

SYRAP II

Shinran Shonin

Learn about Shinran Shonin as the founder of Jodo Shinshu.

A. Shinran Shonin's early life

Shinran Shonin was born during a turbulent time in Japanese history with infighting within the Imperial Palace after the passing of the Empress Dowager. His father, Hino Arinori, was a member of a branch family of the Fujiwara clan and was a high court officer in the service of the Empress Dowager. The foundations of Japanese society were in turmoil and the warrior clans began to assert themselves against the nobility led by the Fujiwara clan.

Shinran Shonin was said to be born on May 21, 1173, in an area southeast of Kyoto in a place called Hino and given the name Matsuwakamaru. His mother was Kikkonyo, the daughter of Yoshichika, a member of another branch of the Fujiwara clan. Apparently, she passed away when Shinran was 8 years old. As a result of the political circumstances, his father and all five sons, was driven to enter the monkhood in order to survive.

Due to the political upheaval all the people suffered from the government collapse and continuous warfare. There also were widespread earthquakes, famine, and disease. By the time Shinran was seven, two great earthquakes had destroyed many houses, a fire had destroyed a third of Kyoto, and in 1181 an unprecedented famine gripped the land and continued till the next year.

In 1181, his uncle, Lord Noritsuna, brought young Shinran to Shoren-in Temple in Higashiyama, where Jien Sojo initiated him into the monkhood. He was given the name Hannen. At this young age, he must have seen how fleeting and empty fames and fortunes pursued by all.

About 1182, Shinran entered Mt. Hiei with Jien Sojo to study the ideas of the various Buddhist schools – Tendai, Shingon, Zen, and devoted himself to Chinese studies. He also participated in the various practices to reach the Awakening. He had been seeking Buddhist liberation by reading the sutras and performing austere practices. The more he studied and the more difficult his practices he became aware of how empty his actions were. He realized how impossible it would be for him to become free of his blind passions, and what a shameful mind and heart he had. Realizing the Path of Sages was becoming an impossible way to seek liberation, he was drawn to the Pure Land Teaching.

Then Shinran changed his practice and reverted to chanting the Smaller (Amida) Sutra. In Genshin's work it states, "As the act that leads to birth in the Pure

Land, the Nembutsu is taken to be fundamental...” Shinran recited the name of the Buddha, “Namo Amida Butsu, Namo Amida Butsu.” He felt that, perhaps would bring about his emancipation. His efforts proved to be in vain.

Rumors about Honen reached Shinran’s ears. Honen’s teaching had spread throughout Japan about the “Exclusive Practice of the Nembutsu.” People of all social levels and ages came every day to hear him speak. Shinran had the desire to descend Mt. Hiei and meet this teacher. Shinran felt that true emancipation should not be limited to a few. It should be available to those who are unable to separate themselves from family and work. He wanted to discard his present life and recite the Nembutsu with a wife and family.

At age 29 Shinran Shonin left Mt. Hiei and stayed at Rokkakudo in retreat for a hundred days. Prince Shotoku appeared in a vision revealing the path to Awakening. Taking this vision as a sign to seek Honen’s help. Then Shinran Shonin went to Honen and visited him daily to be shown the way of emancipation the afterlife. Honen said, “In the matter of liberation in the afterlife, there is no difference between a good person and an evil person, for only the single-hearted Nembutsu is necessary in order to become liberated from the suffering of birth and death.

The hundred days at Rokkakudo represent the break from monastic life and a new direction in his life. The next one hundred days he spent listening to the Dharma of Honen that is:

The wisdom and strength of those of us living during the last dharma-age has declined, so we are unable to perform practices, as we should. Our minds are filled with unnecessary thoughts, which makes it impossible to attain awakening through our own efforts. That is why a way to emancipation has been prepared for us. When we become aware of Amida Buddha’s Primal Vow that causes our emancipation, it becomes the basis of living a true, full life. Because it is the power of Amida Buddha’s Vow, even those who are sunk in delusion and whose bodies are polluted with evil can, without a doubt, escape the cycle of birth and death and reach the world of Awakening.

