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Observations with respect to the education system in Japan

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Impressions from extremely limited perspectives are of course only valuable if they are taken as such. Therefore, I request that when reading this, you should bear in mind that I have a mere 14 months of experience in Japan, at the start of which, I did not even know the meaning of words such as "OHA-YO" etc. !

Having made my opening apologies, I now feel able to express myself without fear of misrepresentation.

Without hesitation, I can begin by stating that the most shocking difference between children I have met in Japan and those I know back home, concerns the passivity of Japanese children. It seems to me that Western children are far more actively participant in their education than their Japanese counterparts. While this may mean that Japanese students are easier to control, in general, it also means that the knowledge they come away from their education system with is mainly factual and theoretical, rather than experiential. It may be true to say that in Britain, there are some similar situations, but not to the extreme I have witnessed here in Japan. I shall also take the liberty of recounting some of my 1.5 years experience of the education system of Amherst Massachusetts U.S.A.. Though in the same way as my experience in Japan my time in America was limited, I did get a taste of the style of teaching. In short, the education system appeared far more active than that which I had been used to in Britain. For example, the number of questions that students asked of the teacher seemed to me to be far higher than I was used to in my own country. Furthermore, the questions were of an independent and sometimes, apparantly aggressive nature. However, upon further consideration, I realized that on the whole, it was the cultural difference of style that made me perceive those questions as inappropriate rather than as "good questions". From my British standpoint, I felt somehow put off by the boldness of the students

in America. However, if one is to attempt an unbiased comparison of such cross-cultural systems, one must at least attempt to step outside of one's own bias, and somehow dare to view the different situations in an equal light. Of course, this is by no means an easy task. Indeed, it may not be fully possible, since we all hold our own prejudices deep down within us. Nevertheless, we can do our best to reduce our natural tendency towards seeing ourselves as the centre of all things, by taking every opportunity to experience what it is like to be on the outside, looking in—to hold a different point of view—to challenge the accepted idea of the moment. Now this may all sound a little revolutionary, but it does not mean that one has to be rude or to intentionally harm or upset anyone. When recalling my first impressions of those rather abrupt and strong questions of American students, I cannot say that they were in any way rude or inappropriate, even though, to my British ears, they seemed harsh and rather unusual.

Returning to Japan, the point I mentioned at the start of this essay referred to the passivity of Japanese children, as I perceive it. One way or another, I can't help making the oversimplification of characterizing Britain as being somewhere in between America and Japan in terms of both culture and education (the two of which are undoubtedly linked). While America impresses itself upon me as a culture of infinite variety and background, Japan strikes me as the complete opposite: uniform in the extreme. Britain somehow falls into the approximate mid-range between these two. To attempt to illustrate my impressions a little further, let me give an example. In America, I had to give a lecture presentation to a group of students at university. During the course of the presentation, I was continually interrupted by students who had questions. The questions, in the main, were sensible and investigative. Though the situation was for me, rather awkward to begin with, I soon realized its benefits. The presentation was not merely a one way process, but rather a two way

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interactive learning situation. The barriers between speaker and listeners had been reduced to those between equal level participants. Far from being a disaster, such situations can provide the atmosphere in which active learning can take place. Thus the problem of control did not appear to be a problem at all in my experience. At the same time, however, the group which I have just described, consisted of self-motivated, highly interested students. The problem of how one might create motivation, is another question in itself. However, in my opinion, motivation should stem from the interests of the student rather than from those of the teacher. Likewise, the ideal gift of an education system, to its participants, is the ability to think independently and to be able to judge for oneself with respect to new issues as they arise. My shock then, upon meeting various Japanese students of a cross-section of different backgrounds, was centered around the inability of the students to do more than exactly what I told them to do. To be honest, I sincerely thought that there must be a problem of some kind which I could not quite see. Now, however, I realize that the education system is such in Japan that anyone, however extravert by nature, is taught to conform. This is nothing less than frightening to me, since I have been taught since I was a child, that I must, above all else, think for myself and decide independently what is appropriate and what is not.

Quite clearly, education is a close relative of culture and of a country's way of thinking. For that reason, it is a particularly sensitive issue. I do not intend to be negatively critical of the Japanese culture or its education system. There are indeed, many positive points of benefit with respect to the Japanese style of education, such as the tremendous factual knowledge with which so many students leave. However, if this factual foundation is not built upon, it serves little or no purpose in my opinion. Another very positive point which one cannot help but be impressed by as a westerner is the traditional extended family concept which one finds in Japan. The patience and sense of duty towards one's elders which comes as part of the culture of Japan, must surely be very carefully preserved if possible.

