

Reverend Marvin Harada
Finding Meaning in Mortality
Week Three: “The Nembutsu”
February 18, 2019



Welcome back to Week 3 of our four week series for Tricycle magazine, on the topic of “Finding Meaning in Our Mortality.” Last week we learned about a wonderful, devout Shin Buddhist layperson, Shinmon Aoki, and how he came to encounter the Shin Buddhist teachings in the heart of the dharma through his work as a mortician; he found the deepest meaning of his life through his work dealing with death on a daily basis.

Today, in Week 3, I’d like to share what we consider the real core of Shin Buddhism, which is the *nembutsu*, or “Namu Amida Butsu”, as a timeless truth. I’d like to share the true stories of two individuals and how they came to encounter and receive the nembutsu throughout their entire being within their lives.

I know that these are foreign words, so first I’d like to explain what I mean by the nembutsu, or “Namu Amida Butsu.” The nembutsu is depicted in Chinese characters. The character *nem* literally means *to think on* or *contemplate on* and *butsu* is the character for Buddha. So *nembutsu* is to think on or contemplate the Buddha. In China, the nembutsu tradition started out as primarily meditating on the Buddha. In China, there was a great Pure Land master by the name of Shandao, who is called Zendo in Japanese, who began to change the nembutsu from not just contemplating on the Buddha but to actually recite the Buddha’s name by saying “Namu Amida Butsu.” In our Shin Buddhist tradition, the nembutsu is not only contemplating the Buddha, but it’s also saying, “Namu Amida Butsu.” *Namu* means “to vow” or take refuge in. What am I vowing to? Amida Butsu. Amida Butsu is Amida Buddha, which, for Shin Buddhists, is the timeless Buddha. We all know the historical Buddha, Shakyamuni Buddha or Gautama Buddha. But the nature of Shakyamuni Buddha’s enlightenment, the contents of his heart is timeless truth. And the nature of the Buddha’s enlightenment is, of course, wisdom and compassion. As a Shin Buddhist when I say “Namu Amida Butsu,” I make a vow in my head to the nature of enlightenment, wisdom, and compassion.

I wanted to cover the meaning of the *nembutsu* first before I discuss two individuals who lived and encountered the *nembutsu*. The first person I’d like to discuss is a wonderful professor I studied under in Japan at a Buddhist University called Ryukoku University. His name was Professor Takamaro Shigaraki. He was a tremendous scholar and minister of Shin Buddhism, and he has a unique life story of how he encountered the nembutsu, which I’d like to share with you today. Professor Shigaraki grew up in Hiroshima, Japan, before the war. At that time

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tuberculosis was one of the most feared illnesses. It was communicable and there was no treatment at that time, so to get tuberculosis was almost like a death sentence. At a young age, Shigaraki Sensei’s mother came down with tuberculosis. In his memories, his mother was always in the back of the house—she didn’t want to get close to the family because she didn’t want to give them tuberculosis. So he could never get physically close to his mother. One day when he was in elementary school, around fifth grade or so, his aunt came rushing to the school and said, “You have to come home right away, your mother is dying.” He rushed home and got back in time—his mother was still alive. She was lying on the bed or the futon, and the family was all around. They called him Taka-chan and his aunt said, “Taka-chan is home now. You can say goodbye to your son.” But surprisingly for Shigaraki Sensei as a young boy, his mother did not open her eyes and say goodbye to him. Instead, she was reciting the nembutsu, “Namu Amida Butsu,” over and over again, with her eyes closed. She recited “Namu Amida Butsu” over and over again as devout Shin Buddhists do, and she died in that posture while saying the nembutsu.

For young Shigaraki Sensei, it was a very painful question to ask, “Why didn’t my mother say goodbye to me? Why did my mother choose to recite this nembutsu instead of saying goodbye to me herself?” This became a driving spiritual question of his life. “What is so important about the nembutsu that my mother would choose to say it over saying goodbye to me?” It was the driving force for his deep study of Shin Buddhism at Ryukoku University. Years later he came to receive the truth of “Namu Amida Butsu” with the totality of his being, and then he was able to look back with gratitude. He felt grateful to his mother for having left him with something truly timeless, truly precious. He realized if his mother had said goodbye to him, maybe he would’ve been comforted at that time, but he would never have been put on this long, spiritual journey to find the meaning of “Namu Amida Butsu.” He realized that his mother gave him the greatest gift in her passing by dying with the nembutsu on her lips.

