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102

Atarashii jibun (A new self)

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"Ping-pooong". All of a sudden the interphone bell rang. I opened the front door, and there stood Bunaki and Kikuchi. It was 8 o'clock. My two friends had come at such an early hour because we were to do practical professional training today. The Ishioka supermarket at Tôkôdai, that's where we (*jibun* = "self") were going to work. We had chosen this place [because of] the importance of attending customers (*sekkyaku*), and in order to understand the [real] meaning of work (*shigoto*).

We put on our aprons, feeling very worried (*fu'an*). The first thing we had to do was to arrange the goods for sale. We didn't know what went where, so we kept feeling more and more worried (*fu'an*). What we couldn't anticipate at that time, however, was that at the end of the day these feelings of worry (*fu'an*) would turn into pleasure. We asked the shop assistant, Mr. Ôtsuki, where to put the [various] goods. After somehow getting through with this job the next thing was to wipe the windows. I had wiped windows many times before, so I felt (*ki-mochi*) "Ok, I'm sure I can do that". However, window-wiping it certainly was, but those windows were so large you couldn't really call them windows. It was impossible to do the job without using ladders.

As [I was wiping those windows] I noticed (*ki-zuita*) that a strange sense of fulfillment had started to grow inside self (*jibun*). I knew that the intense feelings of worry (*fu'an*) I had so far were turning into self-confidence (*jishin*). It appeared to me (*ki ga shite kita*) that now I was ready to actively perform my tasks of my own accord (*mizukara susunde*). I started to feel immensely happy about such a self (*jibun*).

When this was finished they let me take a break (*torasete kureta*) for about 15 minutes. Those 15 minutes passed in an instant. Then, returning to work, I readily (*susunde*) went to ask Mr. Ôtsuki, "What job do you want me to do next?" He replied, "I'm afraid there is not much left to do now", and he really seemed at a loss. "Anything will be all right", I said firmly this time. "Well", he

answered, “perhaps we’ll have you (*yatte moraô ka*) arrange the box lunches (*o-bentô*)”. When I heard him utter the word “difficult”, feelings (*ki-mochi*) of worry (*fu’an*) blurred my head. But [in the same manner as] I had wiped the windows before, I of my own accord (*mizukara susunde*) went ahead and tackled this job. Thus I succeeded in setting up a target, and this gave me back a firm feeling (*ki o torinaosu*).

“[You’ll find] a label on the boxes with a number on it. Those with the number 3 are old boxes, so take these out and put them into the basket. Those with the numbers 1 and 2 on them are still fresh, so they’ll be all right. Then place new lunch boxes into the spaces where you removed the [old] ones. As [this work] has a lot to do with the trustworthiness of the store (*o-mise no shinyô*), do it carefully! (*ki o tsukete yatte ne*).”

Reflecting (*omou*) upon how important a job must be upon which “the trustworthiness of the store (*o-mise no shinyô*)” rests, I set to work. I fixed my gaze on the numbers and slowly went through [all the boxes] from one end to the other. I repeated [my check] several times. I don’t know why, but I realized (*wakaru*) that I felt a sense of relief every time the number 3 hit my eye.

The tension (*kinchô*) with which I performed this job was not released once until I had finished, and I took great care never to touch the wrapping of the boxes. “Oh, be careful!”, I suddenly heard someone say behind my back. It was Mr. Ôtsuki. “This box comes into this refrigerated shelf over here. The shelves may all look the same, but their temperatures vary, you know.”

I had not been aware of that. I had thought that there was no difference among them, so I paid absolutely no attention (*ki ni tomeru*) [to their temperature]. “Why didn’t he tell me that from the very beginning?”, I thought, and began to feel (*ki-mochi*) a little annoyed. But after some introspection (*hansei*) [I saw that] self’s (*jibun*) mistake was self’s (*jibun*) mistake, and so I soon picked up my spirits again (*ki o torinaosu*) and got on with my work.

