'The Dharma of Amida Buddha in the Modern World' as found in the Essays chapter in 'The Unhindered Path' by Rev John Paraskevopoulos.

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SBFUK STUDY 2

> Because the power of the Vow is without limits,
> Even our evil karma, so deep and heavy is not burdensome;
> Because the Buddha's wisdom is without bounds,
> Even the bewildered and wayward are not abandoned.
> (*Shōzōmatsu Wasan*)

It should be readily apparent, to those familiar with the perspective of Shinran, that it is, first and foremost, a teaching for the 'bewildered and wayward'; the spiritual emancipation of which is the primary focus of the Pure Land tradition. It is also important to acknowledge that Shinran was not interested in social reform *per se*, and that any political application of his teaching is secondary if not altogether irrelevant to his primary purpose:

> Concerning compassion, there is a difference between the Path of Sages and the Pure Land Path. Compassion in the Path of Sages is to pity, commiserate with and care for beings. It is extremely difficult, however, to accomplish the saving of others just as one wishes. Compassion in the Pure Land Path should be understood as first attaining Buddhahood quickly through saying the nembutsu and, with the mind of great love and compassion, freely benefiting sentient beings as one wishes. However much love and pity we may feel in our present lives, it is hard to save others as we wish; hence, such compassion remains unfulfilled. Only the saying of the nembutsu, then, is the mind of great compassion that is thoroughgoing. (*Tannishō*)

Our current age, like any other, faces its own unique problems and challenges. However, the perennial concerns of salvation and enlightenment have remained constant throughout the ages. Buddhism, along with other faiths, appears to be going through a crisis of identity in the modern era. In fact, there is an increasing tendency today to call to account all spiritual traditions with respect to their social relevance. In other words, traditions are judged as 'useful' to the extent that they are capable of guiding people in their social and ethical conduct. Any religious path that seems too 'other-worldly' is dismissed as of little value in the face of the imperious demands of modernity. This same tendency is now gaining a foothold in *Jōdo Shinshū*.

The phenomenon of 'socially-engaged' Buddhism is currently seen as the new direction that must be taken if the Dharma is to maintain any pertinence for people today. It is commonplace these days to play down the other-worldly tenor of the Pure Land tradition as it if were largely irrelevant, but to do so would be to grossly distort its teachings. Traditional ideas regarding the spiritual life, transcendent reality or the posthumous states of existence are being abandoned as regressive and outmoded, seeing that some modern exponents of Buddhism prefer a more this-worldly *raison d'etre* for the teachings of Shakyamuni. What are the implications of this quantum shift in apprehending the Buddhist path?

There is much talk about the need to manifest compassion in the world as the most effective way of practicing or demonstrating our faith. However, we need to be clear that such manifestations can be both very limited and misguided. In Shin Buddhism, we also have to be careful not to

advocate the practice of compassion with a view to a selective socio-political agenda or, more critically, with the aim of setting some kind of benchmark for determining authentic *shinjin*. In other words, there is a danger in suggesting that the mind of faith should manifest itself in certain types of behaviour or ethical conduct, or that it ought to be qualified on the basis of social considerations. We often hear that the essence of the Dharma is 'kindness'. Well and good, but is the person of shinjin always kind? Is it inconceivable that such an individual cannot be, for example, racist or homophobic? Assuredly, most of us would strongly disapprove of such prejudices but can we say that people who harbour them are not individuals of true faith? If not, how do we understand Shinran's references to our being 'burdened with deep and heavy evil karma'? To what can this refer except to thoughts and views that are harmful to both ourselves and others? On the other hand, should we always assume that people who appear to be kind and compassionate necessarily manifest Amida's working?:

> We should not express outwardly signs of wisdom, goodness or diligence for, inwardly, we are possessed of falsity. We are filled with all manner of greed, anger, perversity, deceit, wickedness and cunning, and it is difficult to put an end to our evil nature. In this, we are like poisonous snakes or scorpions. (*Kyōgyōshinshō*)

In any case, it is far from obvious that kindness is, in fact, the essence of the Dharma or that it can be treated as, in any way, synonymous with compassion which is an altogether different order of virtue[1].

