

Walk This Way: Universal Value in the Japanese Countryside

By Adam Fulford



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Any way with a name is not the way itself
Any thing with a name is not the thing itself

Not naming is where the universe starts
Naming is the mother of the world of things

Opening of *Tao Te Ching* by Lao-tsu (Fulford translation)

An article that I wrote for the *Japan SPOTLIGHT* January/February 2019 issue ended with the comment: “We must back-track to the Japanese countryside and explore the many opportunities there to access the past, present and future.” “Back-tracking” is the term I use for the process of returning to society’s roots and considering what we can learn that may help us decide what to do next.

Learning in a countryside community is a feature of the “NowHow” activities that I described in that article. During a three-day weekend in Nakatsugawa, a small mountain village in Yamagata, students of English who work at a Japanese company find out about local life in order to share what they discover in English with foreign visitors. Then the students and visitors brainstorm the future of the community.

Japanese villages contain valuable information about sustainability, resilience and other important matters. I have spent five years in Nakatsugawa testing various possibilities, and for me it is the best place to showcase activities that could lead to a better future for rural Japan. Eventually, though, I would like visitors from Japanese cities and all over the world to take part in NowHow activities in communities around the country.

Recently, I was very happy that my activities were featured in a TV show called “Catch Japan” on NHK WORLD-JAPAN, and next year I am hoping to produce more material for TV both in Nakatsugawa and

in other locations in northeast Japan.

Nouhaku & NowHow

These days, government support for rural tourism is surging. One official initiative in which I am involved is exploring the potential for farmhouse B&B stays of two to three days by tourists from North America, Europe and Oceania.

As I mentioned in my previous article, visitors for whom Japan is a long-haul destination tend to spend more time and money in Japan than tourists from places closer by in East Asia. Many stay for two weeks or so, which increases the likelihood that they will try a few days in the countryside, where they can enjoy Japan’s kaleidoscopic variety of local food and scenery.

The Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries calls such countryside stays “Nouhaku”. While Nouhaku is written with the kanji characters for “farm” and “stay”, the concept is much broader than staying at a farmhouse B&B. It embraces all forms of accommodation and visitor activities in the Japanese countryside.

One of the more unusual accommodation options that I encountered over the past year was a castle in Shiroishi in Miyagi Prefecture that should soon be available to those who would like to get a sense of life as a feudal lord. More affordable, and equally attractive, was a guest house by a beach in a tiny cove in Tokushima Prefecture. Both options, in countryside settings off the beaten track, are forms of Nouhaku.

I myself have a special interest in farmhouse B&Bs as a forum in which foreign visitors can engage rewardingly with a host community. But there is a significant hurdle to boosting the supply of Nouhaku and NowHow experiences in almost any part of Japan: an aging workforce and a declining population.

Photo 1: Author



This restaurant in Tokushima Prefecture keeps its seafood in the sea until it is prepared.

Photo 2: Author



Not everywhere in Japan is enjoying the benefits of a tourist boom. This hotel in the mountains of Yamagata Prefecture closed a few months ago.

Photo 3: Author



In the old days, this type of over-kimono was made specially for people who had had a very successful year fishing out of a port in Chiba Prefecture.

I am tackling this challenge in two ways.

First of all, I am aiming to recruit NowHow trainees (that is, English-speaking guides for foreign visitors) not only from major Japanese companies but also from small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the region around the farmhouse B&Bs. Many of these smaller firms are seeking to expand internationally, and need employees who are comfortable speaking in English.

By taking part in NowHow, trainees from SMEs would improve their communication skills and find out more about the outstanding characteristics of the region where their company is based. The social networks of these trainees, and of the companies who employ them, might eventually lead to new people, outside the host community but in the local region, who are willing to consider work at a farmhouse B&B.

Secondly, I would like English speakers who are studying Japanese to spend weeks or months in Nakatsugawa on working holidays. The idea is that as their Japanese language skills improve and they learn more about countryside life in Japan, these temporary villagers (I call them *karisonmin* in Japanese) would boost the community's capacity to receive foreign visitors by helping out at farmhouse B&Bs and showing visitors around at times when NowHow trainees are not present. I feel sure that some of them would love to welcome their own families to the village.