Then, quite unexpectedly, Mr. Ôtsuki said, “When you have finished with that, we’ll have you (*yatte morau yo*) come to the cash register.” What? Really? My feelings (*ki-mochi*) now I don’t know (*wakaru*) how to describe. I don’t know whether I was overjoyed, or whether I felt [the situation] to be extremely unpleasant. Anyway, I saw that the movement of my hands was beginning to get slower [and slower] (*yukkuri*) and took notice (*ki ga tsuita*) of self’s (*jibun*) true feelings (*honshin*), which told me, “Try to keep going with this job (placing the lunch boxes in the shelves) as long as you only can. I don’t really want to work

at the cash register.” Just a few minutes later I had completed the work I was doing. I was called to the cash register. I could feel self's (*jibun*) feet grow heavier and heavier as I headed in that direction.

“No!” [Again] I pressed the wrong button. How many times had I done that already! “Won’t such [mistakes] cause the customers to have unpleasant feelings (*fukaikan*)?” I thought, and was completely filled with feelings (*ki-mochi*) of worry (*fu’an*). But then Mr. Ôtsuki said, “Well, I’ll play the customer for you, check me out, will you? (*yatte mi na*)”. To be frank, I really felt relieved. Mr. Ôtsuki took a box of cigarettes and pretended to be buying it. With awkward movements I scanned the bar code and pressed the necessary buttons for the price, the tax and the date. My hands shook. But in the end [the machine] gave out the receipt. Luckily!! I took a deep breath. My hands were wet through (*ase*), and I felt as if my heart were wet through (*ase*) too.

Also Bunaki and Kikuchi appear to have learnt to operate the cash register. Mr. Ôtsuki said, “You can slowly think about lunch now. Take a juice and whichever box lunch you would like and go and have your meal (*motte ite tabete ne*).” “Wonderful”, I thought, as I chose the meal I wanted and headed for the office. All three of us sat the whole weight of our tired-out bodies down onto chairs. There we gave a big sigh. A sense of achievement that can hardly be described drifted through the space in which three human beings were. To be having one’s lunch in such a space was something quite special.

“How pleasant, I’d like to do more!” it came out of Bunaki all of a sudden. Ha? For a moment I was startled. Myself (*jibun*), I had, until today, been holding quite wrong conceptions about what work actually meant. I had been under the impression that our (*jibun* = “self’s”) parents reluctantly went to their offices for the sole purpose of getting money. However, if I think about it, [work] means more than that. That is the feeling (*ki-mochi*) I have now. At the same time I [see] that I was able to experience [true] pleasure at working. It is like when we go to school – doing one and the same thing, but doing it with pleasure. I took note of (*ki-zuita*) these things now for the first time. I began to feel how stupid self (*jibun*) had been to have such a biased understanding of work. I had the feeling (*ki ga shita*) that now I had truly come to understand the meaning of work, the pleasure of work. After lunch I pulled out a book and leisurely took a rest of about 30 minutes.

“It’s time for work!”, I could hear Mr. Ôtsuki calling. Upon that I energetically (*ki-ai o irete*) put on my apron and headed for the cash register.

Most of the afternoon I worked at the check-out point. There was not much business. However, as “trustworthiness of the store (*o-mise no shinyō*)” [was such an important factor], I could never once sit down. On the contrary, I stood there with a straight back, and although doing so may appear to be a tiring [duty]; in fact this was not the case. I gave a quick glance at the clock and saw that it was 2:30. Just one more hour I could do work. I did feel (*ki-mochi*) like wanting to go home quickly, but another feeling (*ki-mochi*) was still very much stronger, namely, “I would like still to do more work”. So my feelings (*ki-mochi*) were complex.

In order to make good use of the one remaining hour, and in order to make this hour as enjoyable as possible, I did not just wait for customers at the cash register but took every opportunity to wipe the shelves and tidy up the goods. Like that I arranged the use of time the way I myself (*jibun*) thought best. “I would like to see many more customers come”. Such feelings (*ki-mochi*) arose in me now for the first time. I had got used to operating the cash register, and it gave me much the same kind of pleasure as a computer game. True work, true jobbing, brings in money, so it is possible to obtain two things at once, I thought (*omou*), pleasure and money.

