Honen Biography

Honen

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Biography

The Japanese Buddhist monk Honen (1133-1212) is considered the real founder of Japanese Amidism in the form of the Pure Land sect, or Jodoshu.

Honen was the son of an official of Mimasaka Province whose dying wish was that Honen become a monk. Honen began his studies at the great Tendai center on Mt. Hiei. Ordained, he withdrew to the outskirts of Kyoto to lead a solitary life of meditation and contemplation. Dissatisfied with religion as he had learned it, he wanted to break with traditional religious observance. It was only in 1175, when he was 43, that he began to teach his beliefs.

In 1198 Honen formalized his ideas in the *Senchakushu,* an abbreviated title which, rendered in full, means "Collection of Passages on the Original Vow of Amida, in Which the Nembutsu Is Chosen above All Other Ways of Achieving Rebirth." In this work, Honen made it clear that the *nembutsu,* or the calling of Amida's name for his aid, was superior to all other forms of religious practice. One was saved not through one's own efforts (*jiriki*) but through the compassionate mercy of another (*tariki*), that is, Amida. Traditional methods of salvation relied on severe personal disciplines that ultimately led to enlightenment; these he called the Path of Holiness (*shodo*) and the Path of the Pure Land (*jodo*), as the heaven over which Amida presided was called. To attain the Pure Land all that was necessary was the invocation of Amida's name and complete dependence on his mercy. It was felt that for most men the Path of Holiness was beyond their capacities and that hope for salvation thus lay in the second path, which was bound to be successful since it stood beyond personal jurisdiction.

This book was written for the edification of the premier, Fujiwara Kanezane; but when it came out, it provoked the harshest of criticisms from the monks of Mt. Hiei, who destroyed all the copies they could set their hands on. They felt that Honen was turning against Tendai teachings, and he was accused of moral laxity as well.

In 1207, as a result of a misunderstanding with the emperor Toba II, Honen was exiled to Tosa. He remained there only 10 months but was not permitted to return to the capital until 1211. He died in March 1212.