

The Role of Japan: Ultimate Weaver of the 21st Century

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Japan has been an enigma for many people in other countries throughout the ages. Whether it was in times immemorial or today at the start of the 21st century, whether in business or in culture, in society or in diplomacy, Japan has evoked opposite reactions in feelings and thought, from enthralment to frustration, from anger to calmness, and has never ceased to cause wonder in those who try to understand it.

Every culture has its differences, its unique aspects. However, in many of the cultures one is likely to have been associated with, the variations on the surface tend to be more numerous than those that exist at a deeper level. On the other hand, in the case of matters Japanese, often it is the other way around. Similarities on the surface actually conceal a deeper difference in the way things are done. In this article, I shall refer to this uniquely Japanese way of doing things, as the Japanese “Art of Doing.”

I feel that it is this very fundamental difference in approach to matters that must form the basis of what Japan can contribute to the world in the 21st century. In order to be effective in achieving this, there are also some factors that Japan must adopt. This article addresses this subject.

The Trigger

On Friday March 11, 2011 at 2:46 p.m., disaster struck Japan. An earthquake registering magnitude 9.0 struck off the Pacific coast in the northeast of the country. The quake triggered massive tsunamis in the hour that followed, impacting a coastline of almost 500 kilometers. Entire communities including people, houses, cars, and railway carriages were swept out into the Pacific, while berthed fishing boats were brought inland, leading to surreal images of schooners perched upon buildings, of houses with their ground floors swept away standing as it would seem on stilts. Adding to the problems were the earthquake-tsunami impacted nuclear power plants leading to evacuations of people living within a 30 km radius of the plant and the threat of widespread radiation fallout. It was the worst national calamity since 1945.

What people across the globe got to see about Japan in the next days and months caused amazement and deep respect. It was a people who were calm, organized and disciplined. In many countries, one may have had a law and order problem. Not in Japan – it was just the opposite. It was a nation of nobody taking advantage of a calamitous situation. Here was a people who had met a big tragedy with the utmost dignity. Instead of spending time lamenting the loss, people started to take stock of what had happened, of what nature had not taken away and of what they needed to do to put things right. In short, organization was being searched for, organization was being set up and implemented right into the midst of natural chaos of an unimaginable magnitude.

Organization

The Japanese “Art of Doing” has organization built into it. All the Japanese arts – both performing and fine arts – have defined forms and structures. All events – social and official – have clear timelines

and definitions. Families and friendships, business and polity are all structured on roles and responsibilities. Protocol is in-built. Attempts are made to identify, evaluate and address all aspects of an issue and then to clearly codify the action to be taken in different scenarios. In order to instill this minute level of organization, the principle of “practice makes perfect” is all pervading. Japan’s precision-oriented technological prowess has its foundations in this approach, an approach which fits in well with the psyche of its people.

Japan can contribute this aspect of its functioning to the world. This could be achieved through Japanese entities in other countries, in the business they conduct, in the activities they engage in, in the products that they develop and in the services that they provide. These entities need to understand deeply that this aspect of the Japanese “Art of Doing” is fundamental to them, to Japan. They then need to examine and find out how to blend this harmoniously with local conditions.

Spirit

When at its very best, the Japanese “Art of Doing” encompasses what can be simply termed the “Japanese spirit.” A combination of dedication, commitment and perseverance, it is the unsaid, usually unwritten, underlying cause in manifesting everything that represents the quintessence of Japan. To describe the ideal spirit of business, Takatoshi Mitsui, the founder of an icon of the Japanese retail industry, the Mitsukoshi Department Store, used the phrase *magokoro no seishin* – which roughly translates as dedication that is founded on deep sincerity. A sterling example is the spirit of Japanese hospitality. The establishment expects itself to go to an extent where the guest’s every need is anticipated and to provide that subtle extra bit of service that was not expected by the guest, an action that is referred to by the word *omotenashi*. Another epitome of Japanese hospitality is the



The traditional fishing dance Maiwai being revived by the tsunami-impacted Yuriage community at temporary housing in Natori, Miyagi Prefecture in March 2012. A sterling example of Organization, Spirit and Harmony. (from the left)

“Spirit” The spirit behind the dance.

“Maiwai revival” Through harmonious organization and a never-say-die spirit, the dance is revived by members of the community.

“Maiwai garb” The traditional cloak known as Maiwai (Ten Thousand Celebrations). It is a simple yet difficult garment to make requiring an elaborate hand dyeing and stitching process.

traditional tea ceremony. It is based upon the concept of *ichigo ichie* – that every encounter with a guest is to be treasured as it may never occur again. This is such a beautiful concept, so different from the standard business principle of trying to identify a good customer as one who has the potential of providing repeat business.

Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, a leading saint of modern times, stated at a large gathering in India in November 2010 that the world can learn hospitality from Japan. It is the spirit behind the best traditions of Japanese hospitality that Japanese entities must take to other countries by emulating it in the business that they do.

Harmony

I shall recount a story that has often been told by Sri Sri Ravi Shankar.

“When President Richard Nixon visited Japan for a conference, on one side of him was a Buddhist monk and on the other was a Shinto priest. He asked the Shinto priest, “What is the percentage of Shintoism in Japan?” The Shinto priest replied: 80%. He then turned to the Buddhist monk thinking there would be 20% of Buddhists in Japan. He asked, “What is the percentage of Buddhists in Japan?” The monk said 80%. President Nixon was so confused. He asked how it was possible. Both priests said that it was possible.”

Shintoism and Buddhism exist in complete harmony, like a classical symphony in which different instruments play different melodies and at different volumes, all blending together into a harmonious whole. At different events in one's life, standard practice is based on this or that, whichever is considered appropriate for that occasion. In the best traditions of the Japanese way of conducting a negotiation, all opinions will be invited and the information will be sifted to identify common ground. A plan will then be drawn up which has this commonality for its foundation. Thousands of years ago, the Japanese language developed in a similar way, taking in waves of Chinese characters and blending these into a harmonious whole with original Japanese vocabulary. Digging deeper one can discover innumerable Japanese productions which are the outcome of a creative and

harmonious blend of the best of different systems of thought.

This is the third principle in the Japanese “Art of Doing” which must be exported. Japan has the capability to create new products by adopting best-of-breed ideas from different places and creating a harmonious blend of these.

Conclusion

In this article, I have selected three aspects of Japanese tradition – Organization, Spirit and Harmony – as forming the basis of what Japan can contribute to the world. Japanese entities may need to look again at their approach to the global stage and adopt appropriate changes, using and instilling their own traditional skills and specialties and identifying those from other lands. This instilling of traditions must happen in the context of universal human values. The events of March 11, 2011 along with the economic stagnation of the past 20 years, whilst unfortunate, have set a base for the change to happen, and to make Japan a leader in the roaring 21st century.

What Japan can offer can be visualized as a beautiful and intricate garment for people from all over the world to wear. It would be a masterpiece – the ultimate outcome of weaving the very best that the world has to offer into a harmonious whole that could soften the spirit and bring joy to many.

Dedication

This article is dedicated to all the people of the coastal areas of northeastern and eastern Japan. A lot of lives were lost in the aftermath of March 11, 2011 and for those who survived it has been their Organization, Spirit and Harmony which is taking Japan through a difficult time. It is these very qualities which will take the country to its deserved position as a leader in the 21st century. **JS**

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