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JODO

SHINSHU

A GUIDE

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Concise, abridged edition

HONGWANJI



**JODO SHINSHU**  
A GUIDE

Concise, abridged edition

HONGWANJI INTERNATIONAL CENTER  
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## INTRODUCTION

Sakyamuni Buddha taught that there are numerous paths to awakening, enlightenment, and liberation. The Nembutsu teaching of Shinran Shonin provides a path to that attainment for all people of the world. This publication, which is a concise, abridged edition of the book with the same title, provides an overview of general Buddhism and the Jodo Shinshu teaching only.

For those desiring to know more of the history, organizational structure, traditions, and activities of Jodo Shinshu Hongwanji-ha, we recommend referring to the original version in English.

We hope that through the use of this abridged edition, many newcomers to Buddhism and Jodo Shinshu will be able to deepen their understanding and appreciation of the Nembutsu Path.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The idea for this book was originally conceived by the Southern District Council of the Buddhist Churches of America. With the able translation of Mr. Ken Yokogawa, an English version of the *Jodo Shinshu Hikkei* was prepared. It subsequently became a project in collaboration with the Hongwanji International Center, Kyoto. As it was our objective to make the basic tenets and traditions of Jodo Shinshu available to all those with little or no knowledge of our tradition of Buddhism, the original manuscript was augmented to its current form. While the finished product at times departs from the Japanese original, we believe that it adequately presents the Jodo Shinshu teachings and traditions in an easy to understand manner.

We wish to thank the following people for sharing their expertise: Mr. Ken Yokogawa, Bishop Hakubun Watanabe, Rev. George Matsubayashi, and the Kaikyoshi ministers of the Buddhist Churches of America Southern District. We would also like to express our deep appreciation for the careful review of the draft manuscript in its final stages, and the kind and knowledgeable suggestions offered by Dr. Tony Barber, Ms. Juliet Kono Lee, Rev. David Matsumoto, and Dr. John S. Yokota. Our utmost gratitude is extended to Dr. Taitetsu Unno for his valuable advise. Further, we would like to acknowledge the generous assistance of Mrs. Corliss Yamaki, Mr. Harry Bridge, Ms. Naomi Nakano, and Ms. Tabitha Kobata for the creation of this abridged edition. Finally, our thanks go to Rev. Patricia Kanaya and Rev. Gene Sekiya of the Hongwanji International Center for their work in making this publication possible.

Hongwanji International Center  
Jodo Shinshu Hongwanji-ha  
April 2004

## THE ESSENTIALS OF JODO SHINSHU – KYOSHO

DENOMINATION: Jodo Shinshu Hongwanji-ha

(a.k.a. Honpa Hongwanji or Nishi Hongwanji)

FOUNDER: Shinran Shonin (1173-1262)

BUDDHA: Amida Buddha (Namo Amida Butsu)

SUTRA: The Principal Sutras of Jodo Shinshu are the Three Pure Land Sutras: 1. *The Sutra of the Buddha of Immeasurable Life Delivered by Sakyamuni Buddha (Bussetsu Muryoju kyo)*, also known as the *Larger Sutra (Daikyo)*, 2. *The Sutra of Contemplation on the Buddha of Immeasurable Life Delivered by Sakyamuni Buddha (Bussetsu Kammuryoju kyo)*, also known as the *Contemplation Sutra (Kangyo)*, 3. *The Sutra on Amida Buddha Delivered by Sakyamuni Buddha (Bussetsu Amida kyo)*, also known as the *Smaller Sutra (Shokyo)*.

TEACHING: Having awakened to the compassion of Amida Buddha and rejoicing in the assurance of Buddhahood, we shall endeavor to live a life of gratitude and compassionate activity.

TRADITION: The Hongwanji is a community of people joined together by the joy of a common entrusting in Amida Buddha. As Jodo Shinshu Buddhists, we shall seek to be humble and sincere in words and in deeds, to be responsible citizens of our society and to share with others the teachings of Jodo Shinshu. Understanding fully the principle of causality, we shall not practice petitionary prayer and magic, and do not depend on astrology and superstitions.



## *Chapter One*

# **SAKYAMUNI BUDDHA**

## **Birth**

Once long ago, a clan called the Sakya established a small country on the high plains of northern India, with Kapila Castle as the center of its activities. Their leader was King Suddhodana; his wife, Queen Maya.

On about the eighth day of the fourth month in the middle of the fifth or sixth century BCE, about 2,500 years ago, Queen Maya was on her way to her parents' home to give birth to their child, as was the custom in those days. Passing by Lumbini Garden on their journey, Queen Maya's retinue decided to rest there for awhile. While rising to take a closer look at a branch of a lovely Asoka tree, the queen suddenly gave birth to a beautiful prince. The name chosen for him was Siddhartha.

According to sutras that describe the event, Prince Siddhartha took seven steps as soon as he was born. Pointing to the heavens and to the earth, he proclaimed in a loud voice, "In the Heavens above and on the Earth below, I alone am the World-Honored One. All that exists in the Three Worlds is suffering, but I will bring comfort." In addition, it is said that the Heavens were so moved by these words that they rained down sweet tea in response.

The day of his birth, April 8, is celebrated today as Hanamatsuri (lit. "Flower Festival") or Buddha Day.

## **Leaving Home**

Even as a child, Prince Siddhartha showed great ability in his studies and in the practice of martial arts. His father, King Suddhodana, and the people of his country had high hopes for him.

During his young life, however, the Prince witnessed a constant cycle of living things killing and eating other living things in order to survive. These experiences made such a great impression on him that he began to consider deeply the meaning of life.

In order to divert his son from such reflections, King Suddhodana provided a luxurious castle for him. When Prince Siddhartha came of age, he married Yasodhara. However, although the outward aspects of his life were exciting and dynamic, his quiet contemplation of the suffering of life continued.

The day came when the Prince decided to observe the world outside his secluded palace grounds. Leaving through the Eastern Gate of Kapila Castle, he was surprised to see an emaciated old man.

Later, when the Prince left through the Southern Gate he saw a man wasted by illness, and when he left through the Western Gate, he caught sight of a funeral procession, leading him to realize that life was just one endless cycle of birth and death and suffering.

Finally, leaving through the Northern Gate, he spotted a renunciant who had abandoned the ways of the world. Struck by the noble and dignified attitude of the man, it is said that Siddhartha resolved to become a renunciant that day.

When a child was born to Siddhartha and Yasodhara, the Prince rejoiced at the birth, but he could not avoid thinking that the child was just another obstacle to his spiritual quest. The baby was given the name Rahula.

The desire to satisfy his inner turmoil continued to grow within Siddhartha. At 29 years of age, he relinquished the life of a prince, abandoned his beloved family, and sought answers among those who performed ascetic practices. His extended family still cared for his wife and child, a common practice among warrior families.

## Attainment of Buddhahood

Determined to seek the truth for himself, he joined a group of five ascetics. He himself was so strict in his practices that he limited his daily food portion to a mere grain of rice. At times, he consumed nothing at all. Indeed, he pursued the ascetic path so assiduously that he often lost consciousness and collapsed.

