

## ***Hongwanji History's Unsung Heroines***

*(Talk given April 24, 2004 at Eshinni Day/Kakushinni Day Service at the Honpa Hongwanji Hawaii Betsuin)*

### **by Mrs. Chihoko Yosemite, Honorary President, Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii Federation of Buddhist Women's Associations**

Good morning, everyone. Today we are observing "Eshinni Day."

The observance of "Eshinni Day" was established in 1978 at the 6<sup>th</sup> World Buddhist Women's Convention and "Kakushinni Day" was created at the last World BWA Convention, which was held in Brazil two years ago. This year, the Betsuin Buddhist Women's Association combined these two special days into one, and planned this special "Eshinni Day Service" to honor these outstanding women, Eshinni sama, wife of Shinran Shonin and Kakushinni sama, daughter of Shinran Shonin.

I have been asked to share with you how these two women have had such significant roles in the Hongwanji. I would like to ask that you pardon me for my elimination of honorific titles when referring to Eshinni sama, Kakushinni sama, Shinran Shonin, Honen Shonin in my speech as it will simplify my talk.

I mentioned to you earlier that Eshinni was the wife and Kakushinni was the daughter of Shinran, however, these facts were not officially accepted by people until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 1921, Professor Washio Kyodo discovered 10 letters in the archives of Honpa Hongwanji in Kyoto and found out that these letters were written by Shinran's wife, Eshinni, to her daughter, Kakushinni. These letters confirmed Shinran's marriage and validated the existence of his wife, Eshinni.

Prior to the discovery of Eshinni's letters, there were some people in Japan who did not believe in Shinran's marriage, the existence of his wife, or even the existence of Shinran himself. It was Eshinni who cleared all those doubts by leaving her letters to us.

Eshinni's letters revealed very important facts of Shinran's personal life as well as his spiritual journey. Eshinni wrote about Shinran's break from the Tendai Order; when Shinran experienced religious anxiety and dissatisfaction and left Mt. Hiei and entered the Rokkakudo in Kyoto. Later, Shinran became a disciple of Honen and found the way of liberation through the Nembutsu. He found that the assurance of complete enlightenment could occur to anyone through Shinjin, the spiritual transformation.

When Shinran married Eshinni, traditional monastic precepts forbade Buddhist monks' marriage because married life was said to be a distraction from the search for enlightenment. Then why did he marry?

When Shinran married Eshinni, strictly saying, he was not a monk. As you well know, in 1207, the court banned the teaching of Nembutsu and ordered the exile of Honen and Shinran. Shinran was exiled to Echigo, Niigata prefecture, where he met and married Eshinni. Shinran was deprived of monkhood and given a layperson's name, Fujii Zenshin. Since then, Shinran referred to himself as neither a monk nor a layman. Shinran was very angry over the unjust persecution of Honen and himself and indicted the emperor and his ministers as he wrote in his book, *Kyogyoshinsho*, that the court's order was "acting against the dharma and violating human rectitude."

However, this tragic exile period was, at the same time, a superb time for both Eshinni and Shinran who were allowed to meet and marry and also were able to nurture their love and understanding of each other. Imagine how much Shinran's wounds and grudges were healed by Eshinni's grace and support. While Shinran and Eshinni challenged the traditional society and authority with their marriage, Shinran was able to acquire security, safety, comfort and warmth from Eshinni. Eshinni also learned and received the wonderful Nembutsu teaching from Shinran.

In regard to Shinran's reasons for getting married, there are various reasons proposed by scholars. One reason is that Shinran's teacher Honen did not prevent Shinran from his marriage. Honen said, "People should always live by creating the proper conditions for being able to say the Nembutsu. If you cannot say the Nembutsu as a celibate, say it by getting married." Honen did not specify a particular type of lifestyle, either celibacy or married life, to seek salvation through Nembutsu. Shinran and Eshinni proved with their marriage that the way of Nembutsu is also available for ordinary men and women.

