

Shinnyo-en: Buddhism for Our Times

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My name is Tony Giannakoulas. I serve at Shinnyo-en as one of the staff who work on the English publications and educational materials. I've been in the Shinnyo-en community for almost 17 years now. When I arrived in Japan, I was eager to explore anything Japanese, especially Buddhist temples, since I already considered myself Buddhist. By that time, I was especially convinced that Buddhism had the answers that I was seeking. But I didn't know how to really find those answers. I wasn't a member of any organized Buddhist group then. From having read many things already, my head was full of ideas and theory, but what I lacked was practice—an actual way to express what I knew in my head. This is what Shinnyo-en gave me. It's the greatest gift I think I will ever receive in my life.

True enlightenment in Buddhism involves not only wisdom, but also loving concern for other people's suffering. When these two aspects work together, that is when a person finds real happiness, and also becomes a true teacher who can show others the way to enlightenment and happiness. I had yet to realize deep in my heart that being Buddhist meant you had to express universal virtues, like kindness, in everyday life. I still had the misconception that nirvana was more about realizing some idealist vision of the principles that govern the universe than about connecting and caring for others as if everyone was your own family.

The Founder

Shinjou Irou, the founder of Shinnyo-en, passed away in 1989 at the age of 83. He is also known as "Kyoushu" which is a Japanese Buddhist term for "guru." He grew up in the Yamanashi area of Japan, and from an early age, he felt a calling toward spirituality of some sort. Despite being an ordinary family man and working as an engineer, during his spare time, he used all his knowledge and piety to encourage others and give counsel concerning personal and professional problems. He eventually decided on the Buddhist path to answer his calling to live for the sake of helping others, which was the same calling as Shakyamuni Buddha had 2,500 years earlier.

Founder Shinjo was ordained into the priesthood in Kyoto at the Daigoji monastery of Shingon esoteric Buddhism. The training in Shingon is said to awaken the cosmic self, which is one's buddha nature and the source of innate spiritual power. His motivation, though, was in finding a way to help ordinary people do the same. He was eager to do so, but as long as he remained part of the Shingon tradition, he couldn't reveal all its secrets unless someone went through the same monastic training that he had.

Unfortunately, most of modern Buddhism around the world is like this today. Unless a person is willing to make a monastic commitment, it is very difficult, if not outright impossible, to achieve a high level of enlightenment. However, the founder's mastery of Shingon esoteric Buddhism qualified him to start his own lineage, or denomination, and after World War II, he and his followers branched off to become administratively independent. This new start paved the way for the shift toward making the goal of Buddhism as accessible to lay devotees as it was to monastics. He felt the key lay in the Nirvana Sutra. After reading it, he realized, with great excitement, that it pointed to lay practice as having the same potential for enlightenment as monastic practice. He saw in it the same depth of wisdom that he had acquired in the esoteric Shingon tradition. And with it as a tool, he could begin to teach lay people how to walk a path to the same liberating insight that he had cultivated.

Founder Shinjo's wife Tomoji (also known by her religious name of Shoujuin) also played an important role in the establishment of the training methods. She assisted Founder Shinjo until her passing in 1967. Her way of being also demonstrated the Buddhist teaching in full flower. Founder Shinjo often said, "If you would like to know how to apply Buddhism, observe Shoujuin." She was a good example of the practical demonstrating the theoretical, the spirit filling the form.

Basics of Buddhism

I'm sure all of you know the basic concepts of Buddhism. The goal of Buddhism is to become a Buddha, in other words, an "awakened one." In short, we wake up to the reality around us. Actually, that's what the word "shinnyo" in Shinnyo-en means-it's a Buddhist term for the underlying reality of everything; the true form; the essence; the essential quality that makes something what it is; its most basic character. But if we make it an intellectual pursuit, something removed from the context of our everyday life, then it's not true awakening. It is empty and has no real substance. And real happiness eludes us.

As you know, Buddhism developed from the teachings of a man who became known as Shakyamuni, the Buddha. As a practical and philosophical system, it took shape over many centuries as succeeding generations developed the teachings further and adapted them to each unique culture or society. It was always meant to evolve with each generation. It was one of the things that made Shakyamuni's message so powerful and relevant. The founder of Shinnyo-en did this very thing. It was what motivated him to continue despite the many challenges (difficulties) he faced.

In Buddhism, all rituals, images, worship, prayer, meditation, and other material forms are just tools to help you reach your goal. And those tools can always be reshaped or even discarded when no longer necessary. This flexibility and open-mindedness may be one of the reasons we don't have a supreme figure that we name in Buddhism. It was a conscious decision by Shakyamuni not to do so, because human beings tend to get stuck on it, and even go so far as to judge their own god or gods as better than others. That doesn't mean we deny the existence of something divine, or spiritual power, it's just that primary and more important than anything else is walking the path, or applying the teachings, that help us become divine ourselves.