After six years of this severe lifestyle, Siddhartha realized he would never succeed in his quest by following such a course. At last, he came down the mountain, washed himself in the Nairanjana River, and gratefully accepted milk-porridge offered to him by Sujata, the daughter of a village elder.

After regaining his health and the courage to continue his search, Siddhartha sat down under a large bodhi tree (*pippala*), vowing not to

rise until he had attained the truth he sought, and entered into a meditative state.

Siddhartha successfully overcame both external threats and the internal seduction of his base passions. And so, in the early morning on the eighth day of the twelfth month, Siddhartha found release from the unawareness that causes the agony of old age, illness, and death. He had penetrated the true nature of all things and had become Awakened, which thereafter was called Enlightenment.

Siddhartha was then 35 years old. From then on, he was referred to as Sakyamuni Buddha, the “Awakened One of the Sakya clan.”

## The Wheel of the Dharma

After attaining Buddhahood, Sakyamuni Buddha decided that the first persons with whom he wanted to share his understanding were his five ascetic companions. At first, when Sakyamuni reached them, they looked upon him with suspicion. However, amazed at the change that had taken place, for he now overflowed with inner strength and confidence, they could not keep themselves from hearing what he had to say. Realizing he had attained the Awakening that they sought, they became his disciples.

In this historic discourse by Sakyamuni Buddha, referred to as “Setting the Wheel of the Dharma in Motion,” the “Three Treasures of the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha” were complete. The Dharma refers to the truth that Enlightenment brings forth, and the Sangha, to the disciples who gathered around the Buddha.

Sakyamuni completely disregarded the caste system then prevalent in India and considered everyone to be on an equal social level. As he traveled around India spreading the Dharma, he took into account the personalities and conditions of the people with whom he came into contact in order to teach effectively. Those who looked up to him as a teacher crossed all social strata and the boundaries of all kingdoms, and a tremendous following developed.

In his later years, Sakyamuni Buddha was quoted as saying, “We are not noble because of the family into which we were born. Rather, we become noble as a result of our actions.”

The greatest crisis that Sakyamuni Buddha encountered in spreading the Dharma involved his cousin, Devadatta, who yearned to lead the following that looked to Sakyamuni as their leader. In his scheming, he tempted a certain Prince Ajatasatru to seize the reigns of power by killing his father, King Bimbisara, the king of the country of Magadha, and

imprisoning his mother, Queen Vaidehi. Then, with the prince's help, Devadatta tried to replace Sakyamuni Buddha as the spiritual leader of the land.

Devadatta's intrigue failed, but the incident led Sakyamuni Buddha to give the discourse that remains with us as the *Sutra of Contemplation on the Buddha of Immeasurable Life* (one of the Three Pure Land Sutras that substantiates the Jodo Shinshu teaching).

## Entering Nirvana

Even at the advanced age of 80, Sakyamuni Buddha tirelessly continued to spread the Dharma. His final journey was from Rajagrha to Sravasti. It ended before he reached his destination, at a place called Vaisali. At this point, even the great spiritual leader was unable to escape the truth of the impermanence of life, for he had fallen fatally ill.

Lying down between twin *sala* trees, he gave his final Dharma Talk, ending with this admonition, "After I leave this world, make the Dharma your place of refuge. Make of yourself a light...all things in this world are impermanent. Follow the Dharma diligently." Those were his last words. Sakyamuni Buddha engaged in spreading the Dharma until the end of his life in this world.

## **THE TEACHINGS OF THE BUDDHA**

### **Buddha Dharma**

We can never know the exact process that Sakyamuni Buddha followed to experience Enlightenment he attained under the Bodhi tree. There is no doubt, however, that the key to understanding his teaching and reaching the truth is the “dharma of dependent origination,” sometimes referred to as “dependent causation”. This means that all things are related by cause, condition, and result. That is to say, all things in the world are interdependent and interconnected in a multi-dimensional, web-like structure of infinite details. The relationship of cause, condition, and result is not simply linear, as time and activity are often imagined to be. The Buddha Dharma does not concede miracles. Human beings must use reason to resolve problems and recognize the causes and conditions that brought them about.

The basic principles underlying the Buddha Dharma are contained in these three formulations:

1. All conditioned things are impermanent; all things change in relation to causes and conditions.
2. Nothing exists independently or statically; everything exists only because of conditions that make existence possible.
3. Nirvana is peace; in transcending suffering, a person may live with untroubled peace of mind.

Repeatedly instructing in this manner, Sakyamuni Buddha traced back to the cause of all the suffering from which no person is exempt. He then stressed that the basic cause for suffering was unawareness. The solution to spiritual problems, therefore, is to look into oneself and become aware of the problem for what it is. A mere intellectual understanding of dependent origination is insufficient for awakening. A person must change perspective in order to see and respond to the world in the context of interdependence. In effect, such awakening brings forth a paradigm of unshakeable truth.

## The Four Noble Truths

1. Life is unavoidably connected to suffering. The “truth of suffering” is not just a view of life; rather, it is the truth of life itself. The Buddha taught that human life, measured from the first breath taken upon birth until the last breath when that life expires, is unavoidably connected to eight types of suffering:

Birth

Old Age

Sickness

Death

Parting from those we love

Having to associate with those we dislike

Being unable to acquire what we wish

Being attached to the five elemental aggregates of which our body, mind and environment are composed, in other words, that which keeps us alive

In short, nothing is permanent or constant. The greatest joy does not last forever. Things simply do not always go as planned. Such is the nature of life.

2. The basic cause of life’s suffering is a person’s *bonno* – base passions or worldly desires – which is often referred to as blind passions. They are called “blind” because although they seem obvious in others and may appear easy to understand, more often than not, people fail to see those qualities in themselves. Thus, the human being is blind to the very cause of suffering. A person’s *bonno* are countless, but those that cause the most problems are greed, anger, and unawareness.

3. Recognizing and acknowledging these passions will dispel suffering. Once people become aware that the cause of suffering is blind desire, they will also see that the cessation of suffering occurs with the dispelling of the egoistic mind and heart, and seeking the world of nirvana. This term, “nirvana,” literally means “blow out” as in blowing out the flame of a candle and refers to the state in which blind desires no longer control human behavior. Thus, transcending the ego, the source of suffering, is the ultimate goal.

4. The way to transcend ego-caused suffering is to follow the Eightfold Path:

Right View

Right Thought

Right Speech  
Right Conduct  
Right Livelihood  
Right Endeavor  
Right Mindfulness  
Right Meditation

The Eightfold Path is summarized in the six *paramitas*, or types of practice by which a bodhisattva attains Buddhahood: *dana* (the act of giving, donation, generosity), *sila* (ethics and deportment), *ksanti* (perseverance), *virya* (diligence), *dhyana* (meditation), and *prajna* (wisdom). These are considered the standard practices and are means by which a being endeavors toward a selfless life of the Buddhist Way. A bodhisattva is one who makes vows to attain Enlightenment and assists suffering humanity, and begins on the course of practice which requires a long period of time to complete.

