what we would call a *genius loci*, or, more adequately, a *barakah* that will have the last word." (p. 14) We end this review with the well-known verse of the Islamic tradition: "Unto God all things are returned" (3:109).

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[1] Rūmî, "The One True Light," in *Rūmî: Poet and Mystic*, trans. Reynold A. Nicholson (London, UK: George Allan and Unwin, 1950), p. 166.

[2] Rūmî, "2120 – Book III," in *The Mathnawî of Jalālu'ddîn Rūmî, Vol. IV*, trans. Reynold A. Nicholson (London, UK: Luzac and Company, 1930), p. 118.

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THE UNHINDERED PATH: RUMINATIONS ON SHIN BUDDHISM. By John Paraskevopoulos. Kettering, OH: Sophia Perennis, 2016, 252 pp.

> "Buddha-nature is *Tathāgata* … *Tathāgata* is *Nirvāna* … *Nirvāna* is called Buddha-nature."
> –Shinran (quoted in the book)

In these exceptionally uncertain and confusing times, making sense of the human condition and what it means to live in this world becomes particularly challenging. By honestly confronting this predicament, it soon becomes apparent that the solution lies in a reality that transcends the limited sphere of human doubt and confusion. This requires embarking on one of the time-worn paths of the world's traditional religions. In doing so, direct knowing, healing and integration becomes possible. This work exposes modern audiences to the wisdom of the little-known *Jōdo Shinshu* school of Buddhism (the largest in Japan) that was founded by Shinran (1173–1263).

A major difficulty that all religions face today is the secular undermining of anything that pertains to a transcendent order of existence. Paraskevopoulos writes, "We live in a world where higher truths are reduced to lower ones, where everything is considered subjective and relative, and where the notion of anything being absolute is dismissed as naïve." (p. 19) He goes on to ask: "How can even the notion of truth be conceivable when the very thing that makes it possible, namely objective reality, is declared to be a fiction?" (p. 19) This describes the post-truth era that we currently inhabit bereft, as it is, of any signpost to what is 'true and real' as Shinran would say.

The Buddhist tradition asks us to deeply ponder the meaning of our enigmatic existence. A paradoxical feature of the human condition is the seeking of permanence in a world that is transitory, yet the more firmly we hold on to what is ephemeral, the more it fades away before our eyes. And yet, even if we acknowledge this truth, we nevertheless frantically aim—albeit in vain—to keep the 'restless winds of impermanence' at bay. No matter how insulated and engineered our personal or collective bubbles become, there is no escape from this sobering fact about our lives. It is through the world's religions that

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we can take refuge in what transcends all change and dissatisfaction, as Paraskevopoulos points out: "The spiritual traditions of the world have, each in their own way, endeavoured to provide some kind of anchor to keep us rooted in what is, otherwise, a world of shifting sands." (p. 85)

Many are drawn to Buddhism because of its focus on the mind, yet it would be a grave error to reduce it to what we understand today as the secular discipline of modern psychology. Buddhist psychology, like all forms of traditional wisdom, is rooted in sacred science, metaphysics and spiritual principles. For this reason, it is not only able to accurately diagnose our fallen or *saṃsāric* nature, but to treat it. The Buddha, who was often described as a 'great physician' in that he dispensed the necessary 'medicine' for our ailing condition, taught that we had a deeply flawed view of human identity. Rather than viewing our everyday 'self' as an immutable reality that has any solidity, he described our human constitution as a bundle (*skandhas*) of conditioned and unstable elements comprising form, perception, feeling, volition and consciousness.

Because of our inability to discern the transpersonal dimension comprising our true identity, we cling to the empirical personality as our real self. Paraskevopoulos writes, "The many wounds we bear in our hearts are a sign of our radical incompleteness as human beings." (p. 9) Furthermore, "much of our suffering can be found within us … [in] our own prejudices and false impressions that provide the fuel for sustaining our endless anxieties." (p. 66) At the same time, Buddhism upholds that, ultimately, "We are made for happiness." (p. 16)

Within the Buddhist tradition, we find the doctrine of *mappō* or "the Decadent Age of the Dharma." Paraskevopoulos notes that "we are living in an age where spiritual life is undergoing a gradual debasement." (p. 71) In light of this decline, the author shows how "Shin Buddhism is uniquely placed to offer a compelling antidote to the spiritual malaise that afflicts us today and how it is exceptionally suited to give ordinary people the inner resources to confront a world where the 'three poisons' of greed, anger and ignorance are rampant." (p. 85) He goes on to say that "the Pure Land is an upāya (or 'saving means') for conveying the inconceivable nature of enlightenment through forms that are immediately accessible and deeply attractive to us." (p. 30)

