



Hi, my name is Mauricio Hondaku. I am an ordained minister from the Shinshu Otani Order of the Jodo Shinshu sect of Pure Land Buddhism. Our institution is also known as Higashi Hongwanji and our main temple is located in the city of Kyoto, Japan. The Shinshu Otani Order was found by a Buddhist monk called Master Shinran [1173–1262] who lived in the 13th century. He was part of the Tendai sect [a Japanese school of Mahayana]. We will talk a little more about him during this dharma talk.

To introduce myself, I’ve been a Buddhist teacher for more than 15 years. I’m a very different kind of minister from what people might expect of a Buddhist minister and monk. My hope is to break some of these stereotypes and to show you that Buddhist ministers and monks can be normal people like you. I live in Sao Paulo, Brazil, where we have around 25 temples and around 30 ordained ministers of Brazilian and Japanese descent.

For me, it’s a great honor to be a part of this dharma talk. In the next four weeks, we will have the chance to analyze and understand that we do not need to build a mask of success or be a superhuman to practice Buddhism. We do not need to be the perfect human being to understand or follow the Buddhist steps. It’s okay to fail; it’s okay to be the worst person in our sangha; and it’s okay to be a lousy meditator because we are human.

Shakyamuni Buddha understood we have a lot of limitations, but he left several different methods for us to follow the Buddhist journey. Believe it or not, this journey is not limited to sitting meditation. There are several other methods of meditation we can practice, but all of them are based on the principle of mindfulness. In this first week, let’s see how Buddha Shakyamuni and Master Shinran, the founder of the Jodo Shinshu sect of Buddhism, managed their own failures and see how we can bring some light to our efforts to be the best we can.



Let's travel back 2,600 years ago, and then forward to just 550 years ago, to learn about those events. This will bring some relief for those who feel we'll never “get there.” I'm assuming that you are familiar with Prince Siddhartha Gautama—the man who become Shakyamuni Buddha after his enlightenment. Let me concentrate on the four visions he had after he left the palace—the old person, the ill person, the corpse, and the holy man.

Prince Siddhartha left his palace and decided to live in the forest where, under the supervision of multiple masters, he underwent many challenging ascetic practices. Several times Prince Siddhartha went in front of those masters to seek advice and to report on his progress. Sometimes he even overcame his masters in terms of their practice and diligence. For six years Prince Siddhartha dedicated every single minute of his life to finding ways to mortify his body as a method to free his mind. He and several other practitioners believed the physical body and its sensations were obstacles to reaching a higher state of spiritual realization.

The prince was very focused on finding a way to eliminate suffering. He practiced fasting, which was thought to be one of the best ways to acquire wisdom. He decided to eat only a grain of rice per day, and his body became so thin that his legs were like flower stalks. His backbone was like a rope and his chest was only bones. His eyes sunk down into his face. His peach-like skin lost its color and, it is said, became black. In some of the statues that capture the prince's appearance at that time, he looked like a living skeleton. He suffered terrible pain and hunger, yet he continued to meditate non-stop.

The prince also tortured his body by holding his breath for a long time until he felt violent pain in his ears and fell senseless to the ground. Several nights he went out to meditate in the forest or cemetery wearing rags collected from graveyards. Even when wild animals came, he didn't run; he stayed behind bravely in those dreadful places, continuing to meditate.



He carried on those practices for six long years despite feeling great pain and suffering. But he didn't find wisdom or even any answers to his questions. He finally decided those austerities were not the right way to achieve enlightenment. At that point, he realized he had failed—that he would never reach enlightenment undergoing that much suffering.

Only after this moment did he realize he could not fight suffering with more suffering. He realized he was a human like you and me. Of course, he had lived many lives like we did and his karma was in a stage where he could carry on the proper practice to enlightenment. But he knew he was reborn as a mundane human, not different from ordinary people.

If a person like Prince Siddhartha—with his diligence and discipline—could not fight suffering with suffering, if he couldn't find success conducting extreme practices, why do we think we can? We are talking about the Buddha here. How could our ego put our discipline and diligence above the Buddha's? Why do we insist on the idea of being the super practitioner, the super student, the ultimate meditator, if even Shakyamuni Buddha failed at extreme practices?

Our arrogance and spiritual materialism are the contemporary equivalent of his ascetic practices. We challenge people in schools, at work, or even in our dharma centers and temples to be the leading student, to be popular, to be a manager, or to be an outstanding disciple. But can everyone be like that? Do we need to be a cyborg capable of sitting for one, two, three, or even five hours meditating to reach enlightenment? Do we need to take the bodhisattva vow even when our mind is full of poisons, like rage and craving, and we know deep inside we are incapable of carrying on even simple practices?

In fact, I believe most people who take the bodhisattva vow need a bodhisattva to help them more than they need to become one themselves. Instead of developing our humility, recognizing



we are fools and lousy practitioners, we want to present a perfect bodhisattva image to the public and even to ourselves, forgetting we still have poisons running through our veins.

