

**‘Jōdo Shinshū: The Supreme Teaching for the Present Age’ as
found in the Essays chapter in ‘The Unhindered Path by Rev John
Paraskevopoulos.**

Publisher: Sophia Perennis SBN-10:1621381986 ISBN-13: 978-1621381983

**SBFUK
STUDY
2A
Jan-May
2025**

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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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 (Nirvāṇa, 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.

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.

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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—Nirvāṇa, 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.

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

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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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

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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 ...

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.

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

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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.

(iii) Problem of Evil

A major stumbling block for theistic faith is the difficulty of reconciling the goodness and omnipotence of God with the incomprehensible suffering and unhappiness we find in the world. In fact, one could argue that it is well-nigh impossible. Buddhism offers the distinct advantage of not positing an all-powerful deity that brings creation into being through a conscious act of will. And yet, in the non-dual scheme of the Mahāyāna, the supreme bliss of Nirvāṇa is not severed from the miseries of saṃsāra but, clearly, neither are they identical. To be sure, this is a profound mystery at the heart of reality but it cannot be avoided.

A conclusion we can reach is that this world is, in some respects, a manifestation of a better one (that cannot be fully realised in this life and of which the reality of *dukkha* is a constant reminder). Its unsatisfactory nature reflects our ‘distance’ from Nirvāṇa while the joy, love and beauty³ we do find in this world reveal its luminous presence at the core of everyday life, prompting us to seek a higher awakening. Evil is a consequence of living in a realm that is evidently not the Pure Land but this world is not, nevertheless, entirely bereft of its light. The reality of suffering is no reason, therefore, to doubt the reality of Nirvāṇa—our very capacity to see suffering as such, and to want to free ourselves from it, is proof enough of its opposite⁴.

(iv) Universal Salvation

This brings us to one of the most outstanding features of Shin Buddhism: the notion of universal salvation. No other spiritual tradition is as explicit in proclaiming that all sentient beings are embraced spiritually and that all will eventually be released from their current bondage to pain and ignorance.

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]

³ “Every beauty that evokes a yearning for transcendence is the fruit of Amida’s practice. Beauty is a saṃsaric expression of transcendent virtue and Amida’s stored ‘merit’ finds its natural expression in beautiful forms” (Chris Morgan, *pers.comm.*). In the preparation of this essay, I am indebted to Mr Morgan for the assistance provided by his many helpful insights.

⁴ “*Dukkha* is a natural consequence of possessing Buddha-nature in the world of birth-and-death. Without *dukkha*, there can be no awakening of faith.” (Chris Morgan)

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Amida Buddha is the ‘human-facing’ dimension of Nirvāṇa—the accessible aspect of the Dharma-Body that addresses us directly according to our fraught condition. It can do so directly and intimately because, at base, it is our fundamental essence so, by liberating us as individuals, it is also freeing aspects of itself. This is why no one is—or can be—left behind. All that is required is that we accept the working of the Vow which emancipates us, unencumbered by our fretful calculations. And this is where the simple believer, in many ways, has the advantage. A literal belief in Amida Buddha is uncalculating, and allows the nembutsu to penetrate unhindered whereas more sophisticated adherents get bogged down in over-intellectualising faith which leads to a host of fruitless doubts and spiritual paralysis.

Buddhism assuredly has its hells (sixteen of them in fact!) but they are not eternal. Some individual karmas are worse than others and therefore require more radical expiation but, in the end, all beings are destined for the Pure Land. Many will simply refuse to believe this and, indeed, our current age of spiritual myopia strongly encourages us to remain sceptical. Even those who are vaguely attracted to the teachings will say: ‘Surely, this is too good to be true’. From the perspective of perfect compassion, however, ‘too good’ is precisely why it is true. Our innate longing to be freed from our mortal fetters is, in fact, the evidence of that which fulfills this very desire. To invoke a cardinal Buddhist law—no effect without a cause.

(v) Accepting imperfection

In light of the foregoing considerations, it is easier perhaps to see why the fragile nature of unenlightened beings is no obstacle on the Shin Buddhist path. There is no crippling perfectionism because this is impossible; what is inherently imperfect, can never cease being so. The very conditions that keep us bound in chains of error, greed and anger are essentially ingrained in human nature and in the fact that we inhabit terribly unstable physical bodies riddled with endless desires and infirmities⁵.

The only response by Amida Buddha to such a state of affairs is profound concern, not condemnation. Therefore, the Buddha has vowed to remove the grievous conditions that bind us—through awakening us to the truth in this life and by guiding us to the Pure Land of Nirvāṇa when we relinquish our defiled minds and corruptible bodies at the time of death. Hence the emphasis in Shin on lay life; that is, living fully in this world with all our burdens and responsibilities but accepting the reality of our earthly plight honestly, through lives of acceptance, humility and quiet joy without the compulsion to become something we cannot be.

