

One Cup at a Time

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WRITER'S COMMENT: Growing up bilingual and mixed race, I have been asked countless times to translate a specific word or phrase in either Japanese or English and felt speechless, finding no equivalent to the pure meaning. When asked in my UWP 18 class to write of such a language-barrier incident, the phrase “ichigo ichie” immediately surfaced. I have had countless encounters throughout my life, ranging from a chance meeting of a couple seconds to months and years of friendships. But despite the length of my encounters, they have always been interconnected with departures. From the goodbyes I said to my classmates in Japan to the hellos I mouthed to the people I have met in America, “ichigo ichie” has always comforted me in times of change. This phrase has taught me to cherish each encounter, for “Ichigo Ichie” literally translates to “One encounter, one chance”—meaning every encounter with someone, even a friend whom you see often, should be treated as if it were a once-in-a-lifetime occurrence. It truly embodies how delicate and fragile life is, for every encounter and departure is a chance occurrence for this time only, never again to be repeated—one chance in a lifetime.



—Jessica Sayuri Boissy

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: Perhaps the surest indication that this essay deserves its distinction as a piece of Prized Writing is that it was a pleasure to return to. It serves as a balm to a stressful day and reminds me that this moment is different from the first reading and that this is a moment I hope to return to anew. Jessica wrote this essay in response to an assignment that asked students to think about one word or phrase in particular. One of the possible ways of responding was to think through a foreign word with no English equivalent. The beauty of Jessica's essay was immediately apparent, as it commented on both the word and its cultural signifiers and integrated the Zen spirit of the phrase into the style of writing itself. The piece accurately portrays Jessica herself—thoughtful, artistic, generous. I hope to hold the lesson here, that

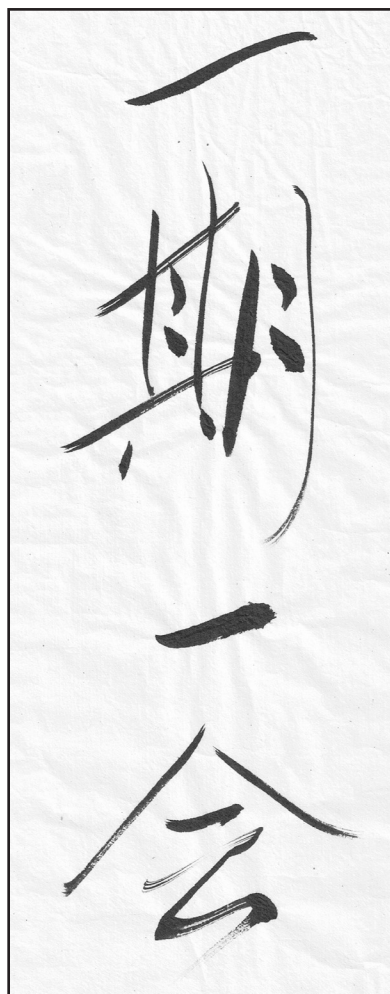
although “the water in the kettle eventually boils,” we should not take any thing or any moment for granted.

—Greg Miller, University Writing Program



ICHIGO ICHIE CONVEYS A JAPANESE AESTHETIC ideal relating to transience that, when translated into English, literally signifies “One Encounter, One Chance.” The philosophy behind it is that one should always do one’s best when meeting someone, treasuring each encounter as a once-in-a-lifetime event, even if it is a friend whom one sees often. For me, this phrase has brought awareness of the value of living each day, hour, minute, and second to the fullest and seizing each chance encounter that life unexpectedly brings. Though the ritual of meeting people follows a regular routine, this phrase stresses that each moment is a unique meeting to be lived intently, never to be repeated, as if today were the last time you might meet—in other words, this phrase teaches one to live his/her whole life now—the fullest in the moment.

Unlike the English alphabet, the Japanese writing system is composed of *kanji*, characters that embody the meanings in graphic forms. Although *Ichigo Ichie* can be written with the English alphabet, in Japanese, the phrase is written as 一期一会, giving a more visual representation of the meaning. The first part of the word, *ichigo* or 一期, symbolizes one period, in the terms of *ichigo ichie*, one lifetime.



