

## **SHINRAN:** LIFE AND WORKS

SHINRAN stands today as one of the most consequential figures of his turbulent period, an era of social upheaval and religious ferment. He was not, however, a major actor in the public events of the times. His aristocratic birth and monastic career were undistinguished, and he was never to wield widespread influence or achieve great recognition. His most active years were spent in a self-imposed exile in isolated provinces. There he first built a following among the common people, then relinquished its leadership, retiring to an inconspicuous life of writing and reflection in the capital. Nevertheless, through his thought he decisively altered the landscape of Japanese religious life, and his teaching remains one of the peaks of the Mahayana Buddhist tradition.

Around the time of Shinran's birth, the center of political power and cultural creativity shifted irrevocably from the nobility to the warrior clans. The temple establishment, sharing the decline of the class that it served, had fallen into scholasticism and ritual, and figures emerged who chose to abandon the old institutions in search of authentic awakening. Shinran was such a figure, and his achievement lies in setting forth, with thoroughness and coherence, a path to enlightenment accessible to all people, one that might be accomplished while carrying on life in society and bearing its responsibilities. Moreover, he founded this path not only intellectually, in the realm of doctrine, but also in practice, transmitting it to people eking out a marginal existence in the harsh conditions of the countryside. As a religious thinker, he continually tested his realization—against the available scriptural texts, against new situations, and above all against the fundamental realities of human existence. Thus, he deepened his awareness throughout his long life, coming to stand with increasing clarity within the mind of the Buddha, his “thoughts and feelings flowing within the ocean of dharma” (*Passages on the Pure Land Way*, p. 40).

Shinran composed many writings articulating his understanding of the Buddhist teaching. Of the circumstances of his personal life, however, he says little, and the outline of his biography, as far as can be reasonably ascertained, is brief. Here, we will summarize the major events of his life, focusing on aspects that illuminate his thought and writings.

## The Life of Shinran

### *Birth*

Shinran (1173-1263) was born into the Hino family, a minor branch of the Fujiwara clan which had dominated political and cultural life at the imperial court in Kyoto for two centuries. The Hino are said to have traditionally served as Confucian scholars. Shinran's father, Arinori, was a low-ranking courtier in the office of the empress dowager, and his uncles were also active at court. Nothing is known of his mother, though she was no doubt similarly of aristocratic lineage.

The Fujiwara emerged from among other families as the most formidable power court during the ninth century, shortly after the capital was established at Kyoto. By the latter part of the tenth century, their ascendancy was complete, maintained through marrying daughters of the clan to emperors and establishing control of the throne through a regency.

In the tenth and eleventh centuries, the aristocratic culture in Kyoto flowered, supported economically by manors throughout the countryside. After centuries of borrowing from the Asian continent for the fixture of court life, including even the organization of the state bureaucracy and the written language of learning and government, native creativity began to flourish. This is the period of *The Tale of Genji*, one of the world's first novels, which depicts an elite society pervaded by an exquisite aesthetic refinement. Indeed, the Kyoto court, though a milieu of only a fraction of the populace, stands as one of the highest achievements of that period in world history, surpassed in splendor and elegance only by the Chinese court.

By Shinran's day, however, deep fissures had already appeared in the foundations of the life of the nobility, and real political supremacy had become a thing of the past. The warriors of the countryside, who had served the court aristocracy by maintaining social stability, began to seize power for themselves. By the time Shinran was born, the two most powerful warrior clans, the Taira and the Minamoto, had been locked in struggle for several decades, and Shinran's childhood saw first the rise to power of the head of the Taira clan, Kiyomori, who became Chancellor in 1167, and then the decimation of the entire clan at the hands of the Minamoto, in open warfare between 1180 and 1185. After the defeat of the Taira, the Minamoto established a "bivouac" government (*bakufu*) far from the court, at Kamakura, southwest of present Tokyo. Thus, the center of political authority passed from Kyoto. It was during this period of warfare that Shinran, at the age of nine, entered the Tendai monastery of Enryakuji on Mount Hiei and embarked on the life of a monk.

In his writings, Shinran exhibits a probing sensitivity to the interior life of the emotions, perhaps reflecting in part his aristocratic upbringing, but probably the clearest mark of his early education is the subtlety and

precision of his use of language. This is seen particularly in his Japanese works, but is also evident in his attention to the grammatical structures and possibilities of Chinese Buddhist texts. We find his attitudes toward language explicitly stated in his writings. In a letter, he assures a disciple that scholarly learning and discourse are of no significance in themselves for religious attainment, which is expressed as birth into the Pure Land of Amida Buddha:

Simply achieve your birth in the Pure Land, firmly avoiding all scholarly debate. . . . I remember [the teacher Honen] smile and say, as he watched humble people of no intellectual pretensions coming to visit him, "Without doubt their birth is settled." And I heard him say after a visit by a man brilliant in letters and debating, "I really wonder about his birth." (*Letters of Shinran*, p. 31)

Shinran records few of his experiences with Honen, under whom he studied for six years, so no doubt the attitude described here deeply impressed him. Learning for its own sake is not necessary for religious awakening; in fact, it may become an obstruction. This view contrasts sharply with the emphasis on scholastic study in the major temples of the day. At the same time, however, Shinran recognizes that the Pure Land way is conveyed through the verbal teaching, and though it does not require the scholarly grasp of doctrine encouraged in most other schools, neither can it claim, like Zen, "no dependence on words." Thus, he acknowledges the importance of language in the transmission of the teaching. In a postscript appended to two of his writings, he states:

That people of the countryside, who do not know the meanings of characters and who are painfully and hopelessly ignorant, may easily understand, I have repeated the same things again and again. The educated reader will probably find this writing peculiar and may ridicule it. But paying no heed to such criticism, I write only that ignorant people easily grasp the essential meaning. (*Notes on 'Essentials of Faith Alone,' Notes on Once-calling and Many-calling*)

One cannot mistake his keen awareness of the situation of his audience, many of them oppressed and unlettered, completely removed from the culture of the capital in which he had grown up. Such people may have been able only to listen to Shinran's written words being read aloud, yet it was for them that he wrote. He well understood that the educated would find his writings awkward, but he was also conscious that he was creating a language by which people may "easily grasp the essential meaning" of the teaching. Such a language involves the capacity to communicate that which can transform people's lives and bring even the illiterate to the highest religious awareness.

### *Entrance into Monastic Life*

The reasons for which Shinran became a monk are unknown. Tradition states that both his parents died when he was young, suggesting this as the motivation for his renunciation of mundane life. Indeed, his education seems to have been entrusted to his uncles. But documentary evidence suggests rather that his father retired from the world and took Buddhist orders, as did all of Shinran's brothers. Entering the monastery at a young age was not uncommon for the offspring of the aristocracy, especially those in declining circumstances, for a powerful ecclesiastical institution like Enryakuji temple offered its own opportunities for social advancement. It maintained close ties with the court as well as its own army of soldier-monks, and at the same time provided a haven for learning and culture. The accomplishments of Jien, the monk under whom Shinran took the tonsure in 1181, manifest the close bond that existed between the state and Buddhist institutions, and the potentials of temple life: he was a ranking Tendai prelate, appointed Chief Abbot (*Zasu*) four times; one of the outstanding poets of the age; a historian and man of letters; and brother of the regent to the throne.

