

# ***Spiritual Values and Personal Identity***

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The issue of spiritual values and personal identity or the question of the meaning of life and self-responsibility are major issues in modern life, particularly in connection with the development of youth. In this essay I would like to pursue the topic from the standpoint of Shinran (1173-1212) in Japan. He was the founder of the Shin Buddhist tradition. Though he lived a long time ago, his insights are still relevant today. Further the question of personal identity is a major problem in our contemporary society. Young people, and even older people, ask the question: Who am I? What is the worth and purpose of my life?

In earlier times these questions were more easily answered, because our family and community defined our identity for us. In Japan it was one's group that generally defined the role and status of a person's life. There was a clear set of values and way of life. The question was rarely raised individually. Around the world the same situation has existed so that people were defined by their ethnic relations, family heritage, national, state or local communities, and sometimes by religious affiliation. However, in our contemporary, international and multicultural world such definitions have become inadequate to resolve our many personal problems or establish satisfying community relations.

There is a phrase we often see, exhorting us to think globally and act locally. It suggests that we should have a wider vision of ourselves in relation to the human community, but to realize that vision within our immediate life situation.

Where do we secure such a broad vision of humanity, and why is it important today? In brief, a world vision of humanity is a spiritual vision. It is rooted in religious understanding. We do not get such a perspective from our national or ethnic communities or immediate family relations, because all groups work for their own particular, rather than universal, interests, often competing with other groups. Only a religious understanding which transcends our differences can provide a sound basis for uniting the world community of which we are a part.

Our deepest and enduring sense of identity comes from realizing our connection to the larger world of spiritual reality. We come to see ourselves as expressions or manifestations of that reality, working to bring people together and to break down barriers of distrust, hatred and prejudice.

The values that are required for a self-identity which includes the world of others are love-compassion, justice, peace and mutuality-community. Without these values functioning in our world, we cannot live meaningfully and securely. We can only attain a secure identity when these values motivate our lives, because they are life-affirming values, rather than death-destructive values. All the great religious traditions affirm the supremacy of life, growth, and creativity over death, decay and destruction. These faiths are the source of hope in a violent and self-destructive world.

Shinran, the founder of Shin Buddhism, taught that Amida Buddha, whose name means Eternal Life and Infinite Light, is reality itself. Amida Buddha, through his fundamental Vows, works within our own minds and hearts, experienced as the aspiration for a fuller and deeper life in this world and in the Hereafter. The awareness of Amida's unconditional compassion and wisdom is the essence of true entrusting or shinjin, that is, true entrusting or faith, which is the core of Shin Buddhist life and teaching.

The deliverance given by trust in Amida Buddha's Vows is the release from self-striving, self-serving religious efforts, distorted by egoism, and the awareness of a deeper self identity as a focal point in the world for the fundamental life-sharing values of love, compassion, justice, peace and community.

Shinran's teaching offers a vision of reality which transcends all human distinctions, which we often employ as a means to categorize, discriminate or judge people or to prove our superiority. Shinran's highlighted the non-discrimination and inclusive nature of reality in his major text, the "Teaching, Practice, Faith and Realization" (*Kyogyoshinsho*):

"In reflecting on the ocean of great faith (shinjin), I realize that there is no discrimination between noble and humble or black-robed monks and white-clothed laity, no differentiation between man and woman, old and young. The amount of evil one has committed is not considered, the duration of any performance of religious practices is of no concern. It is a matter of neither practice nor good acts...It is simply shinjin (trust or faith) that is inconceivable, inexplicable and indescribable. It is like the medicine that eradicates all poisons. The medicine of the Tathagata's Vow destroys the poisons of our wisdom and foolishness."

It will be argued that Shinran's view is idealistic. That is true, but the world functions and has meaning only to the extent we pursue positive ideals and realize life-affirming values. Hatred, prejudice, and violence destroy life, emptying everything of meaning. A life which is based on what we hate, rather than what we love, offers a shallow identity which is self-destructive, because it places a low evaluation on life itself, even our own life. To divide people and isolate them as objects of hate means to deny our true identity as persons who are interdependent and share the same life with all others.

Consequently, Shinran defined religious faith as the working of the mind of enlightenment. The mind of enlightenment seeks to bring compassion and wisdom to realization in the lives of others.

In our world, wracked by violence and hatred, threatened by blind passion, and darkened by spiritual ignorance, we all need to establish our identity and assume our responsibility to life by deepening our faith and commitment to the ideals and values manifest in Amida Buddha, the Buddha of Eternal Life and Infinite Light. Only by such conviction can we maintain hope for the future of ourselves, our children and the human community. Only such a vision will truly answer the question: Who am I? What is the value of my life? Thank you. *Namo Amida Butsu*.