

Eshinni-Kakushinni Service
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Thank you so much for allowing me the opportunity to speak at this year's Eshinni-Kakushinni Service. I am honored and very humbled by this opportunity.

A wonderful side-effect of preparing for this talk was the investigation and information gathering I did about both Eshinni and Kakushinni. I learned many things I did not know about them. Much of my information came from the book Letters of the Nun Eshinni, by James C. Dobbins. Other information came from a speech given in 2004 by Mrs. Chihoko Yosemite, wife of Bishop Chikai Yosemite and from Jodo Shinshu websites or Jodo Shinshu ministers like Rev. Patricia Usuki, of the San Fernando Valley Buddhist Temple. Of course, you will also notice my own thoughts as I talk about both of these amazing Jodo Shinshu women, as it is natural for information to be distilled through our own perceptions and experiences. I have been truly amazed with the information I have found and my profound respect for both Eshinni and Kakushinni has grown immensely.

It's too bad we don't hear more about Eshinni and Kakushinni, as important as they are to the founding and perpetuation of Jodo Shinshu. Before I did my research, I thought "Oh they were important because after all, Eshinni was Shinran's wife and Kakushinni was their youngest daughter." While that is certainly true, there is so much more to these two strong women.

According to history, Eshinni was born in 1182. Eshinni's family was from the Echigo area, where they were land owners. They were not necessarily farming the land, as I understand, in the sense of "going out into the field" to work, but they had land and owned servants to help work the land. Eshinni has been described as "a strong, sophisticated and capable matriarch" and as an independent & assertive woman who had a life and a mind of her own, especially in her later years. To my surprise, I discovered that Eshinni did not depend on her husband for a living; instead, because of her family, the land and servants, she supported Shinran financially and materially so she was able to sustain Shinran in his work and allow him to spread the dharma. As one source put it, "Imagine how much Shinran's wounds and grudges were healed by Eshinni's grace and support. While Shinran and Eshinni challenged the traditional society and authority with their marriage, Shinran was able to acquire security, safety, comfort and warmth from Eshinni. Eshinni also learned and received the wonderful Nembutsu teaching from Shinran." This is one of those opportunities when I wish I had a time machine and could go back in time to meet her. She sounds like an extraordinary woman.

Shinran and Eshinni were married around 1210 and lived in Echigo, where he had been exiled in the year 1207. According to most of the sources I read, these dates indicate that Eshinni & Shinran met and married after he was exiled to Echigo. There is some discussion and disagreement about this fact. Some sources say they were married before going to Echigo and some say they met and married after he was exiled to Echigo. This is another one of those facts that differs based on the source and the author and on translation and interpretation. It is actually good to know there are

different & conflicting ideas so there can be discussion. After all, this happened almost 800 years.

If you are like me, I had heard about the letters Eshinni wrote to her daughter Kakushinni but I never gave it much thought. However, as I read more about the letters and the translation of the letters themselves I have come to realize how truly important the letters and the women are to Jodo Shinshu. There were a total of ten letters which were not discovered until 1921 in the Hongwanji archives. The letters actually helped to confirm Eshinni's existence and verify her marriage to Shinran. Prior to the discovery of Eshinni's letters, there were some people in Japan who did not believe in Shinran's marriage, the existence of his wife, or for a few, even the existence of Shinran himself. The letters were necessary as Eshinni moved from Kyoto to Echigo in 1234 to take care of her family property during a time of drought & famine while Kakushinni stayed in Kyoto to care for Shinran until he passed away in 1263. Eshinni's letters have allowed us to see her reverence and support for Shinran, whom she considered to be a manifestation of Bodhisattva Kannon, revealing very important facts of Shinran's personal life as well as his spiritual journey, adding to his stature. Her letters have the added importance for their reflections of a female writer, since most writings at the time were produced by men.