## Amida Buddha

To explain Amida Buddha to the people of his time, Sakyamuni spoke before a gathering at Vulture's Peak near Rajagrha. He told them of a king who renounced his throne and was given the name Dharmakara. Motivated by deep compassion, he resolved that he would save humanity from suffering. He made forty-eight vows, promising that he would not become a Buddha until it was possible for all beings to be born in his Pure Land.

For an inconceivably long time, he devoted his life to performing the duties of the bodhisattva until he attained the highest, perfect Enlightenment. Realizing wisdom and compassion, he became Amida Buddha. By becoming a Buddha, he fulfilled his vows and accomplished the liberation of all humanity.

The 18th Vow, referred to as the Primal Vow, is the essential focus of Jodo Shinshu:

Upon my attainment of Buddhahood, if the sentient beings in the ten quarters, who have sincerity of heart, with sincere minds entrusting themselves, and wishing to be born in my land, repeating my name, perhaps up to ten times, would not be born therein, then may I not obtain the Great Enlightenment.

Sakyamuni further reassured people to trust completely in the Teaching and to recite the Name of Amida Buddha, "Namo Amida Butsu," for the great compassion and wisdom of Amida would always be with them.

Amida Buddha, then, is the Ultimate Embodiment of Compassion and Wisdom. Amida is neither a creative nor a destructive force. Amida is neither forgiving nor judgmental; neither merciful nor vengeful. The polarities that exist in the human condition do not exist in Amida Buddha. Amida Buddha asks for nothing; Amida Buddha simply beckons all to his Pure Land. Amida's Vow is therefore an unconditional promise of compassion and liberation.

## Development of the Teaching

### *Compilation of the Sutras*

Some time after the Buddha's passing, a disciple, Mahakasyapa, suggested to other disciples that the teachings be organized systematically so that misunderstandings would not arise. This effort led to the formation of the Buddhist council that compiled the Buddha's words into sutras as they are called today.

### *The Mahayana Tradition and the Pure Land Way*

The teaching of Buddha Dharma that began in India spread to other countries in two basic directions. One, the Theravada, was towards the tropical countries of southern Asia, while the other, the Mahayana, was to more temperate zones such as China. As it was being transmitted to these other regions, the Mahayana tradition gained ascendancy.

Rather than narrowly following only the Theravada monastic model established by Sakyamuni Buddha, the Mahayana tradition sought the same awakening from a much wider point of view. It is a teaching in which all sentient beings can participate in seeking freedom from the bonds of illusion and suffering.

Over this period, the teachings widened and deepened. The writings of Nagarjuna describe the difficult path and the easy path. The difficult path requires the practitioner to rely on himself alone, the "Path of Sages". The easy path is one wherein the practitioner relies on the assistance of the compassion of the Buddha, the "Pure Land Path". The latter path is followed by many different Mahayana schools in Tibet, China, Japan, and elsewhere.

As the Pure Land Path developed, what emerged was the recognition that the only way to become awakened was through unconditional reliance on Amida Buddha's Primal Vow (*Hongan*). Indeed, it is the cause for birth in the Pure Land, where Awakening and Buddhahood

may be attained. The power of this vow will not rest as long as a single individual remains unawakened. As all human beings are unaware and self-centered, filled with base passions, the power of Amida Buddha's Primal Vow serves to bring about the awakening of all. There are various epithets used for Amida Buddha's Primal Vow, such as the 18<sup>th</sup> Vow and the Primal Vow.

### *Seven Masters*

Sakyamuni Buddha's true teaching has lasted over 2,500 years and traveled over thousands of miles with none of today's modern transportation or communication technology, relying solely on the efforts of countless monks, followers, and other persons. From among the many spiritual predecessors to whom Jodo Shinshu is indebted, seven eminent individuals are revered as the masters of the Pure Land teaching. They are: Nagarjuna and Vasubandhu (India); T'an-luan, Tao-ch'o and Shan-tao (China); and Genshin and Honen (Japan).

They all wrote many works that helped to develop the teachings of the Pure Land Way.

## *Chapter Three*

### **SHINRAN SHONIN**

#### The Founder of Jodo Shinshu

Shinran Shonin, the founder of Jodo Shinshu, never intended to start a new tradition. He considered himself as simply a person who accepted Amida Buddha's Primal Vow as the vehicle by which the Pure Land could be reached. After many years of study and practice, he came to understand the precise difficulty in achieving Enlightenment; it was impossible because of the poison of self-centeredness in every human action. Thus, he abandoned the difficult path and began traversing the easy path of relying on Amida's compassionate Vow. After studying the works of the seven masters, maintaining that they were ones who properly transmitted the Pure Land teaching, he came to revere Honen Shonin.

Shinran coined the term "Jodo Shinshu," meaning "True Teaching of the Pure Land," and employed it to indicate that the teaching he had received from Honen was the true teaching. Exhibiting modesty and humility throughout his life, Shinran inspired and won the respect of many people.

#### Early Years

Shinran is said to have been born on May 21, 1173, in an area southeast of Kyoto in a place called Hino, and given the name Matsuwakamaru. His father, Hino Arinori, was a member of a branch family of the Fujiwara clan and was a high court officer. Shinran's mother was Kikkonyo, said to have been the daughter of Yoshichika, a member of another branch of the Fujiwara clan. Apparently, she passed away when Shinran was 8 years old.

Because of the turbulent infighting for political power during that period, the once proud family, including the father and all five sons, was driven to enter the monkhood in order to survive. Losing his father in 1181, young Shinran was brought by his uncle, Lord Noritsuna, to the Shoren-in Temple in Higashiyama, where he was hurriedly initiated into the monkhood by Jien Sojo and given the name Hannen.

## Shinran's Search for Truth

Mount Hiei was recognized as the highest institute of Buddhist learning in Japan. By the time Shinran ascended Mount Hiei, however, it had degenerated greatly from its former prominence. Shinran earnestly sought Buddhist awakening while living among those who had merely brought themselves to Mount Hiei to live from day to day with no awareness or goal in mind.

He spent night after night, poring over the sutras and performing austerities to an unprecedented extent. However, the harder he studied and undertook difficult practices, the more 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. As he began to sense how difficult it would be for him to cultivate his mind and heart to follow the Path of Sages, and how impossible it was to attain liberation through these practices, he was gradually drawn to the Pure Land teaching.

Fortunately, a brilliant predecessor in the Pure Land teaching by the name of Genshin had long been associated with the Yokawa area of Mount Hiei. It is said that while Shinran was there, the teaching of the Nembutsu was still as it had been during Genshin's time.

Shinran eventually changed his practice and reverted single-mindedly and unwaveringly to chant the Smaller (*Amida*) Sutra. Following a suggestion in Genshin's work, *Ojo-yoshu* [Essentials for Attaining Birth], which 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, the Buddha would respond and bring about his emancipation. His efforts proved to be in vain.

During this time, Shinran continued to hear rumors of a certain Honen of Yoshimizu. Honen had established the "Pure Land Denomination" based on the principle of "Exclusive Practice of the Nembutsu." Consumed with the desire to descend Mount Hiei and meet this teacher, Shinran resolved to seek the Way from the image of Avalokitesvara (Kannon), enshrined at Rokkakudo Temple in Kyoto.

