

April 24, 2011

My Educational Philosophy

There are two main reasons why I wanted to establish an international school in Japan, and have students from around the world study here.

1. The Ability to Determine What Is Most Important

The leadership program at ISAK includes an emphasis on “mindfulness.” This practice helps us determine what is most important, even in difficult times.

The concept of “mindfulness,” which was developed on the West Coast of the US, is currently practiced by prominent individuals, corporations and medical institutions worldwide, and the effectiveness of mindfulness has been proven in numerous clinical experiments. The roots of mindfulness are said to lie in the Japanese practice of Zen. It is well known that Steve Jobs was devoted to Zen since his youth, and it has been said that the simple design of the iPod reflects the spirit of Zen.

The 20th century, represented by the pursuit of quantity, is over. In the 21st century, quality is becoming ever more important. Observing yourself deeply as you are. Sensing the unity between yourself and all around you. The pursuit of ultimate simplicity, by ridding yourself of what is unnecessary and only leaving the fundamentals. These are all interesting insights which Zen provides us in the 21st century. It could be said that true beauty is achieved by pursuing your plain self, not by adding, but by subtracting, what is unnecessary.

I believe it is extremely meaningful to introduce the practice of mindfulness, which is influenced by the spirit of Zen, to education as a way to give young people the ability to ascertain the essential truth.

2. Realizing the Values and Happiness of Each Individual

The second reason for creating a school in Japan is that the traditional values of Japan will help each student find happiness based on his or her individual characteristics and values, while respecting the differing values of others, and achieving the ability to empathize and coexist with other people and with nature.

The Western-style, capitalism-based society which brought about the prosperity of the 20th century is the “differential calculus” approach. In other words, it simplifies the world, separates economic activity into several factors, and tries to achieve overall growth by improving the major factors. For example, in business, focus is placed on benchmarks such as ROE and profit margins, and it is by enlarging these figures that corporate value is improved.

This approach is effective to a certain extent, when society is still simple and productivity is still low. However, this growth approach relies on leverage, in the sense that it focuses only on certain factors, and by dramatically improving these factors, overall improvement is achieved. Factors which don't receive focus and attention always remain unimproved, which is a very unbalanced type of growth.

It also creates a hierarchical society based on a small number of values (factors), in

which the small few who are good at improving certain factors reap in economic value, and the remaining majority of people become their tools. However, society is intrinsically more complex, and today, we are seeing these imbalances surface and turn into social issues. For example, in the world of investing in which I have been involved, oil prices should have trended from 30 to 80 dollars over a decade or so, based on economic fundamentals. In the socialist world, the oil price will be pegged at 30 dollars, and when the imbalance exceeds the limit, it will suddenly be adjusted to 80 dollars. Society cannot withstand such sudden changes. This was precisely why the market mechanism and capitalism were said to have “won,” because supply/demand are slowly adjusted. However, because capitalism went too far, causing an oversupply of money, and everyone was basing their actions on the same values, the oil price exceeded 140 dollars, at which point the Lehman Shock occurred, causing the oil price to plummet to 30 dollars. This is a prime example of the excesses of capitalism. Today, society is becoming unable to withstand such excesses of capitalism, not just those of socialism.

Going forward, it should not just be those few factors that are taken seriously, and not just the people who can manipulate such factors ending up as winners. Based on the above-mentioned background, it is important to create a society in which various factors (values) in the world are treated with significance, and all people have their values respected and can be happy.

It is precisely in this sense that the Japanese (Oriental) style of “integral calculus,” which raises the overall platform, is required. We wish to focus on talent that acknowledges and respects the diversity of society and people, instead of simply pursuing a single value. In doing this, we believe two traditional values of Japan will be extremely useful.

Firstly, the divine view of Yao-yorozu, in which it is believed that myriads of gods and deities exist in everything that surrounds us. Under this viewpoint, people respect not only each other, but all of nature, including plants and animals, and accept their natural state.

For example, a sushi apprentice begins training by choosing the food ingredients. The apprentice respects the goodness of the food and tries to bring it out, instead of processing it. Similarly, a carpenter starts off by choosing the right building materials. He or she tries to build structures by bringing out the quality of the material, instead of processing it. In Japanese gardening, the rocks that are placed in the gardens are those that were simply dug out of the ground.

As a result, it takes years to train an apprentice, and decades to become a skilled professional. Even then, the goal is not accomplished. There is a culture of professionals continuously working to improve their own values throughout their lifetime. In such a world, there is no single benchmark for evaluating things, which means only a few end up “dropping out,” and first-rate professionals with wonderful characteristics are born, whether it be in the world of sushi or carpentry. This is the reason why there are not many sushi chains or large scale carpentry operations under a unified brand. There is a clear distinction between this type of world and modern capitalism, in which a single genius or one with great power makes the overall decisions, and everyone else exists to support these decisions. It is not just one person or thing that has greatness, but rather it is all people, all things that have their own individual greatness. It is very important to acknowledge and nurture this greatness.

We believe that if each student realizes and nurtures his or her own strengths and likes, the student will end up being able to realize and respect the same for others, as well as the goodness of nature. It is our belief that leaders of the future need to be able to think in this way.

The second value is the spirit of do (pronounced “doh”) or “the way.” Japanese turn everything into “do,” including sado (the art of tea ceremony), kado (flower arranging) and judo. This is the spirit of untiringly continuing something. Creating something better and further refining it, even if it is time consuming and does not necessarily lead to economic value. What is important is the process and, in a way, the process is the objective. There is no competition with others, just the pure joy of feeling yourself grow and improve day by day, as well as the attitude of enjoying the process while doing one’s best to improve oneself.

Result-oriented efforts burn out once results are achieved. On the other hand, if the objective is the “process” itself, one can continue to grow throughout one’s whole life. It is probably easier for people to feel happy throughout their lifetime if they can actually feel their own growth.

Once you find something that you want to do, we believe it should be pursued, even if it takes time. However, living in the current society based on Western values and uniform standards, many people give up before achieving anything. Let us remind ourselves of the sushi apprentice. Even if his/her sushi is lowly ranked today, no one knows how the world will view it in the future, after 40 years of pursuing the “do” of sushi.

There is a story I heard from Mr. Nobukazu Kuriki, an alpinist who climbs high mountains without using oxygen. When things get tough, he tries to invigorate himself by telling himself to “overcome nature” or to “triumph over those that said it would be impossible.” However, this approach does not last long. The best way, he says, is to maintain a happy and bright feeling, and to be thankful to all things that allowed him to be alive, including the current suffering.

Respecting and being thankful to all things in nature. Winning over yourself instead of over others, finding joy in your own growth, and enjoying the process. People who can do this for themselves, as well as engage and influence others to expand that circle -- this is precisely the type of person that should create the society of tomorrow. And we firmly believe that Oriental values will help in nurturing such talent.