The Nirvana Sutra

Earlier I mentioned the Mahaparinirvana Sutra (or Nirvana Sutra, for short). Out of the various scriptures that exist in Buddhism, it has a central role in Shinnyo-en's teachings, although the other sutras of Buddhism are also part of Shinnyo-en's doctrinal foundations. The Nirvana Sutra is considered the final teaching of the Buddha, and we believe, the culmination of the Buddha's 45-year ministry. It highlights many of the main points of the Buddhist canon and gives the hopeful message that everyone can achieve buddhahood themselves. All they need is the will, determination, proper guidance, and practice.

There are 4 principles that set the Sutra off when it was composed sometime around the 3rd century:

1. Through faith and practice, the Buddha is always with you
2. Even the worst evildoer can be spiritually liberated if the will is there
3. The concept of "permanence-bliss-self-purity," which means that nirvana is forever present, joyful, related to one's unique character, and spiritually purifying
4. Everyone without exception has a Buddha nature, the capacity to attain Buddhahood

The founder of Shinnyo-en created a foundation, a path, for all kinds of people to be able to

endeavor and make these principles a reality in their lives. Whether you even consider yourself a Buddhist or a religious person is not important. All it takes is your sincere effort. You can even continue to practice your original faith at the same time. What will probably happen is that you'll come to understand that faith more deeply and appreciate it more. That's what happened in my case, and many others I've heard about. In Shinnyo-en, and in true Buddhism, we don't convert from something else. We simply practice and add our Buddhist beliefs to the spiritual or religious foundation we already have.

Because of the various teachings and images in Buddhism, there are many misconceptions about what it means to be a Buddhist, especially in the West. It is already accepted in Buddhism that there are many ways to cultivate wisdom. That's because there are so many kinds of people in the world. However, there needs to be some structure to have an authentic practice. This brings to mind what we call the "Three Jewels. They are: Buddha-Dharma-Sangha. The founder, in a lecture he gave at the University of Oslo in 1967, said the following about that:

"Buddha" refers to the spirit of Buddha-hood (or the essential substance of what makes up a Buddha). "Dharma" is the scriptures, and "Sangha" is the spiritual community that explains the scriptures and expounds the teachings of Buddha. These three are one.... Buddha-hood is something sublime. Nevertheless, we can begin to understand it when it is revealed in scriptures. But the scriptures cannot be understood by ordinary people without the existence of a sangha or a sage to explain them. The existence of the Buddha, or the spirit of Buddha-hood, along with the scriptures and the community, cannot exist separately. They are one body. Shakyamuni stated this over 2.5 millennia ago.

Unless the Three Jewels are in a good balance when it comes to one's practice, then there is the danger of focusing too much on the devotional or mysterious aspect of faith, or on the philosophical, or too much on the social or hierarchical aspect. Without this balance, a person may create their own religion, something that is off the track of true Buddhism. In Shinnyo-en, the founder tried to make sure this would not happen, and also, that there is no distinction made between lay followers and those who may be ordained or have a priestly rank. The path is made available to all equally.

Reclining Buddha

Most Buddhist sects have some image that they use as a focal point, as some kind of personification of the goal of our practice. For us in Shinnyo-en, it is a reclining Buddha portraying Shakyamuni giving his last teachings. The Founder often warned against idol worship and hoped that this "nirvana image" as we call it, which he sculpted himself, would help people connect to their own buddha nature, their own potential for buddhahood. He also hoped that it would invoke the feeling that they are spiritually linked to the Buddha Shakyamuni, feel a closeness to the Buddha, as if being part of the assembly of people who gathered around the Buddha to hear his last teachings. In essence, it is an "ever-present" Buddha that we can always turn to for inspiration and a doorway to spiritual development. Followers of Shinnyo-en customarily place a nirvana image at their own home altar using a picture of the reclining Buddha. It is in front of this picture that we chant or pray every day as a meditative tool. It is not absolutely necessary, however.

Sesshin Training

All forms of Buddhism have meditation as a core practice. It's ultimately an effective meditation practice that gives us the clarity to act in a way that can really help us. One of the

things that makes Shinnyo-en unique is its form of meditation, which we call “sesshin,” which means “to touch the essence” in Japanese. It is meditation, or reflection, to gain insight that we can apply in daily life to nurture our individual buddha nature.

The Zen tradition also has a meditative method called “sesshin.” Although its aim is similar, its form is different in Shinnyo-en. In the Zen tradition and elsewhere, people may spend many hours, even days or weeks, and in many cases, years, to gain significant insight into themselves.