Shinran left Mount Hiei and remained in retreat for a hundred days at Rokkakudo, praying for emancipation in the afterlife. Then, Prince Shotoku, who is said to have introduced Buddhism to Japan, appeared in a vision at dawn of the ninety-fifth day, revealing the path to Awakening after Shinran recited a verse. Taking this vision as a sign to seek Honen's help, Shinran immediately went in search of Honen Shonin.

He then visited Honen daily, for one hundred days, asking about all the problems that had bothered him: how could lay persons who must work for a living, who are fettered by love of their families and unable to engage in spiritual practices, ever come in contact with the Buddha's emancipation?

Honen said, "...as for the matter of liberation in the afterlife, there is no difference between a good person or evil person, for only the single-hearted nembutsu is necessary in order to become liberated from the suffering of birth and death." Here, an "evil" person does not have the implication of being bad or sinful.

Nonetheless, upon meeting Honen, Shinran did not accept the way of "reliance on the Primal Vow through Buddha-centered power," right away. Rather, he had just begun the process that led to realizing the importance of the Primal Vow. From Honen, Shinran learned that emancipation has been prepared for all beings by Amida Buddha. Awareness of Amida's Primal Vow then becomes the basis of living a true, full, and meaningful life. This is the world of the Nembutsu that Shinran entered.

Accepting Amida's Primal Vow and living within the Great Compassion, he was no longer discouraged by anything. After becoming Honen's disciple, Shinran received the name Shakku and continued deepening his understanding of the Pure Land teaching. His efforts were unflagging, and he gradually began distinguishing himself even among Honen's many disciples.

## Persecution of the Nembutsu

Though fortunate to have encountered a good teacher and to have received his guidance, Shinran was unable to remain with his esteemed teacher for long because the discord and turmoil in the world gradually encroached upon even this circle. The monks on Mount Hiei and in Nara, offended and angry at the growing popularity of Honen's teaching, frequently criticized Honen's group at Yoshimizu. They submitted a nine-article resolution to the Emperor, petitioning that the Nembutsu teaching be prohibited.

As a result, Honen, at seventy-five years of age, was exiled to Tosa Province (present-day Kochi Prefecture). Shinran, who was thirty-five years old, was exiled to Echigo Province (present-day Niigata Prefecture). The resolute relationship between master and disciple had been disrupted by the worldly interests of others. Shinran was separated from his "good teacher," and they never met again.

## Life in Echigo

Shinran's exile must have caused him to reflect deeply on his situation. As a result, he began referring to himself as "Gutoku," meaning "ignorant, stubble-haired one." Shinran was neither a monk recognized by the Imperial Court nor an ordinary lay person. In any event, he enjoyed the truth of the Nembutsu, free from any courtly or religious position.

Such insight does not come from a shallow reflection of one's own conscience. Rather, it comes exclusively from suffusion by the limitless light of Amida Buddha's compassionate heart. Shinran came to believe that this limitless compassion has been shining upon all beings long before awareness of it occurs. Only upon realizing one's own unawareness and imperfection can anyone become aware of the Great Compassion, and filled with humility, can only feel gratitude for it.

Accordingly, Shinran came to transform the misfortune of his exile into an opportunity to spread the teaching of Amida's Primal Vow. He felt he could freely spread the wonderful teaching of the Nembutsu to everyone he met.

Not long after arriving at Echigo, Shinran married and began raising a family. His wife was the daughter of Miyoshi Tamenori, a samurai of high rank. She was later referred to as Eshinni.

## Echigo to the Eastern Provinces

Shinran was pardoned in 1211, five years after being exiled. Honen was pardoned on the same day. Although he was free to go wherever he wanted, Shinran remained in the Echigo area. Since Honen had passed away two months after being pardoned, it was no longer necessary for Shinran to make the arduous journey to see his teacher.

However, in 1214 Shinran and his family settled in Hitachi Province in the newly-developed Kanto area (around modern Tokyo). The Kanto area was the center of the military government known as the Kamakura Period (1185–1333) in Japanese history. Life for the peasants in that area was very difficult. Not only oppressed by warriors and landlords, but they were also further plagued by drought and earthquakes which seemed to occur nearly every year. Observing their difficult life must have affected Shinran profoundly.

In the course of their journey, Shinran thus decided to chant the Three Pure Land Sutras a thousand times to benefit the suffering people they saw along the way. However, Shinran realized that the chanting was a

mistake. He stopped chanting after reflecting, “What is it that is lacking in my recitation of the Nembutsu that has caused me to begin reciting the Three Pure Land Sutras like this?”

Seeing the plight of the peasants and wanting to do his best to help them, Shinran had been trying to do the only thing he had been trained to do during his twenty years on Mount Hiei: to chant the Three Pure Land Sutras. Seventeen years later, in 1231, Shinran caught a severe cold, accompanied by a high fever. During this time, he again began to chant the *Larger Sutra*, then again stopped doing so.

Later, considering both incidents, he reflected deeply and admonished himself, realizing that the suffering of the peasants could not be alleviated through his own actions. Rather, the need was to relieve them of suffering by illuminating their minds and hearts with the light of the Nembutsu. His mission became clear.

While in the Hitachi province for twenty years, Shinran continued to spread the teachings. His efforts bore fruit, and the number of people who sought the Way continued to grow. Shinran never attempted to build a temple. Rather, he spoke with whomever he met as an equal, wherever they were – at their homes, in a hall, or on the road – about the Dharma. He referred to those with whom he spoke as “fellow practitioners of the Nembutsu teaching,” and gave no consideration to the class distinctions that were so prevalent at the time.

Accordingly, Shinran seems to have shared his understanding in a very personalized way, always taking into consideration the background of his listeners and relating his talks to their problems, rather than preaching in a general way to large crowds. 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. In the Kanto area, Shinran gathered his own sangha made up of practitioners of the Nembutsu teaching.

On the occasion of the thirteenth-year memorial for Honen in 1224, Shinran completed the first draft of his monumental work, the six volumes of *Kyogyoshinsho*. Because of the importance of *Kyogyoshinsho* in the Jodo Shinshu teachings, the work also came to be referred to as the “Basic Scriptures” and the “Basic Text.”

In later years, this date came to be considered the year in which the Jodo Shinshu organization was established with Shinran as its founder.

## Return to Kyoto

When he was about sixty-three years old, after twenty years of spreading the Nembutsu teaching in the Kanto region, Shinran returned to

Kyoto with his family. His motivation for doing so is not clear, but it was likely that he needed access to reference works that were available only in Kyoto. In Kyoto, however, the Kamakura feudal government again prohibited the Nembutsu teaching and continued their oppressive attitude towards Nembutsu followers. Under these circumstances, Shinran devoted himself to writing on the sacred teaching so it could be transmitted to future generations.

