

## **An Introduction to Seizan-Zenrinji Pure Land Buddhism**

Eikandō is the head temple of the Seizan-Zenrinji branch of Pure Land Buddhism, one of three branches established by the monk Zennebō Shōkū (1177–1247), Eikandō's thirteenth abbot. Pure Land Buddhism is characterized by a fervent belief in the power of Amida Buddha, who has made the Fundamental Vow (Hongwan) to delay full enlightenment until he has saved all those who ask for his salvation. This vow, as well as the methods for achieving rebirth in Amida's paradise in the far west—the Pure Land—are described in the Infinite Life Sutra (*Muryōjūkyō*). Together with the Amida Sutra (*Amidakyō*), and Contemplation Sutra (*Kanmuryōjūkyō*), these three sutras form the basis of Pure Land Buddhism.

Zennebō Shōkū was one of the top disciples of Hōnen (1133–1212), a brilliant monk who is largely credited with establishing Pure Land Buddhism in Japan. Hōnen synthesized centuries of Indian, Chinese, and Japanese scholarship on the Pure Land Sutras. He arrived at two important understandings: first, that human society has entered the “Latter Age of Buddhist Law” (Mappō), the period beginning 2,000 years after the death of the historical Buddha when his influence has faded and his teachings can no longer be transmitted accurately. Second, that under these conditions, living beings cannot possibly follow the path of the Buddha by themselves, and their only hope for salvation is to invoke Amida's name as a plea for salvation. This ritual invocation, referred to as the *nenbutsu*, is a crucial aspect of Buddhist practice within Pure Land Buddhism.

Having studied under Hōnen, Shōkū also believed that placing one's sincere faith in Amida's saving grace was all that was necessary to achieve rebirth in the Pure Land, where enlightenment is assured. In Shōkū's views, it was less important to speak Amida's name and more important to have sincere faith in the power of Amida's vow. One, ten, or even ten-thousand recitations of the *nenbutsu* were equal, if the degree of faith was the same.