

## Dedication to the task in hand

### *Reflections on the Japan Foundation Study Tour 2006*

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My first visit to Japan was probably one of the most intense experiences of my life. On the go from early morning to late night each day, constantly off to the next visit, meeting, meal or event, the 14 days in Japan were an ever-changing riot of new sights, sounds, tastes and experiences. At the time, every moment was an adrenalin rush, but on returning home, I was able to reflect a little more. So many things made a deep impression – the display of beautiful autumn leaves at Kyo-mizu temple in Kyoto, the tranquillity of drinking tea in the island tea house in Hamarikyū Gardens, Tokyo, the skill of the bunraku puppet-master at Gion Corner, the atmosphere of the Hiroshima A-dome lit up at night. So many vibrant memories.

Many of these memories were connected with the deeply aesthetic scenes which pepper Japan – a new beauty round every street corner – but something which also struck me deeply was connected with aspects of daily life which might be considered quite mundane, like cleaning a grill or pruning a tree. This was the intense concentration on doing a task to the utmost of one's ability because that task has inherent value. Obviously this is just an outsider's interpretation, but I felt it might also be linked to the foregrounding of sensory experience in life, for example traditional sweets are designed with regard to their texture, smell and the sound of their name, as well as taste and look (see <http://www.toraya-group.co.jp/english/wagashi/art.html>). Thus, perhaps, the *felt experience* of cleaning, or whatever, has as much value as the end result.

I'm not trying to say that all Japanese people we observed doing things were like this all the time, but here are a few examples of intense dedication which we did see. The one which probably brought these ideas into focus for me was the young man cleaning the grill in an izakaya (small bar which also serves food) in a restaurant mall in Kyoto station. Our bar seats were right next to the large, solid metal grill on which the food was cooked. We were still finishing off our noodles with cabbage, accompanied by the requisite *biru*, when the staff started the 9.30pm close down. First, one of the men who had been doing the cooking hosed water onto the grill whilst it was still hot, creating clouds of steam. Then he loosened every bit of brown

*meticulous attention  
to preparation of  
okonomiyaki,  
Hiroshima*



with a wide, wedge-shaped palette knife, before cleaning the wet surface with great sweeping movements, holding the cloth with both hands, his muscles standing out on his bare arms. Then he cleaned every bit again, including the surrounds of the grill, and finally hosed it down. It must have taken around 5-10 minutes to clean one metal grill so thoroughly, and it was as much of a show as the cooking had been. He was so involved in his task, that you almost

wondered if he'd spent years learning 'the way of grill-cleaning'. It was certainly different to the somewhat cursory flick by the most junior staff member that such a cooking implement might have received elsewhere.

Initially, I might have seen this as a one-off, an instance of an unusually dedicated person, but once I started to think about it, there seemed to be lots of examples – the young woman in smart blue uniform with a 'light sabre' directing the traffic in the dark outside the hotel, the bus driver running an outsized feather duster over his coach to remove the last speck of dust, the gardeners at Nijo Castle trimming each alternate clump of needles from the Scots pines with scissors...

This dedication to the task in hand didn't just relate to adults either, another profoundly memorable experience from the trip was a the musical performances given by children at the schools we visited. Perhaps the most striking was at Yamashiro High School, Kyoto Prefecture, where the school brass band, perhaps numbering forty or so pupils, played with extraordinary skill and flair. In addition to playing so well (without sheet music), the children were dramatising each section of the piece, for example the saxophones bounded to the front when their section came, and the flute players suddenly swapped to recorders, one boy with a blue recorder playing his like a jazz instrument, end raised to the ceiling. It really was special.



We knew about the emphasis on extra-curricular activities in Japanese schools, with children often staying till 7pm or so at night, sometimes even coming in at weekends, but we'd expected that pupils would undertake different activities each night. In fact, it seemed that, as well as having music as a standard part of their curriculum, the brass band practised for a couple of hours almost every night of the week, hence the professional results. In another school, we saw a practice room entirely dedicated to the use of their band, with the children's music and accessories set up waiting for the end of the day. Whilst we did have some concerns about the work-life balance of both teachers and pupils in the schools we visited, the results that such dedication was producing were certainly exceptional.

I know we have to be so careful of generalising and romanticising when comparing groups of people. I'm sure there are Japanese folk who are lazy and undisciplined in their work, as there are folk elsewhere who are incredibly focussed and committed. I guess what struck me was that, in Japan, this dedication wasn't just shown by craftspeople, professionals or artists at the top of their field, but by normal folk doing 'everyday' jobs and school activities. What does it mean? What to conclude? I don't really know. Maybe, like many aspects of Japan, it is something best absorbed and experienced rather than analysed.