

SHIN BUDDHISM: CURRENT CHALLENGES AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

by Rev John Paraskevopoulos
Keynote Address
Buddhist Churches of America Berkeley
19 August 2017

It has been 14 years since my last visit here and I can see that much has changed, including the establishment of this splendid facility. It has impressed upon me the historical importance of the BCA in the early dissemination of Buddhism in the United States and, indeed, its ongoing role as a guardian of the Dharma treasury in the West more generally. You are blessed with considerable resources that Shin communities in places like Europe and Australia can only dream of. I believe that this entails a heightened obligation to ensure that Jodo Shinshu is faithfully served and accurately transmitted to future generations living outside Japan.

To this end, I will be sharing with you some of my thoughts about our tradition, the challenges it faces in the modern world and how it might fare into the future. In particular, I am keen to consider how Shin Buddhism can best position itself to continue offering genuine spiritual nourishment by playing to its great strengths and not forgetting what they are. Having said that, though, I feel as if the future of Shin is looking somewhat precarious. It strikes me as being subject to a host of difficulties and pressures which, if not tackled through a renewed focus on what is most essential in its teachings, will lead to it floundering and struggling for relevance. In the midst of so much confusion and acrimony in the sangha, it is easy to overlook the joy and comfort afforded by the teachings of Shinran, particularly the great insights they give us into the nature of reality and the human condition. We should never lose sight of these foundational aspects of Jodo Shinshu and must always remain vigilant in expounding them with confidence.

I would like to commence with an overview of the challenges facing Shin as I see them. This will then be followed by some reflections on its future prospects in an increasingly secular world where spiritual values are regularly under attack and fighting for survival.

It may be helpful to commence with five issues that can generate obstacles to a satisfactory presentation of Jodo Shinshu. These are: 1) its religious nature; 2) claims that its outlook is pessimistic; 3) its apparent lack of praxis; 4) the tendency to be evasive, reductionist or obfuscating when using doctrinal terminology; and 5) the claim that Shin Buddhism is alien and out of context in the West. Some of the matters I will be raising have already been thoroughly rehearsed by others. However, I think there is always scope for new light to be shed on these difficult but important questions. Let us begin with the first of these.

Many who are contemplating this path, including some adherents already on it, feel distinctly uncomfortable with what they consider to be its similarities to Christianity and, perhaps, theism generally. Of course, this is only a problem for those who completely reject theistic religion in every respect. The first observation one can make is that there are, in fact, many significant and far-reaching differences between Shin and Christianity which are not stressed as often as they should be. I think that doing so, in a fair and balanced manner, would greatly assist in the transition for many to Jodo Shinshu. While the aggressive pursuit of novelty by certain scholars sometimes tends towards an immoderate emphasis on differences alone, these must nevertheless be acknowledged where they are real. On the flipside, however, it is surely obvious that there are also some striking parallels between them in virtue of sharing a religious outlook grounded in a number of universal realities pertaining to questions of faith, liberation and transcendence.

People often remark that they do not consider themselves religious at all, even though they are very interested in ‘spirituality’. There is clearly a widespread view that spirituality is ‘good’, because somehow pure and elevated, but that religion—which is about dogma, organisation and control—is largely corrupted and therefore ‘bad’. While such an attitude is understandable, I think it represents a false dichotomy. After all, Jodo Shinshu is, without doubt, an organised religion but this has never detracted from its function as a profound spiritual vehicle. To be sure, religious bodies can be hidebound and inflexible in their outlook; they can sometimes kill the spirit in

obsessing over the ‘letter’ but this is an inevitable consequence of imposing flawed human structures and behaviours on a reality that is inconceivable, as our Pure Land masters would say. But each religion also has a preserving function and that is to safeguard the body of wisdom handed down to us through an abundance of sacred forms, such as our rich liturgical practices, and in the maintenance of doctrinal orthodoxy which keeps the teachings alive and accessible to ordinary people.

Assuredly we may, at times, find ourselves frustrated or disappointed by the occasional shortcomings of priests or ecclesiastical bureaucrats but most do try, to the best of their abilities, to retain something of what is most valuable in that which has been transmitted; both the teaching itself and the cultural ambience that pervades it. We cannot function as mere ethereal entities for we are embodied flesh and blood human beings who need tangible forms with which to anchor our spiritual lives. Now this problem is not unique to Shin—every religion faces this tension between its forms and their relationship to the formless—but ditching the former in favour of an absolute focus on the latter is perilous in that it leads to the gradual dissipation of a tradition’s integrity. These two dimensions are not mutually exclusive. They reinforce each other and provide a balanced approach, along with the appropriate supports we require to maintain our spiritual equilibrium.

So, yes, I do see Jodo Shinshu as a religion in that it manifests all the classic features of a religious faith: belief in a higher reality, degrees of post-mortem existence, salvation, worship, ritual, devotion, reliance on spiritual authorities and so forth. However, it is not an indispensable requirement of being religious to believe in, say, an omnipotent creator God as I think that a strictly theistic interpretation of what religion is limits its meaning too much, notwithstanding this being a widely prevalent conception. But having made the claim that Shin is, indeed, a religion (the same being the case, arguably, for Buddhism as a whole), I would also insist—against those who resist this claim—that it offers more than just a philosophy or a code of ethics.

This is closely connected to my next point and that is the difficulty that some people have with the so-called ‘pessimism’ they see in Buddhism’s assessment of

human nature, along with its ‘other-worldliness’, especially in Pure Land thought. The first thing to point out is that *pessimism* is a misnomer here in that it suggests a lack of hope for any kind of betterment in our situation; this is definitely not the teaching of the Buddha. Shinran, in particular, has been criticised for not embracing earlier Buddhist views regarding our potential to become Buddhas in this life reflecting, it would seem, a poor estimation of human capability. In other words, some claim that the spiritual failures of Honen and Shinran, as they regard them, should not be projected onto other Buddhists as a pre-determined limitation that only considers Nirvana possible in the Pure Land rather than in the here-and-now, thus denigrating the importance of this life in their view.

