

# The True and Real World of Salvation

by Eiken Kobai

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## **Introduction (by Paul Roberts)**

If you were asked what the biggest problem in your life is, what would you say?

Of course, with more than six billion people on the planet, there are lots of answers to that question. But they all boil down into a small and universal number of categories.

In many parts of the world, people have problems getting the basics of life: clean water, enough food, reliable shelter, decent health care. People have emotional problems – in their own minds – in their family lives. Tribal, ethnic and religious groups don't get along – and often slaughter one another brutally. And people in prosperous, stable societies suffer from sadness, anger and fear – from loneliness and confusion – from a sense of existential despair.

But the one we call the Buddha Shakyamuni – a man who lived 2500 years ago and became fully and finally enlightened – had a bigger understanding. It was an understanding that both transcended and included the experience of everyone on the planet, alive back then and alive today, too.

Shakyamuni Buddha, speaking from a place of enlightened omniscience that is impossible for us to fully comprehend, declared that our biggest problem is that we were each and all stuck in a terrible cycle of repeated birth, life, suffering and death.

Yes, the problems that you have are real and important. But as Shakyamuni Buddha explained, we are all seeing our lives from an ant's eye view. We think that our biggest problem is that we are suffering from THIS particular issue in THIS particular life. But (Shakyamuni explained gently but firmly), this life is brief, and at some point will be over. And then we will awaken to another life, in another form, and the cycle will start over again.

We will no longer even remember this life, and its problems, after we close our eyes in this body for the last time. And in the next life, it will be the same thing: birth, life, suffering and death.

Over and over, endlessly, for countless ages, moving blindly from life to life, from suffering to suffering, from death to death – strapped like prisoners on a terrible wheel that never stops turning, and never releases us into a full and final experience of freedom.

THIS, Shakyamuni Buddha said, is the crux of our problem – the human condition – and indeed the condition of ALL sentient beings, human and non-human alike. It is – once seen clearly – both terrible and pitiable.

Whatever your particular PERSONAL problems might be, in this body, in this life – THAT (Shakyamuni said) is your REAL problem.

Therefore, the MOST important question you might ask yourself, on your own behalf, and on behalf of us all, is this: How can I SOLVE this problem of being strapped to the wheel of birth and death, of being blindly born into one life after another, of suffering in all the ways that sentient beings suffer, and finally dying once again – only to repeat the cycle?

Everything Shakyamuni did, in his earthly life here 2500 years ago, in his role as “The Buddha”, the Enlightened One, was geared towards helping people like you and me answer this question. Everything He said and did was purposefully said and done to help us get free of the terrible cycle of birth and death, and to finally become fully enlightened ourselves, True Buddhas, at last.

So here is the very first – and the most important – step on the journey towards enlightenment: AWAKEN YOUR ASPIRATION – awaken your deep and perhaps previously hidden desire – to become enlightened just as Shakyamuni Buddha became enlightened. Until that happens – until you ALLOW yourself to feel your deep yearning to escape our common ignorance and darkness, nothing that Shakyamuni Buddha says will make much sense to you.

Once you’ve awakened your aspiration for enlightenment, you are faced with a cornucopia of potential directions, philosophies and teachings. Although there are literally thousands of such directions, both within Buddhism and without, they all boil down to two. There are – in essence – only two distinct pathways to answer this question about how to escape the cycle of birth and death, and finally become a fully enlightened being. Of course, Shakyamuni Buddha taught both pathways – with many, many variants to suit the temperaments and capacities of different people.

What are these two ESSENTIAL pathways?

The first is the path of self-power. It is the path of doing some sort of discipline, wisdom and practice that, step by step, and life by life, will enable a person to climb the mountain of enlightenment. This is the kind of Buddhism that most people are familiar with. It’s the path that depends on PRACTICE – and that tells people that PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT...literally. It is a heroic path, for heroic people, of heroic dedication and unswerving commitment.

The second is the path of OTHER-power. It is the path for those of us who are not heroic – who simply don’t have the capacity, who are too ignorant, too distracted, too caught up in their day to day dramas. It is the path for those of us who are – more often than we’d like to admit – just plain foolish. It is the path for those of us who recognize that we have evil tendencies that simply cannot be eradicated, no matter what kind of practice we might attempt.

In this path of OTHER-Power, we depend on someone or something entirely outside of our finite, limited selves to attain our aspiration for Buddhahood. And, because of Shakyamuni Buddha’s explanation one day at a place called Vulture Peak, we know

WHAT that something else is. We know WHAT we can depend on – and WHO we can depend on. For it was there on Vulture Peak that Shakyamuni Buddha taught us about the person and work of ANOTHER Buddha – a transcendental Buddha named Amida.

It was on Vulture Peak that Shakyamuni Buddha first explained that for those who cannot follow the discipline, wisdom and practices of the path of self-power – there IS another way to complete the journey of birth and death through countless lives. There IS another way to break the karmic bondage that has caused us to suffer. There IS another way to attain the perfection that only a Buddha knows.

Master Shinran became the ultimate teacher of this other way – this way of OTHER-power. He taught people – plain people as well as educated people – how to experience the blessed state of SHINJIN – the state of KNOWING, in THIS life, that we would become Buddhas immediately after this life is over, simply by depending on the person and work of this transcendental Buddha named Amida.

This state of KNOWING – this diamond like FAITH that is the core of SHINJIN – is not something we can work up. Rather it is something given to us by Amida Buddha himself. It is given, freely and fully, to the person who truly YEARNS for complete liberation, and yet knows he (or she) cannot achieve it – and then comes to entrust himself completely and utterly to Amida Buddha, who has vowed to save us all, and is fulfilling his vow right up until this very moment in which you are reading these words.

You may not understand this yet – but in that very FIRST moment that a person so entrusts himself to Amida Buddha, he (or she) is sealed for birth in Amida's own Pure Land at the end of this life. And as soon as birth in the Pure Land occurs, the person IMMEDIATELY completes his (or her) journey, and becomes a True Buddha at long last.

This was the Dharma message of Master Shinran. This was the Dharma message of his successor, Master Rennyo. And today, there are still some who are preach and teach the very same Dharma message – some clerics, some scholars, and some lay people as well.

Eiken Kobai Sensei is one of those scholars. He is a TRUE teacher of Shinran's True Teaching of the Pure Land Way – the way of entrusting oneself and one's karmic destiny ENTIRELY, without even a SHRED of doubt – to Amida Buddha and to His promise to save us from the terrible suffering that comes from continual rebirth in a non-Buddha state.

If you are hungry – yearning for enlightenment – trying to find a way to end your own sorrow and suffering – looking to become the kind of enlightened being that can lead others to the end of suffering at last – then please do read Eiken Kobai Sensei's books. Listen closely to him as he teaches the TRUE teaching of Master Shinran, and also as he deconstructs the FALSE teachings that have often arisen over the centuries that have confused and obscured the True Teaching needlessly.

Why do I recommend Eiken Kobai Sensei's English language books? Because they are the BEST doorway I know into understanding the heart and mind of Master Shinran, and the true intent of Shakyamuni Buddha in coming into the world – and they are all available FREELY online.

Personally, I am grateful beyond any words I could write that I found his written works online. And I am more grateful still that we have had a profound karmic connection, and that he has become my own Dharma mentor. The clarity of Eiken's writing, and his own FAITHFULNESS to our primal teacher Shinran, allowed me to find true SHINJIN when I was drowning in a pool of inexpressible sorrow. Because of Eiken's influence in my life, I have become established on a rock of FAITH that has never wavered through the ups and downs of daily living – and I KNOW that this is, indeed, my last life as a non-Buddha.

I commend him personally, and the words he writes, without reservation to ANYONE who aspires for enlightenment. All you need to do is open your mind, open your heart, and listen deeply. Amida Buddha will do the rest to bring you to a state of SALVATION IN THE PRESENT, where you know that you know that this is your last lifetime as a suffering and ignorant being – and then BUDDHAHOOD IN THE LIFE TO COME.

Gassho,

Paul Roberts

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## Foreword

We now live in the 21st century.

