

## Chapter 6

### Know when you have enough

One characteristic of the times when people only depended on solar energy is a low capacity to manufacture commodities. As a result, the lives of our ancestors in the Edo period was very simple--in fact, it had to be so, because once they resigned themselves to being satisfied with a simple life, they could live with small amounts of energy. Though it is difficult to know objectively how our ancestors lived in the Edo Period, one clue is provided by some documents written and left by foreigners who came to Japan from the last years of the Edo Period to the beginning of the Meiji Period.

Harris Townsend, who established the first American consulate in Japan in 1856, wrote of a meeting with a Japanese Tycoon (a liege lord, shogunate) in his book:

--- "The dress of the Tycoon was made of silk, and the material had some little gold woven in with it. But it was as distant from anything like regal splendor as could be conceived. No rich jewels, no elaborate gold ornaments, not diamond hilted weapon appeared, and I can safely say that my dress was far more costly than his. The Japanese told me his crown is a black lacquered cap, of an inverted bell shape." "I did not see any gilding in any part, and all the wooden columns were unpainted. Not an article of any kind appeared in any of the rooms, except the braziers and the chairs and tables brought for my use." --- Harris Townsend, *The Complete Journal of Townsend Harris*

Even in the illustrations of novels written during the Edo Period, we commonly only find tools such as braziers and folding screens. People living in big houses put their clothes in big chests called "nagamochi" in storage rooms. Those living in small row houses on back streets wrapped their clothes with a square piece of cloth called "furoshiki" and placed it at the corner of a room or on a shelf. This was sufficient as they had only a few clothes.

Alice Mabel Bacon, an American appointed to be a teacher at a Japanese school in 1888, described her impressions of the gatehouse of her school in the following way:

--- "In the living room there was a god-shelf, containing the family idols, with flowers set before them, and a little china cupboard, in which were the cheap but prettily decorated pieces of china that form the table service of any ordinary workingman's family. These things, with the omnipresent hibachi and tea-kettle, formed all the furniture of the room, except a pretty bamboo vase of autumn flowers that decorated the wall. Certainly, the independence of furniture displayed by the Japanese is most enviable, and frees their lives of many cares. Babies never fall out of bed, because there are no beds; they never tip themselves over in chairs, for a similar reason. There is nothing in the house to dust, nothing to move when you sweep; there is no dirt brought into the house on muddy boots ...."--- Alice Mabel Bacon, *A Japanese Interior*

Harris recorded his impressions during his stay in Shimoda City, Shizuoka Prefecture:

--- "But this is a poor place, where all are poor and have enough to do to live without looking to the ornamental. But they live comfortably, are well fed according to their wants, and are abundantly clad, and their houses are clean, dry, and comfortable. In no part of the world are the laboring classes better off than at Shimoda." "I have never seen a person that had the appearance of want marked on his countenance. The children all have faces like † full moons,<sup>2</sup> and the men and women are quite fleshy enough. No one can for a moment suppose that they are not well fed."--- Harris Townsend, *The Complete Journal of Townsend Harris*

Basil Hall Chamberlain, a British Japanologist who came to Japan in 1873, left us a document about Japan, entitled "Japanese Things." He wrote that, in Japan "even though there are poor, there is no poverty." What does this mean? A Japanese author, Kyoji Watanabe, analyzed the meaning in his book:

--- "In the eyes of Europeans, who visited Japan and admired the people's richness and happiness, Japanese poorness provides a sharp contrast with the poverty and moral collapse of the slums, one of by-products of industrialization in Europe...

"Friedrich Engels described the wretchedness brought by the industrialization in his book, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. 'In the West, poor people are given either a soggy basement or a leaky attic for shelter... shabby rags for clothes, and coarse, adulterated indigestible food. They are driven as wild animals and not allowed to get rest or have peaceful joy of life....' "Compared with these dirty slums, it might be miraculous that the Japanese poor keep their clothes and houses clean."--- Kyoji Watanabe, "Yukishi Yo-no Omokage" (which means "Glimpses of Passed World" in Japanese)

Terrace houses lining the narrow back streets of the period were a microcosm of Edo society. People from all walks of life lived there, including carpenters and other artisans, peddlers of vegetables or seafood, teachers of writing, ascetics, and doctors. Such tenements were totally different from the slums of modern societies. In the Edo period, the gap between the rich and the poor lay much more in quantity, rather than quality of possessions.

The examples I have provided here are just some of the things that surprised Westerners, but they are pointers to the essential difference between Western civilization, which had already begun using coal in large quantities to fuel industry, and that of Edo, which used only solar energy or the products of solar energy of one or two years of age. We really don't need that much to get through everyday life, and if we take a good look at what we need, and limit ourselves to the bare essentials, our lifestyle might appear somewhat austere, but we can live without lowering our living standards significantly. The Edo-era Japanese had developed some very sophisticated means of living simply, but elegantly.

There is a saying that goes, "Only those who know when they have enough will find contentment in this world." People with endless desires can never be happy, because they soon get bored with things even though they may gain temporary satisfaction from them. In the modern, fossil fuel-based society, people are trying to satisfy infinite desires through economic growth. In a mature, solar energy-based society, on the other hand, everyone would have been aware of just how few distributable items there were. The late Edo Period saw the natural emergence in Japan of a distribution system that didn't cause extreme inequalities. The fact that Japan of that time was one of the most densely-populated countries in the world speaks for the success of this distribution system.

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