“Gotane”

We are observing Gotane service today on May 17th to celebrate Master Shinran’s birthday. I would like to reflect upon his footsteps from his birth to encountering his mentor, Master Honen.

Shinran was born in the suburb of Kyoto on May 21st, 1173. At the age of nine, he was ordained and left his parents’ home. Even in the medieval period of Japan, his age was regarded as a child. There were some reasons why he decided to enter the monkhood at such a young age.

One of the reasons lies in the history of Japan. Before the medieval period of Japan, some clans ruled over Japan. This political custom continued for a while. However, some warrior clans tried to steal political power from them. This conflict provoked a war among the warrior clans. Many cities including Kyoto became battlefields. Unfortunately, the bad harvest affected people’s lives. The shortage of food supply and the war took away many innocent lives. As a result, a lot of dead bodies piled up on the streets in Kyoto. This tragic condition in Kyoto at that time was well described in a novel called “Rashomon” by a Japanese novelist Ryunosuke Akutagawa. The story conveys the conditions of many people who were suffering, including a poor old lady who was selling human hair she picked from the dead bodies.

Shinran was born as a son of Arinori Hino who served in the government before the battles. His family, however, gave up raising him due to these unfortunate factors and sent him to Mt. Hiei. His uncle took infant Shinran to a temple to get him ordained. The head monk of the temple suggested postponing his rite till tomorrow because the sun was about to set. When infant Shinran was advised by him, he answered with a poem and encouraged him to have it right now.

Cherry blossoms that are felt
To last till the morrow,
May well blow away,
During the night.

This poem expresses his feeling that everything is impermanent observing that hollow situation. His seeking for peace of mind may have started at this time.

There is a symbolic phrase explaining his Buddhist way, which is “the path surpassing life and death”. We can find this expression in the letter to his children written by his wife, Eshinni. After he passed away, she recalled his life and wrote down on the letter in order to honor him in the children’s memory. According to Eshini’s letter, young Shinran performed his practice for about 20 years at Mt. Hiei. After that, he went back to Kyoto and secluded himself in the hexagonal hall for meditation practice. During the meditation, he had a spiritual experience of Prince Shotoku suggesting meeting Master Honen who later becomes his future mentor. In those days, Honen taught the Nembutsu Path to all sentient beings whether they are good or evil that they are embraced by Amida Buddha to be born into the Pure Land with reciting Amida Buddha’s Name. Eshinni refers to this teaching as “the path surpassing life and death”. When young Shinran listened to the teaching, he was deeply impressed. Eshinni recorded the words of Shinran Shonin in her letter as follows: “I made my mind to pursue this path and follow Master Honen, even if his teaching would lead me to hell because I recognize that I'm equipped with the blind passion that causes me to repeat to be born and die.” At that moment, Shinran declared to discard sundry practices and take refuge in the Amida Buddha’s Primal Vow.

Honen’s teaching is simple compared to the other traditional Buddhist practices. It is just saying the Nembutsu which means to leave aside the self-power practices and take refuge in the Primal Vow. As I mentioned earlier, Shinran lived his life in an unstable social situation and realized himself as a foolish being who is
far from enlightenment. Then, he rejoiced that his heart and mind were rooted in
the Buddha ground of the Amida Buddha’s Vow. Shinran composed a wasan to
describe this fortunate encounter to Honen as follows.

**Full of compassion for the sentient beings of this defiled world,**

**Mahasthamaprapta encourages us to say the nembutsu;**

**He embraces the people of shinjin**

**And brings them into the Pure Land.**

*(Hymns of the Dharma-Ages)*

As I reflect upon the life of Master Shinran, his life was not easy. While he
was alive, there was no peace. Shinran observed the world of impermanence from
his experiences such as his departure from his family, the many battles and dead
people, relatives killing each other, and the shortage of food supplies. These
circumstances caused anxieties to the society and government, which led Shinran
to consider entering the monkhood. All, including Shinran, wanted to be free from
their anxieties and find something they can depend on. When Shinran left Mt. Hiei,
he was relieved from such a deluded mind by encountering the Pure Land
Teaching delivered by Master Honen. It was the teaching that Amida Buddha
liberates all sentient beings equally from this defiled world and enables us to
become a Buddha with reciting the Name. In other words, it is the Amida
Buddha’s Salvation. Amida Buddha chases after those who are suffering in this
defiled world and grasps and guides them to the World of Enlightenment. The
practices which Shinran performed at Mt. Hiei were difficult to accomplish unlike
the teaching taught by Master Honen. He recognized his incapability of
accomplishing the practices by his own efforts at Mt. Hiei and resolved to take
refuge in the Nembutsu Teaching. He appreciated the teaching of “the path
surpassing life and death” and rejoiced the moment of saying the Name which
arose from the Amida Buddha’s Boundless and Great Compassion.
We can’t physically see the figure of Shinran and directly listen to his teaching. However, we can share and enjoy the Nembutsu Teaching which is “the path surpassing life and death” through his footsteps.