The great image of the Buddha carved into the sandstone cliffs of Bamiyan in Afghanistan was destroyed by the Taliban during March of the first year of this century. And just half a year after that, on September 11, 2001, the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York City were destroyed, almost as if signaling that this will be a most terrible century.

The 20th century was a time during which our material culture developed at an astonishing rate because the peoples of our world sought a happier life. And yet, because of ruinous world wars unprecedented in history that have taken place twice, it was also a most calamitous century.

The environment has become an acute problem because of the destruction of nature, particularly during the latter part of the 20th century. We have the problems of indiscriminate killings, murdering people for their insurance, mistreatment of children, bullying among school children,... the list can go on and on, all pointing to the fact that we as a society have lost our hearts.

There are also the problems of terminal care, and dying peacefully and with dignity. Because of the great advances in the life sciences, we now have problems regarding the ethics of prolonging life and stem-cell research.

The ideal of a materialist culture has collapsed because of these problems, and at least in Japan, the 21st century is considered to be a period of the heart – when what was lacking in the 20th century must be brought back into our culture. In Japan, there is now a slight regret for having hidden within the shadow of a materialist culture, and I believe this is a period during which we must turn our eyes to religion – true religion – in order for true happiness to be experienced by the peoples of the world.

Religions can be defined in many different ways. And because there are so many religions, it can also be said that there are many ways of expressing what religion is. I believe true religion is what confers peace and tranquility, and teaches us how to live correctly. Further, I believe the teaching of Jodo-Shinshu that the Venerable Master Shinran (1173-1263 CE) taught is a true religion that combines both these aspects.

I was born the eldest son of the resident minister of a Jodo-Shinshu temple. In keeping with Japanese custom I was groomed to succeed my father from the time I was a child and for that reason, the members of my father's temple and people in the neighborhood treated me very carefully. Although I was very grateful for such consideration, because I had absolutely no idea about the world of *shinjin*, I was then not at all happy about my future. In fact, I was very uneasy about it.

I entered the university maintained by the denomination with which my family temple is associated (Ryukoku University), studied the doctrines of Jodo-Shinshu and discussed my lack of understanding with many people, but could not seem to come to any resolution.

During this time when my obligation to follow the path of a resident minister weighed heaviest in my heart, I came across a passage in the “Hymn of True *Shinjin*” (*Shoshinge*) which I had chanted since childhood:

*Shakyamuni appeared in this world  
Solely to teach Amida’s ocean-like Primal Vow;  
Because we are evil beings in a world of five defilements,  
We should entrust ourselves to Amida’s words of truth.*

Although I had chanted this passage many, many times in the past, only then did I realize “evil beings in a world of five defilements,” is me! That was over forty years ago. Since then my admiration and appreciation of the Jodo-Shinshu teaching has only continued to increase. My long period of anxiety was completely settled and I now boast about being a Jodo-Shinshu minister.

I am grateful to be asked by the Tankyusha Publishing Company to write this booklet. If it is of even the slightest cause for others to experience the truly wonderful world of salvation that the Venerable Master taught, I can ask for nothing more.

## Chapter One. The Venerable Master's Life

The Venerable Master Shinran (hereafter Venerable Master) was born near the capital city of Kyoto during 1173 CE (Joan 3). This was during the latter part of what is referred to as the Heian Period (794-1192 CE). His father was Hino Arinori, a member of the Hino family, a branch of the Fujiwara clan.

According to tradition, the Venerable Master was born on the 1st day of the 4th lunar month, which is May 21st according to our modern calendar.

The Venerable Master lost both parents as a child, and was initiated as a monk during the spring of 1181 CE, when he was nine years of age. He climbed Mt. Hiei, then the center of Buddhist study and practice, and concentrated on Buddhist practice.

Enryaku Temple on Mt. Hiei is the main temple of the Tendai Buddhist denomination established by Saicho(767-822 CE). The Tendai denomination is primarily focused on performing religious practice, the goal of which is to discard all selfish and willful thoughts (referred to as *bonno*) through “self-centered effort” (*jiriki*).

The Venerable Master spent twenty years on Mt. Hiei, single-mindedly devoting himself to the Tendai teaching. Although he must have practiced to a degree beyond the capability of most, because he was so severe with himself, he did not feel his practice was doing any good.

The Venerable Master was filled with anguish because he could not reach a state of *satori* enlightenment which would remove his selfish and willful thoughts. This is not to say that the Venerable Master did not strive earnestly enough, or that he failed in his practice. Rather, it points to how sincere he was, and how deeply he delved into himself as a human being.

During the year 1201 CE, when he was 29 years of age, after performing the most difficult of religious practices on Mt. Hiei, the Venerable Master reached an impasse. He felt he could not continue following the Tendai teaching any further, and determined to seek the way to follow by secluding himself for a hundred days in a temple named Rokkakudo. The Venerable Master is said to have decided to seclude himself there because Rokkakudo was established by Shotoku *Taishi* (574-522 CE), and that the object of worship in that temple was Kusekannon *Bosatsu*. The Venerable Master venerated Shotoku *Taishi*, who was considered to be the “Japanese Buddha” and was the form that Kusekannon *Bosatsu* took in order to appear in this world.

At dawn of the 95th day of the Venerable Master's seclusion, he received a suggestion from Shotoku *Taishi* in the form of a dream. Because of that suggestion, the Venerable Master went to see Master Honen (1133-1212 CE) who then had a hermitage in the Yoshimizu area of Kyoto.



The Venerable Master listened earnestly to Master Honen's Dharma Talks and became his disciple. He abandoned the way of "self-centered effort" that he had followed until then, and began following the way of "Buddha-centered effort" (*tariki*). In the Chapter on Transformed Land of his "Teaching, Practice, *Shinjin*, and Realization" (*Kyogyoshinsho*), the Venerable Master wrote:

*I, Gutoku Shinran, disciple of Shakyamuni, discarded sundry practices and took refuge in the Primal Vow during the first year of the Kennin era (the metal/cock year, 1201 CE).*

In other words, the Venerable Master stated that during the year 1201 CE, when he was 29 years of age, this ignorant Shinran who is unable to follow any religious practice, abandoned the way of "self-centered effort" in which religious practices are performed in order to attain Enlightenment and accepted the Nembutsu teaching which relies on Amida Buddha's Primal Vow.

The Venerable Master entered Amida Buddha's world of salvation because of this encounter with Master Honen. There are, unfortunately many misunderstandings of the Jodo-Shinshu teaching as being salvation that takes place after leaving this world, which implies that we become Enlightened only after we die. This is absolutely not correct. The salvation we experience is while we are still in this world – while still alive.

I frequently hear people say they cannot understand a Pure Land that they can neither go to nor see during life, and that the only time we will be able to determine whether the Pure Land does or does not exist is after we die. That, however, is absolutely not the case.

Both the Venerable Master and Master Rennyo (1415-1499 CE, the 8th Spiritual Leader of the Hongwanji) positively state that the certainty of birth in the Pure Land is experienced in the present. They could say that only because they were both within the protective embrace of the Primal Vow while alive.

There are many places in the Venerable Master's voluminous writings in which we can determine how important he considered his coming in contact with Master Honen was. I believe one example is his Japanese poem (*Wasan*) included in "Hymns of the Eminent Monks" (*Koso Wasan*):

*Countless kalpas and innumerable lives passed  
Without knowing the strong cause for being liberated;  
Were it not for my teacher Honen,  
My present life would also have passed in vain.*

This expresses the Venerable Master's awareness that he had been deluded for a long time because of his self-centeredness. He was unable to escape suffering in the world of delusion, and accumulated nothing but evil *karma* as a result of being born, dying, and then being born again. Only because of Master Honen did he finally come in contact with the world of Amida Buddha's salvation. If he had not met Master Honen – if

he had not heard about the world of the Nembutsu – he would not have been able to awaken to birth in the Pure Land. He would have been destined to continue wandering in the world of delusion. What the Venerable Master spoke of was absolutely not something that happened after he died. I believe the Venerable Master’s words above overflow with joy at knowing he was saved in his present life.

