

Jodo Shinshu and Shirakawa

Jodo Shinshu (True Pure Land) is the most widely practiced school of Buddhism in Japan. It was founded by Shinran (1173–1263), a monk who grew disillusioned with the arduous ascetic practices and complex teachings that were believed necessary to obtain enlightenment. Shinran instead preached faith in Amida Buddha, who would guide all those who worshiped him into paradise (the Pure Land) after death.

Jodo Shinshu devotees in Shirakawa believe that one of Shinran's disciples was a priest named Kanenbo Zenshun, who on his master's orders became an itinerant missionary and spread the word about Amida and the Pure Land far and wide. Upon reaching Shirakawa, in the thirteenth century an outlying, sparsely populated part of the remote Hida Province (present-day northern Gifu Prefecture), Zenshun decided to make the village of Hatogaya on the Sho River a base for spreading Shinran's teachings.

Zenshun's efforts bore fruit, and Jodo Shinshu eventually became the dominant form of Buddhism throughout Shirakawa. It has influenced local life and culture significantly over the centuries, affecting everything from culinary culture and architecture to burial practices, and remains the foundation of faith in the area.

The most important holiday for Jodo Shinshu devotees is the annual Ho'onko in November or December, which memorializes Shinran and is also an occasion for families to gather and give thanks for the year that has passed. Ho'onko meals are vegetarian and prepared according to Buddhist precepts. The meals center around tofu and vegetables along with a serving of tea and sweets made with fruit and nuts. Tofu dishes remain a local specialty, whereas the old fruit trees that dot the landscape throughout the Sho River valley are a reminder of how families traditionally grew fruit in their own gardens to be preserved and eaten for Ho'onko.

Ho'onko is usually celebrated at home, with the village priest going from house to house to conduct ceremonies. The need for a space large enough to allow an entire family to attend the Ho'onko sermon is why most *gassho*-style houses in the Shirakawa area came to have a sizeable tatami-mat room with a Buddhist family altar, in front of which the priest would speak and lead prayer.

Shirakawa's traditional burial practices were also strongly shaped by the teachings of

Jodo Shinshu, especially in their early form as preached by Shinran and Kanenbo Zenshun. Maintaining tombs to memorialize the dead has been a core element of religious life in Japan since antiquity. Shinran, however, held that worshiping one's ancestors and conducting rituals at graves containing their remains so that they may eventually pass into the afterlife is unnecessary. As the Amida Buddha offers believers salvation immediately after death, there is no need for tombs or urns. This view was widely adopted in Shirakawa, where people eschewed building conspicuous graves, burying only a small part of the deceased's remains and piling stones on top of them instead. The most notable example of this is Kanenbo Zenshun's grave in Hatogaya.