

Shimanami *Ichi Go Ichi E*

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Before coming to Japan almost a year and a half ago, I never had much interest in cycling. However, upon moving to Imabari and finding myself without a car, I purchased a used sports bike and soon discovered my love for cycling. Over the past year and a half, I have done a number of cycling trips all over Shikoku, including, of course, the Shimanami Kaido. So, when the opportunity arose to take part in the Shimanami cycling event on October 30th, I jumped at the chance and challenged myself to do the longest of the five different courses, totaling about 150 kilometers. Approximately 3,500 people cycled alongside me. To be among so many people all travelling together was a unique experience for me, and one that I will not soon forget.

However, the highlight of the day occurred before the event even began. At 7:15, everyone in my course gathered at the starting position for the opening ceremony. Luckily, the MC spoke fluent English and translated everything for the few foreigners in attendance. After a few guest speakers, he moved into the crowd to interview a few participants. When he noticed a foreigner (myself) so close to the front, he came over to ask a few questions, the last being, “what’s your favorite Japanese word?” Although more a proverb than a word, without hesitation I responded with “一期一会” (*ichi go ichi e*). For those unfamiliar with the phrase, I interpret it as literally meaning “one moment, one meeting,” or “a once-in-a-lifetime encounter.” To me, the deeper connotations imply that one should cherish every moment with another person; every experience with others is completely unique, and as such should be appreciated and regarded as special. I love this phrase, and clearly many other cyclists felt likewise, for as I finished saying it everyone near me released a collective “ahhhhh!” in approval. The MC expounded on 一期一会 by reflecting on the fact that this entire day of cycling was indeed a once-in-a-lifetime experience for everybody involved, and that we should all try to appreciate what we were about to undertake.

I spent the day cycling with this thought foremost on my mind. I have cycled the Shimanami Kaido many times in the past, but that day I took special care to be rooted firmly in the present. I appreciated the breathtaking views from the bridges, the amazingly bright and warm weather, and the feeling of gliding over the smooth roads. But what I appreciated most were the other cyclists I shared the road with. My interview early in the morning earned me a bit of recognition by other cyclists, particularly because 一期一会 was brought up by me, a foreigner, who tends to stand out in crowds. From time to time people would pass me cycling or approach me during rest areas and call out, “一期一会さん!” or “一期一会くん!” and, if we weren’t flying down the road, we would have a short conversation with my limited Japanese and their limited (but occasionally incredible) English. People who didn’t know me as “一期一会さん” proved to be kind, supportive and encouraging, too. From shouts of “*ganbatte!*” and congratulatory cheers after difficult portions of the route to simple nods and smiles, the cyclists I spent the day with felt less like a group of strangers and more like a tight-knit, mutually supportive community.

That, for me, is the essence of Japan: the *ichi go ichi e* spirit. In my day-to-day life working at schools in Imabari and in my travels around Japan where I meet people only once, never to meet again, everybody seems to cherish and appreciate their time with others. When I meet people in this wonderful country, I truly feel that they are 100% *there* with me and as interested in learning about me as I am them. This is a state of mind I have been trying to adopt for myself. Only a short year and a half after coming to Japan, I have learned to better appreciate the moments that I am fortunate enough to share with the many amazing people that come into my life, whether they are lifelong friends or simply a passing encounter. 一期一会 is more than a proverb; it’s a way of life. The Shimanami Kaido event was a special day and certainly merited my appreciation and thankfulness of the people I shared it with; but doesn’t every day, every moment, deserve the same treatment?