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At any rate, that is how, when the Venerable Master was 29 years of age, he became Master Honen's disciple and entered the world of "Buddha-centered power." He referred to this being "(in the group of) those guaranteed to be born (in the Pure Land) in this present life" (*gensho ni shojoju no kurai ni ju suru*). Dwelling in this group refers to being included among those who birth in the Pure Land and complete Enlightenment there is absolutely guaranteed.

Unfortunately, however, the base passions that result from our self-centeredness will never disappear as long as we live in this present world. That's why, although we do not attain complete Enlightenment in this world, we are guaranteed to become a Buddha (*nyorai*, "thus come (from thusness)"). Being in this group is the benefit we receive while still in this world.

An example of how the Venerable Master expressed his great joy at constantly being within the warm embrace of the power of Amida Buddha's Primal Vow is found in the Chapter on Transformed Land of his "Teaching, Practice, *Shinjin*, and Realization":

*How joyous I am, my heart and mind being rooted in the Buddha-ground of the Universal Vow, and my thoughts and feelings flowing within the Dharma-ocean which is beyond comprehension!*

That is how the Venerable Master expressed the joy of being within the protective embrace of Amida Buddha's Primal Vow. He referred to his feeling then as receiving the "mind of great joy and rejoicing."

In contrast, a person who gained as much political and secular power as anyone in the history of Japan, Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536-1598 CE), left the following "death poem":

*Falling like dew  
And scattering like the mist,  
My body, my life... all...  
Are like a dream within a dream.*

In other words, regardless of how much political and secular power Toyotomi Hideyoshi had accumulated in this world, a time came when he felt he had lost it all.

The joy of *shinjin* that we receive from the Buddha, however, never changes, nor will ever be lost, regardless of when or how, and even when death approaches.

The Venerable Master's life from the time he was nine years of age until he was 29, was a life of seeking a way of salvation for himself. After that age, however, his life became one of transmitting the salvation that he experienced to others.

The Venerable Master quickly gained Master Honen's trust. Only four years after becoming Master Honen's disciple, during 1205 CE when he was 33 years of age, the Venerable Master was given permission to make a copy of Master Honen's "Collection of Selected Passages on the Nembutsu of the Primal Vow" (*Senjaku Hongan Nembutsu-shu*). It is said that among Master Honen's many disciples (over 380 persons), only a select few were granted this privilege.

Because Master Honen's teaching of the Nembutsu was for those unable to perform difficult religious practices or engage in difficult studies, it attracted followers from many classes of people. They included the nobility, warriors, merchants, and farmers, of course, but they also included thieves and prostitutes.

Master Honen taught that performing difficult religious practices and engaging in profound study were not necessary, and that only the Nembutsu could be relied upon. This made the teaching of Buddha-dharma available to everyone. That was why Master Honen attracted such a large following. Unfortunately, his popularity caused those who followed the "self-centered effort" teachings of Buddha-dharma to become jealous, and they began petitioning the Imperial Court to prohibit Master Honen's teaching. It was during such a time that the Venerable Master joined Master Honen in Kyoto.

Emperor Gotoba began a pilgrimage to Kumano on the 9th day of the 12th lunar month of 1206 CE (Ken-ei 1). During his absence, two of his ladies-in-waiting (traditionally said to be named Matsumushi and Suzumushi) were very moved by Dharma Talks given by two of Master Honen's disciples named Juren-*bo* and Anraku-*bo*. They determined to quit their positions at the Imperial Court and become nuns. This enraged the Emperor and during the 2nd lunar month of 1207 CE (Jogen 1), he prohibited the Nembutsu teaching.

Juren-*bo* and Anraku-*bo* were sentenced to death, and Master Honen and several of his disciples, including the Venerable Master, were exiled. Master Honen was then 75 years of age. His place of exile was Tosa Province on the island of Shikoku (though other indications point to Sanuki Province on that island as his place of exile). He was given the criminal name of Fujii Motohiko.

The Venerable Master was 35 years of age when he was exiled. His place of exile was Echigo Province (modern Niigata Prefecture), and he was given the criminal name of Fujii Yoshizane.

Although receiving the harsh punishment of exile, the Venerable Master made the best of it. According to the “Honorable Biography” (*Godensho*) written by his great-grandson, Master Kakunyo, this is how the Venerable Master felt about his exile:

*If I had not been banished (from the capital of Kyoto), I would never have been able to (teach the Nembutsu) to the peoples of that remote area. All this was solely due to Master Honen's teaching.*

In other words, it was only because he was forced into exile that the Venerable Master was able to transmit the Nembutsu teaching to people in Echigo Province. From this, I believe we can see the Venerable Master's mind and heart that wished nothing other than sharing his understanding of the Nembutsu with as many persons as possible. That was why he was able to accept his exile with such great joy.

After being exiled, the Venerable Master began referring to himself as “neither monk nor layperson” (*hiso hizoku*). He referred to himself of “not monk” because his ordination as a monk was revoked and he was treated as a criminal. But being stripped of his position as a monk did not mean he could not remain a follower of the Buddhist teaching. Because of his experience in the world of salvation, the Venerable Master could not consider himself to be an ordinary follower. That was why he also referred to himself as “non-layperson.”

The Venerable Master also referred to himself as “*Gutoku*.” The *gu* character of *gutoku* means “ignorant.” The *toku* character means “short-haired,” and refers to a hair style that consists of not shaving off all his hair as was the practice for monks, nor growing his hair long as is the practice of laypersons. It also implies that he was considered a criminal. Thus the name “Gutoku” that he took for himself means something like “ignorant short-haired one,” which can be considered to be how, through self-reflection, he came to regard himself.

There are differences of opinion among scholars regarding when the Venerable Master married. Some say it was while he was exiled in Echigo Province. Others say it was in Kyoto after becoming Master Honen's disciple and entering the way of “Buddha-centered power.” There is little possibility at present of determining which of these views is correct, but there is little doubt that the Venerable Master married *Esshin-ni* (1182 – approx. 1270 CE) while he was in Echigo Province. During that time, marriage by a monk was prohibited and severely punished.

I believe considering why the Venerable Master married is very important in understanding his teaching. Two years after discarding the way of “self-centered effort,” when he was 31, during 1203 CE (Kennin 3), the Venerable Master received the following revelation from Kusekannon Bosatsu while secluded in Rokkaku Temple:

*Oh Shinran, if from the distant past you were so destined, I will transform myself into a beautiful woman and become one with you. I will spend my entire life devoted to you,*

*and when the time for you to leave this world arrives, I will lead you to birth in the Pure Land.*

This is referred to as “Revelation of a (monk’s clandestine romance) at Rokkaku Temple” (*Rokkakudo nyobon no mukoku*).

Some scholars believe this revelation is part of the previously-mentioned revelation that the Venerable Master received when he was 29 years of age. I believe, however, that at that age the Venerable Master was most concerned about the problem of his personal salvation – whether to follow the Path of Sages using “self-centered effort” or following the Pure Land Path of “Buddha-centered power” – and that the problem of marriage was not uppermost in his mind.

I further believe that when the Venerable Master was 31 years of age and had resolved the problem of his salvation, the problem of whether he could or could not follow the path of “Buddha-centered power” while married was something that he had to consider. That’s why I believe the “Revelation of a (monk’s clandestine romance) at Rokkaku Temple” was what led the Venerable Master to marry.

Master Honen was 43 years of age when he entered the path of “Buddha-centered power.” This is what he said after spending his entire life as a monk without marrying:

*Select a life-style that allows you to recite the Nembutsu. If the life-style you select is an impediment to reciting the Nembutsu, then give up that life. (In other words,) if you are unable to recite the Nembutsu while a monk, then give up that life and marry. If you are unable to recite the Nembutsu while married, then become a monk...*

In other words, Master Honen recommended living in a way that allows us to recite the Nembutsu (follow a spiritual life). If anything prevents us from doing so, then we should stop doing it. That is, if we are unable to recite the Nembutsu while remaining single, then we should marry. If we are unable to recite the Nembutsu while married, then we should return to being single.

Although Master Honen personally remained single all his life, he did not criticize the institution of marriage. The Venerable Master determined to marry publicly because of that position. And because there are no distinctions between monks and layperson in this regard, the Venerable Master’s marriage implies that Amida Buddha saves everyone impartially.