Of Shinran's own career on Mount Hiei, we know almost nothing. He seems to have devoted himself diligently to the study and practice of the Tendai school. The only indication of his actual life during this period is a comment in a letter from Shinran's wife, Eshinni, to their daughter, written after Shinran's death. She states that Shinran had been a "monk of the practice hall" (*doso*).

Monks of this category were attached to temple halls in which worship and meditation were performed. In Shinran's case, it is understood to mean that he performed the Tendai Pure Land practice of constant *nembutsu* or "thinking on Amida Buddha." This was one of four types of meditative practice in Chinese T'ien-t'ai teachings, and originally involved ninety-day periods of constant circumambulation of a statue of Amida, during which the practitioner chanted Amida's Name, "Namu-amida-butsu," and concentrated his thoughts on the Buddha. It was taught that through this practice one could enter the meditative state or *samadhi* in which the Buddhas of the universe would appear before one, signifying one's contact with the realm of enlightenment. On Mount Hiei in Shinran's day, such practice was carried on for three or seven day periods in several halls, and Shinran may have been attached to Shuryogon-in at Yokawa, where the Pure Land master Genshin (942-1017) had lived two centuries before.

A record of a typical session of constant *nembutsu* during this period mentions the participation of twelve ranking clerics (*sogo*), twenty one ordinary monks (*bonso*), and twelve hall monks (*doso*). We see that hall monks like Shinran held a relatively low position in the temple hierarchy, and one of their chief functions was probably to provide the musical chant-elements for the performance of worship and practice.

Much later in life, Shinran would speak of Saicho (767-822), the founder of the Tendai complex on Mount Hiei, and his role in propagating the nembutsu in Japan:

Out of compassionate concern for the people of the land,  
Master Saicho of Mount Hiei taught them  
To say “Namu-amida-butsu”  
As an incantation for eliminating the seven calamities.

*Sange no Dengyo daishi wa  
Kokudo nimmin o awaremite  
Shichi nan shometsu no jumon ni wa  
Namu-amida-butsu o tonau beshi. (Jodo wasan, 97)*

Saicho included this advice in a verse to the emperor when asked what could be done in a time of natural catastrophe and epidemic. Shinran’s nembutsu teaching differs completely, but he nonetheless expresses a sense of continuity with the Tendai founder that stems from his long experience with nembutsu on Mount Hiei.

Shinran expresses a stronger affinity with the learned monk Genshin, whose work, *Essentials for Attaining Birth*, did much to spread the teaching of birth in Amida’s Pure Land through reciting the Buddha’s Name. Its depictions of the splendors of the Pure Land and horrors of hell deeply affected the imagination of the age. Genshin’s practice centered on contemplation of the Buddha and the features of the Pure Land, but he also recognized the possibility of lay people attaining birth through simple vocal rather than contemplative nembutsu. Thus, the term *nembutsu* is taken to refer not only to “thinking on” the Buddha but also to “saying Amida’s Name.” Again, Shinran’s thought came to differ significantly, but he also drew on passages quoted in Genshin’s work for important concepts relating Pure Land practice to general Mahayana thought. He also found in Genshin the spirit of deep self-reflection and sensitivity to defiling passions—an important aspect of Tendai thought—expressed in the mode of Pure Land Buddhism:

Although I too am within Amida’s grasp, blind passions obstruct my eyes and I cannot see him; nevertheless, great compassion untiringly and constantly illumines me. (quoted in Shinjin, 17)

Further, it is clear from Shinran’s later writings that, in addition to his nembutsu practice, he also devoted a large part of his energies to Tendai study. Careful, scholarly reading of the Chinese canon—sutras, treatises and commentaries—was keenly pursued on Mount Hiei during the period of Shinran’s residence. Judging from the works quoted in his later writings, he gained a familiarity with such basic Mahayana sutras as the *Lotus Sutra*, the *Nirvana Sutra*, and the *Garland Sutra*, and also studied deeply in Tendai texts and such Tendai doctrines as the One Vehicle, the eternal, transhistorical Buddha, and the concept of the last age of the dharma

(*mappo*), which states that teachings survive but practice and realization are no longer possible. Evidence of Shinran's immersion in such study is also found in the methods of commentary and of formulating and organizing the teaching that he adopts, for example, in his frequent use of analysis through meticulous examination of the dictionary meanings of terms.

Shinran's earliest *surviving* writings are manuscript copies of two Pure Land sutras, the *Sutra of Contemplation on the Buddha of Immeasurable Life* and the *Smaller* or *Amida Sutra*. These copies are remarkable for the diligence they reveal in the study of the texts. In the upper and lower margins, the space between the columns of characters, and on the reverse side of the paper, he carefully added detailed notes, drawn from traditional commentaries in Chinese, on the meaning of individual characters and passages and the structure of the sutras. Even the proper Chinese intonation of each character is indicated. These copies were probably made while studying under Honen, within about five years after leaving Mount Hiei, and they exhibit the qualities of the Tendai study in which he had been trained. Moreover, it appears that he continued to add notes over a number of years, showing the tendency to augment and revise that he would keep to the end of his life.

During his years on Mount Hiei, then, Shinran gained a familiarity with Buddhist texts, with the Chinese language in which they were written, and with the traditional methods of their study, all of which influenced the later expressions of his thought.

At the age of twenty-nine, however, Shinran reached an impasse in his study and personal practice. Saicho, in founding Enryakuji, had delineated a rigorous twenty-one year course of practice, but Shinran, after twenty years as a hall monk, had reached only the realization, as he would say later, that he was "one for whom any practice is difficult to accomplish" (*Tannisho*, 2). In addition, he had been disillusioned by the worldly corruption that permeated the mountain monastery, and in his later hymns on the last age of the dharma he speaks of it. He therefore resolved to undertake a one-hundred day period of seclusion at Rokkakudo, a temple dedicated to Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva (J. Kannon) in Kyoto city, to determine his future course.

### *Encounter with Honen*

Rokkakudo was said to have been built by Prince Shotoku (574-621), who was instrumental in the introduction of Buddhism into Japan. Shotoku was himself widely regarded as an incarnation of Avalokitesvara, the bodhisattva of compassion, and Shinran held him in veneration throughout his life. On the ninety-fifth day of seclusion, Shotoku appeared to Shinran in a dream, and Shinran interpreted this as instruction to seek out Honen and hear his teaching.

Honen (1133-1212) had been a monk in Enryakuji where, like Shinran, he had studied and practiced Tendai Pure Land teachings for several decades. Twenty-six years earlier, however, in 1175, he had descended Mount Hiei, and moving to Yoshimizu in the eastern hills of Kyoto, began teaching the sole practice of saying the nembutsu to people of all walks of life. Prior to him, monks of various schools performed practices focusing on Amida Buddha, including worship, sutra chanting, recitation of his Name, and contemplative exercises. Such forms of practice were undertaken within the different doctrinal frameworks, as parts of larger programs of practice carried on in a monastic setting. Honen, however, extricated the nembutsu—saying Amida's Name—from the context of other practices. He taught that Amida Buddha, in his Vow to save all beings, had sought a practice that any person could easily perform, and had selected the nembutsu. Out of his compassion, Amida vowed that all who simply said the nembutsu entrusting themselves to him would attain birth in his Purer Land, where they would be able to fulfill the practices resulting in perfect Buddhahood. Thus, based on this practice of solely saying the nembutsu, Honen established a Pure Land school independent of the traditional schools and temple establishments, and attracted many adherents, both monks and laity, from all levels of society.

