

SBFUK STUDY 2 – SESSION 1 JŌDO SHINSHŪ: THE SUPREME TEACHING FOR THE PRESENT AGE

In a world where confusion about values abounds and where many of the old certainties that previously governed our views on life, ethics and religion are crumbling before our eyes, one can be forgiven for feeling lost at sea without any prospect of finding *terra firma*. The spiritual traditions of the world have, each in their own way, endeavoured to provide some kind of anchor to keep us rooted in what is, otherwise, a world of shifting sands. And yet, it seems that many of the traditional faiths find it difficult to keep adherents in the modern world (particularly the West) as the juggernaut of secular humanism encroaches, leaving people bewildered as they struggle to find answers to urgent questions; answers that may appear elusive but which remain critical to our well-being.

There are many theories regarding the crisis of modernity, the collapse of traditional values, the loss of faith and the trivialisation of our public culture. We do not intend to add to those theories here. Instead, it will be suggested how Shin Buddhism is uniquely placed to offer a compelling antidote to the spiritual malaise that afflicts us today and how it is exceptionally suited to give ordinary people the inner resources to confront a world where the ‘three poisons’ of greed, anger and ignorance are rampant. While certainly not championing the eminence of Shin in any chauvinistic sense, we will nevertheless propose that this tradition is exceptionally capable of meeting our deepest spiritual needs and, in so doing, furnishing our lives with a quiet undercurrent of abiding joy. This can give us the confidence to face the world as it is, even if we cannot change the ineluctable forces that propel our lives in uncertain and troubling directions.

In reflecting on the teachings of the Pure Land master, Hōnen, a contemporary Zen nun once remarked, ‘I cannot accept a path that is predicated on the notion of spiritual failure’. I think this goes some way towards explaining a number of the difficulties faced by Shin today: the pervading sense of uncertainty regarding these teachings and the not uncommon feeling of inferiority—that we are somehow not real Buddhists because of our inability to withstand traditional practices. As a result, our commitment to the Dharma has become largely luke-warm and listless. These attitudes have had the debilitating effect of preventing people experiencing the liberation that this Dharma has to offer. The honest recognition of our ‘spiritual failure’ is, in fact, critical to seeing why this is so.

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.

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Continuing ... *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 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.

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Continuing ... *where everyone is able to live in peace and harmony.*

When viewed in this way, some will insist that Shin is therefore perfectly compatible with a modern and scientific outlook and thus eminently suited to people of today, without any need to believe in outmoded ‘myths’ and ‘fairytales’. Scratch the surface of many a Western Shin Buddhist and this, alas, is what you will find. But, surely, something terribly awry is going on here. This desperate attempt to be seen as ‘relevant’ and ‘contemporary’—whatever that might mean—has led to the wholesale abandonment of the traditional principles on which Shin is founded; leaving us with no more than a tepid and half-hearted outlook that is perfectly compatible with believing in next to nothing—no more, in fact, than the everyday values to which worldly people commonly subscribe.

This mentality is reinforced by a vast array of secondary literature that has rapidly become a substitute for the primary texts themselves. Not that the sūtras and writings of the masters do not require occasional interpretation and commentary but these should be the benchmark by which contemporary works ought to be judged. Interpretation often becomes ‘re-interpretation’ to the point where the power of the original message is lost.

It is also true (and this fuels the problem) that, in this day and age, many people have simply lost their capacity for spiritual insight—the ability to see and not just think—into the hidden realities behind this veil of appearances; the kind of direct vision that caused Shinran and his predecessors to sing the praises of the power, light and life that they experienced in their awakening of faith. This is knowledge in the highest degree (and of the deepest truths), not a mere flight of whimsy. Tragically, this capacity has largely been eroded; however—as difficult as this may be—it must be recovered if we are to avoid the spiritual wasteland that awaits us. Take away the eternal verities of this ‘power, light and life’ that we find embodied in the reality of Amida Buddha, and you are left with nothing.