In Shinnyo-en, we have a shortcut. Sesshin training consists of brief, face-to-face guidance between trainees and specially trained mentors who act as spiritual guides, or mediums. They have been able to develop their spiritual ability in Shinnyo-en in order to help others understand themselves in light of Buddhist principles. They help the trainee to grasp, in minutes, something they can start to use immediately in daily life toward their spiritual development. Society then takes over as the training ground rather than a monastery or temple. This is one big difference with traditional Buddhism, which is heavily focused on monastic life and ascetic practices. Again in his lecture at the University of Oslo, the founder said:

[The famous 2nd century sage] Nagarjuna systemized the principles of esoteric Buddhism. Sesshin training conforms to these principles plus those of the Nirvana Sutra. The spiritual power I found through my many years of training in esoteric Buddhism is what we had in Shinnyo-en but called the “spiritual faculty”, and so I could use that to develop a training method based on esoteric Buddhism and the Nirvana Sutra.

This spiritual faculty can be explained as the Buddha’s mysterious power of the spirit. References to this power have been made repeatedly in Buddhist scriptures, especially those belonging to the Mahayana category. They have pointed out that anyone who has correct faith in the Buddha and who trains accordingly will acquire this faculty, which enables one to not only improve oneself, but also to lead others to spiritual liberation.

Part of what motivates a person to become more active in their training is the effort to become a teacher or mentor oneself. All members are encouraged to do so. In fact, that is the path to real awakening: Taking responsibility not only for yourself, but also for the awakening and happiness of others, which is another major point of the Mahayana scriptures, and that it ultimately doesn’t matter if you’re a monk or a householder, in other words, a lay practitioner.

Many people, even those who call themselves Buddhists, don’t emphasize this point. In fact, it was Shakyamuni himself who embarked on the path to enlightenment for the sake of others. It wasn’t just to satisfy his curiosity about the divine, the absolute, or the nature of the universe. It was because he was so moved by human suffering that he wanted to do something about it, and so tried to get at its very nature, the very core of suffering so that he could then share what he learned and help people help themselves. That was what he was enlightened to do: What makes us suffer, and his motivation for seeking these answers was altruistic in nature. I believe this is something common to all the great religions and teachers of history.

So, as Buddhists, because of all the teachings, the sutras, the images, the rituals, and the paraphernalia, it’s sometimes easy to forget this fundamental aspect of our pursuit. If we don’t emulate the founders of our various traditions, which fundamentally means to help ease the spiritual suffering of others, we can never be true seekers of the Buddhist path.

Since the passing of Founder Shinjo in 1989, Shinnyo-en has been led by his successor and daughter, Shinso Ito (also known as Keishu, meaning “successor”) who was the most qualified of his many close disciples. She was also recognized by the Daigoji monastery as a high dharma master and as his legitimate heir. Daigoji bestowed her with the same title of “Daisojo” as Founder Shinjo, which is the highest possible priestly rank. She and her mother, who received

this rank posthumously, were the first non-monastic women in the 1100-year history of Shingon Buddhism to be acknowledged as such.

For members of Shinnyo-en, they are contemporary Buddhist masters, successors of an unbroken line going all the way back to the Buddha Shakyamuni, but most importantly, they are models for understanding how to apply the Buddha's teachings in modern life. This is why we can take refuge in them and understand what Shakyamuni, the Buddha of 2,500 years ago, must have been like, and what his teachings were about.

This point about being a model for others is very important. Part of what convinced me to stay in Shinnyo-en was that others were very sincere in helping me to understand what was going on. Many people talk about how it's through other people that they've been able to get a sense of Buddhist compassion or wisdom. The sincerity of the founders, all the Buddhist masters before them, going all the way back to Shakyamuni-their sincerity fills Shinnyo-en to this day, because followers endeavor to express it themselves. It's how the faith stays fresh, relevant, and progressive. Without this, we run the risk of becoming dogmatic idol worshipers, heaping the responsibility for our happiness onto someone or something else rather than placing it squarely on our shoulders, where it should be. Ultimately, it's through our own path, our own unique experience that we understand Buddhism and its goal: How to be a Buddha ourselves. We may never become a fully realized Buddha in this life, but at least we have a path to follow and can keep going as Buddhas-to-be, despite our shortcomings and the many mistakes we make as human beings.

Let me end by pointing you to our website for more specific information about Shinnyo-en. There are links from the Japanese website to our English and Chinese sites as well.

Thank you for your attention. I really appreciate this chance to share with you today.

Takakusu Junjiro: A Champion of Education for Women

Jane Goldstone

Takakusu Junjiro (1866-1945) was a leading Buddhist scholar. His work on the massive 100-volume compendium of Buddhist texts, the *Taisho Tripitaka*, more than assures his place in the history of Buddhist scholarship. Less known, however, is his role as one of the earliest proponents of education for women in modern Japan. Takakusu's commitment to women's education may even be seen by some as incongruent to his image as the illustrious Oxford-educated professor of Sanskrit Studies and President of Tokyo University. In 1924, he established a Buddhist university for women and continued to work to expand educational opportunities for women and girls until his death. This paper looks at the environment in which Takakusu's ideas about women's education were formed and his spiritual response as scholar and educator to the needs of the age in which he lived.