Shinran had surely heard of Honen's new teaching while on Mount Hiei, and taking his experience at Rokkakudo as a sign, he visited Honen at Yoshimizu every day for one hundred days to hear his teaching. At the end of this period, he resolved to abandon his former life and practice on Mount Hiei and join Honen's following.

The twelfth and thirteenth centuries in Japan were a period of sweeping religious reformation, when on the one hand the traditional institutions tied to the court—the old Nara temples, Mount Hiei, and the Shingon center on Mount Koya—stagnated and declined, and on the other, new movements began to emerge, some among the common people. Honen's teaching was the beginning of an open break with the temple establishment, and other new schools—the Zen of Dogen and the Nichiren school—would also arise as independent ways of practice from the eclecticism of Tendai. But this development stands upon a strong undercurrent of monks who, unable to find religious fulfillment within the ecclesiastical institutions, abandoned temple regimen and the official, recognized orders. Having renounced mundane life to enter monastic practice, they renounced their accustomed life once more to strike out on new paths of practice that might bring realization. Some gathered at places near the old temples and joined like-minded men in reclusive practice, Other wandered the countryside as mendicants and spread Buddhist teachings among the people. Shinran's departure from Mount Hiei may be viewed against this background.

From 1201 to 1207, Shinran studied under Honen as a member of his growing following at Yoshimizu. While Honen also imparted his teaching to

lay people, including those of the lowest levels of society, there were many monks who adopted his teaching, and Shinran, like Honen himself, maintained his priestly vows of celibacy, diet, and deportment. In 1205, he was allowed to copy Honen's major work, *Passages on the Nembutsu Selected in the Primal Vow (Senjakushu)*, and also a portrait of the master, and received a new Buddhist name. These indicate Honen's recognition and approval of his grasp of the teaching.

During this period, however, Honen and his following came under mounting criticism from the older Buddhist institutions in Nara and on Mount Hiei, partly for doctrinal reasons, but also because they viewed his success in spreading his teaching a threat to themselves and to the society. A central point of criticism was the assertion that his teaching encouraged lawlessness and immoral conduct, for the observance of precepts and performance of good deeds were not recognized as necessary or useful for attaining birth in the Pure Land. Honen taught that Amida's Vow was established to be universal, and thus saves all who say his Name, without discriminating between the good and the evil. We can surmise from the criticism, however, that some people understood this to mean that one need make no effort to refrain from self-indulgence or fear the consequences of even immoral acts if one said the Name. This impulse toward antinomian attitudes would remain a problem for Shinran also (Passage 14).

In 1204, Honen had a seven-article pledge drawn up to answer criticism concerning the behavior of his followers, and one hundred ninety disciples, including Shinran, signed it. They vowed to refrain from condemning the traditional schools and engaging in debates about the teaching. The pledge also included an admonition against criticizing those who receive and observe precepts; these might be monastic rules or moral observances in lay life. In 1205 and again in 1207, however, the Nara temple Kofukuji petitioned the imperial court to ban Honen's nembustu teaching. Although such petitions by themselves might not have precipitated government action, two monk disciples of Honen incurred a wrath of the emperor by converting several court ladies, and a prohibition was enacted in 1207. The two disciples were executed, and Honen and seven others, including Shinran, were sentenced to banishment from the capital. The master, at the age of seventy-six, was exiled to the island of Shikoku, and Shinran was sent north to Echigo, on the Japan Sea coast, abruptly ending his discipleship after six years.

### *Exile*

The punishment of the exiles involved not only banishment to remote provinces, but return to secular life. Honen and Shinran were stripped of their Tendai ordinations and give new names as laymen. For Shinran, this marked the completion of his break with Mount Hiei.



In the postscript to his major work, *Teaching, Practice and Realization*, Shinran severely criticizes Kofukuji and the imperial court for their persecution of the nembutsu, asserting that they acted out of resentment toward the success of the nembutsu teaching. At the same time, it is recorded that both he and Honen saw exile as an opportunity to spread teaching, an attitude consistent with the spirit of the wayfaring monks of the period, who did much to transmit the learning and culture of the capital to the countryside.

Through sudden and unsought, removal from the capital to the rigors of daily life in the countryside opened up for Shinran a new dimension of human existence. He had learned from Honen that the path of the nembutsu was available to all, without need for other good acts or for the scholarly study and religious practices to which he had dedicate himself for twenty years; thus he had left Mount Hiei. It was in Echigo, however, that he confronted directly and concretely the possibility for people in lives of great hardship to attain Buddhahood through the nembutsu. There, he himself entered deeply into mundane life for the first time since childhood.

The tale literature of the period is filled with stories of virtuous monks who chose to abandon their status in the ecclesiastical centers and retire to lives of seclusion, ridding themselves of attachments by concealing their accomplishments. One of the most famous was Kyoshin (d. 866), an early Heian period scholar-monk of Kofukuji:

Kyoshin, who settled in Kako, built no fence to the west: toward the land of Bliss the gate lay open. Nor, befittingly, did he enshrine an image of worship; he kept no sacred books. In appearance not a monk nor yet worldly, he faced the west always, saying the nembutsu, and was like one to whom all else was forgotten. (*Ichigon hodan*, in *Plain Words on the pure Land Way*, Kyoto, 1989, passage 98).

He is said to have discarded his priestly attainments and all the trappings of temple life, taking a wife and living a meager existence as a laborer. Nevertheless, he constantly uttered the nembutsu, aspiring for birth into Amida's land in the west, and hence though no longer a monk, neither was he immersed in mundane life. Shinran, describing the events of this period in the postscript to *Teaching, Practice and Realization*, also speaks of himself as "neither monk nor worldly" (*so ni arazu, zoku ni arazu*), and he is later recorded as saying, "I follow the example of Kyoshin" (*Gaijoshō*). He kept his robes, a sign of his abiding awareness of the nature of self-attachment and blind passions, and of his aspiration for enlightenment. At the same time, he had been branded a criminal and deprived of recognition as a monk, and shortly after his arrival in Echigo, he married. His wife, Eshinni, appears to have been the daughter of a landed, military steward of

the area named Miyoshi Tamenori. Together they began a family that would grow to six children.

Late in 1211, after five years in exile, Honen and Shinran were pardoned. Honen, who had previously received a partial pardon, was living near present Osaka; he immediately returned to the capital. It is at this point that we see evidence of a change in Shinran's attitude, for he did not take this opportunity to return to see his teacher, who died after only two months. It is sometimes suggested that his family situation did not allow for such travel, but if we consider the journeys that Shinran's own disciples would make to visit him in his old age, or his separation from his wife in his final decade, this explanation appears inadequate. Indeed, so natural has a desire for reunion seemed that one tradition claims Shinran did return, though not reaching Kyoto until after Honen's death. Perhaps the most plausible explanation is that, with his exile and experience in Echigo, Shinran had begun to probe a dimension of Pure Land thought in which he could expect no further guidance from Honen.