There are a number of questionable assumptions in this standard critique that still seem to unsettle many Shin followers today. The fact is that the Pure Land masters had a realistic, humane and compassionate understanding of our existential situation which, personally, I find very honest, compelling and attractive; it strikes me as true to how things are and we cannot ask any more of a teaching. One is perfectly entitled, of course, to reject these insights but the onus then is on demonstrating how they are mistaken based on an unflinching assessment of ordinary people and the reality of their everyday lives. I, for one, find growing confirmation of such insights on a daily basis.

As for the accusation of ‘other-worldliness’, one can only reply that if you do not believe that human life is the be-all and end-all of existence and if you accept that, for the very great majority of us, Nirvana can only ever be realised posthumously, then one’s highest aspiration must, of necessity, have an other-worldly dimension. And why is this a problem? Isn’t it, precisely, what gives us hope against the charge of being unduly pessimistic? If you genuinely doubt that there is any kind of life or mode of existence other than this one and if you question the need for a limitless, unconditioned reality, then perhaps the Dharma is not for you because, clearly, these notions are its fulfillment as a teaching. It is practically impossible to make sense of it otherwise; indeed, it loses its very reason for being. This is not to say that it offers no benefits in our world – just that what transpires during this life is not the end of the story.

This brings to mind Rennyo's well-known remark that "the afterlife is the matter of greatest importance" which, of course, also ought to make it our primary concern right now. This attitude is often dismissed by those who say that he was merely responding to the various calamities prevalent in his time by providing consolation to those suffering in a precariously uncertain world. But this is to get things the wrong way around. Given that Buddhahood can only be obtained in the next life, it stands to reason that in precisely such a focus lies the fulfillment of all our endeavours and the means by which we can place the concerns of this world in proper perspective. That the reality of an afterlife was a source of great comfort to Rennyo's followers wasn't because it served as some kind of superficial balm to help soothe their misery but because it reflected the actual consummation of their spiritual quest.

This is related to another perceived challenge; namely, that it is this other-worldly focus which is responsible for an alleged indifference towards social justice considerations. I would argue that this complaint, for the most part, reflects a declining faith in spiritual realities such that Buddhism then becomes merely a means for improving our earthly condition, including our own behaviour. Nothing wrong with doing that, of course, but the Dharma is clearly much more than this. Shinran always advocated justice and compassion in his dealings with people even if he recognised the impossibility of creating a 'Pure Land' here on earth. Therefore, it is simply not true that he was indifferent towards social problems and the challenges of ordinary life. His solution to these difficulties was to encourage the awakening of *shinjin* as the best remedy to blunt the forces of blind passion that often render our everyday lives so unsatisfactory. And this because the light of Amida Buddha is what imparts the wisdom required to serve our communities with compassion but also with realism in fully recognising the inherently imperfect efforts we often bring to the actualisation of these noble ends.

Many other Buddhists take us to task for the apparent lack of practice in Jodo Shinshu; hence the charge of 'do-nothing Buddhism' which one often hears. The radicalness of this teaching can seem quite confronting even among other Pure Land

adherents. Of course, anyone who has studied it in depth knows that it simply isn't true that one 'does nothing'. Shinran's approach is much more subtle and nuanced in that it does not easily conform to a conventional understanding of practice, as one would rightly expect from a *tariki* perspective. What makes Shin challenging is that it involves, among other things, an ever-present reflection on the nature of Amida's Vow which, given its inconceivability, essentially grounds our practice in this very mystery by removing any possibility that the *nembutsu*, while undoubtedly being something that we do (either spontaneously or deliberately), is a virtue that we can ever claim as our own.

This difficulty has also rendered unclear, to some minds, Shin's relationship to mainstream Buddhism. There can be no doubt that Jodo Shinshu represents a perfectly valid expression of Buddhism, manifesting currents that have been latent in it from the very beginning. Its outlook is consistent with many of the principal ideas that buttress its teachings such as the four noble truths, *pratitya-samutpada*, *karma*, the five *skandhas*, *anatta*, *Nirvana*, the four Dharma seals and so on, even though it maintains a unique view on practice. So, yes, Shin is quite distinctive in a number of ways but it is still recognisably Buddhist as opposed to anything else – it is a thoroughly organic product of that tradition. All the fundamentals are there as can readily be seen by even a cursory comparison with the texts we find in early Buddhism. Its conception of Nirvana certainly differs in some ways but, in this respect, it is in keeping with later Mahayana beliefs which see it as more dynamic in its approach to sentient beings, through the initiative it takes in manifesting a compassionate form for our benefit.

Shinran's distinctiveness also reflects the adaptability of his teaching and its suitability to the capacities of people in our time. This accounts for its great reach and popularity over the course of its history and for the fact that *shinjin*—as our true objective in this life—can be attained in the midst of everyday existence, seeing as perfect enlightenment is not considered possible for ordinary people. This gives Shin a vitality that imparts a forceful impetus to those who seek refuge in it because it

engages them in the condition in which they find themselves – it does not ask for the impossible (which is not to say that the path is easy!).

The practice of hearing and saying the *nembutsu* opens us up to the all-pervasive influence of Amida Buddha who then undertakes true practice on our behalf. We must, therefore, make room for the Buddha's working in our hearts and minds. This may give the appearance of a rather 'passive' practice but—despite appearances—it is far from doing nothing. It entails a life of constant engagement with the teachings and, through them, exposure to the wisdom of Amida. However, as mentioned earlier, this struggle (often borne of a quest arising from an existential crisis) is situated in the reality of the Primal Vow, so every engagement is finally relinquished by the Vow's exposure of our fragile shortcomings – this is what represents the unique value of the *nembutsu*. It completely discloses our nature as *bombu* while, at the same time, foreshadowing our spiritual emancipation. Of course, for those who have a robust sense of self-esteem, as is common nowadays, such a conclusion may not be warmly embraced! Nevertheless, one should bear in mind that, in the end, there are only two kinds of people in this world: there are *bombu* and there are *bombu* with *shinjin*. The importance of this distinction will become clearer later on.

