



聞・門 ———
Hearing and Gate

Free

Vol.1

— 2015 —
Summer



Goeidō 御影堂

Welcome to Higashi Honganji!

Higashi Honganji is the main temple of the Ōtani-ha branch of the Jōdo Shinshū denomination, commonly called Shin Buddhism, whose founder is Shinran (1173–1262). Thank you for coming to visit us today. The reason we have published this free paper is because we

would like you, visitors from all over the world, to get to know more about Buddhism in general, Shin Buddhism, and Higashi Honganji.

The title of this free paper *Mon*, is the Japanese reading of the Chinese character “門,” which means “gate” in English. *Mon* is also the Japanese

reading of another Chinese character, “聞,” which means “hearing”—hearing the Buddhist teaching.

We hope that this free paper can serve as an open gate for you to go through into the world of Buddhism.

Introduction to Buddhism

Buddhism is a way of life that was developed over 2,500 years ago in India. Since then, it has spread throughout Asia and into other parts of the world as well. Buddhism as it is practiced today has three major streams. Theravada (Teaching of the Elders) is said to be the oldest stream of Buddhism and can be found in

southern Asian countries like Sri Lanka and Thailand. Mahayana (Great Vehicle) is the Buddhism of northern Asian countries like China, Korea, Vietnam, and Japan. The third stream is Vajrayāna (Thunderbolt Vehicle), the Buddhism of Tibet.

Buddhism developed out of a wish held by the Buddha to overcome the

suffering he experienced in life. It was not his intention to establish a new religion. He did not establish churches. He did not build altars nor organize rituals. What he taught was based upon what he learned from others, but more importantly, from the experiences in his own life.

The Life of Śākyamuni Buddha

The Buddha was born as Siddhārtha Gautama, a prince in the kingdom of the Śākya clan located close to the border between present-day India and Nepal. Destined to be the future king, he was given all of the education and training befitting him, but also sheltered from the unpleasant experiences of life. He was so sheltered, in fact, that he knew nothing of such everyday experiences as illness, aging, and death until he was a young man.

Upon seeing illness for the first time, he asked, “Did the sick bring this upon themselves?” The reply that came was that all living things must endure illness. The same questioning arose regarding aging and death. He asked himself, “Why were we born into human life if only to suffer from one painful experience to the next?”

He then encountered a monk with a peaceful and fulfilled countenance, who was walking the spiritual path, searching for answers to the mysteries of life. In this monk he saw his future. Rather than succeed his father as king, he found a more important quest, of finding a way to end suffering.

At age twenty-nine, he left the palace, leaving behind his wife, son, parents, and all the status and comforts of royalty, and embarked on his spiritual journey. He learned from the sages, the wise men of the forests, and eventually joined a group of five monks engaged in severe ascetic practice. Through subjecting himself to all types of austerities, including fasting and meditation, Gautama continued his search for spiritual insight.

After six years, he was reduced to flesh and bone, on the verge of death. Reflecting on his life to that point, he realized that he had been living at the two extremes and that neither was conducive to understanding the meaning of life. It is here that he discovered the Middle Path, avoiding the extremes of luxury and selfrenunciation.

With clarity of thought, he sat under what was to become known as the Bodhi tree to reflect on true nature of life. It was through this period of meditation that Gautama watched a countless number of causes and conditions dependently arising every moment to constitute human life. He realized that it was our ignorance that became the

causes and conditions leading to human suffering. Gautama was awakened to the truth—the Dharma.

In order to share his awakening and save people from their suffering, Gautama first encountered the five monks with whom he previously practiced. They took refuge in Gautama’s teaching and became his disciples. At this point, the Three Treasures were established—the Buddha (the person who teaches the Dharma), the Dharma (the truth that has become the teaching), and the Saṅgha (the community of people who follow the teaching). The Buddha also became known by the reverential title Śākyamuni (the sage of the Śākya clan).



The Dharma - The Teaching



The content of that awakening was initially expressed in Śākyamuni Buddha’s first teaching in which he explained the Four Noble Truths:

Life is full of suffering.
There are causes to that suffering.
Such suffering can be overcome.
The Eightfold Path is the way to end suffering.

The original word for suffering is *dukkha*, often expressed as a wheel with its axle out of kilter. The wheel, a metaphor for our lives, does not turn smoothly because its essence is off-

center. Before his awakening, we can presume that the Buddha saw life as we do, that any experiences of suffering were the result of external forces. He lists the principal causes of suffering as birth, illness, aging, and death.

He saw that the one undeniable truth is that life is impermanent, and that it is our resistance to the transient nature of life that brings about suffering. No matter how hard we try to hold on to our health, we become ill; no matter how hard we try to hold on to our youth, we grow old; no matter how hard we try to hold on to