The question comes down to this: Do we need a spiritual underpinning to our moral actions? Many individuals, who adhere to no religious beliefs whatsoever, are perfectly capable of behaviour that is considered beyond reproach, whether it be valorous, compassionate or self-sacrificing. Confucianism, Aristotelianism and, more recently, Consequentialism, are just some examples of highly-regarded ethical systems that do not have any religious basis. A further question thus presents itself: Does having shinjin lead to more compassionate behaviour? The answer must surely be 'Not necessarily'. It may certainly make one more deeply and painfully conscious of one's lack of true compassion but this does not, as a matter of course, entail becoming a 'better' person in the conventional sense – in other words, it does not dispel one's 'bewildered and wayward' nature.

It is also true that people who have been awakened to the reality of Amida Buddha through shinjin can sometimes spontaneously manifest extraordinarily benevolent behaviour but this is never affected, contrived or calculated. It has no objective in mind but is simply a by-product of the profound joy that is felt in this awakening. Nevertheless, such behaviour should not always be taken as a sign of shinjin. The only compassion that is pure and unadulterated is that which flows from Amida Buddha himself and which is able to encompass all beings despite their

[1] "In the sense intended by the Dharma, compassion is no mere kindness (that is to say, fellow-feeling) but … can only occur on the part of those who have understood and transcended the illusion of self, whereby there is a kind of identification with the other. It just never seems to have occurred to Shinran that such a state of mind could be contrived by an ordinary person like himself." George Gatenby – 'True Compassion', a commentary on *Kōsō Wasan* No.35 (www.georgegatenby.id.au/kw35.htm). The author would like to extend his gratitude to Reverend Gatenby for his invaluable advice in the preparation of this essay.

weaknesses[2]. The true end of the spiritual life is not simply to make our worldly life more just or harmonious – one can do as much without any reference to religion. To insist that religious ideas can only be useful if they serve social ends serves to disfigure the goal that such notions have in the first place; namely, to awaken people to a realm that transcends the suffering and anxiety of this world (which is just as often caused by the very moral and social attitudes that many seek to impose on others of a different persuasion). There is nothing absolute or enduring about worldly values. This is not to say that they cannot assist in social cohesion when implemented wisely (all too rarely alas) but they are, nevertheless, too unstable to serve as a benchmark by which to judge the efficacy of the Buddha's teaching.

One sometimes gets the impression that the 'engaged Buddhism' agenda is distinctly calculated to cultivate particular moral or social outcomes without questioning whether these are always helpful or desirable. Ethics is a deeply ambiguous realm of human endeavour and one should be wary of speaking in absolutes here, especially when the facts are unclear. Of course, in a very obvious sense, the world is desperately in need of greater levels of sympathy and understanding but such qualities can only arise naturally and not as part of a program dedicated to Buddhist activism. Otherwise, they will be seen to be hollow virtues backed by nothing more than an artificial 'moral planning' that seeks to contrive what it thinks best in each situation, usually on the basis of a predetermined ideology.

What gives us the confidence to make bold assertions about the well-being of society and its members? Any pronouncements of this kind should be tempered by a profound humility and a sense of our own shortcomings. What is being questioned here is the necessary link between faith and a certain kind of moral outlook. To insist on such a nexus is to deprive shinjin of its universality and efficacy. We should not be intimidated by the demands of other spiritual traditions which insist that religious faith must assume particular moral paradigms in order for such faith to be validated:

> Being without even the slightest love or compassion, how could I hope to benefit sentient beings? (*Shōzōmatsu Wasan*)

The Buddha undoubtedly prescribed many ethical and meditational precepts. These included kindness, compassion, tolerance, love, gentleness as well as wisdom, concentration and fortitude. In doing so, he hoped to have us dispel the 'three poisons' of anger, greed and ignorance which only serve to compound the vices of our ego and our ability to see things as they really are. However, the Buddha's prescriptions were not merely ends in themselves. They served a higher purpose which was to rescue people from the self-inflicted maladies that leave them frustrated, disappointed, directionless and in despair. No amount of 'good-will' can address these challenges unless it can also serve to lead us to an awareness of ultimate reality. All seemingly

