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*Ethics and Society in
Contemporary Shin Buddhism*

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A Review of *Ethics and Society in Contemporary Shin Buddhism*

Jeff Wilson¹

Ethics and Society in Contemporary Shin Buddhism. By Ugo Dessi. Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2008, 265 pages, ISBN: 978-3825808150 (cloth), €39.90.

With the release of *Ethics and Society in Contemporary Shin Buddhism*, Ugo Dessi has done a valuable service for scholars interested in Buddhist ethics, modern Jōdo Shinshū Buddhism, or Japanese religion and society. Aside from a handful of books from Shin Buddhist publishers (such as WisdomOcean's 1998 release of *Engaged Pure Land Buddhism*), there has been very little provided in English on this subject—indeed, in fifteen years of publication, *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* itself has only managed to offer a single article related to the topic. The unfortunate nature of this oversight within the discipline can be recognized when we consider the considerable outpouring of works on Zen and ethics, despite the fact that Shin is a far larger form of Buddhism in Japan and has a longer history in the West. A work of this nature, therefore, is certainly welcome, and Dessi does a good job of providing an initial broaching of the subject by giving a broad overview of Shin Buddhist sources for ethics, discussing many different contemporary Shin philosophers' approaches to the subject, highlighting the social issues that Shin ethics has been most involved with, and exploring some of their practical effects in terms of activism and effects on Japanese society.

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Dessi begins with a quick introduction to traditional Buddhist, especially Japanese, sources of ethical reasoning, such as the monastic codes and bodhisattva precepts. He then moves into a discussion of Jōdo Shinshū specifically, explaining the sources that Shinran drew upon in his creation of this Buddhist sect and then examining how Shinran touched on various issues that have ethical implications, such as the relation of religion to the state and the seeming extreme egalitarianism of Shinran's *nembutsu* teaching. As he points out, Shinran's religious philosophy not only provides resources for the development of ethics but also contains concepts that pose significant challenges to elaborating explicitly ethical approaches to Buddhism. For example, Shinran's writings suggest that, due to afflicting blind passions, human beings have limited or perhaps even no ability to fully discern right from wrong. Furthermore, even those who have some capacity to distinguish them may yet find themselves unable to obey normative Buddhist ethics due to overwhelming karma from previous lifetimes. For Shinran, this was lamentable and yet also was an opportunity to affirm that all people, the good and the bad, were embraced by the compassion of Amida Buddha. It left open, however, the question of how Shin Buddhists were to conduct themselves in the world.

Some early Shin interpreters took this radical teaching that evil and good were equally destined for liberation and used it as license to commit various immoral acts, in some cases even promoting the idea that evil actions made one an appropriate object of Amida Buddha's compassion. While Shinran deplored such interpretations, associating them with the stupidity of drinking poison just because an antidote exists, he was less than clear about where a firm basis for Shin Buddhist ethics should be placed. As Dessi discusses, Shinran appears to have believed that *shinjin* (the mind that awakens to one's blind passions and turns in trust to the power of Amida Buddha) provided some degree of moral improvement, but his writings on this point are not particularly

numerous and can hardly be called systematic. His ethics, therefore, remained largely latent, providing the opportunity for later thinkers to develop more explicit approaches. For many of his premodern interpreters, existing social theories such as Confucianism's five principles were increasingly imported to fill this need. And intense social pressure, including dramatic persecutions, led to the idea of Buddha's Law and King's Law as being two complimentary, or even identical, aspects of a proper approach to the subject. This type of thinking culminated in the institutional Jōdo Shinshū support for Japan's imperial activities in the Meiji, Taishō, and early Shōwa periods.

As Dessi discusses, the primary tension within Shin social ethics exists around the important concepts of self-power vs. other-power. Reliance on self-power, based in egoistic delusion, is seen as the source of suffering and evil in the world, while reliance on other-power is seen as providing liberation from the false self and its endless cycling through states of woe. As a teaching of emancipation, this opens release from suffering to all people in every sector of society, but as a source of moral reasoning, it seems to suggest the utter inadequacy of human actions or intentions. Yet as Dessi points out, Shin Buddhists rate individual moral behavior as a priority and Shin Buddhism has produced numerous activists and groups committed to social change. Thus in his second chapter he provides an extensive look at how social ethics have been approached by modern Shin thinkers.

