

Immeasurable Life: The Essence of Shin Buddhism. By John Paraskevopoulos. New York: Sophia Perennis, 2020. 114 pages. Paperback: ISBN 978-1-62138-542-4.

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Those who attain true and real *shinjin* . . . necessarily attain Nirvana. . . . To attain Nirvana is to attain eternal bliss. Eternal bliss is ultimate tranquility.¹

Shinran

Although interest in religion is largely on the wane today, particularly in the West, we are witnessing, at the same time, a rise in interest in Buddhism. While many individuals have abandoned the faith of their parents or were raised without any religion, they have nevertheless found a spiritual home in the Buddha's teachings. This book provides a profound meditation on Jōdo Shinshū 浄土真宗, or Shin 真 Buddhism, founded by Shinran 親鸞 (1173–1262). This is the largest school of Buddhism in Japan today and is slowly becoming more widely known around the world.

The Buddha taught that the human condition is inherently unsatisfactory (*duḥkha*) and afflicted with the three poisons: delusion or foolishness, anger or hatred, and greed or selfishness. John Paraskevopoulos points out that, “The fact that suffering is so universal is no reason to doubt the reality of Nirvana—our very capacity to recognize suffering as such, and to want to free ourselves from it, is proof enough of its opposite” (p. 85). Due to this diagnosis, Buddhism has been considered by many to be pessimistic; however, nothing could be further from the truth. As the Buddha once declared, “I teach only about sorrow and the ceasing of sorrow” (p. 21).

Paraskevopoulos observes that “we find ourselves constantly grasping for that which will make our suffering go away. And yet it doesn't” (p. 11). Why is this the case? What is preventing us from being happy? It is, in large part, due to our false identification with the empirical ego which creates an unstable mind and unpredictable behavior: “The problem actually lies at the core of our everyday self” (p. 10).

What is needed, therefore, is not only to make sense of the human condition, but to find a resolution to our fallen nature, which is trapped in samsara. This can be done by turning to a religious perspective: “In the end . . . we simply need to recognize that there are no worldly solutions to spiritual problems” (p. 8).

A predicament of this nature cannot be overcome by avoiding the necessary but difficult task of confronting ourselves: “We must first engage with our own existential sit-

¹ This quotation is taken from p. 97 of the volume under review.

uation before giving any thought to successfully improving things” (p. 9). The Buddha taught that the root of the problem exists within us; and the problems of the world are a reflection of the psychological and spiritual disturbances that lie within each human being. Paraskevopoulos points out that “the desire to improve the world, while totally commendable, cannot simply be brought about by ordinary thinking or willing” (p. 39). Furthermore, “Before we take on the colossal task of improving the ailing condition of society, we must first acknowledge the wreckage of our own human nature” (p. 39). We cannot change the world until we reform ourselves; this is something that we find not only in the teachings of the Buddha, but in those of many saints and sages throughout the world’s religions.

In our perpetual yearning for what we think will make us happy, we come to discover that such happiness is quite elusive. Disillusion of this kind can be a very important teacher in that it dispels our myriad misconceptions about the reality of life in this world. This realization, in turn, helps us to see that abiding happiness arises when our true identity—the inherent Buddha-nature in all beings—becomes disclosed to us. Awakening to the essence of reality is what we are continually hungering for even though we are often oblivious to the true object of our quest. In fact, the Absolute (known in Mahayana Buddhism as the Dharma-Body) is always seeking us out as “there is something of this reality dwelling in our hearts *that is constantly calling us home*” (p. 16). This reality exists beyond anything that we can perceive or apprehend:

The Dharma-Body is *transcendent* in the sense that it cannot be identified with the world of the senses or the intellect; that is, it lies beyond anything we can grasp with either of these faculties. At the same time, it is also *immanent* in that it dwells in all things and so can be experienced by us here and now (p. 30).

In order to apprehend the Dharma-Body, we need to employ *prajñā* (wisdom) or a way of knowing that is immediate, intuitive, and independent of our five senses. Through the transpersonal faculty of *prajñā*, “we are able to see the inner unity of all that exists” (p. 34) and are reminded that “the quest for who we really are lies at the heart of this liberating wisdom” (p. 35). Paraskevopoulos emphasizes that “we are here to rediscover the path that will take us back to our spiritual origin” (p. 42), and yet, “in the end . . . our final objective remains the perfect joy that awaits us in Nirvana” (p. 45). Ultimately, “what is finally liberated in Nirvana is our very own Buddha-nature” (p. 46). It is this transpersonal dimension of the human being that lies beyond birth and death.

In Shin Buddhism, Amida 阿弥陀 Buddha (considered the personal dimension of the highest reality which would otherwise be inconceivable) is the liberating light of wisdom and compassion that meets us where we are in this very existence, regardless of

our condition. Through the invocation of Amida's name, we can realize our Buddha-nature:

Nembutsu [念仏], the practice of hearing and saying Amida's Name (*Namu* Amida Butsu [南無阿弥陀仏] in Japanese) as a contemplative act arising from Other-Power [*tariki* 他力], opens us up to the universal influence of ultimate reality which undertakes true practice on our behalf. We must therefore make room for its working in our hearts and minds. This is the only spiritually beneficial act of which we are capable (p. 81).

The deepening of this awareness gives rise to *shinjin* 信心 (true heart and mind), "which provokes a shift at the centre of our being such that we find our identity firmly ensconced in eternal reality" (p. 55). While we seek refuge in "Other-Power" to sustain us spiritually, it is important to remember that "we do not truly practice but, rather, *are practiced by* Other-Power" (p. 51). Similarly, the *nembutsu* is itself a response to "hearing the Name" understood as the Buddha's initial "calling" to us.

It is through spiritual practice, envisaged in this unique way, that Amida Buddha mirrors to us who we are without distortion. Without the working of Other-Power in our lives, we cannot see ourselves as we really are for "we need to be *shown* what we are because it is impossible for darkness to shed light on itself" (p. 52). According to an old Chinese Buddhist proverb, "We cannot see the dust all around us until the sun is shining" (p. 52).

This is what a genuine spiritual path must offer—nothing less than a total transformation of our being—yet this cannot be accomplished by solely relying on our own efforts. Paraskevopoulos writes, "After we've exhausted all efforts to improve ourselves, we come to see that the ego simply cannot cure itself" (p. 59). Again, our true identity, or real self, "is not our mundane personality" (p. 63). We are made for something that transcends everyday existence, the latter of which cannot completely fulfil us for "our hearts are made for something that vastly exceeds this world" (p. 72).

We now have, at last, a clear, articulate, and concise work on Shin Buddhism in accessible and plain English. This is a profoundly engaging work that challenges and explores the rich meaning of the human condition vis-à-vis the key insights of this Buddhist tradition. Paraskevopoulos skillfully navigates the topography of the spiritual journey by exploring its promises and pitfalls in light of the most pressing concerns that face human beings.

This book addresses the timeless questions pertaining to human suffering, life's meaning, the nature of reality, and the kind of spiritual practice that can bring about true inner transformation, despite our deep-seated shortcomings. As Paraskevopoulos points out, "Shin Buddhism is available to everyone without exception" (p. 82); however, we must show a "willingness to take the 'medicine' dispensed by Amida Buddha"

(p. 82). No matter how dark and dire the circumstances of our lives may appear, Shinran invites us to “realize the eternal bliss of dharma-nature” which is always present to us (p. 74).