



## Not just in monasteries: Buddhism for the people of today

### **Rooted in Buddhist traditions, Shinnyo-En is building bridges to modernity**

How can the Buddha's teachings be passed on to the secular community as well? How can traditional religious teachings, Buddhist meditation and prayer be integrated into modern daily life? 70 years ago, answering these questions was one of the central concerns of Shinjo Ito, the founder of the Buddhist order Shinnyo-En. Today, this form of Japanese Buddhism, based on a tradition dating back over 1500 years, is practised by around a million believers worldwide. In Germany, with its two temples in Munich and Hamburg, this branch of Buddhism founded in 1936 already has several thousand followers.

The Buddhist monk Shinjo Ito founded Shinnyo-En on the basis of traditional priestly Buddhism. Before his ordination as a monk, he was working as an engineer in the Japanese aeronautics industry, but in 1936 he decided to end his worldly career and devote himself to life as a holy man. He entered one of Japan's oldest monasteries as a monk, the Daigo-ji. The Daigo-ji, now a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is a high temple of Shingon Buddhism and to this day an important centre for monastic training. Last summer it was at the centre of an exhibition in the Bundeskunsthalle in Bonn, where its sculptures and ritual objects were admired by 60,000 visitors.

Shinjo Ito completed a strict religious training in the Daigo-ji in 1943, received the highest spiritual consecration and the rank of a "Grand Master" of Shingon Buddhism. During his time in the monastery, Shinjo Ito was already constantly on the lookout for ways of sharing the essence of the Buddha's teachings with the secular community. In the end, inspired by this concern, he founded the Shinnyo branch of Buddhism. Shinnyo-En is based, therefore, on a spiritual foundation which grew up over many centuries, which it continues and adapts for the modern day.

One of the keystones of the Shinnyo-En teachings is involvement in society. The order has been involved in charitable causes since its foundation and today it works with several foundations and charitable organisations worldwide. In the process, it works closely with organisations such as the Red Cross and the UN, for example. In developing countries, the IZUMI Foundation,



which was founded by Shinnyo-En, is dedicated to the prevention and treatment of infectious diseases. Further foundations and organisations are involved in disaster protection and environmental conservation and education projects.

Alongside this social commitment, after his death in 1989 Shinjo Ito left behind a significant cultural inheritance in the form of calligraphy, photographs and Buddhist statues, which today are exhibited all over the world.

Since Shinjo Ito's death in 1989, Shinnyo-En has been led by Shinso Ito. The daughter of the founder completed the comprehensive Buddhist spiritual training and went on to become religious head of Shinnyo-En. She also continues her father's social commitment and works intensively towards contact between cultures and religions. Shinso Ito has a close connection to the Daigo-ji, just as her father once had. She is one of few women to have received the highest priestly rank of a "Dai-Sojo" from the order. In 1997 Shinso Ito received a very special honour. On the occasion of the consecration of a prayer hall dedicated to Shinnyo-En, she became the first woman in the 1100-year history of the Daigo-ji to perform a ceremony in the Daigo-ji monastery.

However, it is not just within the world of Buddhism that Shinso Ito looks for dialogue and cooperation, but rather with all world religions. In 2006 she performed a ceremony in Milan, alongside honoured guests from Islam and Catholicism. In 2008, her efforts led to a Buddhist prayer ceremony performed in the Catholic St. Peter's Church in New York.

Shinnyo-En now has temples on all five continents – from Paris via Sao Paulo to Hawaii. Hawaii is also the location for Shinnyo-En's world famous lantern ceremony. Every year tens of thousands of people from various cultures and religions gather on the beach in Honolulu to send off lanterns across the water in memory of their ancestors – images which travel around the world every year.

**For any questions:**

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