Another challenge that seems to confront Shin today is the difficulty faced by many in coming to grips with notions such as *shinjin*, *nembutsu* and *hongan*. Confusion often arises in the absence of clear and compelling explanations of these, and other, doctrinal terms. It's as if what has satisfied believers in the past no longer does so today. Needless to say, this is hardly a consequence of contemporary people being much more intelligent than their forebears! In some ways, we may believe that we are able to demonstrate greater conceptual sophistication in some of our thinking in the present day but this, in itself, rarely brings us closer to a living experience of the Dharma. There is a tendency in Western Buddhism to be too cerebral in our understanding of these matters and this, I would venture to say, reflects a corresponding debasement in our spiritual culture, something for which it seeks to compensate in some way (usually by trying to demonstrate cleverness in analysis

rather than seeking to recover a lost wisdom, long forgotten). The 21st century West may be technologically advanced—and this to an extraordinary degree—but it can hardly be considered wise. Its affluence often distracts us from the brutal realities of samsaric existence (ageing, sickness and death) – something we are constantly trying to control (and the futility of which Shakyamuni warned us about), precisely through such things as the comforts and convenience of technology. However, our means of deliverance lie elsewhere, beyond the heartless narcissism and desiccating numbness prevalent in so much of modern life where, having become dead on the inside, we find ourselves lacking in genuine convictions because we believe all values to be relative.

Consider someone who is, say, deeply immersed in the light and life of Amida Buddha, and derives joyful solace from this potent encounter. Such a person is not likely to be overly-concerned with the barren preoccupations of modernity or infatuated with the latest scholarly fad. Not that academic questions are without interest but they are hardly a substitute for what matters most in our engagement with the Buddha-Dharma – indeed, they can sometimes distort our understanding of it. Our focus, rather, should be directed to the content of what the faithful actually believe and, while it is important to appreciate the context in which such beliefs have arisen, unless scholarly approaches help to facilitate our spiritual understanding, there appears little point in pursuing them other than mere intellectual satisfaction or self-aggrandisement. The problem lies in viewing religious experience as a thing that can simply be subject to, say, sociological or anthropological investigation and thus treated as an object of study divorced from realisation which, after all, is the whole point of our endeavour – or at least should be so if we take the message of Buddhist texts seriously.

Some thinkers have a tendency to regard texts as artefacts in a way that consciously severs them from the most vital concerns of a living faith (by ignoring the spiritual demands they make on us) and which posits (albeit implicitly) the Western critic as more sophisticated than the Eastern devotee. That many should so easily buy into this tendency betrays, perhaps, an attempt to partake of academia's prestige at the

expense of what is most integral in these teachings. Now, such an attitude is indeed far from critical since a proper discernment would readily reveal the illegitimate appropriation (and possibly even cultural supremacy) that lies at its heart, not to mention an insensitivity to the serious limitations of a purely philological approach to studying spiritual texts, which often point beyond what language can appropriately encompass. One is reminded of Nagarjuna's admonition, in his *Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way*, to transcend the limitations of discursive logic through what he called 'a quiescence of discriminative thinking'. We would do well to always keep this salutary advice at the back of our minds. Otherwise, we may succumb to having natural, intuitive and spontaneous insight being displaced by artificial scrutiny along with endlessly contrived debate.

Nevertheless, we must still confront the problems faced by seekers today in trying to negotiate the doctrinal challenges mentioned earlier. We ought to do this in a way that addresses modern sensibilities and respects people's need for philosophical understanding and critical reflection but not, surely, through divesting these doctrines of their power to effect a lasting transformation in our lives. Those who doubt the validity of a direct experience of these realities are, precisely, those who have not enjoyed such a realisation, in the absence of which one feels compelled to question everything that derives from something viewed as merely 'subjective' (with the implication, of course, that it is false or misguided). To arrive at this conviction is a prerogative that any thinking person is entitled to but, in the context of religious faith, it leaves you with nothing and constitutes a very poor exchange. Indeed, in reaching such a conclusion, we come to see—in the words of the old adage—that "the Emperor is wearing no clothes". An honest recognition of this may well serve to instill, in some of us at least, a greater sense of much-needed humility.

We must not fall victim to the notion that criticism based on postmodernist assumptions is the only prism through which we can properly fathom the beliefs of the past; this often leads to a diminution in our own spiritual understanding. We need to come to grips with masters like Shinran, Honen and Rennyo on their own terms, which

means partaking, as far as we can, of their outlook in some measure so that we can see what they saw. There will, doubtlessly, remain various conceptual difficulties and we must always retain a questioning attitude when engaging with what these sages taught; but, surely, this ought to be with a view to enhancing our awareness of dharmic reality, not to tearing it down for the sole reason that we are no longer capable of experiencing what they did. We rarely seem to question our own limitations, somehow taking them as normative and then projecting them back onto these teachers of the past as if to downplay their claims by ‘deconstructing’ them, and thereby insisting that they did not really mean what they said. It would seem that some modern thinkers have, indeed, now finally understood their meaning (or so they would claim) but only through a colossal feat of presumptuousness!

This reminds me of certain night-stand Buddhists who pride themselves on their erudition—by having read everything ever written on the subject of Emptiness for example—but who have completely failed to integrate their book-knowledge into any kind of practice or spiritual engagement. In this sense, much that passes for Buddhist modernism strikes me as having no pulse; it derides spiritual facts with a certain smugness yet fails to come to terms with what actually lies behind those facts and why they are so important. There is this odd compulsion to dismiss those who hold sincere religious beliefs as if they were incapable of independent thought. This kind of reflexive odium, directed at such people, represents an acute failure of the spiritual imagination, reflecting the onset of a withering existential boredom or *ennui* that is rapidly pervading our culture. Now, it is perfectly true that keeping a critical distance from the object of one’s scholarly analysis is quite appropriate but it presupposes that this kind of analysis is all that is going on when we study spiritual texts – and that is certainly not the case.