“Shall we slowly think about finishing?” When Mr. Ôtsuki uttered these words, to tell the truth, I grew a little sad. But there was nothing more for us to do. Reluctantly we took off our apron, and the three of us went with Mr. Ôtsuki into the office to hold a “meeting of reflection (*hansei*)”. At this “meeting of reflection” Mr. Ôtsuki said, “[There is a proverb], no pain, no gain”. So far, I had always taken this proverb to mean, “When you have been through hardships, things will become easier”. However, now, after today’s experiences, I have discovered another meaning, namely, “you may have to go through hardships, but afterwards things turn into pleasure”. Self (*jibun*) merely has not noticed (*ki-zuku*) them, but there are many more new discoveries to make, I think. Just alone in view of these discoveries practical training like this is already rewarding, I think. Such were the feelings (*ki-mochi*) I developed.

Thanks to this practical professional training I was able to find true pleasure through work. I think this was very useful with regard to the decisions I must make concerning self’s (*jibun*) course in life. If I have the chance I would like to face the challenge and discover many new selves (*jibun*).

Commentary

I assumed that a 2nd year middle school pupil in present-day Japan would tend to write an essay by using expressions most of which were not really based on individual deliberation. Rather, many of the expressions are likely to be fragments of thought taken from what the pupils hear grown-ups utter in their presence. Thus what the pupils themselves say may largely be seen as indicators of the value system held by the persons in their surrounding.

I think we should pay careful attention to the fact that this essay consists of a relatively small number of elements that are repeatedly used. The same expressions, or groups of expressions belonging to a narrowly defined semantic field, keep reoccurring. First and above all we are struck by the almost complete absence of references to "I" (or "we"), "my" (or "our"). Instead the most common pronoun used is *jibun* ("self"). In some of the cases this "self" is used naturally and in a similar way to its English counterpart. In many other instances, however, "self" is clearly the focus of intensive observation, almost something like an object apart from what makes up a person's given identity.

The basic expression for "self" is *jibun*. *Jibun* can also imply "by myself", while preceding a noun *jibun* usually means "my own". *Jibun* does not necessarily refer just to the first person but, depending on the context, also indicates "by yourself, by himself ..." or "your, his ... own". In recent years, though, *jibun* has more and more come to replace other pronouns referring especially to the speaker (the first person). Therefore, it need not always receive particular attention, but in the essay translated here *jibun*, as the title "A new self" already indicates, is certainly a key expression.

Other expressions referring to "self" include *mizukara* ("personally, oneself, voluntarily"), and also *susunde* ("actively/energetically going forwards, voluntarily, willingly, of one's own accord").

A large number of expressions used in this essay refer to aspects and psychological states of self, usually – but not necessarily – the self of the speaker. Two verbs we should point out to are *omou* ("think, think about, think of, consider, believe, intend, guess, suppose, imagine") and *wakaru* ("understand, see, appreciate that something is so, distinguish one thing from something else").

Nouns belonging to this category include: *fu'an* ("feeling uneasy about something, anxiety, worry, state of insecurity and unrest"), *jishin* ("self-confidence"), *kinchō* ("strain, tension"), *honshin* ("one's true heart, true feelings,

what one really thinks but does not necessarily show"), *hansei* ("searching of one's soul, reflection, reconsideration, looking deeply into oneself, evaluation"), *fukaikan* (containing the important concept of *kai* – "pleasant, comfortable, willing, refreshing, enjoyable" – *fu-kai-kan* meaning "the feeling that *kai* is absent"). We can also include *ase* ("sweat", indicating an emotional state) here.

In this context passages should also be noted that describe feelings in terms of their physical impact on self such as, "I saw that the movement of my hands was beginning to get slower", "I could feel self's feet grow heavier and heavier", "My hands shook" or "All three of us sat the whole weight of our tired-out bodies down onto chairs". An example indicating anxiousness about the emotional state of others that would have negative implications on *their* physical self is *o-mise no shinyō* ("trustworthiness of the store").

