

Reverend Marvin Harada
Finding Meaning in Mortality
Week Two: “The Coffinman”
February 11, 2019



Welcome back to our four-week series for Tricycle magazine on “Finding Meaning in Mortality.” In week one we discussed the Buddhist view of life and death. Today, I’d like to share an example of a really amazing man, a Shin Buddhist who lives this life of finding meaning in mortality. He is still living in Japan, and he’s not a priest or a minister but a layperson. His name is Shinmon Aoki. He wrote a book about his life experiences that was a best seller in Japan; in Japanese, the title is *Nōkanfu Nikki [Mortician’s Diary]*. An actor in Japan was so impressed with his book he made a movie called *Departures* about Shinmon Aoki’s life, it’s a beautiful movie that won an Academy Award for Best Foreign Film some years ago. They changed a little bit about his life story, but it’s still a very touching movie. There is also an English translation of the book by the title *Coffinman*.

Shinmon Aoki is a very intriguing man who came to Buddhism through his work as a mortician. Let me give you a little background on him. He was a young entrepreneur who had a little bar, but his little bar failed and he went bankrupt. He was married, he had a small child, he was out of work, and he got into an argument with his wife. She threw a newspaper at him during the argument, and when it hit him, it opened up to the “Wanted” ads. He happened to see this “Wanted” ad that sounded like it was for a travel agent job, because it mentioned a “journey of life” or something like that. He looked at this ad and decided, “Well, I think I’ll apply for this job.” When he went to apply for the job, he found out that it was a job at a mortuary in Japan. He thought, “Oh, my gosh, this is not a travel agency! But I have no job, I might as well do something,” and so he began to work for this mortuary.

Funeral customs in Japan are different than in the West. In Japan, when someone passes away, the mortician immediately goes to either the home or the hospital, and they prepare the body to be placed into a coffin. This is like a ritual ceremony, so with the family present. The mortician will place the deceased into a nice coffin and prepare it for the funeral service that will be held the next day. In Japan embalming isn’t common, so the funeral is held the next day or maybe even two days after the death. After Shinmon Aoki takes this job as a mortician, working for a funeral home, his family ostracizes him in the beginning. His uncle disowns him, saying that, “Nobody in our family has ever done this kind of work.” His own wife began to reject his romantic advances. Is that a subtle way of saying it? She would say, “Oh, you’ve been touching dead people all day. You give me the creeps.” So she avoided physical contact with him. But he thought, “I have to do something for a living,” and so he put everything into being a good

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mortician. He was dealing with death every day. He was dealing with grieving families in all kinds of situations. Sometimes it was a tragic accident, sometimes an elderly person, sometimes a young person, but no matter the situation he’s preparing these deceased people for their funeral.

While he is doing this work, he begins to sense a radiance, a light, in the faces of the deceased. It didn’t matter what the person’s occupation was, what their background was, whether they were a criminal, or whether they were a high-standing member of society. In death, everyone seemed to have a very radiant face to him, and so it led to his search for religion. He began to wonder, “What is this light that I’m seeing? What is this radiance that I’m seeing in the faces of the deceased?”

Out of the many religions that Shinmon Aoki began to study and delve into, Shin Buddhism, or Jodo Shinshu, resonated the most with him. Shinran Shonin, the father of Shin Buddhism, is always talking about light in his writings. He’s always talking about the light of the dharma and the Buddha that he sees in the flowers and the trees and all around him. Shinmon Aoki senses that, “Oh, this is the light. This is the light that I’m seeing,” as he begins to explore Shin Buddhism.

In his book, *Coffinman*, Shinmon Aoki shares some really touching episodes of dealing with mortality—of people who have lost a loved one, people who found out that they have a terminal diagnosis, and how they then found deep, tremendous meaning in life. I would like to share one segment from this book in which he writes about a medical doctor, Dr. Imura, who was dying of cancer. Despite the fact that he is dying of cancer, he begins to see this light in the world around him. These are Dr. Imura’s words: “When I was told the cancer had metastasized to the lungs, I was prepared for it. But still, the news sent a bit of a chill down my spine. After all, the cancer cells that had spread were in more than just one or two places. When I came out of the x-ray room, I promised myself that as long as I could walk, I would walk. On the evening of that day, as I was parking the car at the apartment, I saw a mysterious aura. Everything around me was extremely bright. The people going to the supermarket to shop appeared to be shining. The kids who were running around appeared to be shining. The dogs, the drooping heads of rice, the weeds, the telephone poles, even down to the tiny pebbles, all appeared to be shining. When I got back to the apartment, even my wife appeared to be shining, so much so that I wanted to put my hands together in reverence.”

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Despite the fact that he has terminal cancer, Dr. Imura now sees this radiant light. He sees the preciousness of life in all things around him. Even things like weeds and tiny pebbles are illuminating, manifesting this light. We shouldn't misunderstand this—it's not like something from a science fiction movie where he's actually seeing glowing light. It's something he's sensing. He's sensing this radiance in his heart. Even his wife is radiant and shining, so much so that he wants to put his hands together in reverence, meaning he wants to bow to his wife like the Buddha.

Throughout his book, Shinmon Aoki shares these wonderful episodes of individuals who through their mortality find the deepest meaning of life. Shinmon Aoki himself lived in that manner. He went deeper and deeper into the study of Shin Buddhism, and now he's a very popular lay speaker in Japan, traveling and speaking in Shin Buddhist temples and to various groups about his experience as a mortician. He talks about working with death on a daily basis and how that led to his deep insight and awakening, and living with the true meaning of his own mortality.

In week two, I shared the life of Shinmon Aoki, who came to encounter the radiant light of the Buddhadharmā through his work as a mortician. In our next session, we'll be discussing the *nembutsu*, “*Namu Amida Butsu*,” which is at the core of Shin Buddhism. We'll talk about how we can touch the timeless, and resolve the great matter of life and death through the *nembutsu*. And in the fourth week, we'll be discussing this Buddhist expression *ichigo-ichie*, living every day as if it is the first and the last. I look forward to seeing you in the subsequent weeks.