With the rejection of these truths, we lose the hope that comes with a traditional understanding of the Pure Land. For this life is not all there is. In our most reflective moments (if we are receptive to the Buddha’s illumination), we truly sense that this cannot be so and that all of life’s loose ends, unfulfilled needs and expectations, as well as its pointless suffering, are inevitably resolved in the realm of enlightenment—Nirvāna, the Pure Land. This is the message that the Buddha taught from the very beginning—namely, that this world is a fleeting, unsatisfying and disturbing miasma that points to something much greater than itself. Otherwise, the Dharma simply makes no sense; what is truly distinctive about it gets lost in the white noise of worldly folly and ambition¹. Being kind and thoughtful to others, as well as trying to reduce suffering and injustice, are all very laudable but many non-Buddhists do as much and the Dharma—in all its depth, richness and complexity—is much more than effective social engagement. It is a path of illumination and transformation that aims at the highest of ends—which are not merely ethical or political—but spiritual and thus not entirely of this world.

Now, if we cannot agree on this much, then there is nowhere left to go. If all such talk is dismissed as mere ‘fundamentalism’ (a label we gladly embrace if taken in its non-pejorative sense of a return to what is *fundamental*) then we are at a dead end. Those who disparage these time-honoured (and tested) traditional understandings might as well throw in the towel—it would be more honest to move on (in light of the implications of what they really believe) and turn their backs on such doctrines altogether, rather than do harm by misappropriating them to exclusively secular ends.

¹ “Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player, that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more. It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.” (William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*)

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Continuing: ... *rather than do harm by misappropriating them to exclusively secular ends.*

As much as some people are uncomfortable to admit it, they deeply desire salvation. ‘From what?’ you may ask. From the endless ills, frustrations and cruelties of samsāra along with the myriad poisons to be found in ourselves. If you feel these maladies acutely and cannot seem to find a way through them; if you are prepared to acknowledge the inherent difficulties in eliminating your shortcomings or improving the world around you; if you are serious about resolving this problem at its root; and if you feel that sense of mystery and beauty in life that beckons you to look beyond what you can see and touch, then the teachings of Shin Buddhism may have something vital to say to you.

It may be useful to turn now to the specific features of Shin that make it such a relevant spiritual path for our times. We will focus on about half a dozen or so themes that exemplify the strengths of this tradition with respect to other options available to people today, thereby demonstrating why this much misunderstood and under-appreciated way offers a universal scope that transcends all cultures, nationalities and human dispositions—no one is excluded from taking this medicine dispensed by the Buddha for our ailing times of crisis and confusion.

(i) Experiential Confirmation

As with Buddhism in general, Shin does not demand an uncritical adherence to any doctrinal proposition. Of course, it has doctrines aplenty but these have been developed over the centuries through the collective insights and experiences of its followers, all the way back to Shakyamuni himself; doctrines that have received rich embodiment in the symbolism of the Pure Land tradition.

Shin, in fact, offers itself as an invitation. It says to us: ‘Consider the human condition and reflect on the impermanence of all things; listen to the exhortations of the Buddha and taste for yourself the fruits of his compassionate message. If you trust it, then follow in his footsteps’. There is no coercion here; no rejection or condemnation if you spurn the invitation or disagree with what the Buddha is telling you. Just a recognition that one’s own karmic maturity may be at a stage where the Dharma vividly speaks to you and can be accepted—and rejoiced in—wholeheartedly.

The Dharma can only emancipate us if we recognise and willingly accept its truth, not because we are threatened with punitive measures. Despite its many hardships and difficulties, human life is considered most precious in Buddhism as it affords the best opportunity (compared to other samsaric states of existence) for realising the Dharma and thus exiting the wearisome round of transmigration once and for all. For this to be possible, we must want to be liberated and accept this as our ultimate good.

Shin encourages us to open our eyes, be guided by those wiser forebears who have traversed the path already (as witnessed by the biographical accounts of their powerful and extraordinary experiences) and to accept the compelling evidence of our spiritual intuition as illuminated by the wisdom of the Buddha.

