

# JAPANESE VIRTUES AND VICES

Specially Contributed by

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## *I. Introduction.*

Of the lectures I have given in Japan, the most controversial and one of the most popular has been *Japanese Virtues and Vices*. As the lecture is out-spoken, it is easier to see why it should arouse interest than that it should be liked, but its very appeal points to a virtue in the Japanese. Not above praise—who is?—they prefer honest criticism to dishonest flattery. Likewise they are willing and eager to hear a straight man's straight opinion of them. In no other country have I been so encouraged to be so forthright about the people and the country, as I have in Japan.

The lecture itself has had some history since it was first delivered in Sendai about four years ago. I was then very new in Japan, and when invited to give my views on Japanese character I was hesitant to tread where only fools are fearless. I delayed but delay only postponed the inevitable and at last I prepared what I called a "positive" lecture, with the title of *Japanese Virtues*.

This I did for two reasons, one based upon ignorance, and the other upon a theory. I have long thought it was best to know a little about something before blaming it, and my ignorance of Japan was too great for fault-finding. Then, the theory, which I deemed highly constructive, was based upon a concept of teaching, that of looking for the positive good, the virtues, and emphasizing them,

instead of seeking out vices for censure. Increase the positive, and the negative would grow less! Multiply the "pluses" and the "minuses" would disappear! That was the theory and I still think there is much to be said for it.

It was in that frame of mind, at any rate, that I planned and gave my first lecture on the broad and tender subject of Japanese characteristics. But, I had not reckoned on Japanese honesty.

The members of a large native audience listened attentively, applauded politely, and then took turns, one by one, telling me the Japanese vices. My positive lecture seemed to have brought out all the negative in them. The air was changed with confessions of vice. For me the worst to take was the innuendo, not the direct attack, that I had been flattering. Flattery they could not enjoy; I disenjoyed the innuendo. My next lecture, therefore, was called *Japanese Virtues and Vices*.

Japanese candidness and my own subsequent experiences in Japan have helped to correct some of my initial mistakes. The lecture has shifted shape and is still shifting; it may never stand still, and until I find the absolutes, if they exist, I want my opinions to remain tentative. This article is a summary of the corrected lecture. The one point of which I can be reasonably certain is that it will embarrass me later.

## II. *The Virtues* —no one of which is pure.

*They have a Latin soul and a Spartan social code.* (Strictly speaking, this is neither virtue nor vice, but an analysis). Endurance, discipline, self-control, self-denial, self-abnegation are in the code, but behind these are warm emotions, and they have rich capacity for

affection and sympathy, sorrow and happiness. Of the warmer emotions happiness is the one they show most freely in public, the others being kept for the privacy of the family, or in extreme cases, for the greater privacy of the individual spirit. The Japanese are endowed with many, but not all, of the Latin emotions, and the one most conspicuously absent is quickness to anger. With rare exceptions, they are slow to anger and slower to express it. The Latin soul and the Spartan social code are frequently in conflict with each other, in the child, the youth, and the adult. Some conform outwardly, but most cannot conform inwardly, to the Spartan extremes. They are essentially more Buddhist than Bushido, more Latin than Spartan.

*With respect they have prepared a pedestal for culture.* Sometimes their concept of culture is too abstract, their respect only lip-service, and their welcome of foreign civilizations exaggerated and faddish, yet a man of culture is not a misfit in Japanese society. In this the Japanese is in the tradition of Buddha and Confucius, but Buddha, at least, would feel more welcome here, where he never came, than in most places he knew on earth. Japanese materialism may not aid the artist and big business may not promote him, but in Japan the Philistine is rare. When he exists he is more neutral than negative, more indifferent than antagonistic, and he more often assumes a lacquer layer of culture than an attitude of defiance. If the artist must feed on praise instead of food, there are societies of civilized fame where he starves for both. Culture, the created art, and the cultivated man have a place in Japan.