I would like to move on now and discuss a general problem presented by the plethora of designations used to denote ultimate reality in Buddhism. Theists have ‘God’ and this, on the whole, makes things nice and simple – it gives their devotions a clear focus. Buddhists (especially in the Pure Land tradition) have to contend with, for

example, Amida Buddha, Nirvana, the Dharma-Body, Tathagata, Enlightenment, the Pure Land and Suchness, among others. All different ways of trying to encompass the ineffable, to be sure, but ones which do create difficulties for those who, perhaps, are new to Shin and are trying to reconcile all these notions into their spiritual framework. Of course, Buddhism does offer an abundance of commentaries which provide the necessary interpretative keys to help us negotiate this labyrinth of terminology but it takes time, effort and sustained reflection. These tools have been available to us for centuries but I fear that many people in the modern world are sometimes deaf to what they are telling us.

There is a general tendency to drag down to our own level that which we do not fully comprehend. Yes, the Dharma must be accommodated to our understanding – otherwise it can never take root. But one must not do this by diminishing it into something less than what it is. This is to be oblivious to our own blind spots which then become the benchmark for what is acceptable rather than an obstacle we need to overcome; something that is impossible to do without the perspective afforded by that which transcends our limited vision. This something, in Jodo Shinshu at least, is the awakening of *shinjin*, a form of wisdom that confers luminous insight. I appreciate that this conclusion, along with any talk of ‘transcendence’, may not sit comfortably with some in the audience but, honestly, I am at a loss to understand why this should be so.

In the view of certain theorists, to be in the thrall of an ‘experience’ is—precisely—not to be objective at all. This so-called ‘subjective bias’ appears, in the eyes of such critics, to undermine the ability of believers to be sufficiently discerning regarding their own beliefs. But when we are considering spiritual matters (as opposed to, say, the study of archaeology or chemistry), direct experience of transmundane realities (as we find in all Buddhist texts) is actually of the utmost importance and must be regarded as more authoritative—to the extent that it is genuine—compared to an outlook that is bereft of it. Consider, again, someone who claims to have had a vivid encounter with Amida, thereby drawing great spiritual and emotional sustenance through the Buddha’s wisdom and compassion. To then retort, in response, that this is

merely a ‘subjective feeling’ and therefore not a valid criterion for assessing its truth, is absurd – it is the only consideration that is relevant unless you hold the view that all such claims can only be made by people who are stupid, gullible, deluded or mendacious. Perfectly possible, of course, but is it likely? I do not think it is.

How can someone, whose only tool is the critical analysis of concepts, be in a position to judge the veracity of another person’s spiritual awakening? Now, certainly, a critic can point out inconsistencies in the language a believer uses to account for their faith or can suggest ways of formulating such experience in a more theoretically coherent manner but they cannot invalidate it as an authentic realisation ‘from the outside’ so to speak. If your critical methods lead you to become sceptical of the realities attested to by countless adherents—past and present—then no problem; that is your entitlement. The honest thing to do then is either walk away from this nest of ‘delusions’ and pursue something you really believe in or simply be left studying this phenomenon academically as a mere historical curiosity.

A final challenge I wish to mention briefly is the perceived ‘foreignness’ of Jodo Shinshu. One often hears that its peculiarly Japanese form is an impediment to its reception among Westerners. This issue continues to be of concern today to those who aspire to a more ‘indigenised’ and contemporary form of the Dharma that is suited to non-Japanese people. As always with such debates, it is undesirable to go too far in either direction. The traditions that have been preserved by the Japanese—liturgical practices, arts, crafts, temples and vestments—are beautiful and evocative. We should be grateful to these custodians for making such treasures still available to us today. I am profoundly moved when I visit Buddhist sites in Japan and am able to admire the extraordinary rituals and craftsmanship on display. As a Westerner, without such wonderful resources at home, I find that exposure to these monuments of the Dharma has enriched my inner life through the numinous and unforgettable experiences they have given me. In a world that is rapidly turning into a cultural wasteland, exceptionally impressive testaments such as these should always be cherished and

protected for future generations as they are indispensable vehicles for the transmission of many intangible graces that can vivify and nourish the human spirit.

However, not everyone can visit or live in Japan and so the question remains of how this transmission can take place in Western environments. Obviously some things need to be different and adaptations made but perhaps not as many as one might suppose. Our principal focus should be on what is most enduring in the teachings, which is neither Japanese nor Western but of general human concern. The Shin Dharma is certainly distinctive and this aspect should never be blunted, but its uniqueness must not be seen in something that is intrinsically Japanese but rather as residing in a powerful spiritual impulse that speaks to all people at all times. In this way, one might hope to avoid encounters like the one I had in Kyoto many years ago when an eminent professor in Jodo Shinshu studies berated me, saying it was impossible to properly understand Shinran if one was not Japanese! But surely his teaching is either universal or simply confined to a limited socio-ethnic context. If not the latter, then how is Japan more privileged than the modern West? Without a doubt, Shinran's teachings clearly transcend cultural conventions. But I think the transition to this way of seeing things will take time for some and that a happy medium will be found if and when Shin becomes naturalised on, not just Western soil, but that of other cultures as well.

There are a number of desiderata that I think must be stressed if Shin has any hope of surviving in the modern world. I do not expect that it will ever become a widespread religious tradition to rival faiths like Christianity and Islam (which, I have to say, are much more confident and dynamic in their outlook) but it will always provide a precious harbour for those who cannot find what they are looking for elsewhere.