Honen was highly respected for his broad command of Buddhist teachings, which spanned the entire canon. Moreover, he adhered essentially to a monk's life even after embracing the sole practice of the nembutsu. At the same time, he confessed:

Although Buddhism is vast, in essence it is composed of no more than the three learnings [of precepts, meditation, and wisdom]. . . . But as for precepts, I myself do not keep a single one. In meditation, I have not attained even one. In wisdom, I have not attained the right wisdom of cutting off discriminative thinking and realizing the fruit of enlightenment.

While declaring his failure to fulfill any form of traditional practice, he goes on to say:

Without distinguishing between the wise and the foolish, those who uphold the precepts and those who break them, Amida Buddha come to welcome us (Words addressed to Kenko-bo)

Thus he teaches, "Just say the Name and be saved by Amida" (*Tannisho*, 2). No other practice or concern is necessary. *Just* saying the Name implies completely entrusting oneself to the Buddha, without designing or calculating in any way.

Honen himself, however, observed priestly precepts throughout his life, while devoting himself to recitation of the nembutsu, and also bestowed general moral precepts on others. At Yoshimizu, Shinran had shared Honen's way of life as a Tendai monk detached from the temple establishment. His situation, however, came to differ utterly in Echigo. Letting go of the final remnants of his monastic practice, he delved to the roots of religious life, reaching beyond the ordinary conceptions of wisdom

and ignorance, moral rectitude and wrong-doing, into the fundamental nature of human existence as illuminated by the Buddha's wisdom. His new awareness is expressed in the name that he chose for himself. Although the authorities had designated a lay name for him, Shinran states that since he was neither monk nor lay, he would go by the name Gutoku (foolish/shaven), which he used to the end of his life.

Concerning "foolish," Shinran states that the wise are inwardly sagacious while outwardly appearing foolish, while he himself, though inwardly foolish and ignorant, hypocritically displays the pretense of wisdom (*Gutokusho*). The term points to his awareness of deep self-attachment that warps all thoughts and feelings, however learned or upright one may appear. "Shaven," More literally "short-haired," was used to describe the hair of monks that had grown out longer than appropriate; it was employed as a term of derision for those who broke their precepts with no sign of repentance and indicated their essential criminality. Thus, Shinran refused the label of the state as a defrocked monk, only to embrace, at a deeper level beyond the relativities of monk and lay, his own nature as irremediably given to self-centeredness and wrong-doing.

One of the most forceful statements of the significance of Shinran's chosen name is by the modern philosopher Nishida Kitaro, in the essay "Gutoku Shinran":

Among people there are the wise and the foolish, the virtuous and the immoral. But however great it may be, human wisdom is human wisdom, human virtue human virtue. It is no different from the angles of a triangle, however long the sides may be, adding up to two right angles. (*from Shisaku to taiken*, trans. in *Tannisho: A Primer*)

However knowledgeable or insightful a person may be by our usual standards, or however good, such wisdom and goodness stand wholly upon a fundamental ignorance, a clinging to the perspective of the egocentric self, and can never lead beyond it. "Yet," Nishida continues:

When a person has simply turned completely about and abandoned such wisdom and virtue, he can attain new wisdom, and take on new virtue, and enter into new life. This is the living marrow of religion.

Shinran discovered such a turnabout or conversion, in which one abandons attachment to one's own wisdom and virtue, to be the genuine meaning of "just saying the Name." Thus, he stresses Honen's teaching that "people of the Pure Land tradition attain birth by becoming their foolish selves" (*Letters of Shinran*, p. 31). As long as one remains with the framework of human wisdom, one cannot know oneself as one truly is, but only a projection of

one's designs and judgments. As Nishida states, "The eye cannot see itself; the man on the mountain cannot know it entirety." Thus:

Every person, no matter who he is, must return to the original body of his own naked self; he must once let go from the cliff's ledge and come back to life after perishing, or he cannot know wisdom and virtue. In other words, only the person who has been able to experience deeply what it is to be "foolish/shaven" can know them. I wonder if Shinran's Gutoku is not "foolish/shaven" with this meaning.

Shinran states that he abandoned various other practices and took refuge in Amida's Vow in 1201, the year he became Honen's disciple, and to the end of his life he remained grateful to Honen as his teacher. In exile, however, stripped of his priestly status, he was brought even further to "return to the original body of his own naked self." Later he would declare, from his experience begun in Echigo, that the people at the bottom of the society—peddlers and hunters—"are none other than we, who are like stones and tiles" transmuted by the Buddha into gold (passage 7).

#### *Propagation in the Kanto Region*

Shinran remained in Echigo until 1214, then struck out further into the countryside, moving with his family to Hitachi province (present Ibaraki), northeast of present Tokyo. It is suggested that he was following migrations of farmers into the area, not far from the recently established Kamakura government, and also that Eshinni's family had connections in the region. An incident recorded in a letter by Eshinni illuminates his thoughts at this time. In route to Hitachi, Shinran resolved to chant the three Pure Land sutras one thousand times for the benefit of all beings. Part way through, however, he realized that this reflected a residue of attachment to practice, and that there was nothing necessary beyond saying the nembutsu. He therefore ceased, maintaining the conviction that the genuine response in gratitude to the Buddha is to entrust oneself to the Vow and to bring others to do so also.

We see in this incident both the deepening of his religious insight, which had been nurtured by his exile, and also his motivation for remaining in the provinces. In Echigo, his teaching activity seems to have been limited, for the name of only one disciple from the area survives in records. Nevertheless, there he experienced the reality of people with no opportunity for other study or practice awakening to the dharma through the nembutsu. Thus, he resolved to remain away from the world of academic Buddhism and to deepen his own self-awareness and his insight into the dharma by sharing it with the people of the countryside.

Shinran settled in Hitachi and actively spread the teaching there and in neighboring provinces, eventually building a large following. He established meeting places called *dojo* (J.; literally, "place of enlightenment"), which might

be private homes or even temples constructed for the purpose, and people gathered to hear the dharma. Followers included mainly farmers and tradesmen, but also members of the samurai class, and leaders of the various *dojo* emerged from the congregations. On the twenty-fifth of each month, the memorial day of Honen's death, sermons were given and donations collected. While the typical temple hall of the older schools housed a large statue of a Buddha and provided room only for a small number of monks to perform worship or practice, the Shin *dojo* allowed access to the dharma for the common people, and frequently the central image of worship was depicted on a hanging scroll.

Shinran spent twenty years in the Kanto area, until in his early sixties. Only one writing can be definitely attributed to this period, a copy of *Essentials of Faith Alone*, a brief tract by a Seikaku, who was a follow disciple of Honen. This work provides a lucid introduction to Honen's teaching in simple Japanese, and Shinran was to copy it at least six times for his disciples.