Professor Shigaraki would often share this story about his own life and how he came to encounter the nembutsu as this timeless truth. This timeless truth, as we saw previously in talk one, is like the ocean and the wave. The nembutsu enables us to penetrate to the depth and breadth of the ocean through the truth of Namu Amida Butsu.

The second individual whose story I’d like to share with you today was a member of our Orange County Buddhist Church seven years ago. His name was Scott Morris, and he attended our church with his wife and two young children. Scott unfortunately came down with Lou Gehrig’s

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disease, or ALS. This is one of the saddest of all illnesses to me, because there's no cure. The best you can hope for is that the disease develops slowly. Those diagnosed live 10 years, some even 20 years, but some live only a couple more years after they are diagnosed with Lou Gehrig's disease. When Scott was diagnosed with Lou Gehrig's disease, we created “Living Through Illness,” a support group for people in our sangha that were ill or had members of the family who were ill. In one of our meetings Scott was very sad. He said, “I've been thinking that I'm probably not going to live long enough to be able to see so many crucial events in the lives of my family. I'm probably not going to be able to walk my daughter down the aisle on her wedding day. I'm probably not going to be able to be there for my son's high school graduation.” He was very sad that he would not be able to live long enough for those events in his family's life. I thought, “What could I share with Scott that might help him with that?” So I said, “Scott, you're still able to write.” Lou Gehrig's disease affects your feet first, and then it works its way up your body to where eventually you can't use your hands and you can't talk, and takes your life when you can't breathe anymore. But he still had dexterity in his hands, so I said, “Scott, maybe you could write letters to your son that you want him to read on his high school graduation, a letter you want your daughter to read when she's married someday. Write those letters and leave them with your wife and she can share them when they come to that point in their lives.” Then we ended our session for that day.

A month later, we had another support session, and the first thing that Scott said was “Sensei, I wrote something.” So I thought, “He must've written a letter to his children that he wants to share.” But Scott said, “No, I wrote a poem,” and he passed out this poem and he read it out. I'd like to share Scott Morris's poem with you. It reads as follows:

“I have ALS, and I am grateful.

I am grateful to retire early to be with my family.

I am grateful I have family and friends that are so supportive and hopeful.

I am grateful I can still walk and get around.

When that is gone, I am grateful I can still use my hands to feed myself.

When that is gone, I am grateful I can still breathe and laugh and feel.

When that is gone, I am grateful I had a wonderful life, and when that is gone, Namu Amida Butsu.”

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To me, this poem reflects how Scott was able to receive and encounter the nembutsu as a timeless truth. He knows that his life is going to come to an end in the very near future, but despite that, he’s able to have a heart of gratitude, grateful for what he can still do. Grateful that he can still use his hands and he can still talk, and that he can still feel. But when all of that is gone, what remains is this timeless truth of Namu Amida Butsu.

To receive this timeless truth in our own life means that we too become timeless. We touch the eternal in the here and now, and that’s what I think Buddhism offers us. Despite the fact that we are mortal beings, that we have a limited lifespan of who knows how long—forty, fifty, hopefully eighty or ninety years? But no matter how long or short our life is, we can touch the timeless. We can touch the ocean. We can be the wave that touches its true essence and be one with the ocean and have the depth and breadth of life that comes through receiving this teaching of Namu Amida Butsu. That’s what I wanted to share, and there are countless Shin Buddhists who have also lived this meaningful, fulfilled life through encountering and receiving the nembutsu, Namu Amida Butsu.

Today, I was able to share the stories of two individuals—Professor Takamaro Shigaraki, a professor of Shin Buddhism in Japan, and how he encountered the nembutsu through the death of his mother, and the story of our own member here, the late Scott Morris, who we lost a few years ago, who shared a very touching poem on the nembutsu, despite the fact that he was afflicted with Lou Gehrig’s disease. Namu Amida Butsu.

In our final session, we’ll be touching on a very beautiful Buddhist expression, *ichigo-ichie*, which means “every day is like the first day, and every day is like the last day.” We look forward to seeing you for the fourth and final dharma talk. Thank you.