To that end, I believe that we must vigorously defend its spiritual values. This is, undeniably, a religious phenomenon in that it offers a path to our emancipation from *samsara*. I fully appreciate that such a view is not exactly fashionable in our desolate postmodern world but this is not about passing vogues; it concerns the most important

questions we can ask about the human condition and our relationship to the highest reality. This, in turn, means resisting reductionist tendencies in our attempts to explain Shin to modern audiences. Reductionism simply fails to do justice to it as a spiritual phenomenon and must be rejected as a false hermeneutic, although perhaps this is inevitable insofar as the perspective of the religious subject cannot be fully reconciled with that of a non-believing scholar. After all, the current intellectual fashion is to assert that we now live in a disenchanted age where we can no longer claim to know timeless truths – all we have are competing ‘narratives’ with little to decide between them (except power perhaps) since we have long abandoned any criteria for discerning what is real any more. This is often coupled with the dubious claim that, since any narrative is amenable (or so we are led to believe) to innumerable meanings, it cannot possibly harbour any objective truth. Indeed, the very idea of truth has become suspect or, worse, considered a dirty word or some kind of thought-crime. However, making the Dharma relevant to people today does not mean having to strip it of its power to inspire, transform and illumine. And this is the problem I have with the rather peculiar aberration that is ‘Secular Buddhism’. At best, it is an attempt to hijack the Dharma in order to give greater credence to humanist ideologies as if to somehow enhance their cachet, perhaps through an association with something considered exotic; at worst, it destroys the very integrity of any pastoral discourse.

It is, perhaps, understandable how a religion without a theistic conception of ‘God’ might lend itself to a secular adaptation (and there is no denying that Buddhist practices have benefitted many individuals in giving them a certain equanimity in their lives, although often divorced from the wider religious context of such practices, as we often find with yoga today). However, Shin only makes sense when it is envisaged as a spiritual path; otherwise notions such as Amida Buddha, the Pure Land and even Nirvana become incomprehensible. A purely secular reading does not really know what to do with these realities except ‘reduce’ them to something less than what they are; and certainly other than what our dharma masters taught and passionately defended. In fact, such a reading simply betrays a complete loss of the sense of the sacred and affords no possibility for genuine spiritual commitment.

I honestly think that if you were to bring back Shinran today and tell him that we have now become more ‘advanced’ in our thinking and believe that Amida is not actually real, in fact, but just a symbol of our shared inter-personal solidarity or that Other-Power is only the help we receive from others in our day-to-day lives or that the Pure Land is merely the aspiration for an ideal community brought about by social justice (all very common views by the way), then I suspect that he would be utterly appalled. Shinran simply would not recognise his own teaching in what he was hearing. The lesson in all this is that we need to take the tradition’s own view of itself seriously. Some scholars, operating in a restricted modern paradigm, are apt to impose modes of thinking that are alien to the data being studied, which can only do it violence.

The need to interpret a subtle teaching from medieval Japan for contemporary audiences goes without saying. But to do this by essentially turning it into its opposite is no longer interpretation but subversion. I still struggle to understand why some people do this. Why must it be necessary to constantly attack a traditional spiritual exegesis, when it is clearly the obvious one? What does a secularised take on, not just Shin but the Dharma generally, add to our understanding of these claimed realities? What purpose does it serve when you can hold worldly views without any reference to Buddhism at all? Indeed, why do we settle for so little? Many believe that Buddhist teachings are important in that they confirm a number of scientific and modern insights about human nature or the mind. Maybe so but surely they are doing much more than this. I urge those, who are inclined to this view, to seriously ponder its implications, both for the correct understanding of Jodo Shinshu and for their own spiritual welfare.

Nevertheless, even within the context of a properly religious understanding of Shin, we must always be vigilant in resisting extreme, uncritical, narrow-minded and fundamentalist tendencies that only serve to betray the requirements of logic and our intelligence. For example, a purely literal interpretation of the sutras leads to all manner of contradictions of which Shinran himself was acutely aware. If you accept the story of Dharmakara as actually having taken place in human history (even though

Shinran saw Amida as an immeasurable reality) or regard the Pure Land as a creation of a special realm by Dharmakara's practices over many aeons (even though Shinran viewed it as tantamount to Nirvana and thus not having an origin in time or space) then why not also accept the view that the Pure Land lies literally to 'the West', in some spatially circumscribed location, as the sutras teach? Clearly, reference to 'the West' is a symbolic notion. It represents the direction of the setting sun (i.e. where we go to at the 'setting' of our lives) and thus offers a focus of aspiration to those who require some concrete imagery for our devotions (which most of us do I think). One cannot say, therefore, that the Pure Land is in the West but not in the 'East' or the 'North'. It is a spiritual realm whose dimensions are inconceivable. To say that something is a symbol does not mean that it stands for nothing real – a symbol is a living sign of the reality it represents but in a manner that makes it accessible. In other words, the reality behind the symbol is always greater than the form it assumes. It is 'more than', not 'less than'.

Indeed, the readiest counter to fundamentalist readings of the sutras is to point out that Shinran himself viewed them in ways that were often at odds with the conventionally-accepted readings of his time. The belief that only a literal understanding of the sutras can be true, coupled with a hostility towards subtlety and nuance (which are not incompatible with clarity) or a readiness to condemn 'heretics', with great zeal and often hatred – this is not the way to disseminate Shin today. I daresay that many of you may well consider my doctrinal views to be a little too conservative, at least by the standards of liberal American Buddhism, but I can assure you that my own name has been duly entered in the index of heretics maintained by those who are the self-appointed guardians of the 'true' teaching as they see it!

I recognise that there are many faithful and committed followers who think this way (and who may indeed be people of *shinjin*)—and I also have much sympathy for what they are trying to protect—but as a means of making the teachings comprehensible in today's world, adopting a rigid, narrow and unimaginative posture

does not serve the Dharma well and will only alienate sincere seekers who are tentatively exploring it.