It is also thought that he worked on a draft of *Teaching, Practice and Realization* during this time. The date 1224, when he was fifty-two, occurs in the last chapter, but this does not necessarily indicate the year of completion. The order in which the chapters were composed is uncertain, and in any case the work underwent considerable revision over several decades. The state of the work while Shinran was in Kanto is unknown, for no early drafts survive.

This work is, as the full title explains, *A Collection of Passages Revealing the True Teaching, Practice and Realization of the Pure Land Way*. It consists almost wholly of passages drawn from the Buddhist canon in Chinese, interspersed with a small number of passages by Shinran himself, also in Chinese. It is sometimes said that he composed this work in order to answer the criticisms of Honen's teaching by monks of the traditional schools. Clearly it could be fully comprehended only by a person trained in Buddhist study, and it does include a message intended for the monks of the period. Shinran, however, did not circulate his work, and may not even have shown it to disciples while in Kanto. He first permitted a copy to be made when he was seventy-five. The impulse behind the work, then, lies less in polemics than in the profound gratitude he felt for the teaching:

Rare is it to come upon the sacred scriptures from the westward land of India and the commentaries of the masters of China and Japan, but now I have been able to encounter them. . . . Here I rejoice in what I have heard and extol what I have attained.  
(Preface)

The work of collecting and arranging important passages from the scriptures arises from the same source as his teaching among the common people, and manifests his desire to refine and sharpen his own religious awakening by

actively responding to the wisdom-compassion of the Buddha. His continuing self-reflection is also expressed in an incident similar to that on the way to Hitachi. In 1231, when suffering from a fever, he was tempted once more to take up recitation of the *Larger Sutra* in order to gain merit, but thinking back on his earlier experience, he again desisted.

About 1234, when in his early sixties, Shinran entrusted the *dojo* centers and their congregations scattered throughout the area to close disciples and returned to Kyoto. As with his move to Kanto twenty years earlier, the reasons for his return are not clear. It has been suggested that, with increasing government concern about the conduct in the unofficial nembutsu *dojo*, he felt his propagation activities being restricted. From the perspective of his later life, however, it seems more probable that the major reason was to pursue yet further his religious understanding, this time by seeking the time and resources for completing his literary work.

### *Kyoto*

The last stage of Shinran's life was outwardly uneventful. He was probably accompanied to Kyoto by his family, but by 1256 Eshinni returned to her native Echigo with three of their children to oversee property she had inherited. From then on, she and Shinran remained separated, though there is no sign of estrangement. Shinran seems to have dwelled in various places in the city, finally living with one of his younger brothers. His youngest daughter, Kakushinni, remained in Kyoto and married a person of the Hino clan. She tended Shinran in his old age, and afterwards established the gravesite and chapel that would grow into the Hongwanji, the main temple of the Shin school that claims him as its founder. He is also said to have been involved in the education of his grandson Nyoshin, born in 1235 to his son Zenran.

It appears, then, that Shinran lived a modest life. He reestablished contact with some of his relatives, but did not actively propagate his teaching. His only known means of support were gifts from his followers in Kanto, but he did not suffer deprivation. His life might be called one of retirement, but it extended for nearly three decades, and to the end he reveals through his remarkably energetic literary production, an active, probing mind, and an ever deepening and richer interior life of awakening.

Shinran seems to have spent the first decade after his return working on *Teaching, Practice and Realization*. His own manuscript copy survives (the Bando manuscript), and studies of the paper and calligraphic features indicate that it was made when he was about the age of sixty-three, with the process of revision and addition continuing until he was eighty. Since Shinran allowed a disciple to copy it in 1247, when he was seventy-five, we may assume that he felt the work complete at that time, though he continued

to make corrections. In another sense, he may never have felt that it was fully formed. It is at this time, however, that he turned to other writings.

During the first years on his return to Kyoto, Shinran also copied *Essentials of Faith Alone* repeatedly and *On Self-Power and Other Power* by Ryukan, another disciple of Honen, once. These were tracts in Japanese written for a wide audience. From 1248 on, however, he began to compose writings of his own in Japanese for his followers in Kanto, continuing until his death. These are discussed in the second part of this chapter. Here, we note simply that although Chinese was the medium of learning and of Buddhist scholarship, and though Shinran continued to write in that language also, his Japanese works are crucial for a full grasp of his thought. They are not mere simplifications for a popular audience, but attempts to communicate, with the accuracy available in the written language of his native tongue, the understanding he achieved as his religious realization matured in his old age.

Honen's following had gone their separate ways. Many had been subjected to repeated persecutions and prohibitions after his death, and in 1227 monks of Mount Hiei had even attacked Honen's grave. In that year, several disciples, including Ryukan, were exiled from the capital. Another disciple, Shoku, dissociated himself from the movement and carried on an active career as a preacher in Kyoto, gaining renown even in court circles. Still others built well-established followings elsewhere in the country. Shinran seems to have stood apart from all public turmoil, leading a quiet life devoted to writing. He could not escape, however, the rifts that developed in his own following in Kanto.

He had left the congregations to trusted leaders, but in his absence disputes arose. Some involved personal rivalries and jealousies; he seems to have had to admonish some leaders against bickering over followers or raising funds by teaching that one's status in the Pure Land corresponds to one's donations in the present. Others, however, were based on serious misunderstandings. The nature of the latter is clear from Shinran's surviving letters, which were often written in response to questions sent by troubled followers, and from *Tannisho* ("A record of Shinran's words set down in lamentation over departures from his teaching"). From these documents, we know that some of his followers even felt impelled to make the hazardous journey to Kyoto—"crossing the borders of more than ten provinces, undeterred by concern for bodily safety" (*Tannisho*, 2)—to resolve their doubts.

The most disruptive misunderstanding was the notion that Amida's Vow frees one from the generally accepted standards of morality. In 1252, within ten years after Shinran's return, a disciple from Kanto named Myokyo-bo visited Shinran in Kyoto with gifts and news of the various *dojo* centers. He related that a leader named Shinken-bo was teaching that people may give

themselves to any wrong-doing without fear, and that many were being led astray. In response, Shinran wrote a long letter (Passage 14), to be read at the various *dojo*, admonishing practitioners and explaining that a profound self-awareness arises as an aspect of true entrusting, making willful self-indulgence impossible.

A number of similar letters reveal that the problem was both deep-rooted and widespread. Despite Shinran's efforts to guide the Kanto community from Kyoto, the misunderstanding caused both dissension in the congregations and conflict with the larger society, and began to provoke the concern of local landowners and village heads. He therefore decided to send his eldest son Zenran to Kanto to resolve the crisis. After a time, however, Shinran began receiving reports that Zenran was imposing his authority by stressing his relationship with his father and claiming to have received a secret teaching from him. The consternation of followers was great, and many were deeply shaken; Shinran, characteristically, was later to declare this a valuable experience for them, for it revealed that their entrusting of themselves to the Vow was not yet genuine.