Because the Venerable Master married as a result of a revelation by Kusekannon *Bosatsu*, he very likely considered his wife *Esshin-ni* to be the transformed body of Kannon *Bosatsu* (the body that Kannon *Bosatsu* took to appear in this world). Conversely, *Esshin-ni* considered the Venerable Master to be the transformed body of Kannon *Bosatsu* in this world. This is evident in letters that she wrote to their youngest daughter *Kakushin-ni* (1224-1283CE) following the Venerable Master’s passing. These letters are collectively referred to as “*Esshin-ni’s Letters*” (*Esshin-ni Shosoku*). In one of

those letters, Esshin-*ni* wrote that while they were residing in the village of Shimotsuma in Hitachi Province (Sakai in Ibaraki Prefecture today), she dreamed that the Venerable Master was the incarnation of Kannon *Bosatsu*. She did not inform the Venerable Master about that dream but that is how she seems to have considered him from then on.

At any rate, the Venerable Master and his wife revered each other as embodiments of Kannon *Bosatsu* in this world. That's why I believe theirs must be considered an ideal marriage. Another very impressive comment in another of "Esshin-*ni*'s Letters" is her statement that regardless of the way in the Venerable Master left this world, there is absolutely no doubt that he was "born in the Pure Land" (*ojo*). This letter was written in response to a letter from Kakushin-*ni* in which the particulars of how the Venerable Master left this world was described. Because Kakushin-*ni*'s letter does not remain today, we can only speculate that bright lights did not flash, nor music heard (as is often the case in describing the deaths of outstanding Buddhist monks), or whether or not the Venerable Master suffered even a little in deathbed. But in response to Kakushin-*ni*'s letter, Esshin-*ni* was adamant in telling her daughter that regardless of the Venerable Master's last moments, there was no doubt that he was born in the Pure Land. She obviously had no doubt that in his everyday life, the Venerable Master spent his days absolutely confident that his birth in the Pure Land was assured because his *shinjin* was settled. This is referred to as being in "(the group of) those guaranteed to be born (in the Pure Land) from which there is no retrogression" (*shojoju futaiten*). I believe this is indeed a wonderful thing.

When the Venerable Master was 39 years of age – on the 17th day of the 11th lunar month during the year 1211 CE (Kenryaku 1), five years after being exiled -he and Master Honen were pardoned. I believe the Venerable Master wished to return to Kyoto as soon as possible and be reunited with his revered teacher, Master Honen, and planned to do so soon after the new year began and the deep snows of Echigo Province had melted.

Master Honen had already returned to Kyoto by then. It is said that he had found a place to stay on the second floor of Katsuo Temple in Settsu by the 8th day of the 12th lunar month of the year he was pardoned. Unfortunately, he passed away on the 25th day of the 1st lunar month of 1212 CE (Kenryaku 2).

The Venerable Master remained in Echigo Province after learning of Master Honen's passing. About the year 1214 CE (Kempo 2), however, when he was 42 years of age, the Venerable Master decided to move to the then frontier area of the Kanto (general area around modern Tokyo).

In the Kanto area, he made the town of Inada (in modern Ibaraki Prefecture) his headquarters, and began spreading the Nembutsu teaching.

The Venerable Master spent some twenty years in the Kanto area, during which time many disciples and followers gathered around him. About eighty of his direct disciples

were said to have been formally initiated as monks. The followers of his direct disciples were said to number in the tens of thousands.

Many stories are told about the Venerable Master while he was in the Kanto area. Among them is the story of Bennen (later *Myoho-bo*) of Mt. Inada. Bennen was a mountain ascetic who became jealous of the following that was gathering around the Venerable Master, and determined to kill him. He forced his way into the Venerable Master's hut in Inada. The moment Bennen saw the Venerable Master's serene and composed attitude, however, he dropped his weapons and became the Venerable Master's disciple.

The following is a poem that *Myoho-bo* (the former Bennen) is said to have composed on Mt. Itajiki:

*The mountains are the same,  
And the roads are  
just as they were in the past.  
All that has changed  
Is my heart...*

After returning to Mt. Itajiki where he had formerly practiced asceticism, *Myoho-bo* realized with a start that nothing had changed – neither the mountains nor the roads – and yet everything had changed because of the change in his heart. Although he had harbored thoughts of killing the Venerable Master, now that he was the Venerable Master's disciple and able to take joy in basking in the light of Amida Buddha's Primal Vow, he was no longer the same Bennen. That was why he changed his name to *Myoho-bo*.

Although there are many other stories of dramatic conversions to his teaching, in Article Six of "Notes Lamenting Differences" (*Tannisho*), the Venerable Master is quoted as saying:

*I do not have even a single disciple. Perhaps I might say they are my disciples if they recite the Nembutsu through my personal efforts. But how preposterous it is to refer to others as "my disciples" when they say the Nembutsu because they have personally experienced the power of Amida Buddha's Primal Vow!*

Buddha's disciples. He considered those who followed him to be "fellow followers" (*ondobo*) who "follow the same path" (*ondogyo*).

The Venerable Master wrote many works, but he is considered to have begun writing his major work, "Teaching, Practice, Shinjin, and Attainment" about the year 1224 CE (Gennin 1) when he was living in the Kanto area. He was then 52 years of age.

About the year 1232 CE (Joui 1), when the Venerable Master was approximately 60 years of age, he returned to his hometown of Kyoto. That was where he wrote the



majority of his works, and from where he wrote many letters to his followers who remained in the Kanto area.

Among the unfortunate things that happened to the Venerable Master after returning to Kyoto was having to disown his eldest son Zenran (1209 – approx. 1292 CE). About twenty years after the Venerable Master left the Kanto area (when he was about 80 years of age), the number of people who misunderstood what he had taught began to increase. Because he was too old to travel back to the Kanto area to correct those misunderstandings, the Venerable Master asked his eldest son Zenran to take his place in teaching them correctly. Unfortunately, Zenran found that task extremely difficult. Not only that, it appears that Zenran began taking the side of those who misunderstood the Venerable Master's teaching, and personally began teaching what is called "secretly transmitted mistaken doctrine" (*mitsuden igi*).

Zenran lied to the Venerable Master's followers in the Kanto area and said that the Venerable Master taught him (Zenran) the truth in secret late at night when no one else was around. That was the mistaken teaching that he spread. It is impossible to determine at this time just what that mistaken teaching was. In a letter dated the 29th day of the 5th lunar month of 1256 CE (the Venerable Master was 84 years of age) that the Venerable Master sent to Zenran, however, the Venerable Master wrote that he was cutting all ties with Zenran because of the lies that Zenran told the Venerable Master's followers in the Kanto area.

We can sense the deep sorrow that the Venerable Master must have felt at having to cut ties with his own flesh and blood. It would have been different if the misunderstanding was about some other matter, but when it came to the Nembutsu, he could not look on indifferently.

After writing the letter disowning Zenran, the Venerable Master wrote many other works explaining the Nembutsu.

On the 28th day of the 11th lunar month (January 16th of our modern calendar) during the year 1263 CE, the Venerable Master passed away in Kyoto, surrounded by his younger brother Jinyu-*shi*, youngest daughter Kakushin-*ni*, and his son Masukata Nyudo.

According to the work "Notes on Correcting Errors" (*Gaijasho*) written by the Venerable Master Shinran's great-grandson, Master Kakunyo, the poem that the Venerable Master wrote on the eve of his passing (referred to as a *jisei*), is:

*When my eyes are closed (forever),  
Please offer (my body)  
To nourish the fish in Kamo River.*

In other words, the Venerable Master expressed his wish to help other sentient beings even after death.

Further, a work titled *Hanazono Bunko*, published during 1847 to commemorate the 650th year of the Regent Kujo Kanezane's passing, contains the following passage titled "Honorable Writing on the End (of the Venerable Master's) Life" (*Gorinmatsu-no-gosho*):

*Though I now go to the Pure Land of Peace,  
Like the waves of Waka-no-ura Bay,  
I will return again and again.  
When you rejoice alone in the sacred teaching,  
Consider that there are actually two.  
When there are two who rejoice,  
Consider that there are actually three...  
And that third will be Shinran.*

In other words, although I (Shinran) have become aged and am now allowed to be born in the Pure Land of Peace and Tranquility (Amida Buddha's world of Enlightenment), I will not remain there. Rather, I will return to this world again and again, doing all that I can to bring even one more person to the awareness of the precious Nembutsu teaching. (In Jodo-Shinshu doctrinal terms, returning from the Pure Land to help those who remain in this world of delusion (this *shaba* world), is referred to as "aspect of returning from the Pure Land" (*genso*).)

