

Japanese Arts and Culture By Adriana Reinecke 2007

During my three week stay in Osaka, I elected to study Japanese fighting arts, but I decided to expand my topic to include not only 武道, but also 茶道 and 生け花, which I was fortunate enough to take part in while I was there. From observing and participating myself, I began to appreciate how much the arts reflect the culture and the culture in turn reflects the art.

On my first full day in Japan, when my host father took me on a walk around his neighborhood, we stumbled on a 弓道 道場, where they graciously welcomed me to come and observe. The 道場 was clean and, as with many indoor spaces, I was asked to remove my shoes before entering. As I sat and watched, I noticed that the walls displayed the names of all of the students, and a poster explaining proper posture and equipment. The head sensei even brought me a book and explained to me about the art. There were parts I could not understand, but the language barrier did not seem important. I was touched by the hospitality, and thoughtfulness they regarded me with.

I returned the next day with my video camera, and watched as they practiced. I began to notice that the focus, diligence, and sense of calm they displayed were very much like the Japanese people. Each movement, each step, each draw, had a meditative purposefulness. There was nothing rushed or hurried. Japan is unique in that it manages to retain its native culture, while still being one of the most modern countries in the world. The Japanese people's ability to remain calm and detached from the every-day chaos and masses of people reminded me of the focus I observed at the 道場. The second time I visited, a family friend of the Suzuyama's was there and she graciously lent me her gear, gave me a pair of tabi, and attempted to teach me how to shoot. It was as difficult as I had imagined, but I also felt a sense of accomplishment when my arrow hit the nearby bail of hay she was having me aim at. I felt that I was slowly beginning to understand on a deeper level the way that Japanese people think, and why they are so dedicated to their art. The Japanese work ethic and the diligence with which they practiced impressed me. Everyone I met was very focused and hard working; the same focus I observed right before the arrow was released. That focus and determination is part of why I like Japan and its people so much.

The next opportunity that presented itself to me was when my second host mother, Chiemi-san arranged for her friend to teach me 生け花 and 茶道. When I first arrived she took me into a separate room where she had laid out all the things needed to make a flower display. 生け花 originated from the practice of laying out flowers for the dead, and developed into an art form. Unlike American bouquets, she explained to me, Japanese flower arranging consists fewer flowers, more leaves, and centers more on lines and levels. The three levels represent earth, heaven, and man. The patience and the care taken in choosing and arranging requires not only practice, but an esthetic sense too. Japanese people are very conscious of how they interact with people based on their relationship, and this same refinement and consciousness carries over into their attention to detail. For the most part, I just did as she instructed me, but I really appreciated the time she took in explaining it to me and genuinely enjoyed myself.

Lastly, she invited over one of her more practiced students to perform the tea ceremony, and then walked me through it too. The tea ceremony is meant to be meditative, and to be an opportunity to appreciate each moment as it happens without any distractions or cares. Despite that, the kneeling posture and the intense attention to detail stuck me as

something that demanded almost too much concentration. That aside, I took care to watch closely, and I noticed that each movement had a meaning to it. If the movements are not performed in the proper order, the one performing the ceremony cannot continue. The movements were like a dance. Each designed to be as graceful and efficient as possible. Not a single movement was wasted. As I watched the young woman, I thought about how amazing it is that this art form goes back hundreds of years, a concept we do not have in America. Sensei explained to me that nowadays, as there are fewer young people interested in traditional practices, it is especially important that the traditions be kept alive.

Sensei also took time to explain the room to me. On one wall was a scroll and flowers, to remind practitioners to center themselves. In the center of the room there was a compartment in the floor for keeping out-of-season instruments, and in the corner opposite from the scroll was the pot for boiling water, the tea powder, and a stand. Apparently, there are different tea cups, arrangements, and tools based on the season. In hotter seasons, they use colors that are cooler, and a larger amount of water, where as in colder months they use warmer colors. It reminded me of how traditional kimonos also have seasonal colors. The Japanese have an appreciation and reverence for nature that is not often seen in our society. Their spiritual beliefs are closely entwined with appreciation of the world around them; something I wish was more prevalent in our own society.

I was very nervous when it became my turn to play a part in the ceremony. In the tea ceremony, even the guests play a part. When you accept the tea prepared for you, first you must bow, take the cup and turn it twice clockwise, and then take a sip, so as not to drink from the front. Before passing the cup either to the next guest, or back to the host to have the next cup prepared, you must wipe the rim and turn it twice counterclockwise, back to the original position. Throughout the ceremony, Sensei would correct or guide the young woman, and it was especially because of this that I was able to appreciate how precise the art is. When it was my turn, Sensei talked me through everything, and both she and I were surprised at what I had remembered just by watching. I was nowhere near as graceful, but I began to see the meditative quality to it.

Everywhere I went, people treated me graciously. Many were surprised that I can speak Japanese, even if my Japanese is still rather weak. What I learned most was that as different as our two societies are, it is not an obstacle in interpersonal relationships, and that we have so much to learn from each other. It was such a pleasure, and a privilege, to be able to learn about their culture directly from the people, and to be able to share some of my own culture in turn. What I learned is not something that can be found on the internet, or in a book. My conversations with the people I met, and the things I learned, are something I will carry with me for the rest of my life. Mr. and Mrs. Suzuyama took me all around 京都 and 奈良, and explained to me all about the history of the places, culture, and religions. Chiemi-san talked to me about 運 and 縁, about the differences between the educational principles in America and Japan, and just about the little things, like how in America people wonder about what color eyes or hair their child will have, or how fewer and fewer people know how to tie an obi in Japan. The little things we take for granted.

Japan's people, culture, and arts, are unique and wonderful. I am honored that I was able to gain some small insight into the Japanese way of thinking, and delighted to find that the differences from our own only made this experience all the more enriching and worthwhile. 私は決して忘れません。本当にありがとうございました。