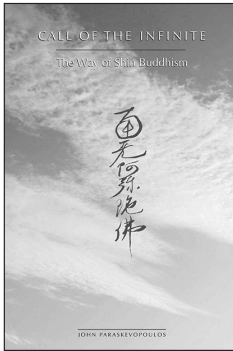


BOOK REVIEWS



CALL OF THE INFINITE: THE WAY OF SHIN BUDDHISM by John Paraskevopoulos. San Rafael, CA: Sophia Perennis, 2009, pp. 114, US\$14.95. ISBN: 978-1-59731-095-6

“For those who are ready, / The door to the deathless state is open. / You that have ears, / Give up the conditions that bind you / And enter in.”— *Majjhima Nikāya*

In light of the increasing interest in Buddhism among many Westerners, it is curious that little is known about the Pure Land tradition of the Mahāyāna ('Great Vehicle'). The most prominent sect of this denomination, *Jōdo Shinshu*, was founded by Shinran (1173–1263) and remains the largest school of Buddhism in Japan today. The book addresses the general reader by keeping technical terms to a minimum and employs accessible language, allowing those who are unfamiliar with Buddhism to learn more about this remarkable religion. The author points out that this book “is not a work of scholarship but rather a contemplative and devotional study of what lies at the heart of this important Buddhist tradition.” (p. xi)

This work consists of four parts that present the key teachings of Shin Buddhism: Chapter One: Pain and Longing; Chapter Two: Infinite Light; Chapter Three: Awakening to the Real; and Chapter Four: Joy Amidst the Shadows.

Gautama Buddha, perhaps like no other religious figure, taught – most directly – the inescapable truth about the inherently unsatisfactory nature of the human condition (*dukkha*). Our false identification with the empirical ego creates a troubled mind and unstable behavior, as Shinran teaches: “Maddened beyond control by blind passions, we do things we should not, say things we should not and think things we should not.” (p. 70) “In the face of this transitory existence, we seek security in order to shield our vulnerability. The Buddha realized that it was through coming to terms with the

suffering, disappointment and anguish of human existence that we can discover its underlying meaning. By seeing that our own minds create the dissatisfaction that plagues our lives, we can be led to seek shelter in that which transcends the conditions of ‘birth and death’” (*samsāra*).

The following is an extract from a foundational scripture of Shin Buddhism, the *Sutra on the Buddha of Infinite Life*:

People of the world, being weak in virtue, engage in strife over matters that are not urgent. In the midst of abject wickedness and extreme afflictions, they painstakingly toil for their living. Whether noble or corrupt, rich or poor, young or old, male or female, all people worry about wealth and property. In this, there is no difference between the rich and the poor; both have their anxieties..... (p. 3)

Without realizing it, we continually yearn for spiritual emancipation, as Paraskevopoulos perceptively observes: “What we are seeking is the Infinite—something that is recognizable in the finite, at the heart of all things, but which surpasses them.” (p. 9) He continues, “If we are able to look deeply into ourselves with clarity, we may come to see that we are inextricably linked to the Infinite, and that only through contact with it are we able to attain the kind of profound fulfilment that so distressingly eludes us in our lives.” (p. 9)

While every person longs to be happy, we are often unclear about how and where to find fulfillment. Paraskevopoulos explains that “if we identify our well-being with a life that is meaningful and which connects us to something greater than ourselves ... then we may be closer to finding what we are looking for.” (p. 14) Paraskevopoulos writes “Nirvana—[is] a state of unutterable happiness,” which is what every human being knowingly or unknowingly is seeking in this existence. In the *Samyutta Nikāya*, an early Buddhist scripture, Nirvāna is depicted as:

[T]he far shore, the subtle, the very difficult to see, the unaging, 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... (p. 21)

