

Manners Maketh Man: The Japanese Perspective

by Master Simon Vickery

Good day everyone, for those of you who have not met me I am the English fellow who has been flitting around Ashikaga (and the surrounding vicinity) for approximately the last eight months. As I hope you all know, England is the land of good manners so I felt that it would be appropriate for me to discuss the differences between Japanese and English manners. I must state that this essay is not a condemnation of behaviour in either country but only a light – hearted comparison.

First, I would like to start with the good points of the Japanese manner system. It is my humble opinion that the removal of shoes upon entering a home or restaurant is a great system. The practical advantage is that helps keep houses clean and gives the feeling of shedding the troubles of the outside world and allowing people to relax into their home life. As a child I was always told to remove my shoes when I entered the house as it prevents carpets and floors being dirtied by traipsed in detritus. Also, the fact that a person is able to walk around his/her house and feel the carpet between their toes is very soothing.

Japanese people are world renowned for their bowing, in the office, in the street, in fact, anywhere. This has spawned various urban myths relating to unfortunate people casually bumping into a superior in the street. In order to express the maximum of respect a 45° bow must be executed, which requires adequate space between the superior and the minor, hence a step back is taken. Many poor souls have supposedly lost their lives when stepping back to facilitate their bow and in the process get knocked down by a passing car. Bowing, as a form of respect, leads onto the next point in this brief essay, that Japan is a country where respect towards your elders is still tantamount.

England is the land where old people are generally referred to as 'Crusties' or 'Old – Codgers', where neither term is polite. In public in the UK, very little deference is shown to people of advanced age. Furthermore, the English language does not have the various levels of respect that Japanese does. I have seen cars stop in the middle of busy roads to allow an old lady to cross (where there is no crossing) and there are myriad other examples of similar behaviour being found in Japan.

I also like the fact that Japanese people will wait before they start drinking until everyone partakes in the opening 'Kampai'. In the UK it is much more of a free for all, get your hands on a drink and pour it down your throat as fast as possible. (However, it must be remembered that I have just left university and my perceptions

may be a little askew). This waiting for everyone to be ready adds a ritualistic feeling to the process of imbibing alcohol, something that I think should be nurtured worldwide.

Finally, Japanese people take politeness to the extreme when they apologise for someone going out of their way to prepare them a cup of tea or coffee. The usual English response of 'Thankyou' does not seem sufficient in Japan, you have to say 'I'm sorry, excuse me [for going out of your way to prepare this delicious cup of tea/coffee]'

Swiftly moving on to the points of Japanese etiquette that jar with my English sensibilities, we encounter the dark side of Japanese social behaviour (obviously from a British point of view).

Firstly, we will start with a point of etiquette that is perfectly acceptable in Japan but utterly forbidden in England, slurping of food. This is not a criticism at all, because it is good manners to slurp solid food in Japan, but the thing that disturbs me is that Japanese people make a habit of slurping their tea/coffee/anything that comes in a glass and is liquid. I have read in Japanese books concerning manners, that this unsavoury practice is the height of bad manners. Why is it then that most of the people I know do it? Time and money should be spent in discovering the root of this evil.

The next two points that I will bring to your attention concern the mouth. Although the etiquette relating to the use of chopsticks, the various bowls and cups to be used in certain circumstances and other small refinements in Japanese table manners is well developed, once the food has reached the mouth manners immediately dissolve.

I was often told as a child that my mother didn't want to see what was in my mouth when I was eating and not to 'Eat with [my] mouth open' or 'Speak with [my] mouth full'. Although I enjoy talking to both students and teachers during my lunch break, I always seem to be asked questions just when I have put food in my mouth. As I quickly try to chew and then swallow my food to facilitate an answer, many people look at me quizzically apparently thinking 'What is wrong with him, why can't he answer?'. This is often interpreted as a lack of understanding on my part and the question is then rephrased in simpler Japanese. I am immensely grateful for this extra time to think, as it allows me to fashion my reply, but I have to learn how to answer questions quickly. If I were to carry food around with me so that I could put it in my mouth just as I was asked a question, thus giving me a little time to think, I would end up rather overweight.

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The congruous point would be the covering of one's mouth when one sneezes. This is not common practice in Japan. It is extremely courteous of Japanese people to wear masks when they are ill in order not to spread their illness to their neighbours, but why does this practice not extend to sneezing? Due to the spread of the plague throughout Europe in the Dark Ages there has always been a healthy respect for sneezing. Sneezing indicated the first symptoms of the dreaded Black Death that wiped out a quarter of Europe's population. In England it is customary to bless someone if they sneeze and most people will cover their mouths when sneezing. I have sneezed many times in class (whilst covering my mouth) and this has generated raised eyebrows and stifled guffaws by my students. Why is this?

The last point that I will raise is to do with coming in and going out of doors. In England it is customary to open the door for women and allow them to pass through with the man following. In Japan it is customary to barge in front of women when going through doors, let doors close on anyone who is behind and generally push anyone who is in your way with no word of pardon. I find this one of the most offensive of behaviours. As mentioned before, Japanese people will apologise profusely if you make them a cup of tea, but if they barge past you no attempt will be made for this gross lack of manners. This is the one thing that I will be critical of and implore all readers of this short essay to take note.

So there you have it, a short and light-hearted little jaunt into the different worlds of manners as experienced by an English man in Ashikaga. I hope you enjoyed my essay and that some of these points will be taken to heart and maybe even remembered if you visit England or America (as our rules of behaviour are generally compatible). Once again, goodbye and thank you, I love you all, my fans.