

Dharma Message: My Dear Dharma Friend, Rev. Ruth Tabrah

Dharma message given at the April 29th
10:00 AM service by Connie Fukumoto

Good morning.

Please join me in gassho to the aspiration written by Reverend Ruth Tabrah and Rev. Shoji Matsumoto as it provides insight into the lives of both Eshinnisama, whom we are honoring today, and Ruth Tabrah, my dear Dharma friend.

***“Yearning to know Life’s meaning,
Tasting the truth that sets me free,
I join the joyous universal chorus
Buddham Saranam Gacchami
Dhammam Saranam Gacchami
Sangham Saranam Gacchami
Namu Amida Butsu”***

We all yearn to live our lives fully, with no regrets, in appreciation of life as it unfolds. We who are lucky enough to encounter the teachings that free us are the luckiest people in the world. Ruth Tabrah, who was a Hawaii Bet-suin member and noted author, had a passionate desire to share the teachings. Her historical novel, [The Monk Who Dared](#), about Shinran Shonin, was published in 1995 and its sequel, [The Monk’s Wife](#), about Shinran’s wife, Eshinni, came out in 2001. As many of you know, Ruth passed away on April 8, 2004, at the age of 83. The question naturally arises — how did someone who was born in Buffalo, New York, become the first westerner and the first woman to write a novel about Eshinni? I’d like to share Ruth’s story with you because I feel that through her writing, Ruth made it possible for us to know

Eshinni on a very human level - and that is a Dharma gift to all of us.

Ruth was born in 1921. Her parents divorced when she was very young and she grew up in a multi-generational home. The family was poor and they moved 17 times because they couldn’t pay the rent. Ruth remembers receiving food stamps during the great depression. But she found happiness in going to the library to borrow books and being free to read and write poetry. At age six, her poetry was printed in the Buffalo Times, for which she received the sum of \$1.00! At Age twelve, she worked part time after school at the library; she was paid twelve cents an hour. She lost her grandfather just before her high school graduation and she worried that she might not be able to attend college. Fortunately, she was



Rev. Ruth Tabrah

able to reconnect with her father who came to her aid by paying her college tuition.

She found employment with a professor’s family who provided her with room and board. She met her husband, Dr. Frank Tabrah, when he was still a medical student, and they married soon after he completed his medical degree. While he was in the service during WWII, Ruth enrolled in a seminar on creative writing at the Univ. of Washington. By the time she was 29, she had published her first book, [Pulaski Place](#), a novel about Polish Americans. It turned out to be a best seller and it was on the Book of the Month Club recommended reading list for 1950. Her second novel soon followed. Ruth’s husband and her mother-in-law were not happy with her success as a writer.

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Ruth's family, which now included two boys, moved from Washington state to Kohala plantation and it was in Kohala that she encountered Buddhism for the first time. Ruth and her husband heard the sound of the drums at the local temple and she fell in love with the music and also the pulse of the place - she was fascinated with the multicultural mix of people. When it started to rain at the bon dance, people rushed into the Hondo, Ruth noticed the Christian-style pews, but she also saw folks comfortably walking and talking in the Hondo and she couldn't believe the camaraderie. She felt at home in the temple and that was so meaningful for her because, for much of her life, she didn't really feel as though she had a home. It was while she was living in Kohala that Ruth wrote a small book called Buddhism - Modern Way of Thought which had been requested by a publisher friend. To write this book, Ruth took advantage of whatever resources were available and found the readings difficult to comprehend. Always mindful of her reader, Ruth vowed to make her writing understandable. She was surprised to find that her book was welcomed by practicing Buddhists.

My friendship with Ruth started in the 1970's. She was already divorced from her husband when I met her during a Hongwanji tour to Japan. Ruth had been a student of Buddhism for a while and was just beginning to learn about the Jodo Shinshu teachings. I remember that we were in Kamakura viewing the Daibutsu. Most of us were complaining about the weather but Ruth said,

"I love to see the statue in the rain - it softens it." I took a second look at the Daibutsu and then at her and realized, "This is a special person."

When we returned to Hawaii, Ruth, who still lived on the Big Island, began commuting to Honolulu to attend Board of Education meetings and to attend dharma classes at the Buddhist Study Center and to join in services at Hawaii Betsuin. Then she moved to Honolulu permanently. I used to pick

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her up to take her to classes at BSC. Every Buddhist scholar that came to BSC found him or herself the focus of Ruth's questioning mind. She was instrumental in creating the BSC Press which published the books and pamphlets, some of which, sprang from the notes she took while listening to speakers.

It was during the 1980's that Ruth Tabrah began to research and write about Shinran. She threw herself into the historical, religious, and social context of Shinran's time. But according to Ruth, the more she delved into Shinran's life, the more she realized

that he must have had a helpmate for him to be able to accomplish all that he did. After all, someone had to oversee the running of the household; someone had to take care of the children. And it was the income from lands owned by Eshinni in Echigo and Kanto that supported the family and enabled Shinran to devote himself to writing and spreading the teachings.

Actually, we knew very little about Eshinni until her letters to her daughter, Kakushinni, were discovered in 1921 in the repositories of Honzan. This discovery led to questions about who Eshinni was. What were her struggles? What were her strengths? Lady Yoshiko Ohtani, mother of the present monshu, began to lay the foundation of what we know about Eshinni through her research, which entailed traveling to Echigo and other areas to see where Eshinni lived.

Lady Ohtani's book, Eshinni: The Wife of Shinran, was published in 1980. It is an informative and invaluable book. In 1990, during a European Shin Buddhist Conference tour in Vienna, and in the presence of Monshu and Lady Ohtani, scholars announced that Lady Ohtani's book was being translated for a broader readership. The book was translated into English by Dr. and Mrs. Taitetsu Unno. In 1995, our BWA received copies.