The Venerable Master Shinran's entire life was lived seeking truth and transmitting that truth to even one more person. I believe his sole concern was the happiness of all.

## Chapter Two: The Venerable Master's Teaching of the World of Salvation

As already mentioned, I believe the world that the Venerable Master Shinran urged us to turn to is the true and real world of salvation.

If I were asked what I base this opinion on, I can only reply that it is the teaching that saved me.

The Shinshu scholar Akegarasu Haya once wrote:

*Though there are billions of mothers  
For billions of people,  
No mother surpasses  
That mother of mine...*

believe what Akegarasu wished to say is that while there are countless mothers in this world – many who are truly wonderful – for me (Akegarasu), no mother surpasses the one who gave birth to, and raised me.

The same is true of religions. We do not determine to follow a religion after logically studying various religions and determining which is best. Rather, we follow the religion that has truly saved us. That is the most important criteria in determining a religion to follow.

I believe that was the case with both Master Honen and the Venerable Master Shinran, and is also the case with those who take their religion seriously.

In Chapter One, I briefly highlighted the Venerable Master's life and teaching. In this part, I will explain the following important aspects of his teaching:

- Salvation based on "Buddha-centered power"
- Salvation "while in this world"
- Salvation of the "evil person"

### Salvation Based On "Buddha-centered Power"

Buddha-dharma is a teaching founded by Gotama Siddhartha, who was born a prince in the Shakya clan in ancient India some 2500 years ago.

Gotama Siddhartha sought a way of release from human suffering. After much experimentation he came to realize that the cause of his suffering was his ego-centered attachment. In other words, the source of his suffering was attachment to his base passions. With this awakening, he became the *Buddha*, the "enlightened one."

From that time on, the Buddha's teaching was transmitted to many different countries, where it adapted to the culture and differences of the people living there. Regardless of how many different countries to which the Buddha's teaching was transmitted, however, it did not lose its basic nature.

Buddha-dharma is considered to have been introduced into Japan during 538 CE (552 CE, according to another theory), by way of China and the Korean Peninsula. Later, Japanese Buddha-dharma divided into two traditions:

- the “self-centered effort” (*jiriki*) tradition in which each individual performs religious practices to attain personal enlightenment, and
- the “Buddha-centered power” (*tarikī*) tradition in which enlightenment is received by relying on the power of Amida Buddha's Primal Vow. As recounted in Chapter One, this is the way in which the Venerable Master became enlightened.

During the twenty years from the age of nine to the age of twenty-nine, the Venerable Master spent all his time and effort performing religious practices that would cut off the base passions that he thought prevented him from becoming enlightened. The purpose of those practices was to cut off the three poisons of greed, anger, and stupidity.

The more the Venerable Master persisted in his practice, however, the more he became aware of the self in which such base passions were not only not reduced, but which actually increased. This does not mean that he was not dedicated to his practice. Rather, it points to the fact that the Venerable Master was so conscientious and looked so deeply into himself, that he could not deceive himself. Everywhere in his writings, the Venerable Master states that he was a person deeply filled with evil. We tend to see the errors or mistakes of others and are very severe with them, but we find it difficult if not impossible to see our own errors, and when we do, tend to look on them very tolerantly. This is very important to know when studying the Venerable Master's writings and Jodo-Shinshu in general.

There are times when we humans suddenly become aware of the depths of our evil that until then we had not even thought about. I believe this is expressed very well in Soseki Natsume's novel *Kokoro*. The central character in that novel was the only son in an affluent family. He was coddled and brought up in luxury. Just before reaching the age of twenty, however, both his parents passed away at almost the same time from typhoid fever. Following their deaths, the central character (who is referred to as *Sensei*, which means “teacher”) went to Tokyo for further schooling.

Following the deaths of his parents, *Sensei's* uncle looked after him and cared for his estate. When *Sensei* turned down his uncle's proposal to marry his uncle's daughter (his cousin), however, the uncle's attitude towards him changed. That was when *Sensei* became aware that his uncle's interest in him was solely for his estate, and he came to harbor a deep distrust of people in general.

While attending school in Tokyo, *Sensei* boarded in a home maintained by a widow with a daughter his age. He soon became enamored of the daughter. When a classmate mentioned that he needed a place to board while attending school, *Sensei* recommended that he rent a room in the same home where he was boarding.

Not long after, *Sensei's* classmate confessed to him that he was madly in love with the daughter. This, of course, caused *Sensei* much suffering, because typical of the Japanese during that time, although he was in love with the daughter, he had not expressed that love at all. He was thus unable to tell his classmate that he also was in love with the daughter.

Without telling either the mother or the daughter of his classmate's feelings for the daughter, nor of his own feelings for the daughter to his classmate, *Sensei* asked the mother for the daughter's hand in marriage. In other words, *Sensei* betrayed his classmate to further his own goal. It was only after *Sensei's* marriage to the daughter was agreed on, that the classmate learned about *Sensei's* feelings for the daughter, and the impossible situation he was now in. The result is that the classmate committed suicide.

That was when *Sensei* realized the depths of evil that lurks within humans that he had not even considered before, and how he had betrayed his classmate.

That's that story line of the novel *Kokoro*. Who can find fault with *Sensei's* "evil"? Yet I believe this novel expresses the depths of evil within human beings very well.

Because the Venerable Master looked so deeply within himself, he realized that such an evil person could not attain enlightenment through his own efforts. That is why, at the age of twenty-nine, he discarded the way of "self-centered effort" and entered the way of "Buddha-centered power."

The way of "self-centered effort" is open only to those who are able to perform all the rigorous religious practices prescribed, but the way of "Buddha-centered power" is open both to those who sense their great evil nature (their self-centeredness) as well as those who are unable to perform difficult practices. That is, the Way of "Buddha-centered power" is open to good persons as well as evil persons, to the elderly as well as the young, to females as well as males, to monks as well as laypersons, to the married as well as the unmarried ? all are saved impartially by the power of Amida Buddha's Primal Vow.

The only reason the Venerable Master entered married life is because the Way of "Buddha-centered power" is what it is. Further, it can be said that he married in order to concretely demonstrate that all - including the married ? are impartially saved by that teaching.

## **Salvation in the Present**

The Venerable Master strongly emphasized that salvation based on “Buddha-centered power” begins from the present. There are many ways in which he expressed this, but a typical way is how he is quoted in Article One of the “Notes Lamenting Differences” [*Tannisho*]:

*“Saved by the inconceivable working of Amida’s Vow, I shall realize birth in the Pure Land”; the moment you entrust yourself thus to the Vow, so that the mind set upon saying the Nembutsu arises within you, you are immediately brought to share in the benefit of being grasped by Amida, never to be abandoned.*

In other words, the moment we sense Amida Buddha’s Vow to save all sentient beings, knowing without doubt that we will be born in the Pure Land where we will become completely Enlightened, we are already embraced within the light of Amida Buddha’s salvation. It is from a sense of joy and gratitude in knowing this that the desire to recite the Nembutsu arises within us. That is the great benefit awarded to us.

This benefit (salvation) that we receive is absolutely not something that we receive after leaving this world. It is what we receive in the present ? the present we are currently living.

The Venerable Master’s teaching of Jodo-Shinshu can easily be mistaken to refer to benefits we receive after dying, but that is a great mistake. It is perhaps unfortunate that the Pure Land teaching previous to the Venerable Master did concern itself with what happens after we die, but there is no mistaking the fact that in the Venerable Master’s teaching, the emphasis is salvation in our present life. It is a teaching in which salvation is experienced in the life we are leading at present.

