

Reverend Marvin Harada
Finding Meaning in Mortality
Week One: “Touching the Timeless”
February 4, 2019



Hello, my name is Reverend Marvin Harada and it is my pleasure to give a four-week series of Dharma Talks for Tricycle on the topic of “Finding Meaning in Mortality.” I have served as a Resident Minister here at the Orange County Buddhist Church for the past 32 years. We are one of 60 churches or temples in a national organization called the Buddhist Churches of America, and we are affiliated with the Nishi Hongwan-ji, which is our mother temple in Kyoto, Japan. We represent Shin Buddhism, more formally known as Jodo Shinshu, which is part of the Pure Land Buddhist tradition, under the wider umbrella of Mahayana Buddhism. Shin Buddhism was founded in Japan in the 1200s by Shinran Shonin, who was a contemporary of the other great Buddhist masters Honen, Nichiren and Dogen.

In the first week we will be discussing the Buddhist view of life and death. In the second week, I would like to share an example of a Shin Buddhist who found tremendous meaning in his mortality. In the third week, I will focus on understanding the *nembutsu*, “Namu Amida Butsu”, which is a core teaching of Shin Buddhism, and how this enables us to transcend or resolve the great matter of life and death. Then in the fourth week, I’d like to share a very beautiful Buddhist poetic expression, *ichigo-ichie* in Japanese, which means something like “every day of our life is like the first day and the last day of our life.” It’s about truly living a life of impermanence. Those are the four talks I’ll be sharing over the course of four weeks.

The topic for today is the Buddhist view of life and death. In the West we have a tendency to look at life in terms of a timeline. I’ll use my own life as an example. I was born on September 12, 1953. If you can do the math quickly you can figure out how old I am! At some point in time in the future—and I hope, like anyone else, that it’s far down the line—my life will come to an end. We have a tendency in the West to look at life and death dualistically, as though life begins at a certain point and death occurs at a certain point. But Buddhism says, “Well, wait a minute. Didn’t I begin to die the very moment that I was born?” Life and death really are two sides of the same coin. I live every day and, in a sense, I die every day. This is a non-dualistic view of life and death. In Chinese, they write *sho-gi*. *Sho* is life, and *gi* is death. It’s one word in Chinese and Japanese. They don’t separate life and death like we do in the West. It’s one term, like “life-death.” First, we need to have this understanding of life and death from a Buddhist perspective.

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Buddhism is saying that our mortality, the fact that we are going to die, is the one thing that gives the greatest meaning to our life. We have been given this one life. We have this one life to share with our friends and family. We have this one life in which we're able to have a career, our life's work. The fact that our life is impermanent and that someday we're going to die is what really gives meaning to this life. In this way, we can embrace the idea of our mortality. It's not something that we try to avoid thinking about. It's not something that we try to put off and ignore. We have to face it head on and embrace it, the fact of our mortality. In embracing, accepting and understanding death, we are able to truly live a meaningful life. This one life that we've been given has tremendous meaning and value and when we see it this way, every day becomes so precious to us. In upcoming weeks I would like to share some examples of people who lived in that manner.

Some religions talk about wanting eternal life. But I think Buddhism is trying to awaken us to a timeless life. Not making life eternal, but transcending life and death in the here and now to discover the timeless. That's what it means to touch the core of the teachings, the heart of the dharma. It doesn't mean living forever and ever, but within this limited life we have the opportunity to touch the timeless.

Many years ago, I was studying Buddhism at a small school. It's a Shin Buddhist seminary here in America, called the Institute of Buddhist Studies, located in Berkeley. About 40 years ago, I was a student there among a very small student body, maybe four or five students, and we were all studying to become ministers.

On one particular day I was the only student in the class, it was just me and the teacher. I thought, *Well, this is a good day to ask questions of the teacher, because I won't look dumb in front of the other students.* My teacher that day was the late Reverend Hogen Fujimoto. I decided to ask him a question that I had been pondering, which is one that we all contemplate at some point in our life. I asked, "Reverend Hogen Fujimoto, what happens to us when we die?" He paused for a minute and then he went to the chalk board and drew this image of waves approaching the shore. He said, "You're like this wave that's floating out on the vast Pacific ocean. The wave's approaching the shore. That is your life." Reverend Fujimoto asked me, "What happens to the wave when it gets to shore?" I just looked up at him, like, "I don't know!"

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“But what happens to the wave when it hits the shore?” he asked again. “Doesn’t it become a part of the ocean again?” Then I realized, “Oh!”

It was such a beautiful image that has stuck with me over the years. In studying Buddhism, I’ve come to find it’s an oft-used metaphor. Thich Nhat Hanh often uses it in his writings. I have taken this image and adapted it for how I teach Buddhism. We can take this image of me as a little wave floating out on the ocean as a representation of my life. Buddhism says that there is a difference between the unawakened wave and the awakened wave or, you might like to say, the enlightened wave and the unenlightened wave. The unawakened wave has a very limited and shallow view, because it is an egotistical, self-centered view of life. This unenlightened wave has a tendency to compare itself to the other waves. It doesn’t realize it’s a part of this vast ocean. The unenlightened wave thinks, “Well, this wave graduated from Harvard. I’m not as smart as that guy,” or compares themselves to a wave that’s better off economically. We can even band together as waves—the Asian waves, the Caucasian waves, the Hispanic waves. We can create groups in terms of politics: the Republican waves and the Democrat waves. On the surface we can create all kinds of distinctions between ourselves but this is an unawakened, narrow perspective of life.

But if this wave can become awakened and come to the heart of the teachings, this wave realizes it’s a part of a great ocean. Now this wave has tremendous depth to its life, not just a shallow view of life. This tremendous depth and great breadth comes from being a part of this vast ocean. When you are one with all the waves, you touch upon your true essence. This little wave sees that it’s a part of this great ocean, that it’s really one with all the other waves. We each differ in terms of our shape and size. It’s my understanding that every wave is actually unique, just like every snowflake is unique. But yet the essence of every wave is, of course, water and it’s a part of this unfathomable ocean.

Buddhism is trying to awaken us to our true essence as a part of this great ocean. When we awaken to our true essence, the shore is no longer a problem. We have touched the timeless in the here and now. That’s why I wanted to share this image in terms of finding meaning in mortality. Without this kind of understanding, as the unawakened wave, we have great fear, apprehension, or anxiety about what happens to us when we hit the shore. Just like anyone, we worry, “What’s going to happen to me when I die?” The wave that awakens to its essence

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doesn't want to rush to the shore. No one wants to rush to the shore! But this wave has this depth and breadth of life knowing that when it hits the shore it will be okay, because it has touched the timeless in the here and now.

That's what I hope to share in the next three weeks. In next week's session, I'll be sharing the story of an individual who lived in this manner, and how he came to encounter others who live in the same way. I also hope to share how the *nembutsu*, “Namu Amida Butsu,” is also like the great ocean. I look forward to all of you tuning in to the next series of talks on finding meaning in mortality.