

A Wholistic Approach

Article by Elizabeth Kiritani and illustrations by Kiritani Itsuo

It's amazing what delicacies pour forth from the Lilliputian kitchens of Japan. Even average Japanese housewives are capable of creating magic in kitchens often not much larger than hall closets. A steady flow of *sashimi*, crispy *tempura*, burdock root, seafood custard, fish roe, boiled and seasoned vegetables, and grilled fish pour out to family and guests. My neighbors, in my old middle class area, are skillful and inventive.

How do the women of Japan manage to do it? "Nothing to it," claims Mrs. Saito. "You just balance the cleaning with the cooking, constantly washing dishes while preparing food, stacking things away in drawers while pulling other utensils out." It's a juggling act that combines cooking, cleaning, arranging and serving into one organized and unified act.

This type of comprehensive, all-inclusive approach is seen everywhere in Japan. Preparations are thought out and systemized to the nth degree. Nothing is wasted — neither time nor materials nor money.

Even the tattoo artist in Japan is not satisfied like his American counterpart with a fragmented anchor or a strategically placed butterfly. Japanese tattoo artists view the entire body — except for the hands, feet and above the neck — as a canvas for a unified work of art. Whether it's a dragon, a *kimono*-clad beauty or Momotaro the peach boy, the design decorates every crevice and cranny, and becomes one with the body that carries it.

My husband, an artist, spent a year in Italy. He decided to go to cooking school to brush up on his Italian while he was there. Language schools in Italy are filled with Japanese and Americans, and he knew that if he attended one of these, he would end up speaking either Japanese or English with his fellow students.



So off he went to a regular cooking class to be with and talk to real Italians.

The cooking classes shocked him. Surrounded by Italian housewives of all ages, he was impressed by their cooking skills. They were, in turn, impressed with his skill — learned in his Japanese school — of cutting and chopping vegetables so finely and neatly. At the end of each session, though, his classmates would drop their spoons and knives and leave an incredible pile of potato skins and

leftovers just as they were.

Itsuo stayed late and diligently washed and wiped his dishes and then helped the teacher clean up the rest. He was astonished at the women's behavior. To him, it was only natural to clean up the mess afterwards. When he later asked his cooking-mates about it, the response was: "We are paying to take cooking lessons, not to clean up."

To them, the cooking was something separate in itself. Cleaning up had nothing to do with it. Itsuo and

millions of people in Japan don't see it this way. To them, cooking is not just the act of cutting, mixing and heating food. Cooking starts with a trip to the store and includes the washing up as well.

Perhaps this is why husbands in Japan escape dishwashing so easily. Dishwashing is not seen as the separate, discrete task it is in my country. An American wife can easily fob off the washing up on her husband, if she makes the meal. The two activities are seen as separate. In Japan, however, there is a wholistic perspective to almost everything, an approach that covers the preparations, the work and the cleaning up afterwards.

The tea ceremony also reflects this wholistic trend. Imbibing a cup of tea is only a small part of this activity, which encompasses an entire philosophy of life, including an elaborate kimono dress code, food preparations, eating manners and room décor. You are not permitted to wear watches or jewelry during the tea ceremony; you are expected to meet your tea with correct thoughts, in correct clothes, and with correct manners.

Years ago my tea teacher in Northern Japan served me an ultimatum: either give up karate or give up the tea ceremony. Glancing at my knuckles, which were bruised from doing push-ups on a wooden floor, Abe-sensei made her pronouncement. Actually, I heaved a sigh of relief. The karate had become painful and I was looking for a graceful way out. But nevertheless, I was displeased at my teacher for sticking her nose into something that I was ignorant enough to think was unrelated and none of her business. In Japan everything is related.

Compartmentalization—the bane of western life — has not yet pervaded Japan. Rather than hiring specialists, Japanese companies have been rotating their workers through different departments and teaching them whatever they need to know. This system may be changing, but the set

up has many advantages. Their workers develop a comprehensive knowledge of their company as opposed to becoming a disposable plug-in part of a single process.

I've heard it said that fragmentalization and specialization are offshoots of the electronic age — a departure from the linear print culture where the comprehensive approach was a given. I don't know whether this is true, but I happily gave up the karate, without really understanding the necessity of it.

Sports watching in Japan is amusing because the game itself is such a minuscule part of a sport here. The football players at Tokyo University don't actually play much football. They are busy with group pow-wows, with running sessions paced to rhythmic shouts and grunts, and with the pounding of their own muscles, the pushing and pulling of colleagues' limbs, and so forth. Once all this is done, you might be lucky to see a little play.

Similarly, in Japan studying is only one of a host of equally balanced activities at schools. The early morning class greeting to the teacher is every bit as important as memorizing the English grammar, producing the homework or cleaning the floors and desks at the end of the day. Many Americans are appalled to

see children clean their classrooms, but most Japanese see it as an integral and natural part of the life that takes place at school. It's not coincidental, I'm sure, that many in this country grow up to be neat and orderly in their everyday lives. They have been brought up to do so and it becomes second nature.

In Japan, almost everything is interwoven and part of the whole. Rather than the individual, what is important is how that individual fits into society, his relationship within his work group, neighborhood and family. This and tradition and modernization; eating and sleeping; studying and cleaning — they are all intricately fitted together into one wholistic process that isn't separated into discrete and unrelated parts.

From my experience living in Japan, this approach gives continuity and a rhythm to daily life. I get up every morning and water the plants outside my old home and water down the pavement as well. In the evenings I repeat the process. I am a disciple to many things, learning to put away things after I finish a job, learning to look at cleaning up as part of the process of doing. My life before moving here consisted of a multitude of separate, unrelated tasks and efforts. Finish the work. Perhaps the next day put away the tools or things taken out.

One of the very fine points of the Japanese education system is that it teaches the obvious: kids learn to put their pencils back into their pencil cases right after they finish using them. It's simple, but it could cause a revolution of orderliness in my country were we to take a similar approach. JTI



Elizabeth Kiritani is a newspaper columnist and an announcer for bilingual programs of NHK (Japan Broadcasting Corporation). Her husband, Kiritani Itsuo, is an artist who has held exhibitions in several countries.