

## **Chapter 13**

### **Nothing Comes out of Nothing**

In Japan, there is an old saying "Shobo-ni kidokunashi," which means "No miracle or supernatural phenomena exist as a so-called "divine grace" in a proper religion," originally meant to advise people to be cautious of a fake religion. This old proverb, however, can also be construed as "Something cannot come from nothing," one of the basic principles of the natural world. In essence, there are no miracles in the natural world, just like no magician can perform a magic without a trick.

As a basic rule of natural science, when someone does something somewhere, the effect of the action does not merely disappear, but instead remains in some different form. Likewise, we always have to pay the price for the convenience we enjoy in today's world in one form or another.

The multitude of convenient machines and tools appeared to be miracles, but they did not simply supply their convenience without some cost. For example, steam engines and steamships did not move an inch without burning coal in the furnace. Telegraphs on the other hand required electricity, this electricity, in the end, also generated by burning coal somewhere. At some point, the main fuel source shifted from coal to petroleum. However, it can't be denied that fossil fuel is still the mainstream of today's energy resource. Natural science, the natural law of today, does not create miracles.

I cannot explain without difficulty why I disbelieve in today's high-tech civilization which seemingly has turned the inconvenient Edo Period inside-out. To put it simply, I see excessive energy consumption causing environmental deterioration, which negatively affects our lives in so many ways. The environmental degradation, physical contaminations, such as shortage of waste dumps as I wrote in the previous chapters, are easier to deal with. Physical problems can be overcome with technologies, but its direct and indirect effects on our bodies and minds are far more complicated and difficult.

When we use the phrase, "Environment and human beings," it may give an impression that human beings are sight-seers looking at the environment from the outside. However, the reality is that we humans are nothing more than a part of the environment just like other animals. Therefore, we are affected by environmental deterioration in the same way as other animals. Worse, the effects on human bodies and minds from the deterioration may not be erased even if we achieve a perfect materials recycling society through advances in technology.

Even if physical materials concerns such as pollution and trash problems disappear, as we become complacent and pursue a more and more convenient life, the situation seems like it will only get worse. Why? Because I know that humans are complicated animals and these problems are complicated and dire -- as things happen they become hard to fix. Take for example the obesity of elementary school children, food allergies and depression.

Compared with 1970, today, only 30 years later, the ratio of obese children has increased by 3.6 times and one out of 10 children is overweight. 80 percent of the obese children are likely to remain overweight in their adult age. As a result of the increase of overweight children, we see the rise in number of children suffering from diseases such as high blood pressure and diabetes and the like. These diseases were once called "geriatric diseases" as they only appeared in the very old, but were soon called "adult diseases" as the age when they occurred dropped. As the age dropped further, these diseases were termed "child and adult diseases" and finally are called "lifestyle-related diseases" today. Also astonishingly, as many as one in eight of today's preschool-aged children are allergic to basic foods such as rice, eggs, milk, and butter.

Modern society has left scars not just on children's physical health but mental health as well. Around 1985, a high school student I know told me, that in some academic-track high schools, four or five in a class of 40 regularly consult a psychiatrist. These days, depression has been steadily spreading to much younger generations, even to children of elementary school age.

Children are the future of human kind. Consequently, if many children are in poor health today, future generations are going to be unhealthy too. What caused this increase of unhealthy children? I can only assume, the fundamental cause is that children are over-affluent in this highly civilized society.

Why is "being affluent" bad? The answer is simple. It is because it is abnormal for animals to live in an affluent environment. Generally, living creatures, including humans, are naturally always under stress, seeking an easier way to survive. They compete or cooperate with one another, and through their struggles they grow wiser and stronger. In sharp contrast, in Japan's advanced society today, parents provide their children with too much abundance, and as a result, children are cheated of the opportunity to learn first-hand experiences including stress and pains for survival on their own. I do not see an ounce of truth in a once widely accepted concept that rich and abundant surroundings can help raise a human being with a healthy strong mind.

We Japanese have achieved the 'ultimate' goal, "to lead an enriched life" within less than half a generation. We overcame the abject poverty during World War II, when everybody suffered hunger and many starved to death. Born before the war, I am one of those who lived through this difficult survival time. And yet, as I reflect on the past half century, that poor and inconvenient time now seems more naturally suitable, even 'easy' in a core sense for a human being as a living form on this planet.

Unlike the time when our energy source was limited to the sun, recycling today requires such a great amount of fossil fuel derived energy, that we would never possibly be able to sustain the current ecological status even if the recycling of all wastes became standard. Moreover, even if we managed to sustain it, physical and mental health of young and old would remain a big problem on a different dimension.

In addition, not only waste that the eye can see, but invisible minuscule wastes such as endocrine disruptors and carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) are also rising to a point where we can no longer overlook and neglect them. Too much CO<sub>2</sub> is a cause of global warming, and minuscule toxins are directly affecting living organisms. It seems we human beings are being cornered by these tiny substances.

Under the motto of "economical growth", we have blindly sought convenience and wealth, refusing to recognize their downsides and must now pay the cost that has quickly accumulated in just less than half a century. Our pursuit for convenience has created huge debts, which will be mostly taxed on our future descendants.

And yet, if most of us live healthily and happily today, one can almost resign oneself that the cost may have been worthwhile. The fact is, however, that incidents of outrageous crimes and suicides continue to rise, and few are delighted at the prospect of long life despite the fact our country is now the nation with top longevity in the world. It seems to me that we are being chased into the dead-end street of civilization.

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