*In education their attitude and aptitude are good enough to spoil a lazy teacher.* To be sure, learning is "the thing", and children are

sent to schools by parents who want tangible results from their investments. This is a social pressure, the very existence and force of which are group virtues, even if some of its members are found wanting. The lack of material support for education is an appalling inconsistency which I shall point out later. But the students who may be pressed to school and told to learn cannot be forced into enthusiasm. My experience has been (and those who doubt it have only to teach in other countries) that the Japanese youth is as eager to learn as any youth in the world and as able.

*The Japanese are not afraid of beauty.\** In fact they accept so naturally the beauties of nature and of art that this very comment seems to them strange. They do not realize that in other countries, where society has different values, beauty is not taken for granted, is often not naturally appreciated, with the result that men who feel a need for beauty sometimes find themselves at odds with their society. The need persistently thwarted or ridiculed, develops in some people an unhealthy self-consciousness, a feeling of being different from others. In a few it grows into a pathological guilt sense and may turn into a fear for the thing desired. This can be *Fear of Beauty*. Some of the best and much of the worst poetry of England and America show evidences of this unnaturalness, the best showing a defiance, the worst a sickening prettiness.

That the Japanese find this concept difficult to understand is one sign that they are without such a fear. Among the Japanese, of course, there are those who, because of their education or individual temperaments, lack a positive response to beauty, but the positive

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\* This is the subject of another lecture "Fear of Beauty".

response of the greater number creates a social atmosphere in which the farmer or city laborer may feel no shame—he may experience confusion in place of joy—before a poem, a painting, a vista, or a single chrysanthemum.

*They have a surprising and refreshing frankness.* It is surprising because of its apparent contrast with their reserve and innate politeness. Cautiously it breaks through aloofness and reticence. *It is careful frankness* and offends only those who, consciously or unconsciously, demand flattery instead of honesty.

One of the most laudable of Japanese virtues is what I call *freedom within convention*. The happy and contented Japanese has attained a living mean, as it were, between law and independence, a balance between public conformity and private freedom. He is correct and abiding in society and profoundly happy in private; in public he can play the part expected of him because at home he is free to be himself. He may be middle-aged, but with his children or grand-children he is again a child, with his friends, at *sake* he is once more a youth, and with his wife, if she is his match, he is a companion as well as master.

Those who have not attained this balance are usually the ones who have forgotten they were once young, or who never learned to be good companions—those who failed to learn how to express oneself by giving as well as taking in human relationships. Their absence of private contentment frequently shows up in a lack of public adjustment. The others have found a freedom within the laws of convention and have achieved a personality, of their own inside the armor of Bushido.

Before I go on to the last virtue, I should like to list a few which, to me, at least, seem more obvious or need less explanation. The Japanese have the oriental respect for the old and the human love for the young. The average man, whatever his work or his education, has good manners, natural or acquired. The exceptions only underline the rule. And, despite the comments of some famed if short-sighted visitors to Japan, the Japanese have a sense of humor as delightful as I have encountered. It exists, until age or dignity withers it. In some it never withers. When they become intoxicated—and this is not meant to be humorous—they usually do no harm to society and seldom offend any but the sober prude. There are exceptions but usually they become happy or sleepy. They are highly capable, therefore, of *harmless inebriation*, a creditable of negative attribute.

Lastly, the Japanese respect for nature—more akin to love than respect—is seen not only in their gardens, their *bonsai* and *ikebana*, in their arts and crafts, paintings, drawings, and architecture, not only in these, but in *their art of civilizing the landscape*. Their cities, except for certain spots, are not beautiful, and those spots are most often gardens, parks, temples and shrines, hidden behind enclosures. The Japanese exist in cities, and the struggle is not grateful, but they live in the country, where the struggle is quite as difficult but more picturesque. Their farms add a beauty to the landscape.