The latter, who do not consider themselves, in any way, as intellectual types, naturally have a need to understand what notions like ‘Amida’, ‘Pure Land’, ‘Nirvana’ and ‘Faith’ really mean and how they differ from comparable ideas taught in other religions. In order to explain this, one needs to go a little deeper into the heart of the tradition in order to provide seekers with intelligible answers to these pressing questions. Even in Shinran’s time, the Dharma required clarification in light of the many misunderstandings that were going on around him. While he preached, very effectively, a simple message, especially to the poor and illiterate, this does not always translate well into modern times in light of the rampant scepticism regarding spiritual matters today. Contemporary people need to hear more than “Just say the nembutsu and be saved by Amida who will take you to the Pure Land” which, in a manner of speaking is quite true, of course, but to jaded modern ears a lot more needs to be said in order to make a statement like that tangible and compelling.

These are the challenges with which one is confronted in an increasingly pluralistic and complex society, when trying to reach out to seekers in an age fraught with so much doubt and perplexity. Not an easy task and I would happily defer to anyone who has found the magical formula to make this happen!

If Shin Buddhism is a path for all people, it must also address the legitimate intellectual needs of many who are no longer satisfied with an approach that was previously suited to the largely ignorant and unlettered (even though Shinran was also quite capable of addressing the more cultivated needs of the intelligentsia). Most of us today simply have a more sophisticated outlook (albeit coupled, occasionally, with a hint of weary cynicism) but that doesn’t mean that we do not, at heart, also suffer from spiritual thirst (even if this is not always readily admitted).

An agnostic friend recently remarked that most religious people make a number of broad, but mistaken, assumptions regarding the need to come to terms with the mystery of our existence and the incompleteness of our lives when spiritually

disconnected – what some of his Christian acquaintances refer to as “the God-shaped hole in everyone”. He pointed out that there are numerous people in the modern world who, apparently, have no need for certainty and no place for mystery, and no so-called holes needing to be filled. And this is part of the problem he thinks Shin faces when it insists on regarding itself as a religious phenomenon – in that it does assume, perhaps unwarrantedly, that there is this kind of existential void in all of us.

Despite widespread denials to the contrary by many in our secular culture, I do believe that such a ‘spiritual hole’ does exist. Of course, not everyone acknowledges it but it is manifested in different ways. I say this because, even when not explicitly recognised, the impact of this dormant dimension of ourselves is everywhere apparent in the universal quest for meaning that we have, even if people have given up trying to find it in a spiritual life. Twenty years of pastoral work has convinced me that it does not simply vanish just because people deny it is there. The Buddha considered most of us gravely ignorant of our true state which is evidenced in our blind pursuit of spurious substitutes for the ‘one thing needful’, all of which fall short of enduring satisfaction (if for no other reason than their very transience). After all, this is a sign of the unfulfilled Buddha-nature in all of us and no amount of frantic distraction or denial can ever really cover it up. I feel that so much of this penetrating teaching is becoming rapidly eroded in the face of more worldly interpretations of Buddhism which have effectively killed off any sense of the divine – to my mind, this has been nothing short of a spiritual disaster for modern seekers.

Many who are attracted to Shin do have an abiding spiritual hunger and a need to understand the Dharma in more than just a sentimental way (and in an age of extreme hostility to religious beliefs, a merely sentimental approach to combating scepticism will never be good enough). These are sensitive and intelligent people who are understandably reluctant to surrender themselves to the Buddha’s Vow unless many of their doubts are dealt with first. This is usually the opposite of what one sometimes finds in Japan where, or so I have been told, a completely rational understanding is not, for many, as important compared to authentic religious feeling. It

is always preferable to have both but this can prove an elusive balance – one side may disproportionately dominate the other.

Shin has to rise to the challenge of skillfully navigating waters in the contemporary world that are difficult and often turbulent. The message in all this is to avoid extremes. Honouring the spiritual dimension of Jodo Shinshu need not lead to rabid fanaticism and honest critical inquiry should not entail rejecting the sacred roots of the tradition. As a philosopher by training, I always encourage searching examination and open discussion in understanding our faith. So criticism is well and good until it becomes ideologically driven, in which case it then needs to become more critical of itself and question its own assumptions which are often far from obvious and, indeed, highly contestable.

Rationality and critical thought are valuable in that they help us to think more clearly about our ideas. In the context of the Dharma, though, they are not ends in themselves. It is all very well to question everything (often thereby also tearing it down in the process) and thinking ourselves very accomplished in doing so, but it is much more difficult to build up something of enduring value. We see too much of the former and not enough of the latter. Criticism (when uninformed by wisdom) can become facile and destructive rather than creative and enhancing. It is too limited and cannot, alone, generate any spiritual insights. For example, the arising of *shinjin* or *prajna* is not the outcome of a logical deduction or an empirical investigation or a scientific experiment. Neither does it come about through political activism or the pursuit of ostensibly ‘progressive’ social agendas. Spiritual insight comprises its own special faculty; it is a realisation of higher truths that leads to a liberating wisdom, which does not have its genesis in our calculating ego or in the kind of cold clinical scrutiny that dissects with the ruthlessness of a child pulling the wings off a butterfly.

So this is the faculty that we must cultivate before all else, it being integral to our spiritual well-being. In this respect, it is infinitely preferable to be a person of *shinjin*, even if our critical skills may not be very refined – an ostensible shortcoming that does not, in any way, detract from the authenticity of this experience. The real

problem arises when critical thinking becomes an inverted substitute for *shinjin* itself, which often happens when this experience has eluded us to the extent that we actually begin to doubt its reality, marginalise its importance or consider it altogether irrelevant. This kind of scepticism, when it lacks the healthy balance provided by the experience of faith, is extremely corrosive and can only lead to the gradual dismantling of doctrines that have arisen from the experience of countless devotees over many generations. The only antidote to this variety of disbelief (which often fails to demonstrate the validity of its own doubts and is, in any case, hardly compatible with ‘true entrusting’) is to taste the Dharma directly for oneself. That is the invitation that it extends to each and every one of us through the methods it has advocated for centuries.

