

**Essay  
by  
Melissa Allen**

**“Bliss”**

Spending three weeks of my summer in Osaka, Japan is one of the best things that has ever happened to me. Traveling to another part of the world, meeting new people, tasting new foods, and just diving into a new and interesting culture was great. It would take me years to write down everything that I experienced in Japan, and months to edit it, but it only took me one day to realize what a wonderful place Japan is. I was amazed at the respect that was given for the arts and nature. A delicate flower, which may be overlooked by many, can be used in Ikebana, the Japanese art of flower arranging.

An act as simple as drinking or making tea can have a deep meaning if you are attending a tea ceremony. Theater that developed centuries ago still sells out shows to crowds of anxious spectators. I admire the people of Japan that have stuck to their roots for over such a long period of time.

I was lucky that I got to work with a woman who teaches Ikebana. This art of flower arranging uses living branches, leaves, grasses, blossoms, and any plant materials. Each arrangement seems to be unique. Both men and women study this art. Actually, in the past, even the toughest samurai worked arranging flowers. Since Ikebana is considered to be art, really anyone can do it. The Japanese make these arrangements to show their appreciation for natural beauty. I love flowers, and with the help of my Japanese teacher, I am now able to make and enjoy my own arrangements at home.

Another practice of the Japanese is the tea ceremony. This features the serving and drinking of matcha, a powdered green tea. There are particular rules and procedures that one must follow during this ceremony. I had to watch closely how everything was being done before I had to perform it myself. Around the fourteenth century, tea ceremonies were held as social gatherings by the upper class. Soon, many people were following this practice. The tea ceremony is mainly held to appreciate paintings and art in a serene environment. I did feel calm during this ceremony. I also took the time to think about the beauty of art and culture.

I really am amazed at how Japan keeps such strong cultural branches of art and theater. I have studied some theater during the time of the Greek, Roman, and Renaissance just to name a few, but I have yet to hear about a whole era which, theater wise, has been saved (Japan excluded). Three popular types of theater that are still practiced in Japan today are Noh, Bunraku, and Kabuki. Each has its own unique style. Noh, which developed around the eighth century, involves dancing and music.

This is performed by male actors who often wear masks. Bunraku was developed in the sixteenth century, and uses puppets. Again, only men perform Bunraku. Kabuki's first debut was in the seventeenth century and was actually first performed by a group of females. People were worried about public morals, so women were no longer allowed on stage.

Fortunately, women have made a comeback. Takarazuka is an all-female theater and is very popular. I got to watch them perform from the second row. Even though I didn't understand exactly what they were saying, I enjoyed every second of it.

I must say that I had a great time in Japan. Festivals, ceremonies, and other practices seemed to keep people together. Even though I feel like I have learned a lot, there is still so much for me to find out. I plan on keeping in touch with my host families and I hope I will get the chance to see them again next year. I will treasure all my memories of the trip, and retain all the knowledge I absorbed.