[2] "Compassion must be aligned with wisdom, lest it be misguided. Sometimes a kind of violence is required in the name of greater compassion. For example, the intrusive and painful treatment for cancer may seem cruel if we do not understand the reason for it. Or protecting the vulnerable may require force that, at face value, may seem opposed to compassion. Bodhisattvas can often take wrathful forms in protecting the Dharma, or as a manifestation of compassionate means. We lack the wisdom to be able to effectively understand what true compassion is and, because of this, what we believe to be compassionate action can often result in greater harm." (Chris Morgan *pers. comm.*)

altruistic or generous activities are limited; either by our own failings or by restrictions in circumstances. Often they are also tainted by our selfish desires, however subtle these may be:

> People of this world are preoccupied with thoughts that are not real ... Even those who renounce this world think of nothing but fame and profit. Hence, know that we are not good persons, nor persons of wisdom; that we have no diligence, but only indolence, and that within, the heart is ever empty, deceptive, vainglorious and flattering. We do not have a heart that is true and real. (*Yuishinshō-mon'i*)

All attempts at improving our lot in this world, while highly laudable, are inadequate to address the root causes of our existential crisis. Needless to say, no one is suggesting that people ought not to be more thoughtful and caring towards others – on the contrary, we see nowhere near enough of these virtues in the world. The point is that the ultimate aim of any spiritual path has little to do with any kind of moral or social activism. In as much as the world is often afflicted with profound self-deception, we need to be aware – as Shakyamuni pointed out – that sentient beings and their activities are similarly impaired. Social values are fluid, changeable and often contradictory. There is nothing inherently dependable in society's mores or ethical norms. While they serve to make life tolerable and serve a utilitarian purpose, they are no substitute for the profound spiritual relief we attain from a direct experience of the eternal reality that we come to know as Amida Buddha.

As indicated above, the Dharma certainly provides ethical prescriptions such as the precepts, the eight-fold noble path and the six *pāramitās*. When practiced in a completely disinterested manner, such virtuous actions can certainly prove morally and spiritually efficacious – but how many of us are actually capable of acting in this way? In almost all cases, our behaviour, however much it may appear driven by moral objectives, is often motivated by subtle forms of self-interest. Genuinely compassionate behaviour is the exception and no doubt rarer than we imagine. It may well be that Amida's light occasionally breaks into our hardened egos and then shines through into the world as a genuine instance of unaffected tenderness or kindness; this, of course, cannot be denied. However, to what extent can this be the subject of exhortation or the foundation of a program for social reform?

One often hears that the Dharma provides us with a deeper insight into the nature of such qualities as compassion through our personal experience of Amida's embrace and through the teaching of inter-dependence. It is indeed true that the life of shinjin does open up illuminating spiritual vistas for the individual. Nevertheless, it does not follow that the realisation of, say, shinjin or *pratītya-samutpāda* must lead to some kind of corresponding urge to address the ills of the world. It certainly can but the fact that it may not should not count against the veracity of such a realisation. As ought to be clear by now, we are not trying to condone any kind of moral indifference towards the many, tragic problems that plague human societies. Neither are we excusing morally reprehensible behaviour. One needs to remember Shinran's distinction between acts that are a consequence of 'blind passion' and those that are deliberately calculated to hurt others. It may well be that genuine instances of wilful and premeditated malice or cruelty are inconsistent with a mind of shinjin, but this is not the point.

An 'engaged' form of Buddhism, while well-intentioned, harbours the very real possibility of causing a certain measure of spiritual harm to those who find themselves unable to conform to

the 'engaged' agenda; which is precisely what it is. An agenda that has nothing immutable about it and which only reflects the passing preoccupations, viewpoints and biases of its age. Indeed, one wonders how relevant (or even recognisable) the current form of engaged Buddhism will be in one or two hundred years' time. If anything, such a contrast may very well serve to demonstrate the fleeting nature of our current concerns. One really has to ask whether Shinran had any sense of social engagement of the kind envisaged by its modern exponents. What Shinran *is* engaged with is Amida Buddha and his Dharma, not with transient values which have no bearing on his final goal of emancipation. Without doubt, he was acutely aware of the many injustices around him as well as the deep-seated moral and spiritual hypocrisy of his contemporaries but he never sought to have his faith act as a kind of catalyst for social transformation. On the contrary, he pointed to the many evils of his time in order to encourage people to turn their minds from worldly matters and focus on the nembutsu path. One fears that in our rush to seem 'relevant', we are putting the cart before the horse. Are we so confident that we have adequately addressed all the spiritual questions and problems that are posed by Shinran, that we can now safely move on from such concerns and busy ourselves with issues of 'application', however that is conceived? Many people today are still clamouring for bread and are only being given stones. This fact may, perhaps, go some way towards explaining the decline in religious faith, not only in Shin Buddhism, but in other spiritual traditions as well.