Zenran gained domination over large factions in some of the *dojo* centers, and he also resorted to approaching the Kamakura government in efforts to suppress rival groups. Though Shinran admonished him by letter, in the end he had no recourse to preserve the teaching in Kanto but to disown him. This occurred in 1256, and thereafter the controversy seems to have subsided. The disownment was no doubt a source of profound distress, but it reveals Shinran's character as a religious thinker, dedicated throughout his life to a pursuit of Buddhist truth or reality despite persecution, criminal punishment, virtual disregard from the Buddhist establishment, and now severance of the closest of human relationships.

Early in 1263, at the age of ninety, Shinran died, tended by his daughter. In his old age he complained of failing eyesight and forgetfulness, but his writings reveal an extraordinary intellectual vitality nearly to the end. It had been common for Pure Land followers to hope for miraculous evidence of Amida's presence at the moment of death—fragrances, falling blossoms, and a tranquil passing. Shinran rejects the significance of such signs, and from the fact that Eshinni felt it necessary to reassure their daughter of Shinran's stature after his death, we may assume that his final moments were ordinary and uneventful.

### **Characteristics of Shinran's Writings**

Shinran produced a large body of writings in a variety of forms, both prose and verse, in Chinese and Japanese. Viewed as a whole, however, his works are characterized by a striking consistency in content and mode of expression. There are two basic reasons for it.



First, virtually all of Shinran's writings stem from the latter half of his long life, after his basic thought had taken shape. *Teaching, Practice and Realization*, which probably took on its present form when he was in his sixties, is at once his earliest work and the most comprehensive and systematic presentation of his teaching, the product of several decades of careful reflection. The only prior writings are his annotated copies of the *Contemplation* and *Amida Sutras*, which cannot be considered original compositions and which directly reflect his study under Honen.

Thus, Shinran's thought appears fully developed in his initial, fundamental work, and his later writings, though they show a deepening of insight, conform to the understanding set forth in it.

Second, Shinran does not depart from the basic concepts, formulations, and organizing principles he adopted in this first, major work. His consistency in this regard becomes apparent when his writings are compared, for example, with those of his contemporary Pure Land thinker, Shoku. Shoku was one of Honen's earliest and closest disciples and aided the teacher in compiling *Passages on the Nembutsu Selected in the Primal Vow*. In his own works, however, he repeatedly adopts new sets of terms and concepts with which to frame and formulate Pure Land teachings. As a result, each work presents new difficulties in grasping his thought. Such problems, however, are not found in Shinran.

Another general characteristic of Shinran's writings is his adherence to the Pure Land tradition in the expression of his thought. As author, he presents a unique figure in the history of Japanese Buddhism, for not only did he forge into clarity a revolution in Buddhist thought, but he accomplished this by devoting himself to literary work that might in large measure be called translation. Although the term must be applied broadly in Shinran's case, he nonetheless stands conspicuous in a tradition that, until modern times, preferred to use the scriptures almost exclusively in Chinese.

Indeed, one of the salient features of Japanese Buddhism is its reliance on the Chinese canon. While the Chinese devoted enormous energy to translating Buddhist texts, some repeatedly in succeeding eras, and quickly made the translated canon the foundation of their study and practice, the Japanese instead adopted the Chinese translations as is and required of monks a reading and writing knowledge of Chinese. This was possible because, although the Chinese and Japanese languages are unrelated, Chinese characters had been adopted for written Japanese, and could be construed with some precision through the use of reading notes that recast the texts into the grammatical structures of Japanese.

Almost the entire corpus of Shinran's works may be said to be a presentation of the texts he considered central in the Pure Land scriptural tradition: in anthology and brief compilations (*Teaching, Practice and Realization* and other works), in annotation and close commentary (*Notes*),

and in translation (hymns). From the fact that Shinran encouraged his followers to read the tracts of fellow disciples of Honen and even made copies for them, it is apparent that he recognized the usefulness of works in ordinary, expository form. Nevertheless, with the notable exception of his letters, Shinran sought in his own writings to adhere to scriptural sources and render them comprehensible.

Perhaps the most graphic expression of Shinran's attitude may be seen in the hanging altar scrolls that he made late in life, during his last decade. He appears to have been the first to use scrolls inscribed with the characters of the Name as the central image of worship. He took as a model Sung dynasty portraits of Buddhist masters, which were in wide use among Buddhists as objects of worship. In a corner of such portraits, a verse eulogizing the figure was often inscribed. In adopting this format, Shinran reserved the central area of the vertical scrolls for the written Name, but also apportioned large areas both above and below for passages from the sutras and treatises of the masters. Thus, Amida Buddha was represented in the form of the Name, by which he manifests himself to beings, and in addition, the texts from the Pure Land tradition were revered as the Buddha's call to beings expressed through the teachings of Sakyamuni and the later masters.

#### *Methods of Exposition*

Shinran's adherence to the scriptural tradition has two sources. First, he conceived of the Buddha not as an object of worship, but as the activity of wisdom and compassion arising from truth or reality itself and working to awaken beings by taking the form of the Buddha's Name. Through Sakyamuni's teaching and the words of the masters, one can come to hear the Name, which is for Amida Buddha's enlightened mind to open forth in one's own mind as the true entrusting of oneself to his Vow. Thus, the Primal Vow is active and vital in the words of those who have awakened to it and expressed it down through the history of the transmission in various lands and cultures. Out of his reverence and gratitude for the teaching, Shinran sought to respond to it by translating it and bringing it alive in the present.

Second, Shinran discovered methods by which, through reading the Chinese texts of the Pure Land tradition, he was able to disclose the fundamental activity of the Vow at their source and thus articulate clearly the nature and significance of realizing true entrusting. While in *Essentials of Faith Alone* Seikaku lends immediacy to the Vow by drawing comparisons with homely details from ordinary life and attitudes, Shinran, with the same purpose, seeks rather to enable even the illiterate to grasp the Chinese of the scriptures by providing character by character explanations. His concern is to reveal the complex meaning harbored in the words of the writings, a meaning not easily amenable to discursive exposition, and he does this by taking the opportunity for interpretation afforded by the Chinese texts.

Written Chinese, for example, often includes no explicit indication of the subject or tense of an action. Further, single characters may possess a variety of dictionary meanings. These features of the language enable Shinran to interpret basic passages from the sutras in radically new ways, departing from the understandings that had been maintained by previous masters and reformulating the teachings so that they express with great precision a path of realization wholly consonant with fundamental Mahayana thought (see, for example, Passages 1 and 2).

The most direct means for conveying his understanding of the Chinese passages is, of course, translation into Japanese, and he provides such translation, most notably in his Japanese hymns. In addition, however, he employs a number of other techniques in his writings. The most important in his collections of scriptural passages is the indication of “reading notes” (*kaeri-ten*) to the Chinese text, which he applies throughout. These define the order in which the Chinese characters are to be read when converted into Japanese. By following them, one casts the original text into Japanese by reading the individual characters apart from their order in Chinese. Such notes may also indicate grammatical relationships between concepts and, through the use of Japanese honorific verb endings, whether the subject is the Buddha or a human being. An important instance of Shinran’s use of the latter occurs in his interpretation of the *Larger Sutra* (Passage 2). The sutra states that beings should direct the merit they have accumulated through practice toward their attainment of the Pure Land; Shinran interprets it to mean that Amida Buddha gives his virtue to beings.