After revising the *Kyogyoshinsho*, Shinran devoted himself to writing about the Nembutsu in everyday Japanese. In 1248, when he was seventy-six years old, he wrote *Jodo Wasan*, [Hymns of the Pure Land] and *Koso Wasan* [Hymns of the Pure Land Masters]. Even in his eighty-fifth year, he continued to write other works, including *Songo Shinzo Meimon* [Notes on the Inscriptions on Sacred Scrolls] and *Shozomatsu Wasan* [Hymns of the Dharma Ages], and other works. In addition, he met with practitioners from the Kanto area and discussed numerous everyday issues such as how to live the Nembutsu life. He also wrote letters to them clarifying points of Jodo Shinshu doctrine.

### Birth in the Pure Land

In about 1254, Eshinni returned to her place of birth, Yonemasu in Echigo Province. She left Shinran's care in the hands of their youngest daughter, Kakushinni. Eight years after Eshinni returned to Echigo, Shinran passed away while reciting the Nembutsu at Zenbo-in, the temple of his younger brother, Jin'u Sozu. It was January 16, 1263. He was cremated the next day, on the twenty-ninth of the lunar calendar, at Ennin Temple. On the thirtieth, his remains were deposited to the north of Toribe-no, at a place called Otani. Kakushinni had a tombstone placed over the grave and immediately informed her mother in Echigo about her father's demise and her final act of devotion.

Shinran's life, spanning almost a century, was described as "a road of thorns." And yet, as he had trust in Amida Buddha's Primal Vow and lived within the Nembutsu, this road of thorns had become the path to Reality.

## *Chapter Four*

# **THE PURE LAND TEACHING – JODO SHINSHU**

## **Jodo Shinshu and Modern Life**

### *Aim*

The Pure Land teaching established by Shinran tells us that all are embraced by the power of Amida Buddha's Primal Vow. Entrusting in this Vow enables all to live in the present with confidence and peace of mind and assures them that they will be born in the Pure Land where they will attain Enlightenment.

The purpose of this teaching is to enable all to live their lives to the fullest, becoming aware of both potentials and limitations in this world. Through this teaching, all may be able to overcome difficulties, thus realizing true happiness within this lifetime.

### *Discovering Your Path*

The word "saved" can be understood in many different ways. To some, it means having faith in gods or spirits and being rewarded as a result of offering prayers to that being. Such an understanding of "salvation" means that when human beings encounter obstacles they feel cannot be overcome, they simply rely on the power of a god to take care of the problems. This kind of salvation is not the realm of the Jodo Shinshu teaching.

People often view money, position, and fame as goals in life and devote all their energies to pursuing them, and in so doing, become attached to people and material possessions. People also believe happiness results from satisfying desires, and unhappiness results from failing to do so. Because of these beliefs, people have a tendency to appeal to something that transcends human strength when they are confronted by unforeseen and possibly insurmountable difficulties, sorrows, and obstacles. Some resort to bargaining and petitionary prayers; others to fortunetelling and superstitious practices. Some believe the devil or divine wrath is behind disasters and obstacles; others give credence to fate or bad luck, unlucky days, talismans, and so on. Such people hope to resolve their problems

by superhuman means. Again, Jodo Shinshu does not advocate such practices.

These beliefs and practices illustrate the weakness and fragility of human beings, and the often futile efforts they rely upon. Such practices are not only groundless but can be the cause of great harm to society, for happiness and sorrow are ever-present in human life.

The Jodo Shinshu teaching of Shinran Shonin offers the promise of liberation based on Amida Buddha's Primal Vow. This teaching is significant for anyone seeking the way to real emancipation from the cycle of suffering.

True liberation must be that which provides the strength to continue, even if things do not go as wished, in full recognition that all problems are transient in nature. Jodo Shinshu explains that such strength comes from Amida Buddha's ceaselessly benevolent Vow-Power, which will most assuredly bring about birth in the Pure Land. It provides spiritual sustenance and lifelong fortitude. Choosing to proceed along this path leads to the same awakening as the Buddha. Although all of Mahayana Buddhism recognizes the assistance provided by the Buddhas and bodhisattvas, Jodo Shinshu particularly values the working of Amida's Compassionate Vow.

## The True Teaching

### *The Larger Sutra*

If human beings had true higher wisdom, they would not have to agonize over global environmental problems. If all beings were free of self-centered greed, no wars, murders, or other senseless acts would plague humankind. Only because human beings fail to see things as they truly are – unable to separate themselves from self-centeredness – the world is burdened with problems, forever plunging further into the abyss of suffering.

The purpose of Buddha Dharma is to cultivate higher wisdom and to lessen self-centered greed. Stated in yet another way, the goal is the attainment of Buddhahood. When Sakyamuni Buddha gave the Dharma Talk that was later recorded as the *Larger Sutra* in which he tells of Amida's Vow, his stated reason for appearing in the world was to expound the Teachings of the way to Enlightenment, and to liberate the multitudes of living beings by endowing them with the benefit that is true and real. Shinran selected the *Larger Sutra* as "the true teaching" because it explicitly expresses the Buddha's aspiration for all sentient beings.

## *Amida Buddha's Compassion*

Generally speaking, in the Buddha Dharma, the way to become awakened and attain Buddhahood is to accept the Buddha's teachings and perform prescribed spiritual practices. As Sakyamuni learned and Shinran discovered, the reality of life makes such practice difficult, if not impossible. Delusions and problems constantly confront the human mind.

It has been 2,500 years since Sakyamuni Buddha appeared in this world and attained Enlightenment. If prescribed practices were extremely difficult to fulfill then, Enlightenment would be impossible to achieve in the same way now with so many expectations, distractions, and conveniences in today's fast-paced modern world.

On the surface, people may believe that they can approach ultimate Truth if they just follow the practices taught in the Buddhist tradition. But actually, the more they perform spiritual practices, the more entangled in their limitations they become. Then, the more people become aware of the depths of human unawareness, the more they realize how impotent they are to achieve Enlightenment through their own efforts. Accordingly, although the ideal of aspiring to attain Buddhahood is very important, again, it is practically impossible. If anything, believing that one's own efforts are sufficient underscores the self-centered, ego-directed presumption of humankind.

In response to such hapless circumstances and motivated by compassion for all beings, Amida vowed to bring the attainment of Buddhahood about without delay or even to wait for human awareness. Recognizing this motivation as described in the *Larger Sutra*, Shinran declared that for himself especially, "there is no other way to attain Buddhahood."

## *Amida Buddha and Sakyamuni Buddha*

We know about Sakyamuni Buddha from historical evidence. Clearly, Sakyamuni Buddha was born a human being in our world. He performed ascetic practices in vain. Despite being a mere mortal, he attained Enlightenment, becoming a Buddha in this world. He then spread the Dharma and passed on to final nirvana at the age of eighty.

From a limited human perspective, we can speak of Sakyamuni in the same way we speak of any other person. Although he was like us in every way, his way of being in the universe changed once he gained liberation. In essence, he became the embodiment of the Dharma.

Sakyamuni Buddha boldly proclaimed that the Dharma was not something that he had arbitrarily created himself. It had always existed and

would continue to exist. It had nothing to do with whether he was born in this world or not. All he had done was to experience that Dharma in order to expound it for others' sake. What enabled Sakyamuni to become a Buddha is the reality of the Dharma, the body of ultimate reality and the transcendent truth that goes beyond both time and space, yet is immanent in the world.