That is what I plan to do in the months ahead. For much of the rest of this article, though, I would like to review my back-tracking activities in other parts of Japan over the past 12 months. They will be grouped under headings that relate to movement along a path, and I'd like to explain why.

Senses in Motion, Mind in Motion

A long-term interest in the nature of a "path" is what led me to quote *Tao Te Ching*, which is about "way" and about "virtue". In Chinese, Tao is way or path, and Te is virtue. Based on the various parts of the kanji characters, however, I also see Tao (道) as "senses in

motion", and Te (徳) as "mind in motion". The senses and the mind are linked by perception, which is what the mind makes of sensory input.

We should always be mindful that no matter how "any thing" is described, the description will not be "the thing itself". "The map is not the territory," noted the philosopher Alfred Korzybski. Various other analogous insights exist in Western thought, dating back at least to Shakespeare's rose that by any other name would smell as sweet.

Nevertheless, the kanji that are used to communicate the essence of path-related phenomena are for me a better way to apprehend "the thing itself" than any other means I am aware of.

For many years, the journey of the human race was on foot. In some circumstances, we would be eager to move away from something bad (other people attacking us, for example). In others, we would be eager to move closer to something good (a source of drinking water in the distance). As we moved, we would have been scanning our environment. Our senses would have been in constant motion, relaying information to our minds. Our minds, too, would have been in constant motion as we attempted to differentiate good from bad. Sometimes we would choose the wrong water, or the wrong thing to eat. People who made bad choices would suffer; many would die.

Words like "good" and "bad" are often quite difficult to define, but not in this context. In the old days, a good choice increased our likelihood of survival. A bad choice decreased it. The Japanese countryside has a great deal to tell us about this type of good and bad.

Objects of Attention

On any path, our attention is drawn to things that we perceive as unusual or valuable. What is unusual or valuable differs from one person to the next, based on experience, interests, and realms of expertise. Let's see what I noticed over the past 12 months.

In Shonai in Yamagata Prefecture, I saw swans wintering in rice fields. As someone with a simple mental association of swans with lakes, that sight took me by surprise, and I assumed it was unique. Less than a year later, though, I witnessed the same phenomenon in Inawashiro in Fukushima Prefecture.

In Osaki in Miyagi Prefecture, where the winter rice fields attract wild geese rather than swans, I learned about *igune*, protective oases

Photo 4: Author



An example of a Nohaku experience: a castle in Shiroishi, Miyagi Prefecture where you may soon be able to spend the night.

Photo 5: Author



Underlining the sustainability of some countryside firms, Yunushi Ichijo, a ryokan in Miyagi Prefecture, has been in business for nearly 600 years.

of biodiversity in a windswept landscape.

In Oku-Aizu in Fukushima Prefecture, I drank from a spring that produces fizzy mineral water, which I hadn't previously encountered in Japan.

In Urabandai in Fukushima Prefecture, I marveled at ponds in otherworldly shades of violet, blue, and green. The powerful eruption of Mt. Bandai in the 19th century catapulted huge boulders astonishing distances. Some of them blocked waterways, and these youthful ponds were among the upshots.

In Hamamatsu in Shizuoka Prefecture, I discovered that a century ago, local cotton was processed on looms made by one or two companies that went on to become well-known car manufacturers. A link between cotton and cars had never previously occurred to me.

Even some familiar objects of attention can be hard to ignore. On rail journeys along the Tokaido, and on flights in and out of Tokyo, I generally keep an eye out for Mt. Fuji. I sometimes wonder what role Mt. Fuji might have played in forming a shared sense of national identity in the days when regional retainers, merchants, and pilgrims walked past the volcano on their way to and from Edo on paths that included the Tokaido.