Some people assert that it is impossible to know whether there is a Pure Land or not until we die and are actually born there. But those who feel that way are those who have not yet experienced the world of salvation. In Jodo-Shinshu terminology, this is referred to as “those whose *shinjin* is not yet determined” (*shinjin ketsujo shite inai hito*).

The reason people such as Master Honen, the Venerable Master Shinran, as well as Master Rennyo and countless others devoted to the Jodo-Shinshu teaching, were so deeply devoted to the Pure Land is not because they lived during a time when science and particularly the study of astronomy was not highly developed. Nor was it because they relied on blind faith. Rather, it was because they *lived within the world of salvation* – they experienced what it meant to be saved. I believe this is what is most important in understanding the salvation of Jodo-Shinshu.

As related in Chapter One, the Venerable Master entered the world of salvation at the age of twenty-nine. He referred to this as “dwelling within the ‘group of those assured of birth (in the Pure Land)’ in the present.” He also referred to this experience as “being equal to Nyorai (Amida Buddha),” and also as “the same as Miroku.”

The term “group of those assured of birth (in the Pure Land)” (*shojoju*) had existed before the Venerable Master, but it referred to a benefit *after* being born in the Pure Land. It was considered to be joining a group – the members of which are guaranteed to become Buddhas (attaining Enlightenment) – after birth in the Pure Land. Because of his religious experience, however, the Venerable Master considered joining that group to be a benefit we receive in our present life.

We can never completely eliminate all our base passions because of our self-centeredness. We are, however, able to join those who are guaranteed to become Buddhas (become Enlightened) because of the power of Amida Buddha’s Primal Vow. That is why the Venerable Master could say that those with *shinjin* are “equal to Nyorai (Amida Buddha).” He could also say “same as Miroku” because like Miroku (who presently is a Bodhisattva), we are guaranteed to become a Buddha.

Because of his experience of the Nembutsu, the Venerable Master denied the thought of “Amida Buddha coming to welcome us at the moment of death” (*rinju raiko*), which was considered to be extremely important then. Because we enter the world of Amida Buddha’s salvation when our “*shinjin* is determined (or settled),” it has absolutely nothing to do with when our life in this world comes to an end.

As an example of how important “Amida Buddha coming to welcome us at the moment of death” was considered in the past, there is the story of Fujiwara Michinaga (966-1027 CE). In the work, “Tales of Glory and Prosperity” (*Eiga Monogatari*), Michinaga is described as desperately requesting that Amida Buddha come to welcome him at the moment of death.

It was in spite of such traditional attitudes regarding salvation after birth in the Pure Land, that the Venerable Master emphasized salvation during our present life. In Article Seven of the “Notes Lamenting Differences,” the Venerable Master is quoted as saying:

*The nembutsu is the single path free of hindrance.*

A statement like this can only come from a person who has experienced what it means to presently live within the salvation of the Nembutsu. Life comes with its share of suffering but when that life is lived within Amida Buddha’s great salvation, nothing can obstruct it. That’s what makes it possible for us to live strongly, regardless of the environment we find ourselves.

The following is a poem by Wariko Kai:

*There are rocks  
And there are tree branches,  
But the water flows on,  
Gently gurgling...*

The water in the stream does not find the rocks and tree branches in its path to be obstructions at all? it just flows on. Similarly, those who live within Amida Buddha's great salvation do not find anything to be obstructions. They just live their lives to the fullest.

Further, there is a traditional Jodo-Shinshu saying:

*All right if I live, and all right if I die...*

I believe this is a truly wonderful saying. It is evidence of living within the world of salvation. It is the single path that we follow in which nothing can obstruct us. That is the world of "All right if I live." But everything that lives eventually dies, so when death appears immediately before our eyes, the joy of living in the great world of the mind at ease (salvation) also becomes the realm of "...and all right if I die." I believe that is the realm of true calm and tranquility, the world of true joy.

### **Salvation of the "Evil Person"**

Article Three of "Notes Lamenting Differences" contains the phrase:

*Since even a good person can be born in the Pure Land, how much more so will an evil person.*

This phrase indicates that rather than a "good person," the object of Amida Buddha's salvation is the "evil person." This is expressed in the Jodo-Shinshu teaching as:

*The evil person is the true object (of Amida Buddha's concern) (akunin shoki).*

Recently a statement which is worded almost exactly the same as the above passage in "Notes Lamenting Differences" was discovered in Master Honen's writings. This has led some to say that the thought of the evil person being the true object of Amida Buddha's concern should be associated with Master Honen and not with the Venerable Master.

Even granting that the thought of "Since even a good person will be born in the Pure Land, how much more so will an evil person" originated with Master Honen, however, I believe thought of the salvation of evil persons in the Venerable Master's teaching has a deeper dimension than in Master Honen's teaching.

The expression, "The evil person is the true object (of Amida Buddha's concern)," was first used in a commentary on Article Three of the "Notes Lamenting Differences" written during the Edo Period of Japanese history (1603-1868 CE), and that is how it came to be associated with the Venerable Master's understanding of the salvation of evil persons. That's why I believe the thought of "The evil person is the true object (of Amida Buddha's concern)" must be associated with the Venerable Master.



And then there is the view that, since the expression “Since even a good person can be born in the Pure Land, how much more so will an evil person” is not to be found in anything written by the Venerable Master, it is not a part of his thought. This view holds that it is just a phrase that the Venerable Master’s disciple Yuien-*bo* quoted him as saying, so the idea of the evil person being the true object (of Amida Buddha’s concern) is not part of the Venerable Master’s thought. That, however, is absolutely not correct.

In the General Preface of his “Teaching, Practice, *Shinjin*, and Attainment,” the Venerable Master wrote:

*...Shakyamuni lead Vaidehi to select the land of peace and tranquility.*

Further, he pointed out that Amida Buddha’s Great Compassion was such that Amida Buddha vowed to even save those who committed the five perversities of: 1) killing one’s father, 2) killing one’s mother, 3) killing an Arhat, 4) shedding the blood of a Buddha, and 5) causing disunity in the Sangha.

The Venerable Master also quotes the “Nirvana *Sutra*” (*Nehan-gyo*) at length in the Chapter on *Shinjin* of his “Teaching, Practice, *Shinjin*, and Realization,” pointing out that even Ajase (Sanskrit: Ajatasatru) who committed the great crime of killing his father was saved by the power of Amida Buddha’s Primal Vow.

Not understanding the true intent of “the evil person is the true object (of Amida Buddha’s concern)” can lead to dire consequences. Those words can lead to the assumption that they encourage us to do wrong. Actually, however, they point in exactly the opposite direction. Because our present society is in such a spiritually desolate state, if those words actually encouraged committing evil acts, they would cause irreparable harm.

That is why, as the Venerable Master is quoted in Article Thirteen of the “Notes Lamenting Differences,” he was very careful to note:

*We should not take poison just because there is an antidote.*

That is also why we must consider what “evil” is.

Evil comes in many different forms. There is the evil of breaking civil laws such as killing and stealing. There is the evil of immoral conduct, which while not illegal, is not beneficial to society. And then there is religious evil which is sensed only after reflecting on what sort of being we truly are.

What the Venerable Master meant when he referred to “evil” is religious evil.

As mentioned in Chapter One where I discussed the salvation of “Buddha-centered power,” the Venerable Master was an extremely introspective person. In Article Two of “Notes Lamenting Differences,” he is quoted as saying:

*... I am incapable of any other practice, so hell is decidedly my abode whatever I do.*

Because I (Shinran) am such an evil person and absolutely incapable of performing any religious practice that will redeem me, there is no place for me to go other than hell. That is how evil the Venerable Master considered himself to be. There are many other places in his writings where he refers to himself as an evil person.

And then there is the passage already quoted where the Venerable Master clearly indicates that he himself is that evil person:

*Since even a good person can be born in the Pure Land, how much more so will an evil person?*

Usually, even when we say things such as, "Many evil persons exist in this world," we do not include ourselves in that group. The evil person that the Venerable Master had in mind when he said, "The evil person is the correct object (of Amida Buddha's concern," however, was Shinran himself. This is an extremely important point.