Because human beings are unaware and filled with base passions, their minds and hearts cannot know the Dharma-body directly. But according to Shinran, this Dharma-body that does not have color or form, works for all beings continually in their world of delusion. Once in contact with human beings, it became the Buddha that liberates all sentient beings in this world: Amida Buddha.

In other words, Sakyamuni is the historical being who founded a spiritual teaching and taught about Amida Buddha's liberation. Sakyamuni urged everyone to experience the Buddha's Primal Vow and assured them of its Power. Amida represents ultimate reality, which is beyond time and space. As the bodhisattva, Dharmakara, he vowed not only to attain Buddhahood, but also, out of his great compassion, to liberate all beings. Shinran reveres Sakyamuni as the human conduit for Amida's teaching.

Shinran referred to Sakyamuni Buddha and Amida Buddha as the "Parents of Compassion." Amida Buddha can be considered the mother of our "emancipation," while Sakyamuni Buddha can be considered the father of the "teaching" about that emancipation.

### *The Primal Vow*

The 18<sup>th</sup> of the forty-eight Vows is also called the "Primal Vow of Absolute *Buddha-centered* Power". The Pure Land masters noted a fundamental flaw in some aspects of Buddhist thought. How can liberation, the state of no-self (non self-conscious effort), be attained through self? This is like trying to wash out mud by using muddy water. The answer lies in the power of the Vow, the Other Power. The human condition is ego-centered; therefore, Buddha-centered power is the only way to liberation. In effect, Amida has staked his own Buddhahood on the emancipation of all sentient beings.

In other religious traditions, the "savior" and the "saved" have the relationship of "superior and subordinate," and that relationship never changes. The relationship between Amida and the self, however, is likened to that of parent and child, wherein the child eventually grows up

to be a parent himself. Amida Buddha is the parent of liberation because all humankind is bound to Amida Buddha by the Primal Vow.

## The Activity of the Primal Vow

### *The Name and the Light*

Most religions teach that all should strive to reach heaven. Although the object of reverence is considered to be a god, they teach that use of the being's strength serves only to compensate for one's own inadequate abilities.

The Jodo Shinshu teaching, however, urges all human beings not to rely on their limited human power at all. Rather, liberation in its entirety is contained in the activity of the Vow-Power. Without exception, all beings can be liberated because its promise is unconditional.

How does the power of Amida Buddha's Primal Vow work for everyone's benefit? First, it reaches into the mind and heart through the words, "*Namo Amida Butsu*," and then it becomes as a light that shines upon and nurtures every being. This phrase, (hereafter referred to as the "Name" and explained below) "*Namo Amida Butsu*," contains all the essentials for liberation. Hearing the intent of that Name becomes "entrusting," and reciting it becomes "practice." Thus the Vow's fulfillment is accomplished through the Name.

Further, Amida Buddha embraces all beings and "takes us in, never to be abandoned." As an expression of the Buddha-mind, its higher wisdom and active compassion are likened to light. While hearts and minds are hurt and distressed by efforts to get by in everyday life, and awareness of the Truth is obstructed by ignorance and base passions, human beings cannot see Amida, yet they are always enveloped by the light of Great Compassion and protected by it.

All beings are liberated just as they are, complete with their unawareness and base passions. The emancipating power of the Primal Vow provides an unshakable foundation for human existence.

### *Namo Amida Butsu*

The Nembutsu, or "*Namo Amida Butsu*" is neither a Japanese nor a Chinese phrase. It is a transliteration of the Sanskrit phrase, "*Namos Amita Buddha*." No effort was made to translate it into either Chinese, Japanese, or into English.

Character	南	無	阿	彌	陀	佛
	Na	Mo	A	Mi	Da	Butsu
Sanskrit meaning	(I)	entrust	non-un-	Measure		Buddha

The term *mida* means “to measure.” When the negating prefix of *a* is added to create *amida*, it has the meaning, “incapable of being measured.” As to what cannot be measured, it is “light” and “life,” which is only implied in the complete phrase, “Namo Amida Butsu.” The light that cannot be measured (immeasurable light) symbolizes “higher wisdom,” and the life that cannot be measured (immeasurable life) symbolizes “compassion.”

*Butsu* is the Japanese way of pronouncing “Buddha,” which literally means, a being who “has awakened.” Accordingly, if *Amida Butsu* were to be translated into English, it would approximate, “The Awakened Being of Immeasurable Higher Wisdom and Immeasurable Compassion who has come to bring about our emancipation.”

The term *namo*, with which the phrase begins, means “to rely upon, to entrust to, etc.” The complete phrase, *Namo Amida Butsu*, therefore, means, “I entrust myself to and rely solely upon the Awakened Being of Immeasurable Higher Wisdom and Immeasurable Compassion who has come to bring about my emancipation.”

We must remember, however, that although the term *namo* does have meanings such as, “to rely upon, to entrust to, etc.,” reliance, entrusting, and so on, is not a conscious, self-directed activity. Actually, Amida Buddha, whose Name contains the driving force of bringing about complete liberation, has already accomplished the “trusting”. Shinran states that *namo* means that Amida Buddha is calling out to us even before we have entrusted ourselves to Amida. Thus, the human intonation of “Namo Amida Butsu” is, in effect, the resonance of Amida’s call, assuring liberation.

## Shinjin

### *Entrusting Heart*

*Shinjin*, a Japanese term closely meaning “entrusting,” is of pivotal importance in the Jodo Shinshu tradition; without it, there would be no Jodo Shinshu. The term, which incorporates the translation of the

Buddhist Sanskrit word *śradda*, is composed of two Chinese characters meaning “entrust, trust, confidence” and the second character meaning “heart, mind.” The word previously had been mistranslated as “faith.” However, Buddhist literature does not promote “faith” as it is understood in the western religious use of the word and clearly gives this term a negative value.

*Shinjin* is not something that one can fabricate through self-centered efforts and concepts. *Shinjin* is the entrusting that is awakened within each person through the working of the Primal Vow. *Shinjin* occurs when the Dharma-Body (mentioned earlier) becomes apparent to sentient beings.

Speaking more conventionally, *shinjin* refers to Amida’s compassion when it becomes apparent to the person thus liberated and awakened.

### *Experiencing Shinjin*

Shinran explains what “true *shinjin*” is, and that *shinjin* itself is emancipation. He has taught that “entrusting” is not something that comes from deluded minds; rather, it comes from the power of the merit transference of the Primal Vow. Amida Buddha does not promise liberation on the condition of entrusting. He assures all beings of his unconditional guarantee of liberation that the entrusting brings.

In other words, Amida Buddha’s aspiration or vow to liberate exists first, and a person’s experiencing that calling voice is *shinjin*. No prior condition is placed on that Vow.

The ultimate reality, which is Amida, manifests itself in a knowable manner through *shinjin*, an awareness through hearing the Name of Amida Buddha (Nembutsu). It allows peace of mind in liberation, free from all delusive thoughts of such notions as self, power, time, causation, and calculation. The ego-centricism that taints human perceptions and feeling is rendered irrelevant; moreover, any self-powered notions disappear.