The Buddha taught the truth of the Dharma in many ways, depending on the level of comprehension, ability and temperament of the individual. Paraskevopoulos expresses how “The Pure Land path was his direct response to the pressing needs of ordinary men and women who hungered for a spiritual life without having to renounce the world or observe monastic precepts and taxing austerities.” (p. 22) As with other Buddhists, those who follow the way of Shin treasure the Buddha’s teachings as transmitted through the Four Noble Truths, the Eight-fold Path and the Six Perfections. And yet, because of our tenacious clinging to a distorted conception of self, we cannot see things as they are and thus our spiritual objectives are often thwarted. The author writes:

As human beings, we suffer because our deepest self is essentially one with the Dharma-Body [*Dharmakāya*] (which, unbeknownst to us, we are seeking all the time) and yet, in our ignorance, we look for it in those things that are but its ephemeral appearances. This is why we are so constantly disappointed by the shortcomings of everything we encounter and pursue. It is as if we recognize something of this higher reality glittering in our world of forms but, when we aim to grasp it, it dissipates like gossamer in the wind. This is what constitutes the tragedy of our human condition. (p. 24)

Human identity consists of both ephemeral and immutable dimensions; however, our true identity is transpersonal or “supra-personal ... it is the source of all personality” (p. 31). In contrast to the empirical ego, Buddhism directs us to the ‘Great Self’, which is none other than the Dharma-Body, also known as Buddha-nature. According to the *Nirvāna Sutra*, “Although sentient beings are impermanent, still their Buddha-nature is eternal and unchanging.” (p. 48) Paraskevopoulos explains that behind our striving for happiness is the goal of attaining unity with the Dharma-Body as absolute reality (or Buddha-nature in its immanent aspect), for “nothing less than the Infinite can satisfy us. Indeed, our ardent attachment to life itself is but a reflection of our desire for the Infinite, alienation from which accounts for our constant state of dissatisfaction. All desires, in fact, even ones that appear aberrant or abnormal, are rooted in the quest for consummate fulfilment and the need to be humanly complete. (p. 33)

By invoking the Name *Namo Amida Butsu* ('I take refuge in the Buddha of Infinite Light and Life'), we become infused with immeasurable Wisdom and Compassion which are the personal dimensions of inconceivable ultimate reality that constantly reach out to us in an accessible form. Shinran discusses how the reality of Nirvāna becomes vividly embodied in this practice known as *nembutsu* (which means thinking of, or remembering, the Buddha):

Amida Buddha grasps beings with the Name. Thus, as we hear it with our ears and say it with our lips, exalted virtues without limit grasp and pervade our hearts and minds. It becomes ever after the seed of our Buddhahood. (p. 57)

This path provides an integral and universal spiritual method of accessing the transpersonal that is available to all. It is known across the religions by different names: *japa-yoga* in Hinduism, the Jesus Prayer in Christianity, and *dhikr* in Islam.

Within the Buddhist tradition, there is a great deal of diversity; it is in no way monolithic and this needs to be remembered. Paraskevopoulos illustrates this as follows: "We need to accept that the scope of Buddhist practice is very broad, encompassing numerous approaches to the goal of spiritual realization and reflecting the immense variety we find in the aptitude and disposition of people." (p. 39) There are many paths, yet there is only one destination: that of Nirvāna, as T'an-luan (476–542) points out: "It is like the ocean's nature having one taste; when various streams enter, they necessarily become the one taste, and the ocean's taste does not alter." (p. 49) Again, "The Dharma is about awakening to the truth of existence, nothing less." (p. 40) Common to all sapiential traditions of the world, Buddhism, like other religions, leads us "to discover our true identity which demands that we relinquish all that we are to the realm of the spirit" (p. 81).

This is a highly accessible work that offers a clear and concise outline of the major insights found in Shin Buddhism which, regrettably, are little known in the West. In this respect, the book's value is found in introducing a compelling spiritual alternative that is unfamiliar to many seekers today. Paraskevopoulos, who is himself a Shin priest, brings both his theoretical knowledge and lived experience to this work, which will certainly inspire and increase one's yearning for the great peace and liberation of the 'Other Shore'.

— Samuel Bendeck Sotillos