We should treasure the insights afforded by such experience (both ours and that of others). People sometimes feel apologetic about holding them because they are told that it is naïve to do so, these being merely ‘personal’ beliefs; thus of lesser value than scholarship which is not sullied, it seems, by any kind of ‘commitment’ to a faith and the inner life that it opens up for us. Perhaps this attitude may be valid in other fields of study but here the requirements of academia must be subordinated to that on which they are, in a sense, dependent. In other words, what modern studies deal with, in reflecting on hallowed texts, are the spiritual insights of others, which they are trying to interpret. In doing so, many scholars aim to be what they consider ‘objective’ but how is this possible if they have failed to enter the mind of their subject of study?

If this is being impartial, then it is of scant value in understanding the texts in question and leads to narrowly reductive readings. This appears to be the ‘elephant in the room’ that many choose to ignore. If, when listening to Shinran enthusiastically proclaiming the wonders of the Primal Vow, one hasn’t enjoyed a similar encounter with this reality oneself, then there is little that any kind of critical study can yield apart, perhaps, from pointing out inconsistencies in expression or trying to identify influences on the writer or analysing their use of certain terms or, much more valuably perhaps, providing a reliable translation. But one of the most egregious consequences

of a study claiming to be disinterested, but which remains experientially uninformed by the tradition itself, is to often denigrate the attainment of these elevated states by condescendingly claiming them to be but the overly-vivid imaginings of the Oriental mind!

Of course, it would be preferable to have the best of both worlds – scholarship that is enriched through the insights conferred by the awakening of *shinjin*. I have certainly been privileged to meet a few people in my time who embody this ideal although mainly in Japan where there is, arguably, less of a stigma associated with such a combination. I think this possibility can be achieved without jeopardising either creative thought or rigorous criticism. In this way, academic endeavour can usefully serve something greater than itself rather than just its own, often peripheral or insular, preoccupations. The nub of the problem is that there is a concern to appear dispassionate in one's study of the Dharma as if to have, for want of a better term, a 'heart connection' to the teachings is somehow a liability in forming a correct understanding of sacred texts – a strange reservation given that the authors of such texts would have themselves been inspired to write them by having the very same connection that is often frowned upon by critics!

My point is that direct experience of these transcendent realities carries its own authority and is, in itself, perfectly objective insofar as such awareness is a vehicle for spiritual truth (indeed, is there any other means?). Now, of course, experiences can be misleading, incomplete, shallow, distorted or generally unreliable but so can scholarly judgements. What acts as a gauge of *bona fide* realisation is the collective wisdom of the tradition and its attempts to demarcate the bounds of orthodoxy in ensuring a certain unanimity in outlook and providing proper guidance to beginners. There is clearly a symbiosis between this body of sacred knowledge, as the benchmark by which to judge these experiences, and the clear embodiment of the teaching in living sages that can expand on current doctrinal understandings but also unfold its latent meanings, as we find in Shinran, where doctrine and experience mutually condition

each other. In this sense, insights based on spiritual perception surely hold greater weight in that they have a direct, rather than circuitous, access to religious truths.

To be sure, there is a subjective element to faith (as it must be mediated by a human subject) but, if the claims of Jodo Shinshu are true, then realisation itself is a channel for conveying a truth that is both convincing and verifiable, the authenticity of which is confirmed, not through mere criticism, but by means of this very truth making itself known within us. In this way, we can speak of the *subjectivity* of truth but this is not to say that truth is itself subjective – only that it must be experienced inwardly, which comprises the inevitable subjectivity involved in trying to assimilate it.

I would now like to move on to some other considerations that are pertinent to the future viability of Jodo Shinshu. Given the profusion of spiritual options available to seekers today, it is critical that we stress the uniqueness of Shin among world religions. By all means acknowledge what it has in common with other faiths (and important parallels are there to be found which is what gives them all their religious ‘stamp’) but we must avoid the trap of believing they are saying exactly the same thing. Therefore, we should advocate the richness of our tradition but always make its distinctive teachings more accessible. We need to be less apologetic about the Shin Dharma – it is wonderful and there’s no need for inferiority complexes and half-hearted responses when challenged about it.

I often hear that there is something wrong with Jodo Shinshu today; that it is somehow ‘broken’ and that we have failed to make its teachings relevant to modern people, for the sole reason that it ought to be much more popular than it is. Those who say this sometimes overlook that which may be broken within themselves and which contributes to their failure to see what does work in traditional formulations of the teaching along with the uplifting experiences that sustain it.

I was recently discussing, with an acquaintance, the question of how Shin—and Pure Land teachings generally—lag behind other Buddhist schools in popularity. Now ‘popularity’ often bears little relation to what is true and the truth about life can be very confronting. As you know, Shin does not mince its words about the human

condition and the nature of spiritual practice. Other Buddhist teachings may seem more desirable because, for the most part, they appear to offer the prospect of attaining Buddhahood in this life, or material benefits or the successful conquest of our ‘blind passions’ as ordinary human beings. This outlook is consistent with the current *zeitgeist* so, naturally, it enjoys greater popularity. But, sooner or later, one sees—time and time again—the emergence of the Pure Land way as a last resort to those for whom other practices have fallen far short of expectations. I sense that the tide is slowly beginning to turn with the Other Power perspective gradually starting to resonate with those who see its truth and yearn for it like ‘life-giving nectar’ to quote Kakunyo. After all, it took the Dharma around 1,000 years to make its way to China from India and become assimilated there so it is still early days for us!

But let us move on. In expounding Jodo Shinshu to others, I feel that it is helpful to adopt a pan-Buddhist outlook. As mentioned earlier, Shin shares many important insights with all other schools of Buddhism (which tend to be better known) from which we can learn much and they from us. We also need to engage with other faiths but do so more intelligently. For example, much Buddhist-Christian dialogue to which I have been exposed has been rather unsatisfactory, often resorting to shallow stereotypes as if to justify the existence of such dialogue. I am not suggesting, for a moment, that these exchanges cannot be helpful but when one hears things like “The purpose of Buddhist-Christian dialogue is for Christians to learn more about meditation and for Buddhists to be more ethically engaged” one has to wonder at the surprising ignorance being evinced by such remarks. Christianity has a highly-developed contemplative tradition, especially in the Eastern Orthodox Church, and the Buddha-Dharma can hardly be considered ethically moribund.