Take the metaphor of an airplane. When you board a plane, the flight attendant tells you, “In case of emergency, oxygen masks will fall, but please put your mask on first before you try to help someone else.” This is a logical system because if you try to help somebody who is desperate or in a panic before putting your mask on, you and the other person will *both* faint and suffer. Be mindful. You need to enlighten yourself before you become a bodhisattva.

To become a bodhisattva, you need to find the antidote for your three poisons—ignorance, wrath, and craving—and follow the path to eradicate the poisons in your daily practice. If you are the kind of person who goes to the dharma center and feels like an ugly duck because you fail to sit perfectly still for one entire hour, or you don’t know Sanskrit, Pali, or Japanese terms, don’t worry. Shakyamuni Buddha predicted this would be the case and reserved special methods for these kinds of people like you and especially me! Remember that the Buddha was incapable of proceeding with heavy practice and asceticism; they are not part of the Buddhist teachings. Shakyamuni Buddha taught us to conduct austerities but not to suffer. The practice can’t be a source of suffering, it needs to be an antidote to suffering.

To learn about the meditation methods for dharma losers and fools like us and millions of other people around the world, let me introduce you to the history of a Buddhist monk who lived in 13th-century Japan. His name was Shinran Shonin, or, as we call him, Master Shinran. He was a Japanese Buddhist monk who was born in Hino, a region near Kyoto, and lived during Japan’s Kamakura period [1185–1333]. He liked to call himself Gutoku Shinran, which in a self-deprecating manner means, “stubble hairy foolish one.” Yes—we can imagine what type of wisdom came out of his lips. History says that Shinran lost both his parents in his first eight years of life and became very desperate to understand what happens after we die. At the age of



nine, he asked his uncle to take him to Shoren-in temple on Mount Hiei. He was ordained after putting enormous pressure on the temple abbott to conduct the ceremony the same night he arrived.

Shinran would live on that mountain for the next twenty years. During the Heian and Kamakura periods, Shingon [a Japanese esoteric school] and Tendai were the main Buddhist sects in Japan and wielded strong social and political power. Interestingly, some ascetic practices were reintroduced back to Buddhism at that time and were practiced by the monks. Shinran was assigned to practice a kind of walking meditation which consisted of long walks around a Buddhist statue while reciting the name of the Buddha. Shinran was very diligent and undertook this practice with ultimate dedication.

After three years, he went back to his master. He reported deep frustration because although he carried on the practice with discipline, he felt no transformation at all and still had mundane passions and impure thoughts. Upon hearing Shinran’s lamentation, the master scolded him, telling him he was not diligent enough and should keep up the practice for three more years.

Shinran returned to Mount Hiei with renewed energy to resume walking around the statue reciting the name of the Buddha. Another three years passed and Shinran had another interview with his master. Again, Shinran reported no progress at all; no transformation; and not a single glimpse of enlightenment, even though his practice was more dedicated than ever.

As expected, Shinran received another letter about how he was lazy and a shame to the rest of the sangha. He was sent back to the temple to start another three-year retreat doing the same practice as he had done for the last six years. As you can imagine, Shinran was very disappointed with his performance and started to think he would never overcome his passions or find antidotes for his mental poisons. He started to believe enlightenment was reserved only for a special kind



of human with special karmic conditions, and that he could never reach Buddhahood. When he was about to give up, he heard about another monk called Honen who was teaching Buddhism to lay people downtown, especially to those who could never spend time inside a temple for meditation classes or do any kind of ascetic practice. When Shinran met Honen, he saw all types of people listening to the teachings—peasants, masons, artisans, samurais, soldiers, and even courtesans. They were the kind of people who had no time or access to practice.

Shinran’s first thought was, “If those people can benefit from Buddha’s words, so can I. I’m like them. No matter how hard I try, I feel incapable of uprooting my mundane passions.” The audience in front of him had to wake up at 3:00 a.m. and work all day long in rice plantations, train in martial arts, or even go to war; they had to work every day to sustain their families. The Buddha’s teachings are for everybody, Shinran thought; he asked himself how he could bring the Buddhist practice to these kinds of people. How could he help those people transform their minds? All the means to develop a pure mind were available to those inside the temple, but which methods would help those out there in the middle of the city, with all the demands of ordinary life?

This is what we will learn about next week. We will see how Shinran Shonin used his failure to increase his faith in the Buddhist teachings, how he cultivated a pure mind to never leave the path, and how he opened the Buddhist path to everyone.

How can we benefit from Shinran’s failure and find peace in our own failure? Well, see you next week when I’ll answer that question. Don’t forget to ask your questions [by clicking on “Ask the Teacher a Question”], which I’ll be delighted to answer. I hope you have enjoyed this dharma talk. Namu Amida Butsu.