The Buddha does not judge our countless faults, errors, cruelties and insensitivities—creatures of blind passion can do little else⁶. As an acquaintance remarked to us recently: ‘Expecting us not to get wet when we are thrown into the ocean of karma is absurd’⁷. The only response from the

⁵ “Such harmony is in immortal souls, but whilst this muddy vesture of decay doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it.” (William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*)

⁶ “Never a straight thing was made from the crooked timber of humanity.” (Immanuel Kant, 1724-1804)

⁷ “Karma involves countless and imponderable interactions which have ultimately formed our present-day reality in the ocean of birth-and-death. The Dharma is known due to the expedient means of Amida Buddha who is able to render his influence through a perfect reading of samsaric currents. The turbulence of these currents is the very energy used by Amida to draw us near, and then into, the depths where stillness and silence prevail.” (Chris Morgan)

‘Other Shore’ is compassionate regard and a desire to dispense the necessary cure for our existential sickness. This is what we must consider next.

(vi) Practice

In reaching out and making a connection with us, ultimate reality needs to come down, so to speak, from the heights of inconceivable Suchness so that it may be disclosed to us in an intelligible manner. What better way to announce one’s presence than through revealing a name? Amida Buddha, as the compassionate form of formless reality, declares itself to be Unbounded Light and Limitless Life; this we learn through the enlightenment experience of Shakyamuni and the Pure Land tradition which has subsequently confirmed the veracity and efficacy of this most direct of methods.

In the experience of *shinjin*, saying the Name is both the call of Amida Buddha and our response in recognition of this call—in fact, this is really a single event. Nothing else is required. What else, indeed, is possible for ordinary people? When you are lost at sea, and you have the good fortune to encounter a lighthouse, all you can do is follow it as the great beacon guides you to the safety of the shore. What makes this deceptively simple practice so effective is that its consummation is rooted in the Buddha’s power which, nevertheless, still requires our acquiescence; we need to admit its light into our hearts if it is to transform us into people of *shinjin* and, ultimately, into Buddhas.

This great salvific drama is embodied in our hearing, and saying, the Name—*Namo Amida Butsu*. The self-conscious practice of meditation or virtue can add nothing to Amida’s working but neither should conventional Buddhist practices be disparaged. Much beneficial activity can emerge, quite naturally, from a life of *shinjin* but these are its spontaneous expressions, not its conditions. This is practice in its purest form. Initially, it may be difficult, or even painful, given the necessary adjustment required to correct our vanity and self-esteem, but the truth is we cannot genuinely free ourselves; only that which is ‘true and real’—from which we are never separated—can do this and bring us back to itself. What is incumbent on us, therefore, is to allow this to happen without our resistance—a faithful yielding to an irresistible force of loving light that will deliver us from this ‘burning house’ as the Buddha described our world.

(vii) Wisdom

While we have given considerable emphasis to the compassionate dimension of the Shin teachings, it is important that we do not lose sight of their ‘wisdom’ aspect. After all, this tradition’s focus on the Buddha’s Light is very much about wisdom and its role in endowing us with the illumination of the Dharma. It is what allows us to see things as they really are and as they will always be. In this sense, we must not regard this doctrine as simply confined to the quasi-historical timescale that we find in the *sūtras*. The *Mahāyāna* often resorts to symbolic expressions in its sacred literature as if to suggest the numinous, ineffable and timeless aspects of the Dharma.

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Many people today struggle to accept the descriptions they encounter in these texts as literally true—something not altogether surprising given the modernist mindset. Nevertheless, we must remain open to the profound truths to which such language points so that it may start working on us⁸. Imposing manufactured or confected interpretations, based on our flawed calculations, will render the teachings meaningless. This underlines the need to find a good and reliable spiritual friend or guide in the Dharma.

As eternal and infinite, the Buddha’s Light is true reality that abides ceaselessly. It works to transform our hearts and minds without thwarting our reason or emotions; rather, it provides an enriching resource for both. The Dharma gives the most penetrating insights that we are capable of grasping with a vision of life that is holistic and connected. It satisfies the intellect and nourishes the spirit, offering genuine fulfillment of our innermost aspirations.

(viii) Practical value

There is an increasing tendency to treat the Buddhist teachings as a tool with which to improve our everyday lives. We see a growing focus on its therapeutic value, its ability to help us deal with stress, anxiety and unhappiness; to address relationship problems or injustices in society. We see a broken world and we want to ‘fix’ it. This is most commendable and much good has been done by Buddhists, and others, to alleviate suffering in our society. Clearly, such efforts must always continue unabated. But, of course, one does not have to be a Buddhist to see suffering and feel prompted to address it. Many people in the world are very active and successful in this respect and have absolutely no spiritual beliefs or inclinations whatsoever. So, what more does Buddhism offer in light of the pervasive suffering we find in the world?

The Dharma has always taught us to moderate our expectations regarding the world and what it can give. There is no naïve optimism about life and its outlook is thoroughly realistic, always informed by a close observation of the nature of things. Shinran, in particular, was under no illusions about samsāra and its limited ability to provide enduring satisfaction, peace of mind or unfettered well-being. In fact, he distinguished these states from a special kind of joy (*kangi*) that derives from spiritual realisation, not something the world can give. This is true bedrock, that which cannot be undermined by the ravages of fortune unlike ordinary happiness. The joy of shinjin enables us to tap into a greater realm from which we can draw sustenance to see us through the unpredictability and disappointments of life.