By all means engage in dialogue; encounters with other faiths can be very edifying but they also ought to be better informed and respectful. They should be entered into in a spirit of open-minded inquiry and a good-willed curiosity about the beliefs of others. We also need to bear in mind that there are limits to such dialogue

and this should involve the frank acknowledgement of irreconcilable differences on important doctrinal matters.

Nevertheless, notwithstanding these differences, we must be able to articulate those things about Shin that appeal to universal human concerns. We ought to focus on what is fundamental and do so in a way that taps into something intrinsic to us as spiritual beings. This can only happen if we allow ourselves to be challenged by the Dharma and its confronting truths. The teachings need to ‘bite’, to leave an existential impact that transforms us and this requires all that we are and what we are is, assuredly, more than just our critical faculties, doubtlessly important as these may be.

This brings me to some concluding thoughts by way of summary and reiteration. It is clear, when reading the sutras and writings of the masters in our tradition, that we are in the presence of those who are describing perceived realities. They claimed to see into the heart of things and this vision imparted spiritual knowledge to them. I believe that this is how they themselves would account for what they were experiencing. We see no hesitation here; no tentative guesswork. They are not saying: “I think I’m fairly sure that Amida Buddha is real” or “On the balance of probabilities, having taken into account all the relevant data, I’m pretty confident that the Primal Vow is dependable”. What we find, instead, is a confident assertion of certainty. So, what are we to make of this? Clearly, what is being claimed is that there is a way of directly *knowing* that which is ‘true and real’ as a result of an authentic engagement with the Buddha-Dharma. It is the exercise of a spiritual faculty that we all possess but rarely use and which far exceeds our ordinary minds and their conceptual constructs or our vacillating feelings, as if the brain alone can explain all of our inner life. It is transcendent in that it surpasses conventional existence yet it is the key to our deliverance, drawing us into a well-spring of felicity and illumination. It is also immanent in that it lies at the core of reality; indeed, this organ of spiritual knowledge —our true center—is symbolised by the ‘heart’ which recalls the character for *jin* (‘heart’ or ‘mind’) in *shinjin*, the term used to represent the awakening of this reality within us.

In his *Notes on the Inscription on Sacred Scrolls*, Shinran says: “Know that *shinjin* is the true intent of the Pure Land teaching”. There is no way of getting around this. To the extent that we ignore this unambiguous statement, we are no longer engaging with Jodo Shinshu – what we’re doing is something completely different. Indeed, the quality of our spiritual lives will be determined by how deeply we have realised this ‘true heart and mind’. *Shinjin* is radiant Buddha-nature; it is the active working of Amida in our lives; it is the happiness that comes with knowing our final destiny and with savouring the Buddha’s light here and now.

This decisive connection is embodied in our saying of the *nembutsu* which facilitates an immediate apprehension of, and access to, the world of Dharma. It enables a powerful intuition that vividly perceives the way things are, unlike reason which can only draw conclusions based on what is furnished from sources outside itself. The ability to intuit spiritual truths was seemingly much more widespread among ordinary people in pre-modern times, and I think it is safe to say that the capacity for such a vision has deteriorated markedly in modernity – something we must recover if we are to salvage any residue of wisdom in Buddhism today.

In short, we cannot avoid making judgements that do not draw, to a great extent, on a direct intuitive awareness of reality. The attempt to ground our sense of truth in logic alone quickly ends in deadlock and paralysis. The forceful insights disclosed in the realisation of *shinjin* is what provides the raw material on which any kind reasoning or argument becomes possible within Jodo Shinshu. These are paramount and must be given priority when trying to understand what is being imparted to us. *Shinjin*, therefore, is faith as knowledge, without which we would not be able to perceive anything other than just physical and mental phenomena, having no access to any underlying primordial reality. This insight challenges the mistaken belief that our existence is restricted solely to the natural world and that we cannot establish any certain truths beyond what the scientific method is able to reveal to us. In this way, we are invited to embrace an altogether different and more profound understanding of reality.

It is usually hardness of heart that precludes this vision; and notice we say ‘heart’ rather than ‘mind’ in order to stress that what is at fault is a spiritual rather than a mere intellectual blindness. *Shinjin*, then, connects us to what is real – hence it is rightly considered a form of realisation. But how does this differ from ‘religious experience’? The latter appears to suggest an ephemeral event, albeit life-changing, whereas a realisation like *shinjin* presupposes an enduring awareness of Amida as all-pervading Suchness. However, to have *shinjin* is to apprehend a spiritual realm and, in this respect, it is also quintessentially religious in nature but not in the sense of being constrained in its scope by any formal doctrinal limits. It is a vision that exceeds worldly understanding but which infuses our everyday lives with wonder and reverence. This is what must be restored and nurtured if we are to sustain a fulfilling inner life. There is no substitute for doing so and we must strive to awaken it in both ourselves and others. Otherwise we are left with a crypto-nihilism that bleeds the life out of everything with pronouncements that are tantamount to slandering the Dharma which, as we are led to believe, is the most heinous Buddhist offence of all.

Accordingly, I feel that the future fortunes of Shin very much depend on us rejuvenating a life of *shinjin* and exploring its rich implications in our everyday lives. Our engagement with this living heart of reality—as embodied in a direct encounter with Amida Buddha, the Pure Land and the Primal Vow—is crucial in ensuring that Shin remains a vital and compelling alternative for those who are not satisfied with mere mundane existence and who seek a more expansive truth; one that is liberating and joyful, and which fulfills our most heartfelt aspirations. If we lose contact with it, then we will end up betraying the precious legacy that Shinran has bequeathed to us and we would be abandoning those, who yearn for the real Dharma, to lives of spiritual impoverishment. Thank you.
