

## **Thus Taught Master Shichiri: One Hundred Gems of Shin Buddhist Wisdom**

By Gōjun Shichiri, Translated by Hisao Inagaki,  
Foreword by John Paraskevopoulos, Preface by Hisao  
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San Francisco, CA: Jodo Shinshu International Office,  
2022, PP. 126.  
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*Jōdo Shinshū*, also known as Shin Buddhism, belongs to the Mahāyāna tradition and was founded by Shinran (1173–1263). It is the largest school of Buddhism in Japan today, and is slowly becoming more widely known throughout the world. This work consists of a collection of spiritual teachings by Gōjun Shichiri (1835–1900) that were recorded by his followers in the late 1800s. Master Shichiri was a very influential and popular propagator of Shin, in addition to being a highly respected scholar and prolific writer.<sup>1</sup>

It is often said that spiritual traditions need to keep up with the times in which we live. While Master Shichiri lived over a hundred and twenty years ago, his insightful sayings speak to the myriad difficulties that we face in today's troubled and perplexing world.

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<sup>1</sup> See D.T. Suzuki, "Sayings of a Modern Tariki Mystic," *The Eastern Buddhist*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (1924), pp. 93–116.

His teachings focus on what is most essential to our lives, which goes beyond the limits of any specific era and which can prepare us to confront challenges in whatever time or place we live. He counseled people from all walks of life and did so with a deep understanding of the Dharma, in a manner that embodied a true spiritual intelligence at work.

Eshō Hamaguchi (1874–1966) collected many of Shichiri’s spiritual instructions in several volumes. The hundred sayings in this book under review were taken from *Shichiri Wajō Genkō Roku* (‘A Record of the Words and Deeds of Master Shichiri’) originally published in 1912. These excerpts were selected and translated by Hisao Inagaki (1929–2021). This is the first time that a book entirely devoted to Master Shichiri has appeared in a language other than Japanese.

When a seeker asked Master Shichiri how they could live an easier life, he responded in the following manner:

In this stormy world, you will encounter joy and pain in anything you do. However, if you limit yourself to half the joys you’re entitled to, you’ll experience only half the pains that you would normally expect to suffer. In this way, you can live a relatively easy life. (p. 11)

Someone came to him to ask if they should leave their busy job in the city and move to a quieter place, in order to engage in spiritual practice without the distractions of everyday life. The Master responded by skillfully discerning both possibilities and how they would spiritually affect the seeker:

[W]hen timber logs are sent down a river, they often collide with large rocks and other impediments. They also encounter difficult corners and curves, which can block their smooth passage. But every time logs come up against an obstacle, this serves as an impetus for them to push forward all the more.

In a peaceful, slow-moving river, logs will not proceed downstream as quickly; yet they will flow quite rapidly in a torrent even when faced with obstructions. Just so, your day-to-day dealings in the frantic world ... give you a better chance of hearing the teachings. Being ... in the country, your life may certainly be happier and more peaceful but your inclination to seek joy in the Dharma will be much reduced. (p. 13)

A peaceful ambiance may initially be conducive to the practice of the Dharma but, without a supportive spiritual community in place, it may likely disappear before too long. The following advice is recalled from Myōe Shōnin (1173–1232) and speaks to the pitfalls of such a path:

It's surely the case that if you live with fellow disciples, many more disturbances will arise for your practice. Nevertheless, these upheavals will give you an incentive not to lag behind others and to succeed in your endeavors quickly. If you are alone, you'll tend to become complacent. (p. 14)

People often state that they are too busy to listen to the teachings or apply their principles to their lives. They overlook that “the winds of impermanence can suddenly blow at any moment” (p. 23) and that the saving wisdom of the Dharma alone is imperishable in this earthly existence.

