

Honen: His Life and Teachings

Honen was born in Mimasaka Province (in present-day Okayama Prefecture). After losing his father in childhood because of a regional conflict, he entered the Buddhist priesthood. While studying the teachings of Tendai Buddhism on Mt. Hiei, he came to reflect deeply on the difficulty of attaining enlightenment solely through one's own efforts, especially through rigorous ascetic practice, and particularly during an era in which the influence of Buddhist teachings is declining (referred to as the Age of the Degenerate Dharma, or *Mappō*).

Subsequently, he thoroughly explored the sutras and the teachings of the patriarchs, and finally he encountered the teachings of salvation through the Original Vow of Amida Buddha in the *Commentary on the Meditation Sutra (Kangyo-sho)* by Master Shan-tao. He came to the conviction that the practice of placing one's faith in Amida Buddha and reciting the *nembutsu*—"Namu Amida Butsu"—is the path to rebirth in the Pure Land, open to all people. *Passages on the Selection of the Primal Vow in the Nembutsu (Senchaku Hongan Nembutsu-Shu)* is the work in which he systematically presented this philosophy.

The teaching of Honen was widely embraced as a practice accessible to all—regardless of social status, gender, level of education, or whether one is a monk or a layperson—and served as a source of support for many. The innovative nature of his teaching, however, triggered protests from the established Buddhist orders, leading to his exile in 1207. Despite this persecution, Honen steadfastly upheld the teaching of the Nembutsu and continued his missionary work.

At the end of his life, he authored the *One-Sheet Document (Ichimai-Kishomon)*, in which he concisely explained the essence of his Nembutsu teaching and entrusted it to his disciples. Honen's philosophy not only forms the foundation of the Pure Land Sect (*Jōdo-shu*) but also has exerted a profound influence on the history of Japanese Buddhism—a legacy that endures to this day. His reformational thought is often compared with that of Martin Luther in Christianity.