

OF CABBAGES AND JAPANESE

Yuki Ihara
Kwansei Gakuin Univ. ESS

Before going up to the stage, we are often told, "An audience is just a row of cabbages, so don't be nervous. They are just cabbages." Actually, however, it would really be bad if you changed into cabbages, because cabbages have no reactions at all. But I think Japanese ARE cabbages. When I first came to Tokyo, a big city, from my home in Wakayama, a small city, I felt very uneasy in a crowd. In this jostling sea of humanity, pushed and shoved hither and thither, I wanted to stop and apologize, but I had no opportunity. People were walking so fast and were so preoccupied with their own thoughts, they didn't seem to care whether they bumped into me or not. After a while I learnt how to survive in this throng. I decided to abandon my 'politeness' and join the mob - that is become one of the cabbages. I was no longer interested in whether I bumped into people. My attitude became 'when in Rome.'

A little while later when I first traveled abroad, I suffered culture shock - not so much from the languages, nor from the foods, but from the local customs. I spent 14 days in the U.S. and I was bumped into 3 times. In Canada during 7 days I was there, the same thing happened only once. 20 days in England I was jostled just twice. When I arrived back Osaka Airport, in the space of only 30 minutes, I had been pushed, shoved and jolted dozens of times. Oh, it was lovely to be home!!

You may say this is due to the huge population and shortage of space in Japan. But suppose you were having a big party, (say, Thanksgiving party...) with your friends. There are 100 people in a small place but no one becomes pushy. We all behave very politely. However, 100 people in a train carriage are a different matter! We think nothing of barging past other passengers or diving for the empty seat regardless of others.

The Japanese have been called 'A polite nation.' We bow so often, saying "Sumimasen," or "Excuse me," over and over again. But our polite manners are only within company. We smile at people we know but not at strangers. We consider our companies but not outsiders.

I was convinced of this when I went to people watch in Kobe. People watching consist of sitting in a public place and watching people. There I found a lot of cabbages in all shapes and sizes. I was able to see myself and my public behavior in many of the people who passed by. It was an illuminating experience.

When you are the victim of someone's selfish, pushy behavior in the street, the day starts badly. And if someone pushes you, the automatic reaction is to push back. It all starts a chain of ill-will.

Why do we behave this way? Why do we change completely when in a crowd? What turns Dr. Jekyll into Mr. Hyde?

I think it's largely due to the fact that we have been taught to act in groups. It is well-known that Japan is a group-orientated society. In the street we are not obviously a member of a group, such as at work, at home or at school. In a crowd we have no responsibility to anyone, no relation to them. We switch off our identities and become emotionless vegetables. Our individual responsibilities are hidden in a crowd. However, as individuals we are still part of a larger group - Japanese society, and though we behave well in our dealings with familiars, we are still indifferent to this larger community. If we treat them the same way as we treat family and friends, then they would reciprocate.

Take the opportunity to be away from work, to find the clues to becoming really wealthy. Get rid of the "Ninomiya Kinjiro syndrome." Take a rest. Take time for your wealth -- the quality of life.

This may sound goody-goody, but it is something I have been thinking about for a long time and I realized it is a matter that affects us all. Life is tolerable without these common courtesies but it's so much the better with them. The sooner we learn to live with one another and accept one another, the more rewarding can be our public and private lives. Stress breeds stress, and goodwill breeds good-will. We have to make our choice as individuals which route to travel.

During my speech, although it's pretty dark in here, I could see some sleepyhead cabbages with no reactions. But after the contest, when you go back into the madding crowd, please don't be a cabbage. Peel back the outer leaves and please show your heart.