The life of shinjin is, without question, a spiritual path aimed at the attainment of enlightenment and the liberation from samsaric bondage. Its social import is really neither here nor there. If the Dharma cannot illuminate and nourish you spiritually in its own right, then no degree of 'engagement' is going to suffice or take its place. One is tempted to think that the excessive emphasis placed on engaged Buddhism masks a kind of agnosticism or, at worse, a spiritual bankruptcy with respect to matters of faith. It is as if, in this 'Decadent Age of the Dharma', the purely spiritual and contemplative aspects of the path have been abandoned and replaced by a restless activism that seeks to transform the world into something it can never be. Intra-samsaric solutions are not the answer. Unless you solve for yourself the fundamental question of 'birth-and-death' (a lifetime's work to be sure), you will never be capable of any genuinely beneficial action in the world. The most important such action or outcome is attaining shinjin for oneself and sharing it with others. This is difficult enough without also attempting to establish a further requirement to make this activity 'relevant to our times' or making it a foundation for social improvement – a precarious exercise to say the least.

The other point that needs to be made is that people of shinjin are perfectly capable of having profoundly opposed positions in relation to moral, social and political questions. The *Myōkōninden*, for example, tells of devout Shin followers who manifested a variety of dispositions with regard to society, although mainly quietist and conservative.

> We who aspire for Amida's fulfilled land,
> Though we differ in outward condition and conduct,
> Should truly receive the Name of the Primal Vow
> And never forget it, whether waking or sleeping.(*Kōsō Wasan*, Verse 96)

There is a need for a ruthless honesty and critical self-examination with regard to any kind of imposition of values that are somehow seen to be self-evident. This is often far from being the case and pernicious results may ensue if we are oblivious to this fact. Are we then to have no benchmark for guiding our behaviour in the world? The doctrine of *ahimsa* ('non-harming') has always been a compelling notion that has guided Buddhists since the dawn of this tradition. The belief that we should not cause harm to sentient beings can usually be discerned at the heart of many moral doctrines as it draws on the Buddhist teachings of compassion and the inter-dependence of all beings. The concept of *ahimsa* can inform a number of our activities in the world (e.g. law and order, welfare policy, sexuality and so on) but even then, the fair and accurate application of this principle is rarely straightforward and can often be mired in deep uncertainty (such as balancing competing forms of harm and establishing degrees of acceptable suffering, for example).

Buddhist models for behaviour are profoundly instructive and are clearly inspired by the Buddha's insight into our tragic human condition, as well as by his compassionate concern to alleviate our suffering. Such models can serve as helpful guides, however short we may fall with respect to these standards. They provide critical touchstones for showing us whether we are heading in the right direction but it is not always clear that they will provide a satisfactory solution in every case. The realm of human values is marked by obscure and hard-to-fathom motives as well as considerable self-interest, despite the possibility of occasionally being able to see our way through to a more objective and disinterested position. Even so, we must be careful not to use spiritual insights (which are not always amenable to adequate verbal formulation) as a catalyst for initiating social or political commentary where this is only likely to fuel confusion, uncertainty and resentment.

The world is full of opinions on questions of moral importance and it is well-nigh impossible to establish any kind of unanimity or consensus on such matters even among people who share the same spiritual beliefs. Accordingly, it is hardly desirable to insist on uniform demands for our engagement with the world. The realm of samsāra can never provide us with these kinds of certainties and we would do well to honestly admit this rather than think we were doing something useful in prescribing criteria for rectitude in matters of faith based on whether such faith has been appropriately applied and translated into some form of engagement with our society.