The popularity of Honen’s Nembutsu teaching angered the monks on Mt. Hiei and so they petitioned the Imperial Court to disband the group. Honen and Shinran were exiled. Honen was given the name Fuji Motohiko and sent to Tosa Province (Kochi Prefecture) and Shinran was given the name Fuji Yoshizane and sent to Echigo Province (Niigata Prefecture).

Though his exile seemed unfortunate, Shinran had the opportunity to spread the teaching of Amida’s Primal Vow. He freely spread the teaching to everyone he met. Not long after his arrival in Echigo, he married and began raising a family.

He married a daughter of a samurai of high rank and she was referred to as Eshinni.

In 1214 Shinran and his family moved to Hitachi Province in the Kanto region (around modern day Tokyo). This area was the center of the military government in the Kamakura period (1185-1333). Life for the peasants was very difficult due to oppression by warlords and landlords, but also plagued by drought and earthquakes occurring nearly every year. Shinran began chanting the Three Pure Land Sutras but it did not seem to alleviate the people's suffering.

He reflected deeply upon his actions and realized that the suffering of the peasants could not be alleviated through his actions. Rather the need was to relieve them of suffering by illuminating their minds and hearts with the light of the Nembutsu. His mission was clear. Shinran continued to spread the teachings for twenty years and his efforts bore fruit. The number of people grew.

Shinran spoke to whomever he met as an equal, wherever they were-at their homes, in a hall, or on the road- about the Dharma. Similar to the Buddha, he referred to those with whom he spoke as "fellow practitioners of the Nembutsu teaching," and gave no consideration to the class distinction that were prevalent at the time. He shared his understanding in a very personalized way, always taking into consideration the background of the listeners and relating his talks to their problems, rather than preaching to a large crowd. He helped them become aware of their suffering and to confront it. Only then could they be led to the awareness of the Great Compassion that had always been present.

Shinran attracted many disciples but not all of them understood his teaching. Some even left him. In response to his disciple Renni-bo about the returning of sacred texts by those who have left, this is Shinran's response"

"I, Shinran, have no disciples of my own; we are all Amida Buddha's disciples. Some teachers may take back what they once gave to their disciples and some disciples may return to their teachers what they received. But the 'object of reverence' and the sacred literature will be useful even if they follow another teaching. Besides, even if a disciple discards a sacred work simply because of the preface I wrote on it, another person may pick it up and be saved as a result..."

B. Shinran Shonin's Writings

While studying with Honen Shinran wrote two volumes of explanatory notes: one on the *Sutra on Meditation on (the Buddha of) Immeasurable Life* and the other on the *Amida Sutra*. These works are valuable indications of how

thoroughly he studied the philosophy of Mahayana Buddhism, especially the Pure Land Teaching.

In 1214, Shinran Shonin had moved to the Kanto region during the time that Master Honen's was under attack. He lived in Inada for twenty years and during that time began writing his masterwork, "Teaching, Practice, *Shinjin*, and Attainment" (*Kyogyoshinsho*) possibly in response to the attack on Honen's work.

On the thirteenth year memorial for Honen in 1224, Shinran completed the first draft of his monumental work, the six volumes of *Kyogyoshinsho*. It contained excerpts from the Three Pure Land sutras, the Nirvana sutra containing his own commentaries, and the writings of the Jodo Shinshu Patriarchs whom Shinran drew inspiration from. Because of the importance of the *Kyogyoshinsho* in Jodo Shinshu teachings, the work is referred to as the Basic Scriptures

After moving back to Kyoto, Shinran finished the *Kyogyoshinsho* at about 74 years of age. It took him about another 22 years to finish from the first draft. The "Hymn of True Shinjin" (*Shoshin-ge*) is found in Chapter Two of the work.

Next to the *Kyogyoshinsho*, his most important works are his wasan, Japanese poems. At the end of the Heian period (794-897 A.D.) a poetic form consisting of alternating lines of seven and five syllables became very popular. Using this poetic form, after two years when he was 76 years old, he completed 118 poems under the title "Japanese Poems on the Pure Land" (*Jodo Wasan*) and 119 poems under the title "Japanese Poems on the Eminent Monks" (*Koso Wasan*).