The famed Japanese writer, Akutagawa Ryunosuke (1892-1927), who wrote the story that was made into the award-winning motion picture *Rashomon*, wrote another short story titled "A Spider's Thread" (*Kumo no ito*). The central character in this story is named Kandata, a career criminal who killed people, robbed them, and set fire to their houses. He fell into hell after leaving this world because of the sort of person he was.

Bad as Kandata was, however, there was one thing he did while living in this world that could be considered good. And that was, once, while walking deep in the forest, he came across a spider busily spinning its web. Ordinarily Kandata would have torn the web to make his way through, but that one time, he changed direction in order to not destroy it. Because of that one good act, the Buddha determined Kandata deserved to escape from the depths of hell.

From the Pure Land where he dwelled, the Buddha lowered a single spider's thread down into hell where Kandata suffered. When Kandata looked up he unexpectedly found the spider's thread dangling in front of his eyes. If I climb this thread, Kandata thought, I might be able escape from this dreaded hell! He carefully grasped the thin thread with both hands. When he found that thin as it was, it did not break, he quickly began climbing it.

After climbing for a while, Kandata became tired and decided to rest. Looking down, he saw hell far below him. Ah! Kandata thought, all I have to do is climb just a little more and I'll get out of here! "Great! Great!"

At that same moment, however, Kandata became aware of the multitudes of evil beings like himself who were trapped in hell, following him up the spider's thread. There were so many they looked like ants climbing the thread to which he was holding on for dear life. The thread was so delicate that he wasn't sure it would support him... how much

less would it support all the others following him?! If that thread broke, not only he, but all the others would fall back into hell!

“Hey!” Kandata yelled to those below him. “This is my thread! Get off! Get off!”

That was the moment when, just above where he was holding it, the spider’s thread broke and Kandata and all the others fell back into hell.

There’s no doubt that Kandata was an evil person. And because he was, it was only natural for him to fall into hell. But when a way for him to escape appeared before him, he ruined his opportunity because he had no concern for others. Shouting to those following him, “This is my thread!” is what ruined his chance to escape hell. He was, after all, a person who thought only of benefitting himself.

What is most important about this story is comparing Kandata’s attitude with ours. Can we say we are better than Kandata? Would we be able to act differently if we were in a similar situation? I believe that was the deep introspection of the writer, Akutagawa Ryunosuke.

Because of deep introspection into his true nature, the Venerable Master is quoted as saying in Article 13 of “Notes Lamenting Differences”:

*If the karmic cause so prompts us, we will commit any kind of act.*

What this tells us is that we don’t know what sort of evil we will commit when confronted with similar causes and conditions.

And as Master Rennyō is quoted as saying in Article 195 of “Heard and Recorded”:

*We clearly see the faults of others but rarely our own.*

We immediately perceive the evil actions of others but are very slow to perceive our own evils. The Venerable Master, however, was so aware of the sort of person he was, he considered himself the most evil of evil persons. I believe it is particularly important to keep this in mind because others did not share his view about himself, and in fact considered him to be the embodiment of a Bodhisattva. But only those who become aware of their evil nature are able to turn away from evil, to stop performing evil acts.

The teaching of “The evil person is the true object (of Amida Buddha’s concern)” is absolutely not a teaching that creates evil persons. Rather, it is a teaching that saves those who are aware of their evil natures. In fact, that is *the only reason* it is able to save those like ourselves. And that is also why it is able to impart true peace and tranquility, and turns us away from evil.

I believe that rather than creating evil persons, the purpose of the phrase “The evil person is the true object (of Amida Buddha’s concern)” is to teach how to cultivate good persons.

### Chapter Three: The Way to Salvation

As I have already indicated, the Jodo-Shinshu teaching of “Buddha-centered power” is how the Venerable Master was personally saved, and also the teaching that he urged us to follow. Rather than striving to perform religious practices, he taught that we are saved by *shinjin* which we receive by complete reliance on the power of Amida Buddha’s Primal Vow.

But does the fact that *shinjin* is what is given to us by Amida Buddha mean that absolutely no effort is required to receive it? What both the Venerable Master and Master Rennyo say about this is the same, and that is the necessity of “listening” (*chomon*). Both of the two *kanji* characters used to write the word *chomon* have the meaning of “to hear,” so listening as intended by the Venerable Master and Master Rennyo is not just passive listening, but listening on a much higher dimension.

As related in Part One, the Venerable Master discarded the way of “self-centered effort” and became Master Honen’s disciple at the age of twenty-nine. The Venerable Master’s wife Eshin-*ni* wrote the following about this in “Letters of Eshin-*ni*”:

*...(the Venerable Master – Shinran) called on Master Honen, and just as he had confined himself for a hundred day in Rokkakudo, he visited Master Honen daily for a hundred days, rain or shine, and regardless of the obstacles that confronted him. (Master Honen) taught him that the sole way to escape the cycle of birth/death was single-minded reliance on the Nembutsu.*

As indicated in this letter, just as the Venerable Master determined to seclude himself in Rokkaku Temple for a hundred days, he visited Master Honen for a hundred consecutive days, “listening” to Master Honen’s Dharma Talks. He did this regardless of the weather.

And in a *Jodo Wasan*, the Venerable Master wrote:

*Those who hear the Buddha’s Name –  
Even going through flames that fill  
The great thousandfold world to do so –  
Forever attain the stage of nonretrogression.*

That is how important it is to “hear,” and is the way our *shinjin* is determined.

In Article 155 of “Heard and Recorded,” Master Rennyo is quoted as saying:

*Make listening to the teaching of Buddha-dharma primary and worldly affairs secondary. Listening to the Dharma only in the leisure you have after your worldly affairs are taken care of, is regrettable indeed because there is no tomorrow when it comes to hearing the Dharma.*

Here again, the importance of listening is expressed. The phrases, “Make listening ... only in the leisure ... after worldly affairs are taken care of is regrettable...” and “... there is no tomorrow when it comes to hearing the Dharma” all indicate how important hearing is.

In contrast, “Listening to the Dharma only in the leisure you have,” makes light of listening because such listening is done at our convenience, and is not listening seriously. That is how important Master Rennyō said we should consider listening to the Dharma to be - that it is more important than any worldly concern.

Again, in Article 193 of “Heard and Recorded,” Master Rennyō is quoted as saying:

*If even those without shinjin listen to the teaching of Buddha-dharma from the bottom of their minds/hearts, they will absolutely receive shinjin because of the power of the Buddha’s Great Compassion that is added. All we need do is expend our efforts in listening to the honorable teaching.*

Here again, Master Rennyō points out that hearing is the way to receiving *shinjin*. I believe the phrase, “even those without *shinjin*” in this passage is extremely important.

I frequently hear people say that because science and technology was not very developed in the past, the people of those days could accept *shinjin* more easily. But, according to such people, we live in a scientific and technologically advanced world where talk of the Buddha and the Pure Land don’t seem to fit in. But from the above passage in “Heard and Recorded,” we see that even five hundred years ago during Master Rennyō’s time, people did not have *shinjin* from the very beginning.

Because they listened by making worldly concerns secondary, however, many of Master Rennyō’s direct followers did become settled in their *shinjin*. But we should also carefully note another important phrase in our Jodo-Shinshu teaching:

*Do not seek merit in the act of hearing.*

The *shinjin* that we receive because of “Buddha-centered power” is not because of the merit we gain as a result of dedicating ourselves to “hearing” (*chomon*). As in the words of Master Rennyō just quoted, we “... receive *shinjin* because of the power of the Buddha’s Great Compassion that is added.”

In the Chapter on *Shinjin* of his “Teaching, Practice, *Shinjin*, Realization,” the Venerable Master wrote:

*The word hear in the passage from the [Larger] Sutra means that sentient beings, having heard how the Buddha’s Vow arose -its origin and fulfillment - are altogether free of doubt. That is what it means to hear.*

“Sentient beings” refers to all living things, and of course includes humans.

“Buddha’s Vow” refers to Amida Buddha’s Primal Vow that seeks to save all living things.

“Its origin” refers to why the Amida Buddha established his Primal Vow, and how it came to be fulfilled. The reason it was established is because we are self-centered beings who are so defiled that it is impossible for us to become Enlightened through our own efforts. The Venerable Master expressed this personally, stating that the Primal Vow was established just for evil persons such as himself, and went so far as to state that the Vow was solely for himself.

