

# ***Remembering Shinran***

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Shin Buddhists are auspiciously commemorating the 750th anniversary of the death of the Founder Shinran Shonin's (1173-1262) death in 1262 and the 120th anniversary of the Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii with activities in Japan, Hawaii and on the mainland aimed at revitalizing the movement and engaging the modern world.

Although officially his memorial will be in 2011, the commemorations began this year (2009) with the completion of the restoration of Founder's Hall in Japan and with events in the overseas Shin communities. Drawing many visitors from Japan, the occasion in Hawaii will be marked by the participation of the Abbot Koshin Ohtani in services and events in September. It will continue with programs on other island.

Of particular significance is the production of two volumes in English. "The Buddha's Wish" by Abbot Ohtani offers his insight into modern living from a Buddhist point of view. The other is "On the Air," a collection of radio talks on Buddhism by various ministers, teachers and members, published by the Moiliili Hongwanji temple from the many years of the weekly White Way programs. Also a ground-breaking event, marking the continuing development of the Pacific Buddhist Academy will take place. An Ohana conference will take place, discussing the future of the movement.

The focus of all these events is to recall the life of Shinran Shonin (1173-1262) and to refocus our understanding of his teaching in line with the needs of our contemporary time. It may seem unlikely to many people that someone who lived 750 years ago could have any relevance or meaning for us today. However, Shinran, through his teaching, still lives on, and provides guidance for our modern life.

We may note that in the West people emphasize a person's birth and celebrate the birth of many significant people such as Jesus, Washington, Lincoln, members of our family or friends. In Asia there is more interest in the death of important people. Perhaps this comes from Buddhism with its concern and care for the dead and memorials. Ancient masters often left spiritual messages at their death. In either case, the impact of such people on our lives extends far beyond the limits in time and distance from those lives.

Shinran's life is the context for the emergence in history of a powerful vision of Amida Buddha's all-inclusive, universal, and unconditional compassion. This compassion leveled society by attributing value and meaning to the lowliest person as well as the most powerful and capable. Shinran referred to his followers as equal companions (*ondobo ondogyo*) in the Dharma. He indicated that no criteria or distinction, gender, social, religious, whatever can be used to measure *shinjin* which means true entrusting or faith. True entrusting is bestowed by Amida Buddha through the power of his Primal Vow which promises to bring all sentient beings to enlightenment, without exception. It is a vision which is still waiting for people to take seriously. It pertains not only to religion but also to society and human relations. For Shinran even the lowest members of society are like broken pieces of pottery which are transformed to gold by Amida's compassion and wisdom.

When it came to his own death, Shinran did not claim anything special. He did not desire any exceptional status or special recognition and charged his disciples simply to throw his ashes into the Kamo River as food for the fish. There is equality in life as well as death, as when he declared that he had no disciples since each person has received his faith equally from Amida, not Shinran.

He noted the universality of Nembutsu because we have all been mother, father, brother or sister to each other through aeons of transmigration. Restrictive family connections are not the essence of Buddhism. Amida's compassion is for everyone. Faith in Amida as fundamental reality embracing our lives abolished all forms of superstition and religious fears.

In his daughter Kakunshinni's letter to Eshinni, her mother, she inquires whether Shinran went to the Pure Land. It is a strange question in the face of his long years of devotion to spreading the teaching. Eshinni wrote in response: "Thus, you should have no doubt [concerning Shinran's birth in the Pure Land] however his death may have been. With regard to this same matter I have heard that our son Masukata was also present at this death. It is a great joy for me to know how strong the bond is between parent and child." [1] Kakunyo, the Third Hongwanji Abbot, indicates in his biography of Shinran that he was living at the home of his brother Jin'u and died there. While the exact location of that residence has long been in dispute within the two Hongwanjis, East and West, there is little information on the event that would create the question raised by Kakunshinni.

Perhaps we can reconstruct the situation at his death. In Buddhist tradition, it was common for biographies of great monks to record any auspicious sign that would confirm the spiritual greatness of the dying monk. We read on occasion of purple clouds descending, perhaps as the Buddha came to meet his faithful disciple, and there would be the odor of perfume and incense, expressing a sacred event. Shinran wrote in a poem concerning his teacher Honen's death:

"Amida Tathagata, manifesting form in this world,  
Appeared as our teacher Genku (Honen);  
The conditions for teaching having run their course,  
He returned to the Pure Land.

