THE LIFE OF SHINRAN SHONIN:
THE JOURNEY TO SELF-ACCEPTANCE

BY

ALFRED BLOOM
Associate Professor of Religion, University of Oregon

Introduction

Shinran’s life has great historical interest because it was the chrysalis within which a new and distinctive form of Buddhist piety and thought developed. His religious experience gave him a penetrating insight into the evil nature of human existence which became the foundation for his understanding that salvation is through faith alone. Just as this perception is historically significant, the life out of which it arose also gains in historical importance. The course of his life has a direct relation to the thought which he formulated for it is quite unlikely had he not been separated from his master Hōnen, nor chosen to live a life among the peasants of the eastern provinces would he have contributed to the development of Pure Land tradition in such a creative manner as his thought reveals.

As is natural in the case of influential personalities, stories grow up which have the purpose to stress his greatness in overt ways. In the case of religious teachers it is not uncommon to illustrate points of doctrine in events of the teacher’s life. Thus numerous tendentious tales may appear.

The life of Shinran is not exceptional in this regard. Hence it is a primary aim of this study to sift the materials relating to his biography in order to provide a reasonable account of the course of his career. It is not the intention of this work to criticise scholars of Japanese religions for accepting, even though tentatively, stories given in the tradition about great leaders, since in many cases direct knowledge of the Japanese language and the availability of critical studies has been lacking. It is hoped that this study can fill some lacuna in a critical inquiry into the life and thought of Shinran.
In addition to sifting the various stories concerning Shinran in the tradition, our inquiry will also be concerned with presenting information on certain significant problems of Shinran's life which have attracted the attention of recent Japanese scholars. Among these are the marriage of Shinran and Eshinni and his family; the nature of religious heresies in Kanto and the tragic separation of father and son, and the social composition of Shinran's disciples.

The information which we glean from the various traditions and historical sources reveals four basic periods in Shinran's life. The first period concerns his entrance into the monastic life and his stay on Mount Hiei. It was during this time that his spiritual conflict, uncertainty and dissatisfaction arose. The second period centers about his conversion to Hōnen's teaching. This was the time of discovery. The third begins with his exile in Echigo and includes the later period of preaching in the Kantō region.

Here his insights into the meaning of Pure Land doctrine deepened, and new and original concepts were forged. The fourth period covers the time after he retired to Kyōto to devote himself to writing and interpreting the faith for his disciples. This last period may be called the time of definition and clarification.

The Period of Religious Dissatisfaction (1181-1201)

Shinran is believed to have been born in 1173 as the son of Arinori and related to the Fujiwara clan through the Hino family, according to tradition. 1) While his mother's name and clan connections are completely unknown, tradition claims she was Kikko, the daughter of Minamoto Yoshichika. 2) It appears that he was the eldest of four or five


2) No mention is made of Shinran's mother in the Denne, but in the Shōtoden of the Takada school of Shinshū, she is said to be of Minamoto origin. See Shinran Zenshū (Tōkyō: Futshūsha, 1958), V, 172. Yamada, op. cit., 36-39. Nanyu Hirose, "Shinrin Shōnin no Shusse," Shinshū no Sekai, II-9 (August 1922), 195 points out that there are great chronological difficulties if Kikko is accepted as Shinran's mother. She must have been born before 1110 when Yoshichika was put to death. Therefore she would have been at the improbable age of sixty when he was born.