

A Lesson in Respect

By Charlotte Pfeiffer

A few days after the Fulbright-Hays seminar group for which I was serving as project leader arrived in Japan this summer, one of the team members found a note and a one-thousand-yen bill on the desk in her hotel room. She asked the Japanese guide to translate the message, which was from the housekeeper saying that she had found the money on the floor by the bed. Not only was Nancy not expecting the maid to return the bill; she did not even know she had dropped it! She, I, and all of the other Americans were surprised at the honesty of the hotel employee.

The same week another member of the group was the beneficiary of the integrity of a taxi driver. Teena had left her camera in the vehicle when she and several others ladies were riding to a shopping area. During their trip, they had seen some of the men in the seminar group going into the Handicraft Center and had waved at them. When the driver discovered the camera but did not know how to find the ladies, he went to the Handicraft Center to find out from the American men where the group was staying. He then called the hotel to report that he had found the camera and would bring it out that evening. He did! Now the team members were amazed: the taxi driver not only had returned the lost item but had gone to a great deal of effort to do so.

Later when the group was traveling on the train, a Japanese man who had lived and worked in the United States for two years started a conversation with one of the seminar participants. She told him how impressed the group had been with the friendliness, kindness, and honesty of the Japanese people and then recounted the tale of

the returned camera. Far from being surprised by the actions of the taxi driver, the man remarked, "We would much rather have our inner peace than a camera." His comment reminded me of an important lesson: respect for others develops self-respect.



A taxi driver at Tokyo station helping to load luggage for foreign visitors

The beautiful attitude of the Japanese people toward others manifests itself in more than acts of integrity. They give dignity to others; they make them feel special. Sales clerks bow courteously to customers entering stores and return credit cards using two hands with the card facing the customers. Waiters and waitresses hand patrons menus in such a way that the customers can read them without opening them or turning them. Business executives solicit suggestions from their workers and listen and respond to the employees' ideas.

Since my return home from Japan, I have been trying to decide what makes the Japanese the courteous and considerate people that they are. Does the long-established Buddhist tradition play a role? Does the emptying of self which this faith teaches nourish concern for others? Or does the situation of having many people living

in a small land area demand that the Japanese people respect one another and each other's possessions? Perhaps the close living quarters create bonds which may not exist in the United States, where people can easily isolate themselves from their neighbors and become anonymous. My husband suggests the possibilities that the system of honor/shame which the Japanese practice may be at the heart of their approach to life. He proposes that the thought of bringing disgrace to themselves or their families discourages them from doing the dishonorable and the opportunity of bringing honor to themselves and their families encourages their virtuous and thoughtful actions.

Whatever the reasons, I experienced the joy of traveling in Japan. I did not have to worry about my personal safety, nor did I have to worry about the security of my possessions. I enjoyed the beautiful scenery, the historical sites, the technological marvels, and the kind and polite people knowing that the Japanese would do nothing to compromise their honor and that they would do all they could to make me feel comfortable and important.

I returned home changed. I try to offer others the same respect I received in Japan. I don't always succeed, but when I do, I feel good about myself. I have an inner peace. **JTI**

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