Dessi breaks this chapter into several sections that each look at how a range of Shin philosophers have approached a subject. The first is the issue of what birth into the Pure Land (and by extension, the Pure Land itself) means and how this relates to ethics in human society. For most contemporary Shin thinkers the Pure Land is not treated as an otherworldly realm somewhere separate from this world. Therefore birth into the Pure Land (which entails the development of wisdom and

compassion and the abandonment of egocentric delusions and desires) can take place in some sense during this lifetime, thus providing a possible basis for ethical reasoning. Tamamitsu Junshō, for example, describes birth as continuous spiritual liberation in the present moment, and Ogawa Ichijō relates it to awakening to self-emptiness and interconnectedness, which has ethical implications. The issue of how *shinjin* relates to morality is taken up by many thinkers. Shigaraki Takamaro, for instance, links *shinjin* to the compassionate aspiration of the bodhisattva to help others, suggesting that this means providing concrete assistance to the needy and working for peace. Tokunaga Michio highlights how *shinjin* includes the idea of responding with gratitude to the liberation afforded by the Buddha, with this response being expressed in part as compassionate activity directed toward others in society.

As Dessi says, “the relevance for the contemporary discussion on Shin Buddhist ethics of that dimension of the teachings which refers to the ideal of equality could be hardly overestimated” (p. 105). Beginning with Shinran himself, the idea of all Shin practitioners of whatever background being equal companions has been a profoundly important principle, and indeed it is among the most commonly cited sources for Shin ethics today. For many thinkers, such as Hirose Takagi and Kaneko Daiei, this has manifested in a stress on the idea of “togetherness” shared by all people and solidarity with the oppressed and suffering. Asai Jōkai ties this back into the bodhisattva concept that one’s liberation can only be obtained at the same time as that of all others’. Yet another major area for exploration is whether and how Shin Buddhism can provide critiques of society. Anti-authoritarianism appears to be an important theme in this area; while contemporary thinkers find much precedence for this in pre-modern sources, it is hard not to see this as at least partially a reaction against institutional Shin Buddhism’s wartime complicity. Many find the idea of the Pure Land to offer a locus from which religion and society can be differentiated, with the ideal of the former

providing a constructive critique of the latter. It is worth noting that while traditional Shin literature is certainly referred to most often and systematically, Shin thinkers also pull from other Buddhist sources, such as the *Dhammapada*. One other issue that Dessi touches on is the Shin critique of anthropocentric tendencies in modern culture, which sometimes seems to slide toward facilely oppositional representations of Western culture and to support conservative notions of Japanese group-based morality.

In his third chapter, Dessi turns to an introduction of some of the ways in which Shin Buddhism has produced actual reform movements in contemporary Japan. Besides general concerns about social welfare as expressed through movements related to such issues as education and hospice care, Dessi highlights two areas in particular: anti-war and anti-discrimination movements. Jōdo Shinshū institutions have been prominent critics of increasing Japanese militarism, such as the participation of the Self Defense Forces in operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. By far the most common target for Shin activism in this area is Yasukuni Jinja, the Tokyo-based Shinto shrine that enshrines war dead, including many war criminals. Yasukuni Jinja serves as a rallying point for conservative nationalists in Japan, and there have been repeated attempts to make it into a state-supported memorial. Both of the largest denominations of Shin Buddhism have been vigorous opponents of state support of Yasukuni and educational overhauls designed to promote nationalism. On the anti-discrimination front, Shin Buddhists have been active in confronting discrimination of *burakumin* (Japanese outcastes) and sufferers of Hansen's Disease (leprosy). Both of these populations (especially the *burakumin*) are disproportionately represented among Shin followers, making them a natural area of reformist concern, especially since at times they have faced discrimination from within Shin Buddhism itself. In his short concluding chapter, Dessi considers Shin ethics in the wider context of increasing globalization, noting for instance how some Shin ethi-

cal rhetoric replicates anti-modern Japanese nationalism while other instances show universalizing tendencies and reflect international concerns.

Ethics and Society in Contemporary Shin Buddhism reads like the first important work in a vast, unexplored territory—which is precisely what it is. It thus displays the same weaknesses of other works of this nature: it must provide basic information on Jōdo Shinshū Buddhism, taking away precious space from ethics specifically; it treats a huge number of thinkers in only moderate depth, rather than developing deeply into any particular thinker or cluster of philosophers; it focuses on elites and institutions, with little attention to average practitioners; and it leaves the reader wanting more information about a wide range of issues, rather than satisfied that the topic has been fully covered. Yet that last caveat is itself also a sign that Dessi has correctly identified an area that is due for greater scholarly investigation, and these weaknesses are mostly unavoidable at this stage. Dessi has provided a solid foundation on which other scholars can move forward, with his citations alone providing enough trails for additional investigation to keep a phalanx of comparative ethicists busy for many years. Especially when put into dialogue with the work already done on contemporary Zen ethics, this begins to offer a more rounded understanding of Buddhist ethical positions and activity in modern Japan, something whose time has surely come.