(ii) Ultimate Reality

Given that a number of Western Buddhists have come from Christianity (often having fled from unhappy or disappointing experiences) it is difficult to broach the topic of a higher or ‘divine’ reality without provoking a strong reaction – it seems that anything which smacks of ‘God-talk’ is resentfully dismissed as un-Buddhist. This is rather unfortunate and surely a case of throwing out the baby with the bath-water. Let us be absolutely clear about this: Buddhism does not abandon the notion of an ultimate reality but refines and strips it of many of the troubling limitations that so bedevil certain theistic notions of God. Even from its earliest days, Buddhism recognised a reality that transcended this world – blissful and free from suffering – described (in the early *Samyutta Nikāya*) as:

... the far shore, the subtle, the very difficult to see, the unageing, the stable, the undisintegrating, the unmanifest, the peaceful, the deathless, the sublime, the auspicious, the secure, the destruction of craving, the wonderful, the amazing, the unailing, the unafflicted, dispassion, purity, freedom, the island, the shelter, the asylum, the refuge ...

Continuing: ... *the island, the shelter, the asylum, the refuge ...*

This is no earthly reality to which one can point. There is nothing in this world of flux, uncertainty and unhappiness that corresponds, even remotely, to such a description. It is quite deliberately depicted as *other-worldly* in that it offers the strongest possible contrast to our world. In this sense, the earlier Theravādin tradition was strictly dualistic—there was Nirvāna (our final goal) and there was this world, with no connection between them whatsoever. When the Mahāyāna began to emerge, its view of Nirvāna became more nuanced and this hard dualism was gradually abandoned. It came to be envisaged under the various aspects through which it was experienced: Suchness, Emptiness, Dharma-Body and Buddha-nature. No longer was this reality remote and merely transcendent; rather, it was now seen as dwelling at the heart of all things, such that life and its teeming forms were a reflection of it—its embodiment in the transitory phases of the material universe. Nāgārjuna famously (or perhaps infamously) even went so far as to equate Nirvāna with samsāra in order to make the point that they were inseparable. We are never divorced from this reality as it is all-encompassing while remaining beyond anything we can conceive.

In the Pure Land tradition, the attributes of Nirvāna or the Dharma-Body were developed even further so that they became invested not only with the quality of illuminating wisdom but active compassion as well; a reaching out to suffering beings which are only so many dimensions of itself—hence the indissoluble bond between them. We are able to respond to this compassion in everyday life as a form of awakening (through our saying of the nembutsu) and, at the end of our lives, it becomes the means for returning to our true state. Such a realisation cannot be generated within the confines of our cramped and paltry egos or in the ephemeral concerns of this passing world. This is why it is erroneous to simply identify Nirvāna with the world without any qualification. The world both ‘is’ and ‘is not’ Nirvāna (‘is not’ in the sense of being riddled with ignorance and suffering of which Nirvāna is free and ‘is’ in the sense that it is a manifestation or ‘crystallisation’, at a lower level, of this same reality).

In any event, to dismiss certain beliefs because they resemble (in part) something you have already rejected, does not make them false. Yes, Shin does have features in common with other religions (how could it not?) but it also distinguishes itself from them in very important ways that are unique to it. D.T. Suzuki once remarked that all religions have their origin in the Dharma-Body which has dispensed their saving teachings in a way that conforms to the countless needs and limitations of humanity. Indeed, in light of this, some have observed that Shin is, in fact, a kind of summation or essentialised distillation of previous Buddhist teachings².

Once that which is formless takes on specific forms in which to express itself, it must also assume the deficiencies that come with doing so (and in a plethora of ways according to the endless varieties of human nature) such that differences—often deep-seated—are inevitable. If the highest reality is truly compassionate, it will leave no sector of humankind without guidance and illumination, despite the strife, conflict and mutual incomprehension to which the varied religious forms often give rise. In this sense, much more separates Buddhism from contemporary atheism than it does from other faiths, which—at the very least—acknowledge primacy of the spiritual.

² There is an interesting passage that appears in what is, perhaps, an apocryphal account of Shinran when he was a young monk, meeting with a woman who was later to become his wife, Eshinni. Producing from her pocket a crystal burning glass, she said: “Please take this and keep it. It has the power to collect the sun’s rays and focus them on one point, on which it shines with burning heat. Do the same for religion: collect and focus into one point the whole system of the faith, and let that point be made burning and bright, so that it may kindle into zeal even the simplest and most ignorant soul.” [Arthur Lloyd, *Shinran and His Work: Studies in Shinshu Theology* (Tokyo: Kyobunkwan, 1910), pp.64-65]