

Session One in our reading and ongoing discussion of:
Jodo Shinshu: The Supreme Teaching for the Present Age.
Essay 1 in *The Unhindered Path*, by John Paraskevopoulos.

On the 8th of January 2025 we will begin a new series of programmed studies, concentrating this time upon the Essays chapter in *Ruminations on Shin Buddhism*, by Rev John Paraskevopoulos. Throughout the study, scheduled to end on the 11th of June 2025, associated text will be uploaded to this page consecutively at fortnightly intervals.

[CLICK HERE TO SEE THE FULL PROGRAM OF OUR NEW STUDY - INCLUDING SESSION DETAILS AND CONFIRMED DATES AND TIMES ON OUR NOTICES PAGE.](#)

Preamble, by John Paraskevopoulos:

The aim of this essay is to challenge these misconceptions (and others) with a view to demonstrating how such perceived negatives are actually positives. What makes Shin Buddhism distinctive is its focus on meeting our spiritual yearnings while not neglecting a frank assessment of our human condition—one which entails both obvious, and more subtle, spiritual ‘snares’. In terms of day-to-day life, it is precisely these that Shin seeks to bring into sharp relief, as their consequences can be far-reaching. This degree of honesty—very uncomfortable at times—confers true freedom and helps us to avoid the toxic pitfall of spiritual hypocrisy, which is the bane of so much religious thinking today.

Whether we harbour any spiritual beliefs or not, we are searching for truth and certainty; a way of understanding ourselves and the mystery of our existence. This perennial need for answers to such questions cannot be ignored without distorting our humanity in some way and, indeed, doing us an injustice. And, yet, this quest—for those who take it seriously—is fraught with doubt and confusion. People today seem to live in a state of constant apprehension, such that any talk of spiritual matters often seems remote and somehow irrelevant to the struggle of our everyday lives.

Indeed, the modern world seems to reinforce these doubts by denying or denigrating our spiritual needs; by regarding us merely as economic beings whose sole reason for existence is consumption—anything deeper is simply dismissed as fanciful and misguided. Notwithstanding the pervasive influence of these powerful forces that serve to discourage any kind of inner or contemplative life, it is impossible to deny that we are profoundly affected by our impending mortality and the ephemeral nature of things—we desperately seek, in all manner of ways, to find a lasting resolution to this problem. Why is this so? Why do we often feel there is much more to our existence than what science and secular culture tell us there is? The totalitarianism of the latter in Western society constitutes an aberration—in terms of what people in all cultures have believed for millennia—and, arguably, has led to much unhappiness. So how can we bring all these considerations together to help us gain a better understanding of Shin and its place in the world today? In order to do this, we need to remove some serious misconceptions that plague much current thinking about this tradition.

Firstly, we need to accept—as difficult as this is for some—that Shin (and Pure Land Buddhism as a whole) is a religious phenomenon, not some kind of humanist manifesto which, if true, would render it unintelligible. What gives Shin its undeniable spiritual quality (which it shares with the higher dimensions of the great faiths of humanity) is: (i) its belief in a supreme reality that transcends (but includes) our ordinary world of the senses—a reality that embraces all things and constitutes their essence; and (ii) that awakening to this reality—which has many names (Nirvāna, Suchness, Dharma-Body, Amitābha, Sukhāvati)—is our highest quest as

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human beings, the purpose of our existence in this life (and any others) as well as the complete fulfillment of our human happiness; none other than the source of our truest felicity.

Now this obvious and, we think, rather innocuous observation is enough to raise the hackles of many who insist that traditional terms which refer to any kind of higher reality, as well as to concepts such as rebirth and karma, are just metaphors employed by less sophisticated people in the past to explain things for which science and modern thought have well and truly found answers. We are told that Amida is not a real Buddha, that this is just a figurative way of referring to the 'oneness' of humanity and to how we are interconnected with respect to a common (often envisaged as a social) good. Amida's compassion is seen as simply the support we receive from

others or the benevolent aspect of the natural world that sustains and nurtures us (conveniently forgetting, of course, its manifold horrors). The Pure Land, it would seem, is nothing more than the state of our minds when purified of their defilements or the ideal form of society where everyone is able to live in peace and harmony.