The *Jodo Wasan* expresses the essence of important passages in Pure Land works so everyone can understand them. It begins by expressing what is contained in "In Praise of Amida Buddha", "Sutra on (the Buddha of) Immeasurable Life," "Meditation on (the Buddha of) Immeasurable Life," "Amida Sutra," and others.

The *Koso Wasan* praises the Seven Eminent Monks of the Jodo Shinshu teaching and explains how they developed the Pure Land teaching.

Shinran continued to write throughout his life:

78 – commentary on "On Faith Alone" titled "Notes on 'On Faith Alone'"

80 – "Passages on the Pure Land" which summarizes what is in the *Kyogyoshinsho*

82 – 83 – made copies of other sacred literature

83 – "A Collection of Passages on the Types of Birth in the Three Pure Land Sutras"

83 – "Gutoku's Notes"

83 – "In Praise of Shotoku *Taishi*" – a collection of 75 poems

- 85 – “In Praise of Shotoku *Taishi* of the Great Country of Japan” – a collection of 114 poems
- 85 – “In Praise of Shotoku *Taishi*” – a collection of 11 poems included in the middle of “Japanese Poems on the Three Periods”
- 86 – “Notes on the Inscription on the Sacred Scrolls”
- 86 – “Hymns on the Three Dharma Periods” – completed 58 more poems
- 86 – “Hymns on Doubting (the Primal Vow)” – completed 22 poems
- 86 – “Gutoku’s Hymns of Lament and Reflection” – completed 11 poems
- 86 – “On Naturalness”
- 86 – Letter Five of “Lamp for the Latter Ages”
- 86 – (hymns on the Three Dharma Periods) – conclusions
- 87 - “The Virtue of the Name of Amida Buddha” – considered his last literary work. He explained Amida Buddha in terms of twelve rays of light, such as “unlimited light” and “unbounded light”.

During all this time he also wrote letters to Eshinni. Kakushinni, Shinran’s daughter, was instrumental in preserving his teachings after his death, and the letters she received and saved from her mother, Eshinni. These 10 letters were discovered in 1922 and are currently preserved in the Nishi Hongwanji temple in Kyoto. Shinran also wrote to his disciples in the Kanto region. He is said to have written 92 letters but only 42 remain today.

A work that is associated with Shinran but written after his passing is the *Tannisho*, “Notes Lamenting Differences”. Yuien-*bo* is attributed to writing about the misunderstandings of Shinran’s teachings.. It is a small work of 18 articles with a preface and afterward, but because of its flowing, fluent writing style brings Shinran’s character and *shinjin* to life.

Sources

- Jodo Shinshu: A Guide* 2002
- Jodo Shinshu: A Guide* 2004
- Young Peoples’ Introduction to Buddhism*
- Shinran: An Illustrated Biography* 2004

Suggested Activities

Shinran Shonin

1. Learn and participate in a Ho-onko service.
2. Learn and participate in a Gotan-e service.
3. Discuss in your group how the events in Shinran Shonin's early life may have affected his view of life. Create a cartoon strip showing your understanding of his early life.
4. Watch the cartoon video about Shinran Shonin's early life or read the book, *Shinran, An Illustrated Biography*. Discuss the choices people have in their lives.
5. Discuss the similarities between the Buddha and Shinran Shonin in their interaction with people in spreading the Dharma. How might those techniques help you to teach others about Jodo Shinshu?
6. Shinran Shonin was a prolific writer. Read one of his poems to share with the members of your group and discuss its meaning..
7. Discuss with your group how Kakushinni was instrumental in developing the Hongwanji.
8. Learn about the Hongwanji's crest and draw and color the wisteria. Find out the significance of the wisteria.
9. Learn about the significance of the Monshu in the Hongwanji.
10. Learn about the importance of Eshinni's 10 letters.
11. Book review – titles of books that would help discussions.