

Reverend Marvin Harada  
*Finding Meaning in Mortality*  
Week Four: “Ichigo-Ichie”  
February 25, 2019



Welcome back to Week 4 of this Dharma Talk series for Tricycle magazine on the topic of “Finding Meaning in our Mortality.” Last week I was able to share the meaning of the *nembutsu*, “Namu Amida Butsu,” and the stories of how two individuals came to encounter the nembutsu as a timeless truth: Professor Takamaro Shigaraki, whom I studied under at Ryukoku University, and also the late Scott Morris, a member of our Orange County Buddhist Church who died of Lou Gehrig’s disease a few years ago.

Today, for our fourth and concluding talk, I would like to share with you a beautiful Japanese Buddhist expression that I learned from my teacher in Chicago, the late Rev. Gyomay Kubose. He’s the author of a wonderful book titled *Everyday Suchness*. Rev. Kubose would quite often give dharma talks on this beautiful Buddhist expression, which is *ichigo ichie*. *Ichigo ichie*, if I were to translate it into English, means something like “every day is like the first day and every day is like the last day.” As Buddhists, we’re all familiar with the Buddhist teaching of impermanence that Buddhism teaches, that everything constantly changes, but that can be sometimes just a very conceptual thing. We think we understand it in our head, but we may not understand it with the totality of our being. But this beautiful expression, *ichigo ichie*, I think puts that Buddhist teaching of impermanence in a manner that we can more beautifully relate to and it resonates with us. So *ichigo ichie* is saying every day is a new day. Every day is fresh and new. We see the world as if it’s like the first day of our life, and every day might be the last day of our life, because we don’t know what might happen even tomorrow. I think we’ve all experienced where we heard that the day before someone, a close friend or relative, passed away, and we think, “How could that be? I just had dinner with that person last night.” We’re here one day and we’re gone the next. So Buddhism teaches us, in this *ichigo ichie*, that we don’t know what might happen tomorrow. We have to live as if every day is like the last day. But also, as if it is the first day.

I had heard this teaching from Rev. Kubose, but, the person that really illustrated it to me, of all people, was the comedian Red Skelton. Now, I don’t know if you’re old enough to recall Red Skelton, but he was a wonderful comedian, and he had a weekly comedy show called “The Red Skelton Hour.” I grew up watching him on TV and I had the opportunity to see him live in concert, and it was just an amazing show. He had us laughing almost for 90 minutes straight. He did all his regular routines that he always does, but it was just hilarious. But at the end of his performance he came down close to the audience and he was more serious and he said, “Ladies

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and gentlemen, I'm in my seventies now. I always put a hundred percent into my performance, because I never know, maybe this is my last performance, and if it's my last performance, I want it to be the very best performance of my life, and that's why I put a hundred and ten percent into each and every one of my performances." Then he said, "Every day in my life I wake up early. I get up at six o'clock in the morning, and the first thing I do is I write a love letter to my wife." He had been married to his wife something like 30, 40 years. But every morning he writes a little love letter to his wife. So I began to think about this, what Red Skelton was sharing. I thought, "Here is a man who's really living ichigo ichie." He doesn't wake up in the morning and look at his wife and go, "Ooh, same old wife. Not getting any prettier." No. He sees her. He sees her as if he's seeing her for the first time every day, and he expresses his love for her in a love letter every morning. I once told the story at another temple in a dharma talk, and there was a couple sitting in the front row and when I said, "Red Skelton writes a love letter to his wife every morning," the wife gave her husband a elbow as if to say, "How come you don't write to me like that?" So we may not do this, but Red Skelton was a person who lived as if every day is like the first day and lived with the spirit of maybe every day is the last day.

So when we take this to heart, when we really take it to heart, our life can really radically change. We go to work, same work and with the same old people, and same old job that I do day in and day out, and maybe your work is very monotonous. But if you go thinking like this is like the first day, first day on the job, then everything is fresh and new. That little shift in attitude. Maybe you feel totally different about going to work with that little attitude of, "It's like the first day. It's like the first day." And if we think maybe, just maybe, today might be the last day of my life, then would you want to complain to your wife at the dinner table that, "Oh, gee, the chicken is kind of tough and overcooked," and you want that to be the last memory your wife and children have of you? Or would you just think, "Maybe this is my last dinner. I receive it humbly and gratefully." So a lot of the things that we would complain about in life, if we think maybe today is the last day, I think we have a different perspective.

So this teaching of ichigo ichie has tremendous meaning when we apply it to our everyday life. Every day is fresh and new. Every day could be the last day. When I left for Japan to study for the ministry, I had to say goodbye to my parents and my grandmother at the airport, and my grandmother at that time was in her mid-eighties or early eighties, and so she was very sad because she thought maybe this is the last time she's going to see me, and I sensed it too in her,

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that I was going to be in Japan for four or five years and maybe this is the last time, and she was saying this, kind of mumbling, "Oh, this might be the last time, this might be the last time." My mother says to my grandma, "No, don't say those kind of things. Let's send Marvin off happily." But my grandmother couldn't help but think that, and I couldn't help thinking that as well, and so I said goodbye to her, and in our goodbye to each other, I feel like her heart truly entered my heart and my heart entered her heart.

I went to Japan for five years, and I came back after studying for five years. I hadn't seen my grandmother in five years. Get out of the airplane, walk out at the airport there, and the first person I see is my grandmother, and she greets me and we see each other as if it is the first time, and she's so elated. You know, "I'm still alive. You're alive." We're able to meet again.

I find tremendous meaning in this expression of ichigo ichie that I learned from Rev. Kubose. I wanted to share it with you, and hopefully you find a meaning of it in your own life. Ichigo ichie, every day is like the first day; every day is like the last day. There is tremendous meaning in our mortality. It means that we're able to live this one life, this one precious life, with meaning, with gratitude, with appreciation, and we can live the most fulfilling life that we're able to live, because it's limited. Because we only have this one lifetime. So ichigo ichie, the nembutsu, the timeless truth of the nembutsu. Wonderful Shin Buddhist individuals like Shinmon Aoki, Professor Shigaraki, Scott Morris, and the late Rev. Hogan Fujimori [ph?], who shared with me the image of the ocean and the wave. I wanted to share all of those, the wonderful teachers, with you in these four weeks. I hope that you have found something meaningful in these talks that benefit you, that resonates with you and helps you to live a more meaningful and fulfilled life. Thank you very much.