*Shinjin* in Jodo Shinshu does not presume or require conditioning the mind and heart with anything and forcing the belief. Actually, such self-willed egotism disappears with the attainment of entrusting. To truly entrust is to be naturally free of those conditions and assumptions.

We come to truly know ourselves and awaken to the truth of Amida Buddha when we realize that we are already enveloped in Amida’s light that touches all beings. It is the light of his Primal Vow. The only way is “to listen,” which means to be open, free from conditioning.

## *True Listening*

People can hear sounds and words without actually absorbing the message or being conscious of the content. In other words, they are not listening. The same is true regarding Amida Buddha's Primal Vow.

Shinran wrote: "What is referred to as 'listening' happens when we sentient beings learn why the Primal Vow was developed, when we understand its activity in causing our birth in the Pure Land, and when the doubtful mind disappears."

Thus, acceptance is the entrusting of our heart and mind to Buddha-centered Power. Rather than merely hearing, the person senses a resonance of the call of the Vow-Power, accepting it unconditionally and without reservation. Then, human intonation of the Name is likened to an echo of that call, a response of gratitude.

## *Who is Evil?*

The object of Amida Buddha's liberation is the evil person. To whom does this refer? Before pointing a finger at others, one should realize that the person in question is oneself. No one in this world eludes this description. The word "evil" used in Jodo Shinshu does not refer to "bad" as defined by narrow and judgmental notions of morality. It points to something with much deeper, even obscure, roots.

For human beings, it is impossible to avoid behaving in a negative manner, even when they may believe they are leading relatively blameless lives. Notice how easy it is to feel superior to someone, to ignore someone, or to dislike someone's looks. How quickly do people think of their own comfort and convenience without regard for that of others? Without thinking, how often do people make excuses in self-justification and at the same time put others down? Are they above criticizing others for shortcomings that they share?

How many plant and animal lives have people taken for personal survival? How many insects have been killed inadvertently in planting crops and in raising animals for human consumption? Evaluating and viewing the world is self-centered; even more so are thinking and feeling. All such self-centeredness is negative. This negative condition is evilness.

When reflected in the Buddha's mirror, how many can say that they are not unaware beings, filled with base passions? And yet, when hearing that the true object of Amida Buddha's emancipation is the evil person, the human tendency is to look around to see who that person

might be. In short, the human being is therefore difficult to awaken and liberate; this too, is the nature of evilness.

Nevertheless, there is a phrase from the *Tannisho* (a record of Shinran's teachings compiled by a direct follower, likely Yuien-bo) which states: "The evil person is the true object of emancipation." It does not mean that the human being is exempt from the consequences of his or her actions. "Emancipation" and "exemption" are completely different from each other. However, Amida Buddha's compassion is so great that even while lamenting the negative karma created, he does not reject us. His fervent aspiration is to liberate all sentient beings and have them attain awakening and Buddhahood. When this is accomplished, the evil person will not fall back into performing negative actions again.

Carefully listening to the Teaching, the human being realizes that the person who is the object of emancipation is himself or herself. This liberation does not give license to continue the evil life, for as Shinran cautioned, "Do not take a liking to poison, just because there is an antidote" (*Tannisho*).

Jodo Shinshu teaching is thus considered the culmination of the Mahayana tradition of Buddha Dharma, which seeks the liberation of all persons.

### *An Expression of Gratitude*

Amida Buddha vowed to bring about the emancipation of all beings through his Primal Vow and intonation of his name, "Namo Amida Butsu"; he promised not to stop working until this was accomplished. The formal way of expressing this is:

*Shinjin* is the true cause; therefore, we recite the Name of Amida Buddha in gratitude.

Birth in the Pure Land accompanies awareness of *shinjin*; for a heart that entrusts in Amida Buddha, mere recitation of the Name is not the cause of birth there. That being the case, why recite "Namo Amida Butsu"? According to Shinran, "recitation of the Name is our expression of gratitude." The Name is something intoned spontaneously at any time and in any place.

Generally, a "practice" is performed as a condition or as the cause for some personal benefit. Intonation of the Name is not such a practice. Shinran believed that intonation honors Amida Buddha's virtue. Moreover, intonation becomes a means by which those with karmic ties to

us, upon hearing the Name, also experience the Dharma and become liberated as well.

When we attain *shinjin*, everything we do – our work, family, and social life, just as they are – as well as reciting the Name, becomes expressions of gratitude. Intonation, then, is how the life of the Nembutsu follower truly manifests itself to its fullest potential.

### *The Higher Wisdom of Shinjin*

When human attachment to self-centered effort is crushed, and the Buddha's Name reaches us, making us conscious of being bathed in his immeasurable light of higher wisdom, we become aware of the truth of our conventional self. Only when we see ourselves mirrored in that light and only then, for the first time, are we able to see a complete picture of ourselves. The light of the Buddha's higher wisdom, alone, reaches to the very base of our being; it allows us to see our delusion for what it is. Thus, the Buddha's higher wisdom enters us fully and opens our hearts.

The important point is that *shinjin* in Jodo Shinshu is “the higher wisdom imparted to us by Amida Buddha.” In short, it is the liberating wisdom of the Vow-Power at work.

### *Present Guarantee for Birth in the Pure Land*

Shinran explains, “Those with *shinjin* are placed in the group of those absolutely assured (of birth in the Pure Land).” Those absolutely assured (of birth in the Pure Land) live joyfully with peace of mind and a grateful heart while in this world. When the time comes to leave this world, they are born in the Pure Land of Ultimate Joy where they attain the same Enlightenment as the Buddhas'. Living joyfully with peace of mind and a grateful heart, and being guaranteed birth in the Pure Land, are not two different things. Rather, they are like two sides of the same coin and cannot be separated.

With *shinjin*, misleading instincts that deepen agony and mire the self in delusion are transformed in each person, thus enabling that person to enjoy a life in which nothing is a hindrance to living fully.

This *shinjin*, therefore, is ultimately the gate to birth in the Pure Land and allows every being to become equivalent to the Buddha. While this may not occur in the present existence because of accumulated negative karma, *shinjin* determines that birth in the Pure Land is absolute and already established.

Transformation through *shinjin* allows each person to work energetically for society and others. This great compassion is the hallmark of Mahayana Buddhism. It is also the nature of those who have entered the group of those assured of birth in the Pure Land, from which there is no retrogression.

### *Benefits in this Life*

Those with *shinjin* are endowed with great benefits. Shinran listed them as follows:

1. The benefit of being protected and sustained by unseen powers.
2. The benefit of being possessed of supreme virtues.
3. The benefit of our karmic evil being transformed into good.
4. The benefit of being protected and cared for by all the Buddhas.
5. The benefit of being praised by all the Buddhas.
6. The benefit of being constantly protected by the light of the Buddha's heart.
7. The benefit of having great joy in our hearts.
8. The benefit of being aware of Amida's benevolence and of responding in gratitude to his virtue.
9. The benefit of constantly practicing great compassion.
10. The benefit of entering the stage of the truly settled.

