conversational in tone. They mix religious instruction with practical advice and down-to-earth imagery, and they exude a feeling of human concern and

understanding. Even when they present doctrinal concepts, they do not seem as elusive and recondite as Shinran's explanations. Rennyo's great talent was to translate Shin ideas into a popular idiom, and to this day his letters, when read aloud, evoke a powerful emotive response in Shin adherents, unmatched by other writings in the school. In fact, until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when Shinran was lionized anew for his religious genius, Rennyo's letters were the most widely recognized summation of Shin Buddhism. Thus if you want to know what ordinary Shin Buddhists have understood as their tenets through most of their history and what many still look to today, Rennyo's letters are probably a better indicator than Shinran's writings.

It is impossible to describe all of the letters, but I might mention a few that I find particularly interesting and significant. Letter I-2, "On becoming a priest in the aspiration for buddhahood," is a brief statement of Shin Buddhism's basic premise: that aspiration for buddhahood does not require renunciation of family and other worldly attachments, but involves an awakening of faith in the person and its ensuing sense of gratitude. What is noteworthy about this letter is how skillfully it renders Shin technical terminology and doctrinal statements into a clear, simple, and comprehensible explanation of Shin religious life. Letter IV-8, "On eight items," is a fine example of the sermonette letters Rennyo would compose for the annual *hōonkō* service commemorating Shinran's death. In content, it addresses such diverse topics as the realization of faith, the *kihō ittai* bond with Amida found in the *nenbutsu,* communal reinforcement of one's faith, discretion in one's interactions with outsiders, and the problem of overdrinking and drunkenness among priests.

Letter V-12, "On [Amida's] sleeve," is a succinct description of the entire faith process: reflection on one's evil and hopeless condition; entrusting oneself to Amida for buddhahood in the afterlife; the experience of being embraced by Amida never to be abandoned; a sense of reassurance and fulfillment in faith; and gratitude for the Buddha's benevolence as one intones the *nenbutsu.* Similar descriptions appear throughout Rennyo's letters, and are frequently expressed in powerful and effective imagery, as in this case—the image of one holding fast to Amida's sleeve in a state of reliance. (Incidentally, this image of clinging to Amida's sleeve may have been problematic to early modern interpreters of Shinran, for it does not convey the Other-Power character of faith as emphatically as they would like. Rennyo himself considered it perfectly consistent with Shinran's teaching of Other-Power.) Finally, Letter V-16, "On white bones," is one of the classics of the collection. It conveys in simple and moving narrative the universal Buddhist message of the fleeting existence of humans, ephemeral as a dewdrop in the morning sun. Because of impermanence and uncertainty in life, people feel an urgency as they entrust themselves to Amida.

The translation of the letters by Ann Rogers is clear and accurate, and in many places bears an elegant simplicity. Rogers has obviously striven to make the translation readable and affective, just as the original letters are, but at

the same time has adhered fairly closely to their grammar and vocabulary. For specialized religious expressions, Rogers occasionally adopts the doctrinally scrupulous (though not so poetic) terminology of the Shin Buddhism Translation Series, such as "practicer" for *gyōja* 行者 and "one thought-moment of faith" for *shin no ichinen* 信の一念. Notes to the letters sometimes mirror those found in IZUMOJI 1978, acknowledged in Rogers's introduction to the translation. Overall, this segment of the book is a fine piece of scholarship, and it will stand as the authoritative translation of Rennyo's letters for many years to come.

The final section of the book is a collection of four essays on various topics relating to the Shin school after Rennyo's time. They deal successively with the transformation of Rennyo's letters into scripture, the importance and complexity of gratitude as an aspect of Shin religious life, the integration of nationalistic values into Shin Buddhism during the prewar period, and the diverse places that Rennyo's ideas appear in popular culture during the postwar period. In these chapters Rogers explores how Rennyo has been woven into the fabric of Shin Buddhism over the centuries. They also deal with how the school has changed, sometimes for the better and sometimes for the worse. More than the earlier parts of the book, this section moves beyond the topic of Rennyo and examines the evolving character of Shin Buddhism amid the institutional rigidity of the Tokugawa period (1600–1867), the secularizing trends of the Meiji period (1868–1912), the ultra-nationalism of the 1930s and 1940s, and the rapid changes of the postwar years.

These last four chapters offer much food for thought. The chapter on gratitude is one that I find especially thought-provoking. In Shin Buddhism, gratitude and a sense of indebtedness to the Buddha (as well as to one's religious mentors, to one's parents, and to everything that aids and sustains one) are seen as natural extensions and expressions of faith. Rogers follows standard Shin scholarship in tracing this emphasis on gratitude to Shinran. But he goes on to show that gratitude came to be associated with social obligation as well, especially in Rennyo's teachings. One observation I would make in passing is that, considering how frequently Rennyo mentioned gratitude in his letters compared to Shinran in his writings, Rennyo may have had a greater impact on instituting gratitude as a core element in Shin Buddhism than Shinran did. One significant point that Rogers makes is that, the more gratitude became associated with conformity to social norms, the more Shin followers became submissive to sectarian and secular authorities. Such social ramifications of gratitude are sometimes overlooked by doctrinal scholars.