I view Eshinni as an extremely independent woman who lived her 87 years of life with her own opinions and decisions. Eshinni did not depend on her husband for a living, instead, she supported Shinran financially and materially. She owned an estate and lived with several servants. She raised her six children almost by herself. Eshinni's letters revealed that she was also a refined and intellectual person. She was a devoted follower of the Nembutsu teaching who respected Shinran and admired him as Kannon.

Now let us take a look at Kakushinni. Between Shinran and Eshinni, they had six children and Kakushinni was their youngest daughter. When Shinran developed his thoughts of Amida's Vow of salvation, he had no intention of founding a new sect of Buddhism nor building the Jodoshinshu School . He simply sought the essence of Pure Land teaching which became known as Jodoshinshu.

When he died in 1263, he was almost unknown in the Buddhist context in Kyoto , because his followers lived mostly in the Kanto area at that time. After his death, Kakushinni wanted to keep Shinran's teaching alive and perpetuated it for the followers.

In 1277, she built a temple enshrining an image of Shinran on the Otani grounds in Kyoto which she owned. Soon after, people started to gather at the temple and learned of Shinran's teachings. The Nembutsu teaching began to reach more people. Appreciated by all - men and women – it spread throughout Japan . About 50 years later, this mausoleum became an official temple and was named the "Hongwanji." The Hongwanji temple has developed into the Jodo-Shinshu school as one of the largest and most powerful Buddhist schools in Japan . Even though Shinran had six children, Kakushinni was the only child who valued Shinran's work. Kakushinni's foresight and deep appreciation towards the Nembutsu teaching saved Shinran's work and established the foundation of Jodoshinshu.

Thus, the Hongwanji started with very humble beginnings. Even though we clearly know that Shinran was the true founder of the Hongwanji-ha Jodo -Shinshu School , without Eshinni and Kakushinni's splendid work in supporting Shinran and his teachings, we might not have been able to listen to the Nembutsu teaching. With Eshinni and Kakushinni's vision, tremendous effort and devotion, the Hongwanji has grown to what it is today. This is the reason why the World Federation of BWA adopted resolutions to recognize and honor Eshinni and Kakushinni annually by observing special services for them in the Hongwanji temples throughout the world.

On this special day, I would like to speak about another woman who saved the Hongwanji and has kept its teachings alive in Hawaii . If not spoken about, I feel that she too, would remain a person hidden in our important Hongwanji history.

When I first met Mrs. Hatsuno Mihara at Paia Hongwanji in Maui , she was already over 80 years-old. Some of you may have heard of Ross Mihara, English commentator on the NGN Sumo and former sportscaster at one of our local TV stations. Well, Mrs. Mihara was his great grandmother. Although I met her a long time ago, her words and stories I heard from her are still very vivid and often come to my mind as a source of encouragement.

When Mrs. Mihara immigrated to Hawaii from Hiroshima with her husband, she was in her teens. Her life in Hawaii started in the sugar plantation camp which was very difficult but common for the issei woman. While she helped her husband in operating their own business, she raised five children, took care of the vegetable garden, fruit trees, and chicken coops in her back yard, which was a typical plantation camp life in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in Hawaii .

When her husband passed away leaving her and five children behind, Mrs. Mihara was still in her 30s. She must have faced various difficulties during those years, which, to me, are unimaginable.

Her husband left her their family business, a public bath. Most of you probably would not know that there were public baths in Hawaii in the sugar plantation camps. Many houses in the plantation camp at that time did not have bath or shower facilities in their houses and many people had to go to a public bath. Besides operating the public bath by herself, Mrs. Mihara tried to attend most temple services regularly, cleaned the temple and gardens, and took care of the altar flowers every week by bringing in her own flowers. She also collected temple membership dues by visiting house to house throughout the camp. Later, I found that the temple's many Uchishiki, the very beautiful expensive materials, which were used to decorate the altar were donated by Mrs. Mihara.