The second part, *ichie* or 一会, symbolizes one meeting. Thus, when put together the phrase *ichigo ichie* is formed, a phrase that easily rolls out of my mouth. Each character has three syllables, and the *ichi*, signifying the number one, at the beginning of each character gives a particular ring to the phrase, a consistency if not an echo—stressing the importance of only “one meeting” in our “one lifetime.”

Also, because the meaning of *ichigo ichie* can be comprehended visually, nothing impinges on one’s understanding. It is as though no interpretation is needed because the visual representation of the characters gives the reader the feeling of the word through the characters. Thus, the reader can be the sole interpreter of what *ichigo ichie* means to him or her.

However, the simplicity of meaning shatters when translated into English. Instead, the English language suggests a blizzard of wordy interpretations, such as “with every departure there is an encounter” or “one chance in a lifetime” or “treasure every meeting, for it will never reoccur”—phrases that sound nice but still cannot communicate the simplicity and wholeness of the original phrase.

Phrases and words can be translated into many different languages, but the culture still plays a significant role in understanding not just the literal meaning but also the roots of words. The English equivalents lack the Zen spirit that permeates this phrase. Much like the Zen teachings, *ichigo ichie* teaches the importance of living in the present moment.

In fact, this Zen thinking lies at the heart of *chado*, the Japanese tea ceremony. By concentrating on making tea inside a quiet tearoom, participants in the Japanese tea ceremony can reach a calm state of mind and reflect on themselves, cultivating a serene and mindful attitude towards each ceremony and towards life outside the tearoom. This attitude demands the awareness that, although the steps of the ritual have not changed over the centuries, every time people come together over a bowl of tea, they create an original experience. In this context *ichigo ichie* retains the meaning of “one encounter, one chance,” but also acquires another meaning—“one cup, one moment.” In this context, *ichie* maintains the meaning of “one encounter” but *ichigo* becomes “one bowl of tea.”

It wasn’t until I attended my first tea ceremony in my first year of middle school that I actually experienced *ichigo ichie* in its fullest sensory delight. I can remember slowly sliding the door to the tearoom and being

showered by an abundance of sensations . . .

. . . from the fragrance of the sandalwood incense set into the charcoal beneath the hot water kettle to the aroma of freshly whisked green tea . . .

. . . from the sound of water coming to a boil to the sound of soft cotton socks gliding over tatami . . .

. . . from the handling of the “yakimono,” pottery streaked with ash glaze, to the small wooden lacquer-ware plates . . .

. . . from the visual beauty of the calligraphy hanging beside the flower arrangement and, ultimately, from the taste of sweet bean cakes to the flavor of bitter green tea . . .

In that moment, this mixing of sensory impressions—whereas in everyday life one at a time will do—helps to create the feeling of *ichigo ichie*. Although incense smoke always rises and the water in the kettle eventually boils, the combination of sounds, tastes, smells, textures, and visual pleasures of the day’s tea ceremony will never be reproduced exactly that way again. This reflection brings to mind another aspect of the physical nature of the tea ceremony—the interrelationship of three basic elements: *monosuki*, *furumai*, and *chashitsu*, or things, behavior, and setting. The tea ceremony that I experienced on that day when I was twelve will never be relived in a tea ceremony when I am eighteen. And the same philosophy can be applied to each day we experience in a lifetime—one should always do one’s best, whether it is making tea for another or simply meeting up with a friend, treasuring each encounter as a once-in-a-lifetime event.

Even before you knew the phrase *Ichigo Ichie*, you were living this word in your life, because life is about the coming and going—about the changes. These changes can take on many forms: our first tea ceremony, high school graduation, 21st birthday, or receiving our Ph.D. And even if we meet each other in class every Tuesday and Thursday, I am not the same student and you are not the same teacher, because we are all participants in this inevitable change. But it is through these changes that *ichigo ichie* stresses the importance of treating each encounter as a once-in-a-lifetime event and focusing on the details of each occasion, the particular people and things involved daily. In other words, living fully in the present—*ichigo ichie*—drinking life, and tea, to its fullest—one cup at a time.