Despite the ugly inroads of train tracks and telephone poles, rice fields sculpture the hills, cottages adjust to their surroundings, bridges arch a river, shrines and temples crown the knolls, pine trees, fruit flowers help to hide uglinesses or add design to the bigger nature of mountains, sea and sky.

Nature without man to correct it can be impressive and is often to be preferred. This is no discussion of which is the more beautiful. But if it can be said that man, by living in nature, and thereby necessarily correcting it, has not violently interfered with its beauties, it is, I think, a compliment to that man's civilization. It is a greater compliment if it can be said that with a kind of art man has added something of his own to the beauties of nature. That is a civilized virtue, a virtue which I think is in the Japanese.

*III. The vices*—no one of which is absolute.

"Inferior characteristics" is more euphemistic than "vices", but I did not select the term; the Japanese did. If some of these seem to be contradictions of the virtues discussed above, and sometimes they are, it is only one indication that the traits of people are not clear-cut, black nor white, pure nor absolute, and that the traits of the Japanese are not exceptions. It should be remembered, also, that the vices, like the virtues, have their qualifying exceptions.

It was through Hamlet that Shakespeare warned, assume a virtue if you have it not; the Japanese assume the virtues of others when they have their own. They have long teetered between ingrown nationalism and a grasping for foreign cultures, and have swung from the entrenchment of what was Japanese to the fancy, amounting at times to a fervor, for what was foreign. During the Meiji era this fervor led most Japanese to think of civilization as meaning anything but native culture. To-day Japan, with a kind of defeatist's Bushido, is *neglecting her own virtues*—the best traditions of her own civilization. Such neglect is myopic, if not criminal.

The Japanese mind is quick to catch the surface form of new ideas, and slow to put them into creative practice. Buddhism and Christianity, for example, were followed before they were understood, and were superficial decorations of outer society until they grew into the roots of the deeper civilization. It is a question today whether Democracy is an imported curio or a planted organism.

This points to two possible criticisms of Japanese character, a *superficial profundity* and a *giftless taking*. First, the superficial, by preceding the profound, at least delays, sometimes prevents, often alters irreparably, the profundity. Not always. Second, does not this tendency to take from others discourage native originality? I think so. It is admirable to learn from the world—more countries would do well to be more like Japan in this—but it is necessary also to give creatively of one's own in exchange. I am speaking, of course, not of material things but of the liberal arts. Japan's good gifts to world civilization have been purchased at a high price from reluctant salesmen.

The plunge from feudalism into an enlightened if chaotic world has cost Japan perhaps as much as she has gained. Her struggle, like that of the rest of Asia and most of Europe, is not only between tradition and "progress", but between the good and the bad of both. In Japan much of the tradition is good and much of the "progress" is not. Her civilization is in the danger of coming to mean materialism, not culture. This, plus the tendencies to be controlled by wills super-imposed rather than self-imposed, to look to authority instead of self, to respect the superhuman more than the human, and the supernatural even more than the natural, to-day, there is more worship



of power, position and rank, than of reason, personality and human understanding. The Japanese look above more than about; they look without more than within; and *they look for help rather than to help*. The one-time vassals are still blinded by the chaos of sudden enlightenment.

This leads to extremes, often alternating, of fatalism and ambition. The Japanese tend towards the former rather than the latter. They are more self-sufficient than self-confident. When they lose confidence they lapse into complacency, and when their complacency is jolted they swing into ambition. To-day, probably a transitional phase after a stunning defeat, their confidence with their ambition has been jerked to a dead stop. They are curled up in a kind of plucky fatalism—with more confusedness, I should add, than self-pity. The ideal, which they have not yet balanced into, may be somewhere between complacency and confidence, or a fatalism with ambition. At present, there is *fatalism without ambition*.

