

LIGHT IN THE MIDST OF ANGUISH

Leaves of My Heart, Lady KUJO Takeko

A New Translation by Wayne S. Yokoyama

One of the most remarkable developments in the entire history of Buddhism from its inception as an informal eremitic movement, through its monastic metamorphosis, was the arising of a lay movement initiated by Shinran in thirteenth century Japan. It still thrives, although little of it is known or understood in the West.

Everything about this movement is the epitome of the deepest truth of the Mahayana. Its unassuming and small collection of *sutras* speaks of the infinite and inconceivable light of compassion that nourishes all beings. Its unconditional openness to all—no matter their background, livelihood, capabilities, conditions of gender or social standing—is manifest in its women.

In order to reveal the truth of the inconceivable light, the *Contemplation Sutra* tells us that Shakyamuni Buddha visited the incarcerated and brutally-treated woman, who was the mother of a son who sought to overthrow his father, the king. This woman was Vaidehi, who became the first lay person to hear of the sublime doctrine of liberation by becoming a ‘person of nembutsu’, one who lives in the embrace of the Buddha of immeasurable light (Amida Buddha) and calls his Name (*Namo Amida Butsu*) whenever he comes to mind.

Then there is the gentle and unassuming devotion to the tomb of Shinran on the part of his daughter Kakushin-ni. As her friends grew in number and in support, this congregation became the Jodo Shinshu Hongwanji-ha. Soon its message of inclusion and unconditional compassion accelerated its spread to millions over time, until we come to the birth of Kujo Takeko in 1887, the daughter of the twenty-first abbot of the Jodo Shinshu Hongwanji-ha order, Otani Koson (Monshu Myonyo).

In 1985, amid my life in the world of commerce, there came into my hands the first English translation of some of Kujo Takeko’s writings. This was a small collection of her short essays entitled *Flower Without Sorrow*. The original work in Japanese was published in 1927, just one year before her death. Within fifteen years, it had undergone four hundred printings.

At that time, I knew nothing of her but, before long, I had come to see Kujo Takeko as—first and foremost—a true and remarkable leader. She is best known for her work to alleviate distress in the Tokyo slums and for her untiring efforts to help people who were destitute as a result of the dreadful Tokyo earthquake of 1923. This latter endeavour ultimately led to the foundation of the Ashoka Hospital, which was the first modern hospital to be established in Japan. Among followers of Jodo Shinshu, she is best known as the founder of the world-wide Buddhist Women’s Association.

Always expressing her indebtedness to her father for her grounding in the exhilarating message of Shinran, Kujo Takeko is the epitome of a person of nembutsu. Now, thanks to the efforts of the American Buddhist Study Centre, we have a new collection of her writing. Like its predecessor, it is the manifestation of a heart of pure trust in the Buddha of infinite light.

Ah, how even this small handful of fallen leaves, rustled together by the wind, is so deeply laden with memories! This book brings together the leaves of my heart that once budded and bloomed, and then were strewn to the winds. Of little value and with few charms, why, they hardly amount to anything at all! If you are one who wishes to know this heart of mine, though, surely there is no better way to begin than by picking up these leaves.

These twenty-five years since Father passed away. Without wavering, I have humbly proceeded on the Way he instructed me from the time I was a child, down to this very day. Now as I make an offering of this volume to his tomb, I would like to commune with my late father once again.

Most of the book is a series of essays that were published in *Yomiuri Shimbun* during the first four months of 1926. Always calling the Buddha Dharma to our attention in a way that is largely free of special terminology, they reward repeated reading and contemplation. Kujo chides us for our worldly vanity but also points to the true and real—the unhindered compassion of the light of Amida Buddha:

Trapped in a world of chaotic change, we seek an eternal, unchanging existence. There is nothing to rely on in this fleeting world; everything here is transient.

There is not a thing to be proud of in this worldly life where our *karmic* conditions dictate that we spend our lives chasing after illusions. Sadly, we try to hide our spiritual poverty by wrapping ourselves in the finery of grand illusions. Exhausted we must walk the dark path of suffering that stretches endlessly into the distance. How sorry I feel for people caught in this state.

But when we openly lament the way we are, when we humbly place our hands in *gassho* from the heart, we will clearly see the bright torch raised high for lost and deluded seekers to gaze upon.

Lest we should think that Kujo is someone of high privilege and removed from the world of suffering we need only remember that she spent her time working in the slums of Tokyo, seeking to address the misery of those who were utterly bereft of any home comforts or the trappings of human dignity. Not only that, the book concludes with the harrowing poem, *The Tinkling of a Golden Bell*, that she wrote when her husband cruelly deserted her without warning for another woman.

Needless to say, Lady Kujo Takeko speaks from the midst of human anguish and suffering and offers light and enduring hope.

GEORGE GATENBY