The situation in general in the West, where old people's homes are the norm, is embarrassing to me in comparison to the Japanese way of thinking. How-

ever, who will stand up and express such an opinion in Japan if the majority does not agree? In Britain, companies have made the complaint that graduates lack the ability to be practical. In addition, there have been specific complaints concerning those graduates who have never experienced working life since they lack "common sense" in the working world. As a form of response, two particular changes seem to have arisen in the education system. One is that it is now totally accepted, if not, at times, encouraged, for school graduates to take a year-off before going to university. The second, concerns the acceptability of sandwich-courses which involve the simultaneous study of theory, and practice of expertise, while obtaining a recognized university degree. With respect to the acceptability of the year-off, I was interested to find that in Japan, the "RONIN" year is seen as a failure (in the ultra-competitive race to qualify as quickly as possible.)

In the final analysis, it would seem that one can only get out of an education system what one puts in. Japan is clearly the fastest developing economic power in the world. Other nations, including America and Britain, seek ways of keeping pace in the "economic war". However, the economical base on which Japan now stands, surely positions her for some changes. It would seem to me that a look at the culturally different, though also qualitatively different educational points aforementioned, would be well worthwhile.

It appears to me that basic ideals in different countries, are fundamental to the resulting education systems. Therefore, it is the very roots of an education system that must be cross-culturally compared if we are to try and see what's best.

Before leaving this subject, I should mention the now growing problem of school refusal in Japan. To my eyes, the school system in Japan appears strict and stifling. I am surprised at the number of children who, having finished ordinary school lessons, are made to study at "JYUKU" in the evening. In addition to this, there are people who begin their child's English education at the age of 3 years! This is all very well if one considers only the idea that as much as possible, as soon as possible, is the goal of education. However, a child surely needs a certain amount of free time to discover what she wants to do. It strikes me that in Japan, the vast majority of child-

ren have little free time due to the pressure exerted on them by their parents and from the highly crammed and intense schedule that most of them have thrust upon them. Coming from Britain, I am shocked at the number of hours that Japanese children spend studying. Also, as I mentioned above, I am surprised at the passivity of Japanese children, especially with respect to their inability to be able to produce their own imaginative thoughts and creative ideas. This I feel is a direct result of the amount of training and learning "parrot-fashion" that children are subjected to. Is it not possible, that the fast growing problem of school refusal in Japan has some of its roots embedded in such a system? I feel obliged to share an impression of mine, gained while teaching a few children some English. Though the children were clearly the ideal students in terms of doing exactly what I told them to do, they could not give me any feedback. In my experience, communication with the teacher has always been of utmost importance to the process of learning, whatever the subject matter. However, try as I might, the effort to undo the education system's conditioning of passive obedience in the children, was futile. Eventually, to avoid the "parrot-like" form of repetition of English words without the slightest notion of their meaning, I asked for the meaning of the English that they had just repeated, in Japanese. The children were shocked by such a question, and it took some time before I managed to get them to feel comfortable about such a process. Until this day, I am still unable to get them to feel that it is for both my and their benefit if they ask questions when they don't understand. I find it frustrating to have to continually guess or test every small detail simply because so few people express their true feelings. However, it does not seem possible to get students to take an active and responsible role in this respect. The students I have taught all seem incredibly shy to me. I have on several occasions, discovered that some or even the majority of students, have not understood a single word of what I have said, and yet they have sat smiling at me, giving me the impression that all

was well! This is a complex problem and the other side of the coin is the ability and quality of patience which should not be underestimated. Somehow, I can't help hoping that we might be able to mix the best of the education systems of such culturally different societies as America, Britain and Japan. Perhaps one of the starting points is the study of the problem of school refusal in such different cultural situations as America and Japan. Why the same problem should occur in such different social and educational settings, is an important and as yet unanswered question.

A final comment is that I was impressed to find that there are some places which have chosen an independent and rather free school type attitude, in order to combat the problem of school refusal. One such place, is various "KYODOGAKUSHA" communities in Nagano, Hokkaido and Kyushu. This independently Christian based program provides an alternative system of education by means of a community style of living, each member taking an active role in the necessary work to be accomplished. One young boy who was suffering from school refusal, had made remarkable progress in this scheme. Perhaps one of the reasons was that he found it possible to be directly useful in everyday chores, thus giving him back some of his lost confidence. Certainly, he had the standard education system crushing to his sense of self-identity and self-capabilities. Having noticed that even some of the most able students that I know have a constant sense of not being good enough and also show various signs of stress while studying, I begin to wonder whether the problem of school refusal in Japan is not linked to the apparently rigid and intensive education system. Certainly, I have never seen such serious young children in Britain or in U.S.A..

My impressions are, as I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, undoubtedly immature and biased by the fact that I am an Englishman who has only stayed in this country for a mere 14 months. However, I have tried to give some of my first impressions. I hope that they may prove positively stimulating.