One of the main faults of the Japanese is a *lack of social responsibility*, or *community indifference*. Their interest jumps, as it were, from the clique of self-family-friends to... the nation. The gap between is large and filled with a vast apathy. It is a no-man's-land for "other men" to attend. Their houses may be neat and clean, their garden's too, but the street in front is littered with refuse. Public buildings are foreign matter for "other men" to tidy. "Other people's" children trundle in the paths of trucks while adults watch, or ignore, and do nothing. The poor and the sick, the jobless and the handicapped, are like public streets and public buildings, foreign matter, the concern of "other people". Man everywhere is more

self-centered than altruistic, but in Japan community spirit and philanthropy are notably lacking. The egoist survives, and he is the product as well as the cause of community indifference.

*The scholar starves!* The scholar, teacher, as well as the writer, painter and musician, all are revered but allowed to live in poverty. That this is true in nearly every country in the world in no way acquits Japan. In Japan it is strikingly inconsistent with their respect for education, art, and culture. Statues to all three are placed on high pedestals while their creators grovel at the bases for subsistence.

There is a tradition of *selfish teaching*.\* In schools, student attitude is often better than the teaching methods, and the pupils are frequently better pupils than the teachers are teachers. Instruction degenerates into proclaiming and dictating, giving out facts rather than inspiring thoughts. Students are told to remember what the teacher reads from his note-book, and if some students learn to think creatively it is by chance rather than by design. The respect for scholarship has turned some good teachers into bad scholars, and has not encouraged the scholar to become a good teacher. That research and teaching, while aspects of education, are very different aspects, is not sufficiently realized. Intellectuals who can hunt knowledge with enthusiasm, have not learned the art of enthusiastic sharing. They hoard without imparting, or impart without inspiring.

In primary and secondary schools instruction is best. This is partly because there are more teachers than scholars (the main difference being of teaching method, not of acquired knowledge), and

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\* This is the subject of many other lectures and essays, which here I must summarize only too briefly.

partly because the relationship between student and teacher is best. The higher up one goes in the educational ladder the greater the distance between the instructors and the instructed. The university professor is on his platform and his students are far beneath with only the facts of knowledge to link them. The professor is like a small encyclopedia, and quite as unresponsive. *Education is dehumanized.*

A general boredom with the value of human life—not for one's self, of course, but for the multitudes of "other people"—has led not only to an indifference towards human suffering but to a discipline which in its rigidity has been more destructive than constructive. It may produce social order, but it also causes psychological chaos. I firmly believe that outright brutality is as rare in peacetime Japan as in any other educated country, but wherever and whenever *discipline is put before humanity*, cruelty too often results. Bushido on top of Buddhism is conflict enough to give suicide the appearance of a virtue.

#### *IV. Conclusion.*

In conclusion, let me say, my point of view has not been restricted to a comparison of the Japanese with my own people or with the people of three or four other countries. I have tried to keep in mind all the lands, some forty or so, in which I have lived or visited. This I say to explain my standards, not to justify my perceptions or lack of them.

Also, I recognize three truisms: the present comes out of the past; there is a moulding force in environment; human nature is basically

pretty much the same the world around. The Japanese are the children of the human race and their own history, and they are the results of humanity and history having played cosmically with each other on a group of islands.

Nature has been kind and cruel ; India, China, Korea, South-Eastern Asia and the Western world have sent their best and their worst ; Buddha, Confucius and Christ have been blessings put to good and to evil ; feudalism, Shintoism, and Bushido have been products and causes of Japanese strength and weakness. All these, and more, are behind the people of Japan and in them.

The object of this article, however, is not to trace causes so much as to point out results. I have on the one hand tried to go beneath the surface of national customs, and on the other taken for granted basic human nature, as well as some of the phenomena of Japan's history. I have, therefore, attempted to draw a line of observation somewhere between man as a human animal and man as a social mask, and to show something, by no means all, of what history in these islands has done to the Japanese man behind the Japanese mask.

The Japanese are between the old and the new, the East and the West, and also between their vices and their virtues.