⁸ “Symbolism is often misunderstood by modern people. A person of faith may have a completely literal understanding of the Pure Land, Amida and Dharmākara; yet this understanding, at an intuitive and affective level, may have a depth which means that these ‘symbols’—though taken literally—are in fact operative within that person. The Mahāyāna is rich in symbolism but one could argue that it is an inspired (in the proper sense of this word) symbolism and, as such, issues forth from the Void itself. We moderns are too sophisticated to take these symbols literally but because we lack the facility, or receptivity, for deep hearing (*monpo*), any penetration into (and the corresponding ability to interpret) these symbols is facile, calculating and misguided. Such interpretations are a hindrance and create a ‘block’ that prevents Shin’s symbols from forming a sacred, and saving, coherence within the practitioner’s being. Without this, *monpo* is not possible as Amida’s call must compete not only with the background noise of our everyday chaos but also with the mental strain of trying to fit something as vast and deep as the Pure Land tradition, into such a small and shallow mental pigeon hole.” (Chris Morgan)

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It is true that there are some Buddhist schools that advocate various practices (for example, mindfulness meditation, tantric rituals and chanting the title of the *Lotus Sūtra*) which aim to harness spiritual energies in order to help improve our human lot. However, there does not appear to be much evidence to support the efficacy of such practices in addressing the unsatisfactory nature of human existence. We will always have sickness, ageing and death to contend with—this is what this *saha* world of endurance is and always has been.

Therefore, attempts to promulgate a view of the Dharma that is entirely this-worldly are bound to fail. We must not be deceived by empty promises and false hopes. Our assessment of the world and human nature should be unflinching. This is more than just being honest—it also implies looking at things with the eyes of wisdom, which are given to us when we awaken to Amida’s Light. If we are not interested in the truth, we can choose to ignore it and just busy ourselves with the creation of futile utopias or be distracted by superficial remedies to the real problems that we face.

The truth of the Dharma can seem like bitter medicine at times but it also leads us on a path to spiritual maturity and self-awareness. Wisdom destroys our illusions and purges our ego. There can be no more ‘practical’ consequences of the teachings—indeed, its fruits are incalculable in guiding our everyday lives.

The great strength of the Shin teaching is that it offers an indirect taste of the Pure Land here and now (in rare moments of grace and lucidity)⁹ while assuring us that our final destiny is the Buddha’s realm of utmost bliss. Many will not be satisfied to know that they cannot experience complete emancipation here and now and that they must wait till the end of their lives—but what is this life anyway but a flickering chimera fated to impermanence; an insubstantial blip on the radar screen of the universe; a mere snap of the fingers between two eternities?¹⁰ And yet, the Buddha’s Light shines through it all and shows us where our journey must end.

Conclusion & Exhortation

We can see how Shin has inherited the most profound insights of the Mahāyāna tradition, and of early Buddhism as well, while expanding them to encompass the further riches of the Pure Land faith. As mentioned earlier, it is a compelling invitation to abandon oneself¹¹ on a journey of spiritual deliverance where true joy can be found.

Therefore, we can only challenge those who hesitate or feel that this path is somehow inadequate or wanting in depth. The only just response in light of this magnificent teaching should be one of gratitude, not insecurity. What other teaching is more suited to the needs of our time and the sober realities of the human condition? Its vision is without peer as is its unconditional acceptance

⁹ “Although my defiled life is filled with all kinds of desires and delusions, my mind is playing in the Pure Land.” (Shinran, *Jogai Wasan* No.8)

¹⁰ “We are such stuff as dreams are made on and our little life is rounded with a sleep.” (William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*)

¹¹ It is said that, in the Pure Land tradition, to accept this invitation from Amida Buddha is to fulfill the conditions of the fourth noble truth.

‘Jōdo Shinshū: The Supreme Teaching for the Present Age’ as found in the Essays chapter in ‘The Unhindered Path by Rev John Paraskevopoulos.

Publisher: Sophia Perennis SBN-10:1621381986 ISBN-13: 978-1621381983

**SBFUK
STUDY
2A
Jan-May
2025**

of every sentient being. This blend of breadth, depth and realism is a precious gift and a lasting legacy for the spiritual benefit of generations to come.

For those who believe, with Shinran and his predecessors, that we live in a dark age where confusion and disorder prevail with seemingly no hope on the horizon, the taste of Amida’s Dharma is to be savoured like life-giving nectar. We should feel honoured and humbled to count ourselves as wayfarers on this path—privileged, in fact, to have encountered this most rare of teachings bequeathed to us by a succession of compassionate sages who recognised our need for it and who understood, as we must surely realise even more today, that it is the only path left open to us given what we know about ourselves and the world around us. An impartial assessment must reveal that this remains the sole option for nescient beings who find themselves yearning for permanent release from the great round of birth-and-death.

This teaching gives us a gift of wisdom and compassion that transcends impermanence, suffering and doubt. Indeed, there can be no more relevant or universal response to the ills of our time and the ills within ourselves.