A seeker's understanding of their life is based on their assimilation of the Buddhist teachings; however, if they suffer from wrong views, even the Dharma cannot come to their aid:

However hard you may try to pour hot water or tea into a cup, you cannot do so if it's upside down. Needless to say, you should place the cup down correctly. However diligently you may hear sermons, if the ‘cup’ of your mind is the wrong way up, the Dharma-water cannot fill it. Therefore, do not overturn the ‘cup’ of your mind. (p. 24)

Shin differs from other forms of Buddhism in that the seeker is urged to take refuge in the ‘Other-Power’ (*tariki*) of the Buddha of Infinite Light and Life (Amida), rather than engaging in ‘self-power’ (*jiriki*) practices. In this tradition, Amida Buddha (considered the personal dimension of the highest reality that would otherwise be inconceivable) is the liberating light of Wisdom and Compassion that meets us precisely where we find ourselves in the midst of our fraught and uncertain existence, regardless of our condition. Through the invocation of the Buddha’s name—*Namo Amida Butsu*—the arising of Amida’s mind within us can take place and transform our lives.

It is through *shinjin* (the ‘true heart and mind’ that is given to us by Amida Buddha) that we can abandon this world of ‘birth and death’ (*samsāra*), without having to rely on our own spiritual contrivances. Master Shichiri adds: “When you hear of the salvation that is available here-and-now, you readily accept it. This is *shinjin*” (p. 99). He explains this subtle yet vital point:

You are not saved by your own efforts; only by Amida’s Primal Vow which is beyond our comprehension. ‘The matter of great importance—birth in the Pure Land—should not be handled by you; leave it entirely to the working of the Vow.’ So it is said. This is Amida’s problem, not yours! Whatever’s achieved by means of your own contrivance is of no use whatsoever. (p. 21)

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 is the personal dimension of the inconceivable ultimate reality that constantly reaches out to us in a form that is accessible to our limited understanding. The reality of *Nirvāna* becomes vividly embodied in the practice known as *nembutsu* (which means thinking of, or remembering, the Buddha). The *nembutsu* is itself a response to “hearing the Name” understood as the Buddha’s initial ‘call’ to us.

We should always be mindful of the Dharma. For this reason, we are reminded to ceaselessly “recite the nembutsu as many times as possible whether walking, standing, sitting or lying down” (p. 29). Regardless of where we are and whatever circumstances may be, Master Shichiri teaches: “In your practice of nembutsu, be sure to recite it day and night, in whatever situation you find yourself” (p. 41). As he points out, we are the obstacle to the working of the Name and, for this reason, we need to be ever vigilant by taking refuge in Amida alone and abandoning calculative thinking (*hakarai*): “The nembutsu is never lazy—you are lazy!” (p. 97).

Master Shichiri conveys a proverb which is often confirmed: “[P]eople often complain about their lives when they are, in fact, very well off” (p. 112) as they tend to overlook many of the good things they are blessed to have and focus only on what is unsatisfactory. He makes very important observations about the role of family and raising children, which apply to all spiritual paths: “Unless you raise children in the Dharma, you can do very little for them when they’re grown up” (p. 46). He cautions, “Always be very careful when bringing up your children. One wrong step could lead them away from the right path by a thousand miles” (p. 46). In summary, Master Shichiri provides an outline of what is required to leave behind the suffering realm of ‘birth and death’ (*saṃsāra*) in order to enter the Pure Land (which is another way of referring to the attainment of *Nirvāna*):

If you give away your doubts, indolence and unwholesome thoughts to Amida, you’ll receive, in return, shinjin, nembutsu and the motivation to perform good—the reward of birth in the Pure Land will then be conferred naturally. As a result, the three ‘poisons’ that afflict you—greed, anger and stupidity—are removed. (p. 102)

In this collection, Gōjun Shichiri provides practical guidance as a pastoral counselor *par excellence* on how to live the *nembutsu* way, especially in what is known in Shin Buddhism as the “decadent age of the Dharma” (*mappō*). It is through these profound gems of

liberating wisdom that we can see how Buddhist psychology can be practiced not only in the face of day-to-day challenges but, on a deeper level, in the quest to restore our true identity in ultimate reality with a view to attaining spiritual healing and wholeness. This work will undoubtedly be treasured by all students and followers of Shin Buddhism, as well those who wish to better understand this widespread and influential school of Japanese Buddhism. Master Shichiri's sayings are a precious gift to all who can discern the timeless wisdom that pervades them; something that is not limited to just the Buddhist tradition, for it is universal and can benefit all those seeking truth and illumination in their lives.