A common misunderstanding of Buddhism is that it denies the idea of an Absolute; however, this is not the case. Paraskevopoulos reminds us that "Buddhism does not abandon the notion of an ultimate reality but refines and strips it of many of the troubling limitations that so bedevil certain theistic notions of God." (p. 91) Elsewhere he has written, "Buddhism speaks of an ultimate reality to which it gives many names." (p. 17) For example, "The Dharma-Body [*Dharmakāya*] is described in the sūtras as being the true and eternal reality behind all things." (p. 18) The Buddha teaches:

> The Dharma-Body [*Dharmakāya*] is the substance of the Dharma; that is, of the Truth itself. In the aspect of Essence, Buddha has no shape or colour and, since Buddha has no shape or colour, he comes from nowhere and there is nowhere for him to go. Like the blue sky, he arches over everything, and since he is all things, he lacks nothing. (p. 202)

It is fitting here to add that explanations of Nirvāna that suggest any kind of "extinction" are largely inaccurate, as what is actually extinguished are the burdensome impediments separating us from the Dharma-Body. Regarding this reality, the *Vijñānamātra Sāstra* emphasizes both its transcendent and immanent aspects: "Absolute Nirvāna is synonymous with the Dharmakāya…. Though it manifests itself in the world of defilement and relativity, its essence remains forever undefiled…. It is universally present in all beings" (p. 208). According to Shinran, "When a person becomes enlightened, we say they 'return to the city of Dharma-nature.'" (p. 125)

The name of Amida Buddha (or Amitābha in the original Sanskrit) is regarded as synonymous with the Buddha's reality. The spiritual antidote in this age of decline in Shin Buddhism is the *nembutsu* or saying Amida's name—*Namo Amida Butsu*. The *nembutsu* is itself a response to "hearing the Name" (understood as the Buddha's initial 'calling' to us) which is also an embodiment of the awakening of faith. The Australian poet Harold Stewart (1916–1995) makes a noteworthy point about the integral role of faith in the Buddhist tradition: "What most Western books about Buddhism fail to mention is that none of the spiritual and psycho-physical practices of the Hînayāna, Mahāyāna or Vajrayāna is going to prove effective if the indispensable prerequisite of Faith is wanting." He goes on to say that "We may abide by all the moral precepts and monastic regulations, recite the sūtras and perform the rituals, practice *zazen* and repeat the nembutsu, but, if Faith is lacking, no Deliverance or Enlightenment will result." (p. 226)

In Shin Buddhism, the Name is considered to be a vehicle for going beyond "birth and death" *(saṃsāra*), as it is regarded as the highest truth, which is none other than absolute Suchness itself. Invoking the *nembutsu* is to say, "I take refuge in the Infinite." (p. 155) The Buddha understands our plight in this world and longs to deliver us from it: "The Primal Vow corresponds to our deepest desire for an existence without pain, suffering and unawareness; something which is not possible in our world of *saṃsāra."* (p. 34) It needs to be stressed that it is not simply the mere recitation of the Name that is sufficient; the true *nembutsu* reflects Amida's working in our hearts which evokes a deep longing to be born in the Pure Land. Likewise, it is incorrect to view Other-Power as meaning "no effort." While it is true that through our own endeavours alone we cannot attain enlightenment, this does not mean that there is nothing for us to do in a spiritual sense—at the very least, we are expected to surrender ourselves to the compassionate light and life of Amida so that we may be transformed by the Buddha's wisdom.

This is a remarkable book which ought to be of great interest to those interested in a very different approach to Buddhist practice and enlightenment. It provides a rich, profound and yet very personal glimpse into this important but largely neglected tradition in the West. In this topsy-turvy age that is starkly dehumanizing and anti-spiritual, we are reminded that the everlasting peace and happiness of the 'Other Shore' is not to be attained through misguided utopian schemes of worldly perfection but by taking refuge in that which is 'true and real'. As Paraskevopoulos insightfully asserts: "It is not for the Dharma to conform to the world but for the world to conform to the Dharma." (p. 124) By way of highlighting another important dimension of the Buddhist faith, we conclude with the words of Kūkai (774–835), the great master of the Shingon school, who once declared: "Everything that is beautiful partakes of the Buddha." (p. 148)

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