

Chapter 2

Darker Side of Convenience

Western civilization invented many conveniences, so that the Japanese admired the civilization's merits without considering its shortcomings. Meanwhile, we ignored the strengths of traditional Japanese culture and instead scrutinized it for its weaknesses. This was the stamp of a "modern outlook" during that era.

It's true that Japan's Edo Period was not characterized by as many conveniences as were Western countries during the same time. Yet, if we look at the technological history of Europe and the United States during the 18th and 19th centuries, it is evident that reality fell short of the ideal of "miraculous progress."

Moreover, the West has paid a steep environmental price for using imperfect technologies to forge its "convenient" lifestyle. In other words, Europe and the United States have already seen the darker side of convenience, and it is this darker side that I want to address.

To cite an example, London and Paris developed extensive sewage systems during this Period, while Japan had open sewers to accommodate the small amount of wastewater from households in Tokyo (then called Edo) and Osaka.

The difference in sewage systems was emblematic for those Japanese who worshiped the West and criticized their own civilization. Yet in London and Paris, untreated wastewater flowed directly into the Thames and the Seine- hardly a system to be admired without reservation.

After the Meiji Period, the Japanese were strongly critical of their traditional culture and blind to its benefit. Meanwhile, they appreciated only the advantage of modern industrial development, shrugging off its downside (as illustrated by their view of the sewage systems).

As I mentioned earlier, the Edo-era Japanese made very efficient use of the sun's energy. Moreover, they did not just live off the energy; their remarkably sophisticated use of energy and other scarce resources helped create a unique culture.

To live in such a culture, people had to spend enormous time and effort based on wisdom and experiences accumulated over a long Period of time. In contrast, the culture of mass production and

mass consumption encouraged people to abandon such a time-and-labor-intensive lifestyle.

This new value system swept the country, wiping out traditional tools, lifestyles, and even words. Yet despite our expectations, our problems are far from solved. On the contrary, these modern conveniences have led to a sense of complex and intractable problems. Although we now recognize the problems, we've yet to do anything about them.

Over 50 years after the end of WWII, we are still doing everything we can to shed the last vestiges of our traditional lifestyle. We regard everything old-fashioned as backwards. For instance, when we say "Dad, you are such an old fogie!," we mean that what is tradition is of little value.

Just three or four decades ago, Japanese culture valued minimizing consumption. This value was embodied in the concept of "mottai-nai," meaning "don't be wasteful". Seduced by the showy American lifestyle, the Japanese rejected their own traditions and established government policies that gave us the second-biggest economy in the world. Yet this newfound prosperity brought us unexpected troubles that had not plagued us when we lived a simpler life.

The amount of household and industrial waste increased with the rapid economic growth, resulting in a shortage of dump sites. Meanwhile, there has also been a rise in what we call "invisible trash"-vehicle emissions exhaust, carbon dioxide(CO₂), chlorofluorocarbon(CFC), nitrogen oxides, dioxins, endocrine disrupters, and other toxic chemicals. One of my neighbors who used to be able to pump plenty of clean drinking water from his [or her] well was notified by public health officials not to use the well water anymore.

The darker side of convenience culture has come to light, suggesting that we should be more cautious in our admiration of the West. The time has come to search for the hidden benefits of our own "inconvenient" traditions as enthusiastically as we searched for their flaws in the past.

How much can we accomplish without relying on fossil fuels? And how can we begin to shift away from the reliance? We don't need to study abroad to find the answers, as trendy as that may be. There are plenty of lessons we can learn right here at home. All we need to do is look back on the life that we ourselves lived until just 40 or 50 years ago. Moreover, if we go back even further and examine the very basic lifestyle that characterized the Edo Period, we can learn to use only energy resources that can be replenished within a year.

This does not mean that we have to return to life as it was lived a century ago. Needless to say, we

cannot do that - and I myself would not be willing to do that. However, if we fail to understand the importance of such energy in that era, we will never manage to incorporate it into our own. Our ancestors in the Edo era saw opportunity where we saw convenience.

From the next chapter, I will describe the realities of traditional Japanese life with respect to the use of solar energy.

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