It was also in 1995 that Ruth's book about Shinran, The Monk Who Dared, was published. It had taken her 14

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years to research and write. When this book came out, it was reviewed by George Gatenby, an Australian Buddhist priest - he wrote, "Ruth Tabrah's penultimate skill lies in her ability to evoke the living cultural context of her narrative. From the opening paragraphs of her novel until the very last sentence we find ourselves immersed in the world Shinran inhabited yet, at the same time, we can identify our own experience in his." Dr. Alfred Bloom, in his review, said, "Ruth Tabrah puts flesh and blood on the bony data of historical analysis. Distant events that gave birth to a vital faith in the unconditional compassion of Amida Buddha come alive on the pages of her novel."

Lady Ohtani had encouraged Ruth to write about Eshinni because so little was available to read in English. She urged Ruth to show Eshinni's human side. Ruth undertook this project with her characteristic determination and during several trips to Japan, she researched Eshinni's life.

For myself, I had an opportunity to develop a deeper connection with Eshinni when our BWA went on a, Eshinnisama pilgrimage to Kyoto and Echigo in 1996. We were joined by Dr. and Mrs. Taitetsu Unno who translated the Dharma talks for us. We were able to walk on the beach at Kotogahama, the same beach frequented by Eshinni during Shinran's exile in Echigo. And we spent the night at Kokobu Betsuin where an enlarged copy of one of Eshinni's letters was prominently displayed. We joined their BWA in fellowship there. We

also visited Eshinnisama's memorial at Yonemasu, where her five-tiered stupa is located. Near the stupa is the Kobushi-no-hana, a magnolia tree which is more than 600 years old. Each spring, beautiful white magnolias blossom by the memorial stupa and that is why we always wish to have magnolia flowers as part of the altar display for Eshinni & Kakushinni Day. As a result of this wonderful pilgrimage, Eshinnisama became a vital part of our Dharma journey

During the period of time that Ruth researched and wrote about Eshinni, she would give two of us, an artist friend and myself, chapter drafts to read because she wanted to know if what she had written was readable and understandable to the common person. We would give her feedback about each chapter, and quite honestly, we couldn't wait to receive the next chapter!

but we felt that we had obtained only glimpses of her life; we wanted to know more about her.

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The Monk's Wife, was published by the BSC Press in 2001. Jeff Wilson wrote this review of The Monk's Wife in the publication, *Tricycle*: "The heart of the book is Eshinni's gradual spiritual awakening as her Pure Land practice deepens. Eshinni is already a Pure Land practitioner, but her upbringing in a noble family leaves her feeling

superior to the people around her.

As events unfold, Eshinni slowly moves from personal thanks for her contact with the dharma to an understanding of the need for humility and fellowship with those she'd previously considered separate and different from herself.

As with The Monk Who Dared, one of the greatest strengths of The Monk's Wife is its author's ability to bring the world of medieval Japan alive for the contemporary reader.

There aren't many works of fiction written in English that focus on Buddhism, and those with both a female author and protagonist are a true rarity. The Monk's Wife is a welcome example that demonstrates how for centuries women struggling to manage their marriages, children, property, and social lives have maintained an

authentic dharma practice. Eshinni is one of the most important women in Japanese Buddhist history, and her story holds many valuable lessons for modern practitioners. Tabrah's book is a milestone that will help introduce this strong and intelligent Buddhist laywoman to the American public."

From my perspective, this book is written so that anyone can enjoy it. Once you begin to read it, you can't put it

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down. It is so believable and moving; we can relate to Eshinni on a very human level. This is a book that you can read over and over again to appreciate the teachings as it applies to our own lives.

Both Eshinni and Ruth Tabrah lived their lives, which included both joys and sorrows, to the fullest, with the Nembutsu in their hearts. Ruth became one with Eshinni in writing about her life. When we read about the many challenges Eshinni faced daily, her struggles become our struggles. We come to understand Eshinni's mental, emotional and physical suffering when she is "reviled as an outcast, as the wife of a renegade monk" in Echigo and when she sees first-hand the reality of prejudice, famine, poverty, and sickness. We empathize

with her and Shinran and their family as they undertake the long and perilously difficult trek from Echigo to Kanto.

When Shinran tells a girl with a facial deformity, "We accept you as you are," Eshinni, initially turns away from this girl but eventually comes to love her as a family member. This is a quote from- one of the Nembutsu followers in The Monk's Wife. "Nembutsu enables us to see the truth of ourselves, and of things as they are. No

matter how hopeless we are, no matter how deluded and ignorant, whether we know it or not, we are all in the grasp of boundless compassion."

It is through understanding what Shinran and Eshinni had to endure that we begin to appreciate the teachings we have been enabled to receive. I believe that's how the Dharma comes alive for us. Ruth wanted us to understand the teachings, to live them and to share them. She made this possible through her writing. After she finished The Monk's Wife., she said, "I'm done." She had completed her great mission, which was to breathe life into the monk, Shinran, who dared to be fully human and then she did the same with his oh so human wife, Eshinni..

During my many years of Dharma friendship with Ruth Tabrah, she and I listened to the teachings together, we walked together, and we laughed and cried together. We were family to each other. She was so skillful and scholarly and at the same time, just one of



**Connie Fukumoto,
Rev. Ruth Tabrah's
Dear Dharma Friend**

us, ordinary and down to earth. She had the gift of seeing the Dharma in everyday life and sharing its poetic truth with everyone. She left us a legacy of her life in the Nembutsu through her writing. And through her writing, she will continue to illuminate the path of Dharma for many in the years to come. Namo Amida Butsu!

