

SHINRAN SHONIN MEMORIAL DAY (Hoonko)

Each sect of Buddhism observes the anniversary of the death of its founder through a memorial service called Ho-On-Ko. The Hoonko Service held in honor of Shinran Shonin, the founder of the Jodo Shin Sect, is the best known of all Hoonko Services and is held each year during the month of January.

Literally the Chinese characters “Ho-on” means “return of gratitude” and “ko” means “to clarify the meaning of” or “a gathering” of those who wish to return this gratitude.

The Buddhist custom is to hold memorial services at a seven day interval for seven weeks with the services culminating in the 49th Day Memorial Service. Traditional belief said that the destination of the deceased person would be determined at seven day intervals. Therefore, these services were conducted to assure that a person would be born in a better life at each interval.

Although this custom is followed by believers of the Jodo Shinshu teaching, the meaning behind it is entirely different from the general view expressed above. We are born into the Pure Land through the Compassion and Wisdom of Amida Buddha and, thus, given an easy path of crossing over from this world of suffering to the Pure Land. Amida Buddha’s virtue is transferred to us in the form of His Name, Namo Amida Butsu, and becomes the true cause for our Birth in the Pure Land.

Since we are incapable of performing any practice which would give us enough merits to attain Birth in the Pure Land, such efforts on our part would be ineffective. Thus, the only recourse is to rely on Amida Buddha for our Birth in the Pure Land. We are enabled to attain Birth instantly upon our death and there is no need for anyone to conduct memorial services in the hope that we would be born into the Pure Land or any other place.

This being the case, why is it necessary to observe memorial services? Such services are unnecessary, but they provide us with the opportunity to quietly meditate or reflect upon the cherished memories of the deceased and remind us of the impermanence of life. This brings us to the further awareness of our own changing existence. As we recall the countless benefits bestowed upon us by the deceased, there arises within us a feeling of gratitude toward the deceased and others for making life possible for us.

Memorial services, therefore, should be looked upon as being an opportunity to listen to the Buddha-Dharma and to express our gratitude to Amida Buddha and the deceased person for whom the memorial service is being conducted. This in turn should lead us to devote ourselves for the good of others in memory of the deceased. By realizing the true significance of memorial services in the light of the Jodo Shinshu teaching, it will become much more significant and meaningful to us.

The main reason for conducting the Hoonko Service is that in our daily lives, most of us are too busy to think of gratitude. Therefore, the Hoonko Service provides us an opportunity to do so on the anniversary of the death of Shinran Shonin. At this time, we should once again trace the footsteps of Shinran Shonin with deep appreciation in our hearts and resolve to dedicate ourselves in the service of others to truly make our world more friendly and happier for all mankind.