The term “fulfillment” in the Venerable Master’s words quoted above is *hon-matsu* in Japanese, which is usually translated “cause and effect,” “means and the end,” etc. The *hon* of *hon-matsu* is usually understood to mean things such as “true,” “real,” “present,” etc., but in this context points to the long period of time during which Hozo *Bosatsu* considered:

- What sort of Vows he should establish to truly save all sentient beings (called “vow of contemplation for five *kalpas*”), and
- The equally long period of time he performed religious practices to fulfill those vows (called “Vow of eons of practice”).

The *matsu* part of *hon-matsu* has meanings such as “end,” “close,” etc. It refers to the fact that the Primal Vow has been fulfilled and that therefore its salvific activity is now available ? that Amida Buddha’s Great Compassion is now constantly being directed towards us. This is referred to as “Becoming enlightened after ten *kalpas*” and also as “fulfillment of the Primal Vow.”

In other words, hearing the “origin and fulfillment” of Amida Buddha’s Vow is hearing the mind and heart of the Vow that was established solely to save those who are so filled with base passions that they are beyond salvation.

Further, the expression, “altogether free of doubt” points to hearing (receiving) the mind and heart of Amida Buddha’s Primal Vow just as it is. It refers to the fact that evil as we are, we are fortunate beings who will undoubtedly be born in the Pure Land (the Buddha’s realm of Enlightenment).

Finally, “That is what it means to hear,” refers to is listening to the Primal Vow without doubt. Passive listening is not true hearing. Only when listening becomes one with *shinjin* can it be said to be true hearing. That’s when our *shinjin* is determined, and when we enter the world of salvation. As already related, as Master Rennyo said, “Buddha-dharma (begins and) ends with hearing.” The way to *shinjin* in our Jodo-Shinshu teaching is through *chomon* - hearing - which includes studying the doctrines of Jodo-Shinshu.

## Chapter Four: The 21<sup>st</sup> Century and Jodo-Shinshu

As already related, at least in Japan, the 21st century is widely considered to be the “Period of the Mind and Heart.” It is the century when great hope is held for religion.

Many different religions exist. Although other divisions are possible, religions can roughly be divided into primitive, ethnic, and world religions. Among them, what are referred to as world religions are those that take up the problems of the mind and heart, in other words, which deeply pursue how we as human beings should live.

Among the three world religions of Buddha-dharma, Christianity, and Islam, the special characteristic of Buddha-dharma is expressed in the *Dhammapada* as:

*Hatred is not overcome by hatred. Hatred is overcome only by extinguishing hatred. This is an ancient truth.*

This passage was quoted by the Sri Lankan (then Ceylon) representative to the Peace Conference held in San Francisco during 1951 following the end of World War II.

Many of the disputes and complications in our world today are centered around religion. I believe the complications are not the result of religion per se, but as in the passage from the *Dhammapada* just quoted, the complications are removed only by extinguishing hatred. That is where I sense the greatness of the Buddhist teaching.

Again, as already stated, society today seems bent on the destruction of nature, which leads to the serious problem of environmental pollution. There are the problems of bullying among children, indiscriminate killings, killing for insurance money, infant cruelty, that leads to desolation of the human heart. And then there are the moral and ethical problems that arise because of advances in medical technology. All these very difficult-to-resolve problems continue proliferating in our world today.

What teaches us about the cause of human suffering and delusion (which is due to centering everything on ourselves) and what teaches us how to escape such a deluded state (which is seeking an enlightened realm of non-ego-centeredness), is the teaching of Buddha-dharma. I believe this teaching of the Buddha – the teaching of Buddha-dharma - is the light that will lead us through our present bewildering and confusing world.

As already stated, I believe that true religions offer us two benefits:

- Confers true peace and tranquility, and
- Teaches us the real way to live.

Further, I believe the Venerable Master Shinran’s teaching of Jodo-Shinshu is a religion



that fully embodies these two benefits.

If we were to limit the above to just the second benefit of “teaching us the real way to live,” then a “self-centered effort” (*jiriki*) teaching would be sufficient. There would then be no need for the Jodo-Shinshu teaching.

But if limited to only the first benefit of “conferring true peace and tranquility,” however, then a “self-centered effort” teaching of Buddha-dharma is insufficient. I believe the Jodo-Shinshu teaching is absolutely necessary in that case. The reason it is, is because, as already mentioned in Chapter Two, the Venerable Master’s Jodo-Shinshu teaching saves those who, while unable to perform the religious practices necessary for that purpose, are aware of their deeply evil nature. Further, it teaches us that we are enveloped within that great salvation in the present. It is the teaching by which the Venerable Master was saved, and is the teaching by which I was saved.

According to the American Psychologist William James (1842-1910), there are two types of conversions (which in Jodo-Shinshu would be considered determination of *shinjin*): a sudden conversion as a result of some experience, and a gradual conversion that takes place so slowly that we are not even aware when it occurred.

Shakyamuni Buddha is said to have attained Enlightenment at the age of 35. Jesus Christ realized he was the Son of God at about the age of 30. Mohammed became aware that he was the Messenger of God at about the age of 40.

Master Honen turned from following the way of “self-centered effort” to the way of “Buddha-centered power” when he was 43 years of age. In the Venerable Master’s case, it was when he was 29 years of age.

I believe there are many different ways leading to determination of our *shinjin*, but as explained in Chapter Three, in Jodo-Shinshu it is by “listening” (*chomon*). It is listening to the mind and heart of Amida Buddha’s Primal Vow (his desire to save all beings and bringing us to a state of Enlightenment) without doubt.

I believe “... (hearing) how the Buddha’s Vow arose - its origin and fulfillment,” that the Venerable Master mentioned in explaining “hearing,” is extremely important in establishing our *shinjin*, particularly for us living in the 21st century. It means becoming aware that we are ego-centered beings and that that is the cause of our evil acts. I believe this awareness is the agony that the Venerable Master experienced during his many years of performing religious austerities on Mt. Hiei. Although others admired him for his dedication to his practice, he knew himself so well that it didn’t matter what others thought.

The betrayal of his best friend by the central character in Natsume Soseki’s novel “*Kokoro*” which I mentioned previously, caused him to become aware of what he truly was. Until then, he had not even been aware of the depths of his evil nature. Although

we humans live an extremely evil life, many, if not most, live our lives completely unaware of doing so.

Like the central character in Soseki's novel "*Kokoro*," however, when we become aware of our true nature, we cannot help but feel that awareness is an opportunity to hear about the origin of the Primal Vow. That is also when we experience the fulfillment of the Buddha's practice which was suffered solely to save deeply evil people like myself.

What is important in coming to such an experience is "listening" (*chomon*) in our everyday life. Listening is not just passively hearing sounds, even if they are laudable sounds such as Dharma Talks. I believe it includes studying Buddhist materials. What is most important however, is that, as Master Rennyō said, we should not listen to the Dharma "only in the leisure after your worldly affairs are taken care of."

We become aware of how to live only when we become aware of our true nature, That's how we experience the Buddha's mind and heart that seeks, above all else, to save deeply evil people such as we.

I began this booklet by saying that true religions confer true peace and tranquility, and a true way of living. I believe the Jodo-Shinshu teaching offers us both these benefits, and is an eminently suitable religion that will save the peoples of the 21st century.

*Gassho.*

Notes:

The word "salvation" may make the Jodo-Shinshu teaching sound like Christianity, but the foundations on which these two religions rest are very different. Some have suggested using a phrase such as "awareness of always being in the embrace of the power of Amida Buddha's Vow" in place of salvation, but such a phrase is not only very unwieldy, it implies the importance of the "I" who is aware. In Jodo-Shinshu, even the awareness is given to us by Amida. I hope to make the meaning of salvation in Jodo-Shinshu clear in this booklet.

The Venerable Master's age is given in the traditional Japanese way of counting ages in which a person is considered to be a year old at birth, and everyone's age is increased by one on New Year's Day. According to this way of counting, a person born on December 31, would be two years old the next day.

Miroku: A being who is presently a Bodhisattva but is absolutely destined to become a Buddha.