

people we love, death brings separation and ultimately our own demise.

His realization, though, was that impermanence is neutral; the changes themselves are not necessarily good nor bad in and of themselves. The cause of suffering lies totally in ourselves, in our reactions to those changes and in our ignorance of the reality of impermanence. Since we are the cause of our own suffering, suffering can be overcome. The way to overcome that suffering is the Eightfold Path, the fourth aspect of the Four Noble Truths.

The Eightfold Path which encourages right understanding, thinking, speech, conduct, livelihood, endeavor, mindfulness, and meditation, is meant to provide us with a

new perspective of life. It promotes wisdom and compassion in our interactions with the world about us, and ultimately leads to finding happiness and meaning in our own lives.

The Buddha attained his awakening at the age of thirty-five, and for the next forty-five years, he shared his understanding of life with everyone he encountered. The truths he awakened to came from his own experience of life, not from any revelation from the heavens. As a result, there is no acknowledgment of gods. Buddhism is focused on this life and has no definitive view of creation nor afterlife. Heaven and hell, therefore, are conditions we create here and now and are not a reward or punishment after death. In its essence, therefore, Buddhism



does not fit into the normal definition of religion. There are no commandments nor beliefs its followers must hold to.

Simply stated, Buddhism is the encouragement of a way of life that enables us to discover the meaning of our birth as human beings and the true joy of living.

## Introduction to Shin Buddhism

Shin Buddhism or Jōdo Shinshū is a Mahāyāna Buddhist teaching that was established by Shinran Shōnin (1173–1263), a Buddhist priest in Japan. Its foundation is based on three *sūtras* (recorded sermons of Śākyamuni Buddha), the *Larger Sūtra of Immeasurable Life*, the *Smaller Sūtra of Immeasurable Life* (also referred to as the *Amida Sūtra*) and the *Meditation Sūtra*. These are the principle teachings of what is called Pure Land Buddhism.

The Pure Land tradition was born in India and expanded greatly in China, but did not develop into a separate denomination until the twelfth century in Japan with the appearance of Hōnen Shōnin (1133–1212), Shinran's teacher. Hōnen was a student at the Tendai monastery at Mt. Hiei in Kyoto. Dissatisfied with the traditional monastic path of climbing up the ladder to enlightenment—which made Buddhism inaccessible to most people—Hōnen chose the teaching of the *nenbutsu*, the recitation of *Namu Amida Butsu* (“I take refuge in Amida Buddha”). He left the monastery in order to share the teaching with the everyday, common people for whom traditional Buddhism was inaccessible.

Shinran shared a similar path. He entered the monastery at the age of nine, then spent twenty years in study of the Tendai teachings. The experience, however, left him empty and feeling far away from the awakening the Buddha described. He left the monastery in 1201, and joined the

Saṅgha established by Hōnen. In his teacher, he saw a totally different model of a Buddhist teacher, a person who considered himself first and foremost a *bonbu*, an ordinary person whose mind was clouded by ignorance and filled with self-centeredness, and exhibited total humility in all aspects of his life.

Through Hōnen and the teaching of the *nenbutsu*, Shinran discovered a path of Mahāyāna Buddhism open to him. He wrestled with the fact that the gaining of knowledge and practice during his two decades on Mt. Hiei had not made him a better person. In fact, that experience had left him more arrogant, feeling superior to those who studied and practiced less than he.

As a result, it left him further and further from the awakening he saw in the model of Śākyamuni Buddha. In Hōnen and in the teaching of *nenbutsu*, he realized that Buddhism is truly universal, and open to anyone who could come to an honest evaluation of himself as a being controlled by ego.

It was an awakening to the truth that he was a *bonbu*. In *Namu Amida Butsu*, he saw the vehicle that enabled him to see the truth about himself. *Namu* represented the ignorance that creates suffering for the “self” and for those around him, while *Amida Butsu* represented the truth extolled by Buddhism, the reality of life as described in the Four Noble Truths.

Pure Land Buddhism has often been incorrectly described as a theistic version of Buddhism, with Amida Buddha in the role of a god leading us to “sal-

vation” expressed as birth in the Pure Land. Shinran's understanding, however, was that Amida Buddha was not a mythical Buddha who promised salvation to anyone who repeated his name, but rather, a symbol for the Dharma itself.

Shin Buddhism, therefore, is a teaching which brings about a true understanding of the life of suffering the Buddha described and the ignorance which creates it. It is a path of Buddhism that shows that awakening is available to all beings. It is a path for those who are struggling to survive, who do not have the opportunities to live in monasteries and devote their lives to study and training, who cannot, through their own powers, polish their lives and climb the ladder towards enlightenment.

It addresses the concerns of all human beings and requires only a true and honest introspection of one's own limitations. That honest reflection, in Shinran's mind, was the first and essential step towards awakening and liberation.



# Higashi Honganji's Other Name

Anyone who visits Kyoto will, at some point, come across the name Higashi Honganji, whether on the map or while walking near Kyoto Station. However, few tourists—or even local residents—are aware that the temple has a second, official name: Shinshū Honbyō (真宗本廟). While this name literally means “The Principal Mausoleum of the True Pure Land Teaching,” the temple’s actual function and significance for the school’s followers is a bit more subtle than simply that of an important grave or a pilgrimage site.

The Chinese character *byō* (廟) originally stands for a shrine containing images of family ancestors. Indeed, the Founder’s Hall at Higashi Honganji was built to enshrine the image of the school’s founder, Shinran, and to this day, the Ōtani Denomination’s most important ceremonies and events are held before this image. However, the actual spot where Shinran’s remains are buried is located elsewhere in Kyoto—at the Ōtani Mausoleum in the east part of the city, near Maruyama Park.

Higashi Honganji, or Shinshū Honbyō, is in fact not supposed to be a physical mausoleum enshrining the body of Shinran, but a spiritual one housing his living teaching. The temple actually started out as a gathering place for Shinran’s disciples, in which they would remember the late teacher while continuing to listen and discuss the teaching he had left for them. It is this function that has always defined the temple and given it its special importance to the followers. At the center of the temple are the Founder’s Hall, which is dedicated to listening to the teaching, and Amida Hall, which is dedicated to honoring the teaching’s spiritual significance. These, together with the other buildings on the precincts, combine to create a place where Shinran’s legacy is not only evoked as a memory by his image, but also practiced as a constantly evolving reality.

