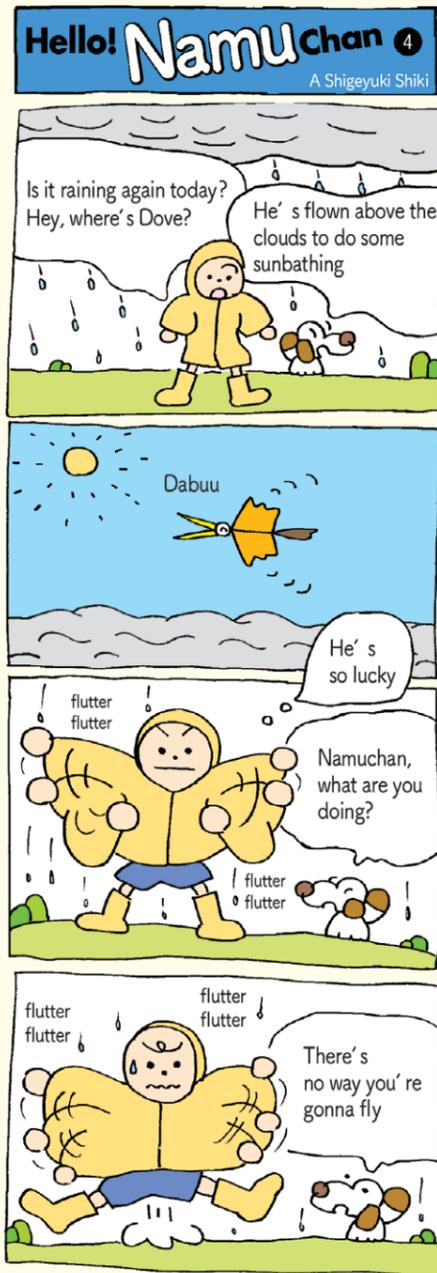


# Hōnen

A Collection of Buddhist Sermons by Jodo Shu Priests from around the World



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## Merit dwells only in those who say that phrase

By Rev. Kodo Tanaka  
Jodoshu North America Buddhist Missions

How is “a person” depicted in both English and Japanese? In English, the subject of a person is always “I”, which consists of “one” line standing. It may be because he/she is independent as an individual created by God. In Japanese, a person (hito) is depicted as 人, which looks like two lines leaning against each other. This glance may tell us that no one can live alone. But let us think of this appearance as that no phenomenon consists of a single condition.

How about a phenomenon, “I see things.”? My eyes can see because there is light. What about flowers? A seed needs sunlight, rain, and good soil to sprout. A sprout also needs a stable condition to receive them to blossom. A seed is a cause and a flower is its effect. In between the relation of this “cause and effect”, there are such conditions as the sun, rain, and good soil, that support a seed to grow. In Buddhism, these conditions are called “en (縁)” and all phenomena in this world are regarded as “en-gi (縁起 Phenomena that arise by conditions)”, which

is subject to change depending on conditions.

“What made me exist in this world?” From the perspective of Western monotheistic religions, it is because God created us. On the other hand, if seen from Buddhism, which upholds the aforementioned teaching of “en-gi”, this is because there are parents. But the parents were also babies when they were born and had another pair of parents who raised them. Please try counting the number of individuals who made it possible for you to be born, like 2 parents, 4 grandparents, and ascend 10 generations. How many individuals are there? It is 1,024, all of who are related from the past to your present life. It does not end at the 10th generation and goes on. It is immeasurable.



We all embrace ourselves more than anyone as described in the legend of Sakyamuni Buddha's birth “I alone am most noble,” and it is true for all of us. It is called “otagai-sama” in Japanese (“everyone's the same”). This I think is a key notion to tackling any difficulties in one's relationship with others. No one can live only prioritizing one's circumstances because all others have their own as well. If based upon this truth, to deal with any human relationship, we are encouraged to exercise acts of thoughtfulness to others, verbally and phys-



Hōnen Shōnin (1133-1212)  
Courtesy of Saishoin Temple, Tokyo

## The Founder of Jodo Shu

Hōnen studied and practiced Buddhism at Mt. Hiei, the center of Buddhist study at the time.

He read through all of the Buddhist scriptures available and it was Master Shantao's commentary on the Meditation Sutra which inspired him to put aside all practices other than Nenbutsu. He had the conviction that only the Nenbutsu was the right activity that would lead to salvation without fail, for it accorded with the essential vow of Amida Buddha.