When World War II broke out in 1941, people in Hawaii had to follow strict rules under martial law. Many Japanese leaders were interned in camps on the mainland and most of the Hongwanji temples doors were closed. Many Japanese language school buildings were donated to the government or other organizations and Buddhist temple buildings were targeted by some people who had strong hostile feelings toward the Japanese. At that time most members were afraid to visit the temple for fear of unforeseen troubles and problems which might have occurred. But Mrs. Mihara was different. She showed her most remarkable devotion toward the temple during and after the war. She came to the temple at least once a day, checked the buildings and gardens, and chased mischievous children of the neighborhood who played in the temple gardens.

She told me that, one day when she was at the temple, a group of American soldiers came and ordered her to open the temple buildings. They went in the temple, the minister's residence and inspected everything everywhere. Later, they went to the Nokotsudo, columbarium, and found many boxes on the walls. Then one of the soldiers asked Mrs. Mihara, "What are in those boxes?" Mrs. Mihara could understand what he was asking her, but she wasn't able to explain in English what was in the box. Then they started to open the boxes and found urns.

Again someone asked her, "What is in this container?" This time Mrs. Mihara answered, "This is human bone! This is ashes!" The soldiers suddenly lost their words, covered the urns, and quickly left the temple. She said that they must have suspected that the members of the temple hid something like chemical materials or gun powder in the urns. They probably never had seen human ashes before, did not know that it was the Buddhist custom of burial.

Mrs. Mihara could recall this incident very clearly as though it happened yesterday. For her, temple was a very sacred place and she could not stand to see the young soldiers carrying guns and going everywhere in the temple with their shoes. She continued to explain to me

the details very vividly. "When I told them that the content of urns were human bones, their faces turned pale and they run away from the temple." And she smiled as if to say "I won the battle with the soldiers."

When I heard this story from Mrs. Mihara, I was stunned by her bravery in confronting the soldiers by herself. And I asked her, "Weren't you scared of the soldiers? Didn't you think that they might shoot you?"

Then she replied to me very confidently, "I have been listening to the Jodo Shinshu teachings for years and I learned that I would be able to go to the Pure Land after I die. Amida Buddha always embraces me anytime and anywhere. I strongly believe that, therefore, I was not afraid of anybody and anything at that time. Even now I can confront anybody in this world."

I listened to her words with shock. I was a very new minister's wife and I was naïve. I did not even know what it was like to be a minister's wife in Hawaii at that time. My faith in the Jodo Shinshu religion wasn't strong enough like hers.

What firm Shinjin, or faith! What unconditional and undoubting faith! How wonderful to hear such confidence in her own religion.

As soon as the war ended, Mrs. Mihara started to collect membership dues visiting from house to house in the camp as she did before, and at the same time asking the former Hongwanji members to come back to the temple. She continued this practice of collecting dues and doing other temple chores by herself for more than 30 years. I was really impressed by her sincere devotion, her incredible patience and most of all her pure faith in Jodoshinshu.

Mrs. Mihara was a strong woman who devoted her whole life to her children and the temple. I knew her for only five years until she passed away, but those five years were the most important and significant years in my religious life, which was much influenced by her words, actions, and faith. Because of Mrs. Mihara's incomparable deeds, the temple was able to survive from vandalism during the war, and was able to reopen its doors to serve people as the center of society after the war.

Mrs. Mihara probably thought that preserving the temple buildings and the teachings of our religion was the most important work in her life just as much as raising her children. Her perspective and words towards the temple influenced many people at that time. On this important Eshinni/Kakushinni Day, I wanted once again to remind myself of her, our pioneer's, work and recognize and share with all of you Mrs. Mihara's great work.

I believe that other Hongwanji temples must have people like Mrs. Mihara who served and protected their temples with their whole bodies and souls during its crucial time. We shouldn't forget these people and their work, and like them, it is now our turn to convey our religion and our temple to the next generation.

Eshinni and Kakushinni are also our pioneers who helped Shinran who introduced Jodo Shinshu to the world. Their lives must have been spiritually filled with gratitude and joy in the Nembutsu teachings.

Let us live our lives as gently and yet just as strongly as possible like Eshinni sama and Kakushini sama who devoted their whole lives to Shinran Shonin and his teachings, and emulate those who helped to keep our Hongwanji teachings so that it could be handed down to us as exemplified by Mrs. Mihara.