Rogers's entire work is impressive and important, but there are a couple of questions I would like to raise concerning his assumptions. The first has to do with the differences he sees between Shinran and Rennyo. Rogers draws his depiction of Shinran primarily from the innovative interpretation of Ueda Yoshifumi and the Shin Buddhist Translation Series, stressing Shinran's idea of faith as a transformative experience within. On the basis of

this interpretation, it is easy to distance Shinran from Rennyo. Faith for Shinran is defined as personal and individualistic, whereas for Rennyo it is group-nurtured and group-supported. This assumption is shared by many Japanese scholars, including doctrinal specialists and social historians. Shinran's writings, however, are so dominated by doctrinal speculation and scriptural explication that his views on how faith functions in a social context are actually rather obscure. The few works that do touch on real-life situations sometimes indicate that he was something of a rebel, but at other times reveal him to be supportive of mainstream social values, including group-centered religious activity. This latter evidence hints that Shinran may have been more amenable to a communal understanding of faith than Rogers credits him with. If that is true, his views may be closer to Rennyo's than scholars generally admit.

The second question to raise concerns Rennyo's role in the unfortunate developments of the Hongan-ji in early-modern and modern times. Secular historians are rather critical of the authoritarian tendencies that developed in the Shin religious hierarchy during the Tokugawa period and of Shin's complicity in the ultranationalism of World War II. From the point of view of contemporary democratic and egalitarian values, these are treated as dark chapters in Shin Buddhism's history. The way Rogers's book is constructed, it leads the reader from Rennyo's articulation of the social, political, and communal character of Shinran's teachings to the more manipulative uses of them in later times. Though Rogers himself may not intend it, one could easily get the impression that Rennyo's teachings facilitated or even precipitated this "corruption" of the tradition. That is certainly the way many people see it, and it is the reason there has been such a strong "back-to-Shinran" impulse in the Shin school in the postwar period. One might ask, however, whether Rennyo deserves the blame for these dubious developments. Could it be that these events were a distortion of his teachings, in addition to Shinran's, and that both of them would have disapproved? Unfortunately, modern scholarship has opened such a chasm between Shinran and Rennyo that it is difficult to get a sympathetic reading of Rennyo nowadays.

Rogers himself is well aware of the present-day popularity of Shinran and the relative neglect of Rennyo. Even though he concurs with many of the distinctions that contemporary scholars draw between Shinran and Rennyo, Rogers invites readers to appreciate Rennyo's accomplishments and to understand his accommodations:

> Shinran and Rennyo, in emphasizing the individual and the group respectively, represent models of piety essential for the development of any religious body. Those advocating a return to Shinran, in discounting the contribution made by Rennyo, may be forsaking hard, practical issues for an illusory world of pure religion. In addition, they may fail to take into account deeply-rooted cultural factors exacerbating Rennyo's dilemma, namely the difficulty of differentiating—even minimally—the mix of political and religious aspects of

> every group, whether overtly political or religious. Indeed,as we have noted earlier, a sharp distinction between the religious and the political in the study of premodern Japanese religions is exceedingly tenuous. (p. 366)

Rogers thus attempts to reaffirm Rennyo's importance as a positive force in Shin history. It remains to be seen whether Rennyo reemerges as a figure of serious consideration in current scholarship.

Overall, I would describe Rogers's study as important and sophisticated. It is the most extensive and in-depth presentation we have in English of this monumental figure in Shin thought and history. I would characterize Rogers's work not simply as descriptive but also as constructive and interpretative. It attempts to define for the Shin tradition what its prevailing themes and historical persona have been. Thus, it both informs and provokes thought. What is particularly pleasing about the book is the loving care that has gone into its production. This very attractive volume contains fifteen photos, helpful kanji integrated into the text, informative appendices, and virtually no typographical errors. As I reflect on the entire work, I tend to view it as a portrait of not just one person, but of two: Rennyo and Minor Rogers. The first two sections give us a comprehensive picture of who and what Rennyo was, but the last section is a window into Rogers's scholarly worldview. It reveals the problems and issues that sparked his interest, the particulars and universals he saw in the example of Rennyo, and his understanding of the role of religion for the individual in society.

REFERENCE

Izumoji Osamu 出雲路 修, ed.

1978 *Ofumi* 御ふみ. Tōyō bunko 345. Tokyo: Heibonsha.

James C. Dobbins
Oberlin College