

*As for me, I simply accept and entrust myself to what my revered teacher told me, “Just say the nembutsu and be saved by Amida”; nothing else is involved.*

—*Tannisho, CWS, Vol. I, p. 662*

## Chapter Three

# SHINRAN SHONIN

## The Founder of Jodo Shinshu

The founder of the Jodo Shinshu teaching is Shinran Shonin. Although we look up to him as the founder, he himself did not intend to start a new tradition. Rather, he always considered himself as simply a person who accepted Amida Buddha’s Primal Vow to cause his birth in the Pure Land, and lived within that Great Compassion. Moreover, he never ceased to revere his spiritual teacher, Honen Shonin. As can be determined from the following passage in *Hymns of the Pure Land Masters*, “Our teacher Genku (Honen) appeared . . . revealing the true Pure Land way,” he always considered himself to be a disciple.

Shinran coined the term “Jodo Shinshu,” meaning, True Teaching of the Pure Land, but he did not mean for it to be used as the name of a tradition. Instead, he employed it to indicate that the teaching he had received from his teacher, Honen, was the true teaching.

In this day of proliferating new religions and charismatic leaders, it is understandable that some people may revel in accumulating a following. Shinran was very different. Although

he had many outstanding disciples, he is quoted in the *Tannisho* as saying, “For myself, I do not have even a single disciple . . .”

He was quoted as saying in the *Kudensho* (Notes on the Oral Transmission), “What have I taught that I am to be called a teacher? Since everyone is a disciple of Amida Buddha, we are all fellow practitioners.”

In addition, Shinran revered the Seven Masters, maintaining that they were the ones who properly transmitted the Pure Land teaching. In the *Shoshinge*, Shinran wrote:

The masters of India in the west, who explained the  
teaching in treatises,  
And the eminent monks of China and Japan,  
Clarified the Great Sage’s true intent in appearing in this  
world,  
And revealed that Amida’s Primal Vow accords with the  
nature of beings. (CWS, Vol. I, p. 70)

And,

With the same mind, all people of the present, whether  
monk or lay,  
Should rely wholly on the teachings of these venerable  
masters. (Ibid. p. 74)

This was the attitude Shinran exhibited all his life. It was because of his modest and humble personality that, conversely, he inspired the confidence and respect of so many people. In the *Commentary on Vasabandhu’s Treatise on the Pure Land*, he noted:

Every single being is born transformed from the pure

lotus of Amida Tathagata’s perfect enlightenment [awakening], for they are the same in practicing the Nembutsu and follow no other way. This extends even to this world, so that all Nembutsu practitioners within the four seas are brothers and sisters.

It was thus that the Buddhist sect known as Jodo Shinshu began and developed. Despite his own inclination to the contrary, millions have revered Shinran as the founder of this organization for over seven hundred years.

### Birth of Shinran

Shinran is said to have been born on the first day of the fourth lunar month, in 1173. During the Meiji Period, this date was converted to May 21 of the western calendar. He was born in an area southeast of the capital city of Kyoto in a place called Hino, and named Matsuwakamaru.

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 of that time. Later, however, he is thought to have become a monk, calling himself Daishin Nyudo. It seems that the death of the Empress Dowager precipitated infighting for political power within the Imperial Palace. The Minamoto clan had attacked the Taira clan while the latter was struggling with the Fujiwara clan for political power. The Hino clan was placed in a disadvantageous position, causing Arinori to resign and become a monk. He apparently secluded himself at a place called Mimurodo, some two and a half miles south of Hino. He lived long after, and did not die until his five sons, beginning with Shinran, had become adults; they gathered to chant the *Larger*

*Sutra* in his memory. At that time, Shinran also made a copy of the *Larger Sutra* with annotations.<sup>8</sup>

Shinran's mother was Kikkonyo. She is said to have been the daughter of Yoshichika, a member of another branch family of the Fujiwara clan. Apparently, she passed away when Shinran was eight years old.

Shinran spent his childhood years at Hino, near the present location of Hokaiji Temple. The Amida Hall within the grounds of that temple was built at the request of Sukenari, the fifth-generation descendant of the founder of the Hino family line. The Hino family grave is located on a hill to the east of this hall.<sup>9</sup>

### **Era of Tragedy**

Shinran's lifetime, particularly from his childhood to adolescence, occurred during an especially trying period in Japanese history. It marked a major turning point in the course of the country's development because the foundations of Japanese society were in turmoil. The warrior clans had begun to assert themselves against the ruling government of the nobility, which had been led by the Fujiwara clan.

Shinran was born in 1173, the fourteenth year since the Taira clan had seized the reigns of power in the Battle of Heiji. Their power was at its height. The branch family of the Fujiwara clan into which Shinran was born was waning in power and influence. Given the circumstances, a once proud family, including the father and all five sons, was driven to enter the monkhood in order to survive. Indeed, Shinran's childhood life was far from easy.

Augmenting the downturn of the Hino family fortune, all

people of that era suffered not only from the collapse of the government system and the continuous warfare, but also from widespread earthquakes, famine, and disease.

By the time Shinran was seven, two great earthquakes had destroyed many houses and a fire had destroyed a third of Kyoto. Again, in 1181, an unprecedented famine gripped the land and continued until the next year. It is said that the elegant streets of Kyoto were littered with dead bodies as a result.

As if to ensure that such disturbances would continue, in 1180, Minamoto Yorimasa, who was very close to the Hino family, and Mochihito-o joined forces in an effort to overthrow the Taira clan. Unfortunately, the effort failed. Yorimasa's forces were overthrown at the Uji River, and he himself was killed in battle. But even without Yorimasa's defeat, the declining fortunes of the Hino family meant that they were bound to be driven into even more miserable circumstances.

In 1181, young Shinran was brought by his uncle, Lord Noritsuna, to Shoren-in Temple in Higashiyama, where he was hurriedly initiated into the monkhood by Jien Sojo. He was given the name Hannen, which is written using the Chinese characters that mean "model" or "pattern," and "repose" or "comfortable."

Having experienced hard times during a period when life was extremely difficult and society was continually changing, Shinran must have seen how fleeting and empty were the fortunes and fame pursued by all.

There are a number of legends surrounding his life, one of which is a tale concerning his tonsure. When told that the