Paths Through Life

My thoughts were especially drawn to the Tokaido in Hamamatsu and in Kuwana in Mie Prefecture, as both were stops on the old highway. Kuwana, unusually, had a *port* on the Tokaido.

In Oku-Aizu, I found wayside monuments referring to Mt. Iide, which I know well from my many visits to the town of Iide in Yamagata Prefecture. People used to climb Mt. Iide as a religious custom. Like Mt. Fuji, the mountain was regarded as a sacred peak.

In Shonai and Tsuruoka in Yamagata Prefecture, I learned about the spiritual renewal that visitors continue to seek by climbing to the top of three mystical mountains called Dewa Sanzan.

In Shodoshima in Kagawa Prefecture, I became acquainted with a route that replicates on a smaller scale the better-known 88-temple pilgrimage of Shikoku itself. Stop number two on the Shodoshima circuit, Goishizan, was a reminder of the days when Shinto and Buddhism coexisted in the same sacred precinct.

In Fukushima Prefecture, I learned about the 19th-century

movement to Koriyama of impoverished former samurai from various parts of Japan. Awaiting them at the end of a long journey was a tough new life, as they had to create their own farmland from scratch. A small town at the time, Koriyama has since grown to become the largest city in the prefecture.

Way to Go

On my travels, I enjoy Japan's many different forms of transport.

In Fukuoka, a thriving regional city, I made a point of using the Nanakuma subway line, as I had heard that its stations and trains offered good examples of universal design. Universal design is predicated on access and inclusion, essential concerns for anyone with a disability, including those in a burgeoning population of very elderly people.

In Tokushima Prefecture, I experienced three unusual modes of transport. I rode the ropeway to Tairyuji, temple number 21 on the Shikoku pilgrimage, and enjoyed a short cruise in a boat with underwater windows that offered views of coral and colorful fish.

More memorable still was a visit to a depot where I saw a train that doubles as a bus. Fewer and fewer people have been riding the train along the east coast of Shikoku, and this Dual Mode Vehicle (DMV) is an attempt to attract more visitors while also preserving a transportation lifeline for increasingly isolated communities. The DMV may enter service before the end of 2020.

Losing Our Ways

The Japanese countryside is packed with information about resilience in varying circumstances, but many of the ideas and viewpoints are rooted in local customs and culture that are fading fast. Some communities are hanging on by a thread. In conversations with a government official about Oku-Aizu and with a taxi driver about Shodoshima, I heard tales of people who are growing too old to look after homes and gardens on their own. They have to rely on grown-up children in distant cities (the people I was speaking with) to come back regularly to help out.

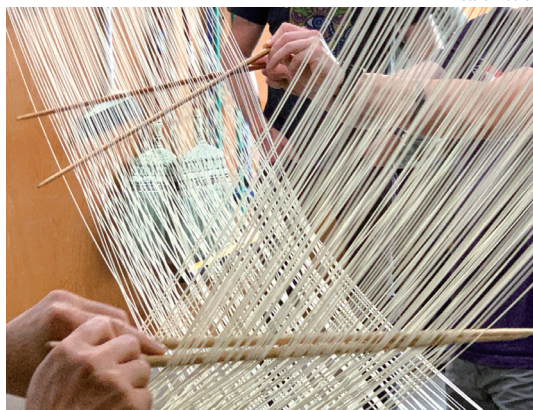
In Yanagibashi in Fukushima Prefecture, I watched village kabuki. While this colorful spectacle is still thriving for the time being, population decline is posing problems for Yanagibashi's two varieties of *kagura*, another traditional performing art.

In Awajishima in Hyogo Prefecture, I visited the oldest shrine in Japan and found that the local community is increasingly short of participants for the shrine's most important annual festival.

Commercial traditions are also under threat. In Shodoshima, I met a maker of soy sauce who is leading an initiative to make traditional wooden tubs for producing the sauce.