This religious conviction occurred when he was 43 years old. After realizing the truth of Nenbutsu, Hōnen left Mt. Hiei for Kyoto and began to spread the teaching of Nenbutsu. In the spring of 1175, he founded Jodo Shu.

ically. The metal attitude behind these actions is called “omoi-yari” in Japanese; to put others first.

However, it is a different matter whether we can exercise acts of thoughtfulness or not, even though we recognize the aforementioned truth. Let us assume this truth of “otagai-sama” is a wallet sank at the bottom of a pond and our hearts the pond. If this pond ripples with muddy water, the wallet is impossible to be seen. It is the state of our mind that is occupied by our own business. Unable to see the truth at the bottom being obstructed by muddy water, the speech and action expressed from this state of mind should be in disaccord with the truth. For us to face the truth, we need first to calm down the ripple of the pond and clear the water in it.

This is why Buddhism promotes many practices that accompany the participation of our verbal and physical actions and that encourage one to lead his/her life with a certain practice to nurture the purity and calmness in their hearts. In Jodo Shu, Nembutsu, the recitation of “Namu Amida Butsu” is the very practice that is encouraged to exercise not once but a lifetime.

Although you could not make your verbal/physical actions properly even if you tried, it is all right.

Hōnen Shōnin teaches us that we all are ordinary sentient mortals who could not practice what is right even though we understand it conceptually. Nembutsu is here for us, who needs external support that would help us to repent on wrong actions and stay on the right course to live fully each day. All we need is to cultivate our faith through our commitment to daily recitations that the phrase “Namu Amida Butsu” contains the divine merit of Amida Buddha’s wisdom and compassion and it is for all of us, with no exception, who vocalizes that phrase.

I often receive a call from those who seek advice to deal with worries that bother his/her life and like to think of them as external problems. In many cases, they would ask, “What would happen if I say Nembutsu as you recommended?” Who knows! Whatever happens, it dwells only in those who say that phrase. What is great about Nembutsu is simplicity and equality that no one can say on his/her behalf.



## Hōnen’s Message of Hope

By Rev. Tetsuyu Wilson  
Jodo Shu Buddhist Community of Australia

Central to Hōnen’s teaching is the Nembutsu, the promise of leaving this world of suffering and being born in Amida’s Paradise. This teaching brought hope to the people in his time and it has continued to give hope down through the ages and it will continue to give hope to future generations.

As people were leaving Amidaji to go home after our Obon ceremony, one man, let’s call him Sam, stayed behind and standing before our statue of Amida began to recite the Nembutsu. Now, in Australia and globally, life has been becoming increasingly difficult due to the rising cost of living. Here, prices for electricity and gas, petrol and food have

increased significantly. Added to this is the sharp increase in bank interest rates. Some people can barely repay their mortgage while others face exorbitant rent hikes. Further adding to household bud-



Hawaiian Hula Dance Club members performing at Obon



Obon Ceremony

get constraints is stagnant wage growth where inflation outstrips wage growth by threefold.

As a result, homelessness is on the rise in Australia and charities here are seeing a dramatic increase in the number of people needing food and clothing. According to one charity, people are limiting their showers to every second or third day, skipping their medication to make it last longer, turning off the heater to save on electricity bills, and forgoing meals to make sure their children can eat. Sam is one of these people.

Of course, things in Australia are not as dire as they were in Hōnen’s times. Then, people in Japan had to face plague, famine, and civil wars. And, in this age of Mappo, they despaired knowing that there was no way to end the relentless cycle of Samsara. The suffering of this life would only be repeated in the next. However, Hōnen assured them that escape from the burning house of Samsara was possible through recitation of the Nembutsu. And, 850 years later Sam stands before the statue of Amida in Brisbane and fervently recites ten repetitions of the Nembutsu. He tells me that no mat-



Musical Performance by Members at Obon

ter how tough things may get in his life, his trust in Amida’s promise gives him hope. On hearing this I was moved to tears. Tears of joy.

Economists tell us that our desperate financial situation will take at least two years before we can see any improvement. With this prediction we can see light at the end of the tunnel, however, two years is a long time to endure adversity. Many people will be forced to make some drastic changes in their lives to see out these bleak years. Fortunately, Hōnen’s message of hope will give us the support we need to overcome the challenges ahead.

Namu Amida Butsu



The Light of Amida Shines on Everyone

## Profile



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It’s up to you.



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- Motto  
It’s not what you do in life that matters, it’s how you do it.