"At the death of our teacher Genku,  
Radiant light shone in the sky like purple clouds;  
Music sounded, subtle and elegant,  
And the air was fragrant with rare perfumes...

"The death of our teacher, Genku,  
came in 1212, in early spring;  
On the twenty-fifth day of the first month,  
He returned to the Pure Land." [2]

In view of such expressions by Shinran in his writings, it is understandable that Kakunshinni would have a question when her father died a peaceful death at age ninety, like ordinary people. Shinran had counseled his followers that they should appear ordinary and not display their religion, stating: "Even if you are called a 'cow thief,' do not act in such a way that you are seen as an aspirant for [buddhahood] in the afterlife, or as a 'good' person or as a follower of the Buddha-dharma." [3] Shinran also does not emphasize the time of one's death, though it had importance throughout Buddhist tradition. He rejected the long-held Buddhist belief that the Buddha comes at death to welcome believers to the Pure Land. He believed that the moment of faith in ordinary life was spiritually one's last moment which assures birth in the Pure Land. It is not simply at the time of one's physical death.

Shinran viewed himself as just a *bombu*, a foolish being, and confessing that he was a teacher, motivated by desire for fame and profit [4]; he was a person who did not know good from evil as Amida knew good and evil [5]. He recognized that he along with other people only speak lies to each other and are insincere. [6] Like ordinary people, he did not

desire to be born in the Pure Land, being attached to life, as he indicates in Tannisho 9 and in the Kyogyoshinsho, his major writing. [7]

Shinran, however, saw himself as being just like others who had been grasped by Amida and assured of his birth in the Pure Land even though he was not capable of the rigorous practices of monastic life. Shinran viewed himself in the Light of Amida where the brighter the sunlight, the sharper and deeper the shadows. Consequently, he regarded ordinariness an aspect of religious faith. He claimed he was a "foolish, stubble-haired person" not a Shonin, or Sage-Saint, as he came to be regarded by later tradition.

Nevertheless, for Shinran's followers, he was a great man, and they probably expected that the wondrous signs which they had heard about other great teachers would also take place when Shinran died. This did not happen, prompting Kakunshinni's question. Eshinni, however, knowing Shinran as he was, could declare that no matter how he died, he surely was born in the Pure Land. This would be true to Shinran's own rejection of any criteria to measure the degree of one's entrusting to the Vow (*shinjin*).

Shinran's greatness lies in his not highlighting his own greatness. His greatness is revealed in his teaching which opened up new spiritual possibilities and hope for all people of whatever status. His teaching liberated them from every form of religious intimidation and manipulation. He did not require people to pursue or experience impossible attainments and goals which only end up in frustration for the practitioner and more subject to the domination of a teacher from whom he looks for affirmation. In this way Shinran's faith was a liberating faith. He combined spiritual freedom with responsibility based on interdependence and compassion which we all receive through Amida Buddha in the course of our everyday lives.

Shinran was ahead of his time and we find it difficult to catch up with him even after 750 years. May we all join together, inspired by the commemoration of Shinran's life and death, in revitalizing his teaching in our suffering age where anxieties and disillusionment are rampant and social distinctions grow with economic disparity.

### **References**

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2. "The Collected Works of Shinran." Kosowasan. (Kyoto: Jodo Shinshu Hongwanji-ha, 1997.) 114-115, 117.
3. Minor Rogers, Ann Rogers. "Rennyō: The Second Founder of Shin Buddhism." (Berkeley, CA: Asian Humanities Press, 1991.) Fascicle Two, II-2, p. 175. Also found in Kakunyo, Gaijasho, Shinshu Shogyo Zensho, III, p. 68.
4. "The Collected Works of Shinran." Hymns of the Dharma-Ages, #116, p. 429.
5. Ibid., A Record in Lament of Divergences. Postscript, p. 679.
6. Ibid., p. 680.
7. Ibid., Kyogyoshinsho, Faith volume, #113, p 125.