Despite Shinran's negative assessment of human nature, it is somehow comforting in that it boldly affirms certain realities that cannot be overlooked, including the fact that we are all, in one way or another, afflicted by countless obstacles in the quest for human fulfillment. His assessment forces us to pause and reflect on the nature of the world, its often specious values, artificial expectations and spurious demands. It also helps us to see the appalling suffering, injustice and tragedy in the world (much of it unnoticed by most of us) as well as the ignorance, cruelty and futility of so many ventures that seek to improve perceived wrongs and injustices[3]. Shinran also helps us to acknowledge the confronting truth that we invariably contribute to this sad state of

[3] "When we are born, we cry that we are come to this great stage of fools." (William Shakespeare, *King Lear*).

affairs despite our best intentions. To gloss over these facts is to fail to understand what it means to endure life in this world of transience, pain and disappointment.

Our lives can be cut short in the blink of an eye. Our influence is limited and we are flawed as moral agents. This was the Buddha's realistic appraisal of the situation in which we find ourselves, and it would be unremittingly pessimistic if he did not also show us a way out of this existential impasse; not through engaging with the world but by transcending both it and ourselves. This is our primary objective in following the Pure Land path – the attainment of Nirvāna and the liberation of all sentient beings from the brutal ordeal of birth-and-death (at least to those for whom such concepts are still meaningful).

The person who has been blessed with the realisation of shinjin may act as they see fit confident in the knowledge that their salvation is assured. They may thus manifest kindness, anger, mercy or lust as conditions and individual karma dictate but always with the full awareness that they are 'bewildered and wayward' yet fully embraced by Amida Buddha. This is the goal of Shin Buddhism in this life to which all our endeavours should be directed. Nothing else can be as important because without it, all our other efforts and aspirations are in vain. This may sound unduly passive but, in essence, our most important task in this life is the awakening to Amida's Mind in the realisation of shinjin. The experience of many Pure Land adherents over the ages has been one of finding ourselves in this inhospitable world as if banished from our true home to which we yearn to return. This calls for a certain measure of extrication from the world, not a total engagement with it at the expense of our spiritual priorities. In the memorable words of Shan-tao:

> Let us return! Do not abide
> In this homeland of māras.
> Since innumerable aeons ago
> We have been transmigrating,
> And nowhere has there been any pleasure;
> We hear only the voices of grief and sorrow.
> After this present lifetime has ended,
> Let us enter the city of Nirvāna! (*Kyōgyōshinshō*)

We must be allowed to be guided by our own lights and conscience in relation to our interactions with the world and also to make mistakes in doing so. Neither should we always be judged for failing to act in ways expected of us by others or for refusing to conform to particular ethical or social assumptions that are, in any event, likely to be far from self-evident. In such instances, we would do well to avoid the traps of self-righteousness and hypocrisy.

We also need to honestly acknowledge the morally agnostic tenor of Shinran's outlook:

> But for a foolish being full of blind passions, in this fleeting world – this burning house – all matters without exception are lies and gibberish, totally without truth and sincerity. The nembutsu alone is true and real. (*Tannishō*).

Any attempt to overlook this truth or to somehow sanitise it is, arguably, a betrayal of his teaching.

This essay has not aimed to present a purely academic exposition of its theme. In view of the exigencies of the matter, it is more of an exhortation to focus on priorities. In Shin Buddhism

today, there appears to be scant regard to the *inner* engagement that we each must have with Amida Buddha. Our actions in the world will be an outcome of this encounter and of our personal karma, and no one is in a position to predict it, let alone prescribe for it. The endless variety of human temperaments and dispositions must must be respected and accommodated in any world-view that individuals may form, even if we disagree or have little sympathy for it.

Shin Buddhism is a spiritual tradition and a profound one at that. It does not constitute or imply a specific social ideology and does not envisage an ideal state of affairs for the world over and above its spiritual aims. Shinran certainly expressed sincere hope for the spread of peace in the world – who would disagree with him? – but this is just an aspiration and not a formula for success. In the modern age, one often hears the complaint that religion has to adapt to the 'ways of the world'. The modern world, with its chaotic confusion of prejudices and misguided aspirations, represents nothing of absolute value when considered *sub specie aeternitatis* ('under the aspect of eternity'). It is not for the Dharma to conform to the world but for the world to conform to the Dharma.