One thing he needed was some very tall bamboo to make long strips that could be woven to form a protective band around each tub. Having searched in vain as far away as Kyoto, he was beginning to despair. But then an elderly member of the local community heard of his plight and told him that decades earlier the soy sauce maker's own grandfather had planted bamboos locally so that they could be used in

Photo 6: Author



In Kagawa Prefecture, which is known for wheat, you can learn how to make somen noodles.

later years on soy sauce tubs.

At the inn where I stayed in Oku-Aizu, I found a book featuring interviews that local children had conducted some years ago with elderly relatives. The children asked what life was like in the old days. An initiative of this kind draws attention to the importance of staying in contact with past generations.

SDGs, ESG, Society 5.0 ...

These days, we seem to be surrounded by important and complicated objects of attention ranging from climate change and the Singularity to personal reputation and identity. Contemporary tools for considering a path to a better world for all include the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations (UN). The goals are: no poverty; zero hunger; good health and well-being; quality education; gender equality; clean water and sanitation; affordable and clean energy; decent work and economic growth; industry, innovation and infrastructure; reduced inequalities; sustainable cities and communities; responsible consumption and production; climate action; life below water; life on land; peace, justice, and strong institutions; partnerships.

The business world, for its part, is taking environmental, social and governance (ESG) considerations increasingly seriously. And the Japanese government has its own plans for achieving a world in which “new values and services are created”. Society 5.0 aims to harness “an environment rich in real and usable raw data” and “Japan’s excellence in the manufacturing of things” to “overcome social challenges”.

For me, all of these initiatives are valuable points of reference when considering what to do in a community such as Nakatsugawa. But I wonder how many people in the UN, big business, and the Japanese government have considered that engagement with a community like Nakatsugawa might be a valuable point of reference for *them*.

... and the 44 Values

Wherever I go, I keep returning to the “44 vanishing lifestyle values” that Professor Ryuzo Furukawa identified by interviewing hundreds of Japanese people aged 90 and over about life before convenience. In these hearings, which I mentioned in my previous article, and which he is still conducting, Prof. Furukawa focuses in particular on life in the 1930s, when there was no expectation of convenience in most rural communities.

People in those days coped by, for example, “walking everywhere”, “learning through living together”, identifying “roles for everyone” and “ways to help each other”, “giving guests a good welcome”, “using things until they are useless”, “living in tune with nature”, expressing “gratitude to nature”, and being “conscious of the gift of life”.

These simple everyday memes seem to have contributed to the centuries-long sustainability of communities in a broad range of environmental circumstances all over Japan. In NowHow workshops, I have started trying to match the 44 values with the SDGs. Stimulating discussions can result from considering which of the 44 values have a bearing on poverty, education, life below water, life on land,

partnerships and so forth.

What bearing might traditional village values have on a company’s ESG priorities? After all, a company is also a community, and both villages and corporations strive to identify sustainable paths to the future. And what better place than Nakatsugawa to explore an “environment rich in real and usable raw data” and “excellence in the manufacturing of things”?

Paths to a Better Future

I keep thinking about how I can use what I notice to contribute to a better future in the Japanese countryside. For residents of Nakatsugawa, the main forum for my activities in recent years, a better future would be one in which more young people and other visitors become attached to the community and keep returning.

My initiatives have achieved a measure of success. Firstly, university students from Tokyo (people I used to teach) are now visiting Nakatsugawa twice a year to lend a hand at local festivals. And secondly, the NowHow weekends generate suggestions for ways to address specific challenges, such as how to make money to cover the students’ travel expenses.

Clearly, some of the students now love visiting Nakatsugawa, and I very much hope that one or two of them will eventually become “Local Vitalization Cooperators”, a role created by the government to bring youthful creativity and energy into the countryside. But that is for the students themselves to decide. My task is to establish conditions that will enable local residents, students, corporate trainees, and other visitors to keep identifying new paths to a sustainable future for the host community.

One of my goals over the next year will continue to be to change perceptions. I want the world to see that the Japanese countryside is a goldmine of universal value, and that unless we actively mine the gold over the next 10 years, it will vanish.

That, using any definition of the word, would be bad.

JS

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