



The Founder of Shinnyo-En – Shinjo Ito

Shinjo Ito was born in 1906 in the Yamanashi prefecture, Japan. He came from a religious family and soon came into contact with Buddhism. His life's path eventually led him to Tokyo, where he worked as an engineer in the aeronautics industry. In 1932 he married Tomoji, who also lived in a religious family. They had six children, although the two eldest sons died at a young age. After having engaged intensively with religion since he was a child, he decided in 1936 to become a holy man. He ended his employment as an aeronautics engineer and was ordained into the Daigo-ji Temple in Kyoto. The Daigo-ji is the High Temple of the Daigo Order of esoteric Shingon Buddhism and a centre of traditional Buddhist priestly education in Japan. There Shinjo Ito underwent the demanding religious education as well as living under the extremely ascetic training as a holy man. He received the highest consecration of Shingon Buddhism and completed his training in 1943 as a Great Master (Dai-Ajari).

Shinjo Ito was always seeking ways to share the profound teachings of the Buddha with people for whom, as secular citizens, the intensive Buddhist education of a holy person was not an option. He was convinced that all people should be able to understand the Buddha's teachings and find answers to their questions in life, regardless of their class. With this in mind, Shinjo Ito finally founded Shinnyo-En as an independent branch of the Buddhist faith. In 1953, the Japanese State recognised Shinnyo-En as a religious community.

Shinjo Ito founded the Shinnyo branch of Buddhism by shaping teachings and training so that the lay community could also understand and practise the essence of the Buddha's teaching. The key to this is in the Buddha's teachings themselves, in the form of the Great Nirvana Sutra. This scripture, passed down in Mahayana Buddhism as the last teachings and statement of the Buddha Shakyamuni, explains the ways in which the secular and religious communities can both have the chance to understand the profound core of the Buddha's teachings.

The Daigo Order retained close ties to Shinjo Ito, even after the foundation of Shinnyo-En, awarding him the highest priestly rank in Japanese Buddhism, "Dai-Sojo", in 1966. In 1997, the "Shinnyo Sanmaya Prayer Hall" was built and consecrated ceremoniously in the Daigo-ji Temple in honour of Shinjo Ito and the doctrine he created.



Shinjo Ito always emphasised the importance of a religious dialogue for a peaceful future for humanity. As part of a trip to Europe in 1967, he visited the Vatican and in an audience with Pope Paul VI presented him with a likeness of the “Nirvana Buddha” as an expression of the common efforts towards understanding and peace between all religions and peoples. In 1989, Shinjo Ito died at the age of 83.

Social commitment was also always at the centre of Shinjo Ito’s efforts striving towards a better life for people. It is for this reason that Shinnyo-En engages in countless social projects on a local level, but also on a global scale. For example, Shinnyo-En supports numerous projects to promote sustainable regional economies in Asia and Latin America and supports social facilities in Europe, Asia and America for young people and those in need of care. The order also focuses on protecting cultural heritage. For example, Shinnyo-En supports the excavations of Angkor Wat, but also projects to revitalise local indigenous traditions and customs, in Hawaii for example. Die IZUMI Foundation, founded by Shinnyo-En, is specifically dedicated to the prevention and treatment of infectious diseases in the developing world.

Alongside this social commitment, Shinjo Ito also worked as a sculptor, printer and photographer and worked intensively with calligraphy. Today, his works are exhibited all over the world.



The current religious leader – Shinso Ito

Today the religious community is led by Shinso Ito, the successor to the order's founder. Shinso Ito was born in Tokyo in 1942 as the daughter of Shinjo Ito, the founder of Shinnyo-En, and his wife Tomoji. Shinso Ito began early on with the study of Buddhist scriptures and the practice of Buddhism. After graduating from Taisho University in Tokyo with a degree in Philosophy and Literature, Shinso Ito devoted herself wholly to her Buddhist education. She completed the comprehensive religious training, receiving the highest consecration of Shinnyo Buddhism and the highest priestly rank of a Dai-Sojo. In 1992, the Daigo-ji Shingon Buddhist monastery in Kyoto also awarded her the highest priestly rank of a Dai-Sojo.

Shinso Ito became head of the order after her father's death in 1989. As its head, she not only dedicates herself to the teaching community, but also strives towards the unity of cultures and religions. Thus in 2002, in cooperation with the Catholic Church in Japan and in Europe, religious concerts with Buddhist prayer rituals ("Shomyo") were put on in Catholic houses of worship in Krakow, Cologne, Paris, Milan and Rome. In 2008, Shinso Ito performed a Buddhist Saisho ceremony for the first time in St. Peter's Church in New York as a prayer for world peace.

In 1997, a prayer hall, dedicated to Shinjo Ito and the Shinnyo doctrine which he founded, was consecrated in the grounds of the Daigo-ji monastery, the centre of Shingon Buddhism. As part of the consecration ceremony, Shinso Ito was given the honour of being the first woman in the 1100-year history of the Daigo-ji temple to perform a prayer ceremony.

As the first female head of a Buddhist order, Shinso Ito has opened a path beyond traditional social roles. She encourages all people – irrespective of their gender – to take an active role in religion and society.

Alongside these substantial religious responsibilities, Shinso Ito also accompanies the founding of numerous Shinnyo-En foundations, which dedicate themselves to religious dialogue and to encouraging education and culture, amongst other things. She is also continuing the countless charity projects started by her father with international organisations such as the United Nations, the Red Cross and Médecins sans Frontières. Shinso Ito is carrying on her father's social commitment through new social projects, by founding the IZUMI Foundation, for example, which is dedicated to the prevention and treatment of infectious diseases in the developing world.

Shinnyo

Shinso Ito lives with her husband in the High Temple of Shinnyo-En in Tachikawa near Tokyo. As part of her extensive travels abroad, she likes to engage with the art and culture of the countries she visits. She has also been inspired by her father's artistic work to take up Japanese calligraphy.

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