

The Spirituality of Shinran

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In our contemporary time, we often hear that people are more interested in “spirituality” than “religion.” Religion in many people’s minds involves dogmatic, infallible or indisputable beliefs as the basis of salvation and membership in a religious institution. We are assured of salvation through believing the doctrines of the institution and active participation in its programs.

Spirituality, on the other hand, rejects dogmatism. It often regards institutional membership as secondary and emphasizes personal understanding and individual search for meaning in life and faith, rather than ritual and doctrine. It is generally more individualistic, avoiding commitment or involvement. While religion is more specific in form, spirituality may appear vague and informal.

However, I believe that spirituality can be clear and challenging and can be combined with participation in a religious tradition. In relation to Shinran, spirituality energizes his interpretation of Pure Land teaching which was widely taught in all sects during his time, offering salvation through the meritorious recitation of the Nembutsu. Wherever it was practiced in China, Korea or Japan it also gave hope for release from suffering in this world and the next.

Shinran’s religious experience, however, led him to re-interpret the traditional Pure Land teachings of medieval Japan to remove self-centeredness and egoism which focuses on individual prayers, seeking health, wealth and spiritual protections in popular religion. He reconceived the nature of spiritual reality based on his deep awareness of Amida Buddha which enfolds our lives. An important characteristic of Shinran’s approach, resulting from this awareness, was liberation from religious superstition, oppressive fears of retribution and religious exploitation. “Shinjin transcends the domain of maras/And manifests the path of unexcelled emancipation.” [1] Shinran employs texts which declare that spiritual forces in the universe protect those who take refuge in the Dharma and that followers should not adhere to other gods. [2] Shinran never used fear to motivate religious adherence.

Shinran’s spirituality is grounded in his sense of the non-discriminating and universal embrace of Amida Buddha’s compassion and wisdom. In his view, reality itself is Amida Buddha whose name means Infinite; the inconceivable, boundless reality that is the basis of life in nature and the goal of ultimate spiritual realization. He is not just one Buddha among many, but rather Amida Buddha is Buddha-nature in all things; we are already Buddhas, though we are not aware of it. True Entrusting is the activity of Buddha nature; “Great Shinjin is itself Buddha-nature” [3]

Such an understanding gives rise to a sense of awe, mystery, wonder and gratefulness, which are marks of deep spirituality. In his writings Shinran wrote of the Eternal Amida [4] beyond the limited expression of the mythic story which describes how the Bodhisattva Dharmakara became Amida Buddha in five eons. Amida Buddha is the Buddha from which all Buddhas are manifest. “To praise the one Buddha, Amida, with the mind that is single/ is to praise all the unhindered ones.” [5] Shinran broke through the boundaries of mythic belief to see Amida, in faith, as wondrous reality shining through our lives and world.

The second mark of Shinran’s spirituality is his understanding of absolute Other Power. [6] Since Amida is the totality of reality in the outer and inner worlds, micro and macro worlds, nothing happens apart from, or separate from, his ever-active compassion and wisdom. Hence, when he describes the tragic events of the Contemplation Sutra in which Prince Ajatasatru murdered his father, he viewed the people involved with the Prince also as

manifestations of Amida's compassion. They appeared in order to instruct people concerning the way of salvation offered by Amida Buddha. Shinran is not sanctioning or validating such evil events, but he sees them as revealing Amida's intent to save all beings. [7] In relation to our experience, he is suggesting that we look more deeply into the sorrows and tragedies of our own existence to perceive the deeper truth working there. Everything is an expression of Amida's working in the world as the source of salvation and enlightenment.

An outcome of Shinran's spirituality is the inclusive equality of all beings. [8] Amida's compassion and wisdom embrace all beings equally. Therefore, spiritual community is a fellowship of *dobo-dogyo*, fellow companions and participants in the teaching. Shinran established a new community of shared faith and responsibility. He rejected the Confucian model, headed by a teacher to whom the disciples are subordinated. He declared that he had not even one disciple. [9] Shinran was responsible to his followers as they were responsible to him as fellow companions on the path.

Shinran's spirituality was both personal and universal. As he reflected on the importance of the Vow of Amida, he exclaimed that "it was made for me, Shinran, alone." [10] While many follow traditional religion because it is tradition, Shinran's faith came about by a personal decision. Though Shinran declared he never said *Nembutsu* once out of filial piety [11], he was not rejecting the concern for parents and ancestors. Rather, he was highlighting the universality of the teaching since everyone one at some time has been our parents, brothers, sisters etc, through eons of repeated life.

Shinran's broad spirituality afforded him an openness permitting dissent and freedom of opinion among his disciples. After declaring the basis of his own faith to disciples who came to question him, he declared: "It is up to you to decide what you will believe." [12] He never shied from a question. He never condemned differences of view unless it was damaging the teaching. Consequently, he would not excommunicate an errant disciple.

Shinran never claimed to have a monopoly on truth. He referred followers to scholars when he lacked detailed information. He knew the limits of judgment, declaring, that if he knew good and evil as Amida knew good and evil, then he could claim full knowledge. [13] But he was a simply an ignorant, foolish being, like everyone else. He lamented that his ego inspired him to pose as a teacher. [14]

Finally, Shinran's spirituality was not a private, isolated or individualistic faith. He quoted a phrase from the Chinese teacher Shan-tao that the true way to express one's gratitude to the Buddha for his great truth was to share the faith he had received with others. [15] In his writing concerning the mind of true entrusting or faith, Shinran constantly reiterated that faith embodies the Buddha's compassion which aims at the salvation of all beings. [16] Thus, Shinran's spirituality is not a passive feeling or sentiment, but issues in efforts to offer the teaching to others and to make it a reality within the world.

As Shin Buddhism struggles to find its way in the world of competing "isms" and beliefs, it can find in Shinran's spirituality a guideline for presenting the teaching to people of all walks of life, while making a distinct contribution in nurturing a renewed spirit of a liberating, open and sharing living faith. Thank you. *Namu-Amida-Butsu*.

References

1. Collected Works of Shinran. (hereafter CWS) p. 101.
2. CWS. *Kyogyoshinsho*, VI, pp. 255-274; *Tannisho* 7.
3. Collected Works of Shinran. *Hymns of the Pure Land*, #94. p. 351; Notes on 'Essentials of

Faith Alone' p. 463; Kyogyoshinsho, III, #31. p. 99; see also p. 79; #21, p. 95.

4. kuon-jitsu-jo-butsu [j] -- a term from Tendai Buddhism for the eternity of the Buddha based on Chapter 16 of the Lotus Sutra CWS, #55. p. 340.

5. CWS. Hymns of the Pure Land, #48, p. 336. See #88 in reference to Sakyamuni.

6. CWS. Kyogyoshinsho. p. 93, #18.

7. CWS. Passages on the Pure Land Way. p. 302; See Hymns of the Pure Land. #78-#80.

8. CWS. Kyogyoshinsho. P. 107, #51.

9. Tannisho 6.

10. Tannisho Postscript.

11. Tannisho 5

12. Tannisho 2

13. Tannisho Postscript

14. CWS. Hymns of the Dharma-Ages, #116, p. 429.

15. CWS. Kyogyoshinsho. III, p. 120-, #94.

16. CWS. Kyogyoshinsho. III. p. 113, #66.