A very conspicuous group of expressions describing a specific emotional state of self in this essay is built around the concept of *ki* (literally "energy of the universe"; "atmosphere in the universe and in given situations, atmosphere that is or arises inside a person and cannot be influenced by that person's will"). Examples are: *ki-mochi* ("the *ki* that I have, the feeling"), *ki-zuita / ki ga tsuita* ("*ki* has come to me, to notice something"), *ki ga shite / ki ga shita* ("*ki* is growing in me/has grown in me"), *ki o torinaosu* ("put the *ki* inside oneself straight again, reposition it properly"), *ki o tsukete* ("put your full *ki* into it!"), *ki ni tomeru* ("fix something in one's *ki*"), *ki-ai o irete* ("put one's full spirits into something").

One of the most important factors determining self in Japanese is the atmospheric context created by individuals as they specifically choose – both in language and in gesture – forms of communication in accordance with the age, gender, rank, position, and degree of "social weight" of the opposite party. In this essay I would like to point to the particular atmospheric touch created this way in the utterances of Mr. Ôtsuki.

For one thing Mr. Ôtsuki never uses expressions that merely indicate the actions the boys (who are about 14) perform, or are expected to perform. Rather, the expressions are always modified so as to define the specific type of relationship between performer and receiver of an action (e.g. "we'll have you do this" instead of "do this!"). In other words, activities are always embedded in person-to-person relationships and are not seen as isolated entities of a merely physical nature.

In this connection we may also note Mr. Ôtsuki's way of indicating permission to end an activity. This permission is never given abruptly by means of reference to a specific point in time. Rather, by indicating that the boys "can now slowly think about" finishing Mr. Ôtsuki subtly retains the position of authority that will not let others determine the rhythm of their activities outside person-to-person relationships and merely on the basis of reference to abstract dimensions like time.

The other point to be made concerning Mr. Ôtsuki's language is his choice of verbs and verb forms that can only be used when speaking to a very narrow segment of society, i.e. when speaking to children. Thus every utterance Mr. Ôtsuki makes not only shows up the character of the relationship between two parties (performer and receiver of an action), but also drives home a specific social definition of the recipient of the communication. In other words, what Mr. Ôtsuki says makes clear to the children that their self cannot be any other than the self of a child. (Examples include expressions like *motte ite tabete ne*, *yatte ne*, *yatte moraô ka*, *yatte morau yo*, *yatte mi na*. *yatte* is a form derived from the most informal level of the most informal verb for "to do", while the sentence endings *ne*, *ka*, *yo* and especially also *na* in this specific syntactic context are unthinkable in normal communication between grown-ups.)

Finally, the expression used throughout for "work" in this essay is *shigoto*, "that what a person has to do, task, assignment, handwork, job, employment".

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Inhalt:

	Introduction	2
	Die japanische Sprache als Weg zu Japan	6
	<i>English summary: The Japanese language as a path to Japan</i>	14
1	Limits of tolerance: In search of principles governing the usage of the Japanese language	16
2	"Interkulturelle Kommunikation" - ein modernes Schlagwort unklaren Inhalts? Dimensionen der Auseinandersetzung mit Japan	22
	<i>English version: Intercultural communication between Europe and Japan - Can it be more than a fashionable slogan?</i>	37
2	Menschenformung und Konflikt: Gibt es überhaupt Konflikt an japanischen Schulen?	56
	<i>English summary: Does conflict exist in Japanese schools?</i>	85
3	"Who am I?" – Testimonies of silent controversies in Japanese schoolchildren's compositions	88
	Onuma Naoki: A new self	102
3	Japanische Schülergedichte	109
	<i>English summary: Poems of Japanese Schoolchildren</i>	128

See separate entries in

- 1** "Facing Norms"
- 2** "Topics and Narratives"
- 3** "Who am I?"