These are all spiritual benefits of *shinjin*; obviously, they are not material in nature. Some religions claim that material desires will suddenly be fulfilled if we have faith or pray to some god, but Jodo Shinshu absolutely rejects any position that is not in accordance with the law of cause and effect. In other words, material benefits are a matter of consequence and not divine intervention.

The ninth of the above ten benefits is also understood as "Able to transmit Amida Buddha's Great Compassion to others." This implies that the joy of *shinjin* is to be shared. Starting with those closest to us, we are urged to inform even one more person of this highest teaching. Simultaneously sharing our joy and also spreading Amida Buddha's Great Compassion is the best way to put the highest teaching of the Nembutsu into practice. Moreover, it allows us to express our gratitude for having come into contact with the Nembutsu teaching. This sharing is not to be misconstrued as preaching or proselytizing. Jodo Shinshu does not advocate or require missionary effort. Rather, people share by exhibiting the benefits listed above in their daily lives; by intoning

the Name they express gratitude for the benefits that have been assured to all beings.

The tenth benefit also includes the meaning of “Entering the group of those assured of birth in the Pure Land, where Buddhahood is guaranteed.” This is the culmination of all the others, marking the beginning of existence in the Pure Land.

## The Pure Land – Jodo

### *Where and What is Jodo?*

If it is true that, “those who have received *shinjin* will absolutely be born in the Pure Land (*Jodo*) and attain Buddhahood,” one may well ask, “But does that Pure Land really exist?” or, “Where is the Pure Land?”

It is natural to want to reassure oneself of the existence of the Pure Land by using human senses and reasoning. In any event, regarding the reality or the existence of the Pure Land, Sakyamuni Buddha describes it in the following way in the *Smaller Sutra*:

Beyond a hundred thousand kotis of Buddha-lands westwards from here, there is a land called ‘Perfect Bliss.’ In that land there is a Buddha called Amida who is expounding the Dharma at this moment.

...(I)n the Land of Perfect Bliss there are many pools of seven kinds of jewels, full of water with the eight excellent qualities. The bottoms of the pools are covered entirely with sands of gold. On the four sides of the pools, there are stairways made of gold, silver, lapis lazuli, and crystal... There are lotus flowers, as large as chariot wheels, growing in the pools. Those of blue color emit blue radiance; those of yellow color emit yellow radiance; those of red color emit red radiance; and those of white color emit white radiance. They are exquisite, wonderful, fragrant and pure.

In contemporary terms, it may be difficult to relate to this concept of a pure world described in such an elaborate literary style. Shinran explains how to interpret these words, regardless of the listener’s orientation.

### *The Path to the Pure Land*

Shinran calls the Pure Land the “True Land of Recompense” and the “Land of Immeasurable Light.”

By this, he means that the Pure Land is the land created by Amida Buddha's Vow-Power which developed from fulfilling the vows he made as a bodhisattva. Since the purpose of Amida Buddha's Vow is to engage all sentient beings, the world that was created in response to that Vow is the ideal world that everyone envisions. Accordingly, rather than asking whether the Pure Land really exists or not, we simply, without reservation, accept the Pure Land as the "world that is awaiting us." The Pure Land is not a world that can be scrutinized and discovered through knowledge. It is the ultimate reality that transcends the present life with all its imperfections and illusions.

Admittedly we are, at times, able to put the interests of others before our own and to be of service to them. Such actions are commendable, but there is always at least an element of self-interest in them. If not for reasons of social obligation, are we not, at times, motivated by the expectation of making ourselves look good or being liked by others? Though we often believe we are acting out of pure kindness, it is easy to feel resentful when appreciation is not expressed, or when a favor is not returned. Shinran stated, "Because even good actions turn into poisonous deeds, they are called the actions of idiots," and laments that at the base of even the best of intentions, lies a calculated self-interest in which the approval of others is sought. This condition, then, is the human condition: inescapable and karmic in the grand scheme of things.

Perhaps a clearer understanding might come from considering how it feels to be on the receiving end of benefits that were neither asked for nor sought. Imagine spontaneous or serendipitous happenings; a popular phrase, "random acts of kindness," comes to mind. Experiencing these benefits offers a small glimpse of *shinjin* at work.

Through the teaching of the Buddha, the Dharma gradually and naturally reveals itself. Through the working of Other Power from the world of Truth, illumination makes awareness for everyone possible.

### *Limitless Life*

One aspect of being born in the Pure Land is that it is a terminus for negative characteristics and resulting karmic suffering. The other aspect, however, is that it allows everyone to attain limitless life and higher wisdom, and to work as a bodhisattva for the benefit of all sentient beings, endlessly.

Perhaps you have reflected on the true nature of life. Many people may choose to believe that they generally enjoy life and live it in a posi-

tive way. However, if we think about it deeply, like Sakyamuni Buddha, we may notice that life is simply an endless cycle of birth, suffering, and death, and that most are simply engaged in a futile struggle not to die. Whatever our life span, we can choose either to resign ourselves to existing in the shadow of these inevitable truths, or to enjoy our lives to the fullest, with the confidence instilled by knowing the teaching of the Buddha. This existence is then enhanced by the brilliance of limitless life, in which death is merely a rite of passage.

Like Sakyamuni Buddha and Shinran Shonin, each of us can live meaningfully, assured of, and therefore grateful for, the power of the Vow.

## CONCLUSION

The information in this book gives an overview of the history and teachings of Shinshu Buddhism as regarded by Jodo Shinshu Hongwanji-ha. It is important to continue studying the Dharma, taking every opportunity to listen to it so that it can manifest itself to us in our daily lives. For readers who wish to delve deeper, we have provided a recommended reading list in Appendix I and a list of contacts in Appendix II.

To truly live a life of joy in the Nembutsu is to understand it and share it with others.

## **APPENDIX I Contact Information**

### **HEADQUARTERS**

#### **Jodo Shinshu Hongwanjiha (Nishi Hongwanji)**

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#### **Hongwanji International Center**

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## APPENDIX II Recommended Reading

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*Notes on Once Calling and Many Calling*, 1980  
*Notes on the Inscriptions on Sacred Scrolls*, 1981  
*Passages on the Pure Land Way*, 1982  
*The True Teaching, Practice, and Realization of the Pure Land Way*  
Volume I, *Chapters on Teaching and Practice*, 1983  
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Volume III, *Chapters on Realization and True Buddha and Land*, 1987  
Volume IV, *Chapter on Transformed Buddha Bodies and Lands*, 1990  
*Hymns of the Pure Land*, 1991  
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*Hymns of the Dharma-Ages*, 1993  
*A Record in Lament of Divergences*, 1995  
*The Collected Works of Shinran*, 1997  
    *Volume I, The Writings*  
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- Vol. I: *Shoshinge*, 1961                      Vol. II: *Tannisho*, 1962  
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Vol. VI: *Koso Wasan*, 1974                Vol. VII: *Shozomatsu Wasan*, 1980

Also recommended are two journals, *The Pure Land and Pacific World*, produced by the International Association of Shin Buddhist Studies and the Institute of Buddhist Studies, Berkeley, California, respectively, which contain many articles relating to Shin Buddhism.

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