

## Introduction to Shin Buddhism

Shin Buddhism or *Jōdo Shinshū* is a teaching that grew out of the *Mahāyāna* Buddhist tradition and was clarified by Shinran Shōnin (1173–1262/63), a Buddhist priest in Japan. Its foundation is based on three sutras (recorded sermons of Shakyamuni Buddha), the *Sutra on the Buddha of Measureless Life* (commonly referred to as the “Larger Sutra”), the *Sutra on Contemplating the Buddha of Measureless Life* (“Contemplation Sutra” or “Meditation Sutra”), and the *Sutra on Amida Buddha* (“Smaller Sutra”). These are the principal teachings of what is called Pure Land Buddhism.

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

Shinran shared a similar path. He entered the monastery at the age of nine, then spent twenty years in study of the Tendai teachings. The experience, however, left him empty and feeling far away from the awakening the Buddha described. He left the monastery in 1201, and joined the Sangha established by Hōnen. In his teacher, he saw a totally different model of a Buddhist teacher, a person who considered himself first and foremost a *bonbu*, an ordinary and unenlightened being whose mind was clouded by ignorance and

filled with self-centeredness, and exhibited total humility in all aspects of his life.

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

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

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

Pure Land Buddhism has often been incorrectly described as a theistic version of Buddhism, with Amida Buddha in the role of a god leading us to “salvation” expressed as birth in the Pure Land. Shinran’s understanding, however, was that Amida Buddha was not a mythical Buddha who promised salvation to anyone who repeated his name, but rather, a symbol for the Dharma itself.

Shin Buddhism, therefore, is a teaching which brings about a true understanding of the life of suffering the Buddha described and the ignorance which creates it. It is a path of Buddhism that shows that awakening is available to all beings.

It is a path for those who are struggling to survive, who do not have the opportunities to live in monasteries and devote their lives to study and training, who cannot, through their own powers, polish their lives and climb the ladder towards enlightenment.

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