As you can imagine, sending letters back & forth at the time of Eshinni was cumbersome. No Facebook, Twitter, or email, no postal service, only the use of couriers traveling across the land. It would have taken 1-2 months to travel the distance between Echigo & Kyoto, almost 700 miles. To put it in perspective, that is twice the distance between Kauai and the Big Island and three times the distance between Los Angeles and Las Vegas. Written communication was precious and complicated.

Kakushinni, born in 1224 and Shinran & Eshinni's youngest daughter, was the one who took care of Shinran in his later years, staying with him when he was ill and on his death bed. We are indebted to Kakushinni, not simply because she was Shinran's daughter, but because his teaching might not be available to us today were it not for her devotion to her father and his doctrine. Kakushinni wanted to keep Shinran's teaching alive and perpetuate it for his followers. In 1277, she built a temple on the Otani grounds in Kyoto which she owned, enshrining an image of Shinran then donating the gravesite to all Shinshu followers as a common memorial to Shinran, keeping his memory and his work alive. Although she was Shinran's youngest daughter, it is interesting to note that the blood lineage that continues to the Monshu today is traced through Kakushinni's son and not through one of Shinran's sons as we might have expected.

The contributions of both Eshinni and Kakushinni have had a lasting impact on Jodo Shinshu Buddhism. Eshinni gave Shinran her complete dedication and support, while Kakushinni established the foundation and center from which to transmit his teachings for many generations. They both represented women of their time who were confident and self-aware, and who actively participated in the history of Jodo Shinshu and never lost sight of the Nembutsu. For those who have ever heard my dharma messages you know how important music is to me, how powerful music and words can be to reach people. As I started learning more about these two wonderful and powerful women, a song came to my mind . . . "I Am Woman" by Helen Reddy. It was written in 1971, 45 years ago. It reflects thoughts from the 70's and our current time, based on some of the news we hear and I think the words reflect the impact of the silent strength

of Eshinni and Kakushinni, even though they would be too humble to say these words. If you need a refresher on the song, check out these two YouTube videos:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gpu_PV3BTfI or
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NAo8k0Fq1OM>

Thanks to Eshinni & Kakushinni, and many Buddhist women throughout the years, we know that the teaching applies to everyone without exception. As we know, Shinran himself was always careful to emphasize that the Nembutsu teaching was for everyone, whether priest or lay, man or woman, without discrimination; with no one excluded on the basis of class, gender, education or other bias. At the time of Eshinni & Shinran, with divisions between the classes and gender differences, this was a rather radical philosophy. Women have always been just as important as men in the Shin Buddhist Sangha, though they have often remained in the background. It does not mean that women are more special but simply that they are equally bright links in the Golden Chain that brings us all together. In a recent post I found the following wise words on the BCA website: "Buddhism is the teaching of oneness, not sameness."

Our lives today now are more comfortable, easier in most ways than at the time of Eshinni but the concepts of Buddhism and the thoughts of Nembutsu are still relevant. Eshinni lived in a time when people experienced the sufferings of life surrounded by the natural cycles of the land, including crop failures and famine. Today we do not have the same experiences as Eshinni yet the cycles of life are still with us; change is always with us whether we welcome it or not. We can acknowledge the changes as Eshinni did and continue on with life or become entrenched in anger, fighting change at every opportunity. Which way seems most practical and life-affirming? Personally, I prefer Eshinni's example of acceptance. A quote I have found seems to express the example of her life: "You either get bitter or you get better. It's that simple. You either take what has been dealt to you and allow it to make you a better person, or you allow it to tear you down. The choice does not belong to fate, it belongs to you." (Josh Shipp)

In closing, let me share Eshinni's words to Kakushinni in her tenth and final letter, written shortly before Eshinni passed away. "I myself will be going to the [Pure Land] paradise very soon. There everything can be seen without any darkness, so be sure to say the Nembutsu and come to the paradise to be with me. Indeed, when we go to the paradise and meet again, nothing whatsoever will be in darkness."

Thank you for coming this morning to share in our appreciation for Eshinni and Kakushinni and their contributions to Jodo Shinshu.

Namo Amida Butsu