Another technique of interpretation is the selection and arrangement of scriptural quotations. This is of course a common and forceful method for presenting an understanding of the tradition, but beyond simple compilation, Shinran at times engages in abridgment, omitting material he finds unsuitable and even changing the order of the quoted portions; altering the meaning by extricating passages from their original context and providing a new context through juxtaposition with other passages; and selecting variant texts when he finds they better express the teaching, even if it means quoting secondhand rather than from the original. While these techniques are not common, they reveal Shinran’s effort to represent the central, living tradition as it has manifested itself in the Pure Land writings.

Another feature of Shinran’s writings is the notation of Japanese definitions of terms at the sides of characters and in margins. These “left-side notes” (*sakun*, the right side was reserved for reading-order notes) appear in both Japanese and Chinese writings. Although the definitions at times seem irrelevant to the specific context of the character, they reveal Shinran’s concern to consider each character in its various meanings and nuances in order to unfold the full implications of the text.

A development of the “left-side notes” may be seen in his Japanese works titled Notes (*mon'i*), which are commentaries on various passages from the Chinese scriptures. There, he often lists several definitions for each character of a passage, then employs all the various meanings in paraphrasing it, freely filling out the connotations he perceives in it, though at times departing from the literal intent. These works are extremely important for understanding Shinran’s thought, for they express meanings that cannot be clearly indicated solely through his Japanese reading annotations appended to Chinese texts.

While Shinran at points speaks of the passages he quotes as “clear testimony” to his assertions, readers trained in traditional interpretations would certainly have found his methods questionable. His fundamental attitude, however, is not to prove the truth of the teaching through marshalling supporting testimony from reliable past masters. Rather, the verbal expressions of the Pure Land tradition illuminate the truth because they arise from the awakening to Amida’s Vow. It is this realization that is most fundamentally expressed, and not necessarily the superficial, literal meaning. Thus he states:

If Amida’s Primal Vow is true and real, Sakyamuni’s teaching cannot be lies. If the Buddha’s teaching is true and real, Shan-tao’s commentaries cannot be lies. If Shan-tao’s commentaries are true and real, can what Honen said be a lie? If what Honen said is true and real, then surely my words cannot be empty. (*Tannisho*, 2)

The significance of verbal expression in the Pure Land tradition is to manifest in human history the truth and reality of Amida’s Vow. Thus, Shinran sought to respond to the tradition by disclosing its roots.

### **Shinran’s Works**

As we have noted, the growth and development of Shinran’s thought is not displayed in his literary works, for they belong to the latter part of his life, and almost all of them apart from *Teaching, Practice and Realization* were written after he had reached the age of seventy-six. It is convenient, then, to consider them by classifying the different forms in which he wrote, rather than taking them up chronologically. A listing indicating their Japanese titles and order of composition is included in the appendices.

#### *Systematic Works*

*Teaching, Practice and Realization* is, as we have noted, a compilation of passages from the sutras and Pure Land writings of India, China, Korea and Japan, all in Chinese. It consists of a preface and six chapters:

Preface

Chapter 1	True Teaching
Chapter 2	True Practice
Chapter 3	True Shinjin (or Entrusting; with special preface)
Chapter 4	True Realization
Chapter 5	True Buddha and Land
Chapter 6	Transformed Buddha-Bodies and Lands (includes postscript)

This work may be called systematic because of the various features Shinran employs to organize his material. Here, three basic principles may be noted. First, Chapters 1 to 5 reveal the true Pure Land teaching and Chapter 6 sets forth the provisional teaching. While Honen adopted the principle of selecting the right practice and leaving aside other Pure Land doctrines and practices, Shinran develops the concept of certain Pure Land teachings as provisional, intended to guide those who, because of the impediments of their self-attachment, cannot enter the true teaching directly. He stresses that true realization is extremely difficult, and states that he himself underwent a process of first taking up and then discarding provisional teachings in his path to true entrusting (see comment, Passage 5).

Second, Chapters 1 to 4 treat the cause of birth in the Pure Land and the nature of attainment, and Chapter 5 presents the nature of Amida Buddha and his Pure Land.

Third, Chapter 4 can itself be divided into two sections, with Chapter 1 through the first part of Chapter 4 revealing aspects of Amida Buddha's activity to bring beings to birth in the Pure Land, while the latter part of Chapter 4 reveals the Buddha's activity to enable beings to return from the Pure Land to this world to guide others to enlightenment. Thus, in Chapters 1 to 4, there are two general conceptual schemes. One is the two aspects of Amida's directing his virtue to beings, and the second is the general Buddhist analysis of the path to enlightenment as composed of teaching, practice, and realization or enlightenment (Chapter 3 on shinjin may be considered an elucidation of practice).

In each chapter, Shinran follows a procedure of arranging passages in a particular section chronologically, beginning with the sutras and moving on to the masters of India, China and Japan. However, the chapters themselves often develop thematically rather than by logical argument, and the wealth of material gives a greater sense of deep resonance than tight exposition. In this respect, the organization within individual chapters may in places share more in common with the sequential or associative principles of Japanese literary works than with the logical structures of treatises in the West.

The second systematic prose work, *Passages on the Pure Land Way (Jodo monrui jusho)*, may be considered in condensation of the first four chapters of *Teaching, Practice and Realization* consisting of Shinran's own passages and the most essential quotations. It therefore forms a convenient

summary of the essential structure of his thought. Notable in this work is the fusion of the sections on practice and shinjin or true entrusting, revealing the interrelationship of these two concepts. Further, the central quotations are the sutra passages in which Sakyamuni teaches that Amida's Vows have been fulfilled, and the Vows themselves do not appear. This indicates the foundation upon which Shinran established his unique interpretation of Amida's Vows.

#### Verse

Apart from his collections of passages, Shinran selected the form of verse, in both Chinese and Japanese, for comprehensive presentation of the Pure Land teaching and tradition. By employing the concise and easily memorized form of verse, he embedded the crucial terms and concepts of the tradition in a comprehensive framework that might be conveyed to ordinary people.

**HYMNS IN CHINESE** Shinran composed two extended hymns in Chinese, both borrowing heavily from the writings of the tradition. The first, "Hymn of True Shinjin and the Nembutsu" (*Shoshin nembutsu ge*), is included in Chapter on Practice, and forms a summary of the Pure Land teaching and the development of the tradition through the works of seven masters, considered in historical order (Passage 3). Though Shinran never employs the term "seven masters," the figures he selected for praise and quotation in this hymn form the mainstream of the tradition as he viewed it.

The second, "Hymn of the Two Gates of Entrance [into the Pure Land] and Emergence [again in this world]" (*Nyushutsu nimon ge*), focuses on the teachings of Vasubandhu and T'an luan, whose influence on Shinran's thought in part distinguishes him from Honen. The later Chinese masters are also presented.

**HYMNS IN JAPANESE** The first works that Shinran undertook after *Teaching, Practice and Realization* were two sets of hymns in Japanese (*wasan*), *Hymns on the Pure Land (Jodo wasan)* and *Hymns on the Masters (Koso wasan)*, the basic drafts of which were completed in 1248. Shinran called them "softened praises," taking the term for "Japanese" (*wa*) in another of its meanings ("mild," "approachable") and thereby expressing his intent to render the teachings in an easily understandable form for ordinary people. The form he adopts (four-line stanzas of twelve-syllable lines) had been widely used for Pure Land worship since the time of Genshin, and had even become a popular song form. Shinran's hymns, however, frequently retain terms and phrases directly from the Chinese of the Pure Land writings, and surely required considerable explanation in the meeting places in Kanto. Thus, even in these "softened praises" Shinran added annotation to many of the terms and marks to indicate the proper intonation in Chinese.

*Hymns on the Pure Land* (118 four-line hymns) includes nearly fifty verses that closely follow hymns by T'an-luan based on the *Larger Sutra*. The remainder of the verses are based chiefly on the three Pure Land sutras and various other sutras.

*Hymns on the Masters* (119 hymns) takes up the seven masters in historical order, conveying both biographical information and their central contributions to the Pure Land teaching.

Shinran composed a third major set of *wasan* nine years later, *Hymns on the Right, Semblance and Last Dharma-Ages* (*Sozomatsu wasan*, 114 hymns). The basic theme is the self-reflection expressed as the historical consciousness of decline in beings' reception of the dharma. Throughout all periods, however, Amida's Primal Vow remains the vehicle for attaining enlightenment.

Shinran also composed two sets of hymns in praise of Prince Shotoku, relating biographical events and his importance in the transmission of Buddhism to Japan.

#### *Notes*

The three works titled *Notes* are Japanese commentaries on passages from the Chinese writings. The sentences of the brief scriptural passages are taken up individually, each character defined, and the entire sentence given in paraphrase. In this way, Shinran develops nuances that often depart from the literal meanings of the passages, but that reveal important aspects of his teaching.

It should be noted, however, that the passages explained in these works have in general not been selected and arranged by Shinran, but are taken from other sources to which he is adding commentary for those who cannot read Chinese. Thus, these works consist of series of passages with commentary, and are not organized as coherent wholes.

*Notes on 'Essentials of Faith Alone'* (*Yuishinsho mon'i*) provides commentary to the Chinese passages quoted in Seikaku's *Essentials of Faith Alone*, a general presentation of Honen's Pure Land teaching. It is therefore not a commentary to Seikaku's tract itself, which is in accessible Japanese, and while treating the quoted passages in the order that they occur in the tract, Shinran shows little concern for the context in which Seikaku cites them. Even with passages that hold little significance in *Teaching, Practice and Relization*, however, Shinran develops important explanations that occur nowhere else in his writings.

*Notes on Once-calling and Many-calling* (*Ichinen-tanen mon-i*) is similarly a commentary to be read with a tract that Shinran copied for his followers, Ryukan's *Clarification of Once-calling and Many-calling* (*Ichinen-tanen fumbetsu ji*). This brief tract deals with major issue among nembutsu

practicers, and several of the passages quoted are central to the tradition. To explain the sutra passage teaching that Amida's Eighteenth Vow has been fulfilled—a critical passage in Shinran's thought—he not only gives Japanese commentary, but provides a sequence of nine other passages, with accompanying explanation, that augment or clarify its significance. We see here the same technique that informs much of *Teaching, Practice and Realization*, in which thought is developed through the resonance provided by different expressions of essentially the same teaching.

*Notes on the Inscriptions of Sacred Scrolls (Songo shinzo meimon)*, employs the same method of word for word commentary, but the passages explained are drawn from the scrolls hung in altars. These scrolls were of two types. The traditional form included the portrait of a venerable master and a Chinese inscription either written in praise or drawn from his writings. The second type, devised by Shinran late in his life, held the written characters of Amida's Name (either Namu-amida-butsu, which is a transliteration of the Sanskrit, or a version as translated into Chinese) and inscriptions from the sutras and masters. *Notes on the Inscriptions on Sacred Scrolls* explains the passages appearing on various scrolls, beginning with those on scrolls of the Name, then taking up scrolls of the masters in historical order, ending with the inscription on a portrait of Shinran himself (Passage 3).

#### *Letters*

Over forty letters survive, chiefly in four overlapping collections. The major collection is *Lamp for the Latter Age (Mattosho)*, translated as *Letters of Shinran*, which includes twenty-two letters, all clarifying the teaching. These letters date from 1251 on, when doctrinal problems began to arise among the following in Kanto, and many are written in direct response to questions. They treat problems in the lives of practicers concretely (for example, not awaiting Amida's aid at death, not giving in to self-indulgence, and the meaning of self-power) and also reveal Shinran's concern to communicate the transformed condition of nembutsu practicers as "equal to the Buddhas" and the same as Maitreya Bodhisattva" (Passage 13).

#### *Miscellaneous Writings*

In addition to *Teaching, Practice and Realization*, Shinran compiled two brief collections of passages. *Passages on the Modes of Birth in the Three Pure Land Sutras (Jodo sangyo ojo monrui)* is organized around his distinction of true and provisional Pure Land teachings. There are two forms of provisional teaching: performing various practices to attain birth (literal teaching of Amida's Nineteenth Vow and of the *Contemplation Sutra*) and performing nembutsu recitation as meritorious act (Twentieth Vow and *Smaller Sutra*). The true teaching is saying the nembutsu entrusting oneself



to Amida's working (Eighteenth Vow, *Larger Sutra*). Those who follow the provisional teachings are born in transformed lands while those who realize true entrusting are born in the true Pure Land. This configuration of three Vows, three sutras, and three modes of birth may reflect a form of systematization that Shinran learned on Mount Hiei, but the development of the concept of provisional teachings within the Pure Land way is an important aspect of his thought (see Passage 5).

The second collection is *Passages on the Two Aspects of Amida Tathagata's Directing of Virtue* (*Nyorai nishu eko mon*). This work of several pages assembles passages, most notably from Amida's Vows, illuminating the nature of Amida's activity to give the virtues of enlightenment to beings.

Another brief work is *On the Virtues of Amida Tathagata's Name* (*Mida nyorai myogo toku*), which explains the twelve kinds of radiance mentioned in epithets for Amida in the *Larger Sutra*.

One further work is *Gutoku's Notes* (*Gutokusho*), comprising two fascicles of notes and outlines of important concepts and conceptual schemes. The first fascicle is devoted mainly to comprehensive classifications of the Buddhist teachings, and the second to Shan-*tao's* analysis of the three minds or essential attitudes taught in the *Contemplation Sutra*. While a manuscript copy bears the date 1255, it has also been suggested that the contents reflect a late ordering of notes originally made while studying under Honen.

### *Compilation*

In addition to the various tracts Shinran copied—Seikaku's *Essentials of Faith Alone*, Ryukan's *Clarification of Once-calling and Many-calling* and *On Self-Power and Other Power*, and *Words on the World Beyond* (*Gose monogatari*)—he also made a major compilation of the words of Honen. *Collections Showing the Way to the West* (*Saiho shinan sho*) includes a large number of writings, letters, and records of words and events, and as the earliest surviving compilation of its kind is a major work in Honen studies. The effort manifested in this undertaking reveals Shinran unflinching reverence for his teacher.