

# Lessons in mindfulness: Reading minds in Japan



## Balancing the Japanese concept of *haragei* with speaking my mind

**Caroline Ishii**  
Columnist

I had turned to a Japanese colleague for some advice because I was perplexed by an interaction I had with a Japanese friend. I had asked my friend about helping me with something. Every time I would ask her the question, the answer would be vague and I didn't know what to do.

It sounded like she was too busy, but could it be her English? Could it be that she was in fact too busy, or cautious because she didn't know yet and didn't want to confirm before she knew? Or was there another reason?

I asked my colleague what to do. She told me, "In Japan, you need to be able to read people's minds."

"What?" I replied.

She explained that Japanese expect you to be able to know what they want so they don't have

to ask for it.

Isn't this what therapists and personal development books warn us about? Thinking another person can read our minds is where the problems begin in relationships?

*Haragei* is a Japanese concept of interpersonal communication. Literally translated, the term means "stomach art" and refers to an exchange of thoughts and feelings that is implied in conversation, rather than explicitly stated. It is a concept that doesn't have a direct definition and is often difficult for Westerners to fully understand.

In interactions, *haragei* is characterized by vague and indirect statements, prolonged silences, and careful avoidance of any comment that might cause offense. Instead, information is communicated through timing, facial expressions, and emotional context, rather than through direct speech. These silent forms of communications can be completely lost on a foreigner who is unfamiliar with the culture.

I asked my colleague how this worked in her relationship with her non-Japanese husband. She said, in the beginning, this caused a lot of problems because when she was upset she would tell him he should be able to know and read her mind. He would reply, "How am I supposed to do that?"

She laughed and said she knows better now.



PHOTO CREDIT: CAROLINE ISHII

In everyday interactions, people often put up masks like these *oni* masks from a festival in Japan, and it is hard to figure out what they actually want or mean.

I've been trying to call in psychic and other powers to try to help me understand better my Japanese friends and acquaintances in Japan, as I want to be respectful and not offend them. However, the more I try, the more I realize how "Canadian" I am. All through my life in school and work, we are told to speak up and say what we feel.

Despite being told to speak up, we don't. Often saying what we want is difficult in Western society because we often end up say-

ty, whether with family, friends or colleagues. What about the "white lies," the minor falsehoods we say to make someone feel better when they ask us questions such as, "Does this make me look fat?"

Where does saying what we think others want us to say versus saying what we think, leave us?

*"Haragei is a Japanese concept of interpersonal communication. Literally translated, the term means 'stomach art.'"*

ing what we feel people want to hear versus what is the truth.

Why? We want to be liked and feel a part of a communi-

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# When family caregiving isn't enough for your parent



## Making difficult decisions while taking care of your parents

**Gil Asakawa**  
Columnist

My brother Glenn and I moved our mom from her house in Lafayette, Colorado, last month to live in a memory care facility nearby. She's had dementia for a long time, and it's gotten noticeably worse for the past couple of years. I'm still sorting through how it felt to take her out of her house, and how it feels now.

Junko Asakawa was born and raised in Nemuro, Japan, a small fishing town in the northern island of Hokkaido. She grew up during the prewar years of Japan, and was even crowned "Miss Nemuro" when she was a teenager.

My mom went to work after the war for the Americans who occupied Japan, because she could speak some English. Nemuro had

a contingent of GIs, and she met my dad, a Nisei born in Hawaii who was stationed in Nemuro during the Korean War.

By the mid-1950s she moved with my dad to Tokyo, where my two brothers and I were born. She was a typically strict "tiger mom" of the day, expecting us to clean our rooms and study hard.

She was like many foreign-national military wives, chatting with neighbours' wives in halting English and shopping at the PX (Pacific Exchange, the wonderfully inexpensive military shops where GIs bought emerging Japanese tech in the form of cameras and hi-fi stereos).

When my dad took a job with the Army Corps of Engineers outside Washington, D.C., we moved to northern Virginia, and then to Colorado when I was in high school.

My mom always cooked Japanese food, even when she made

ered with gravy.

She also baked and decorated cakes for years for extra money, and I was proud to help her by making templates of cartoon characters like Snoopy or Charlie Brown when customers requested them. While in Virginia she began making *mochi manju* to sell in a Washington Japanese grocery.

After we moved to Denver, Colo., she continued making cakes and selling *manju* through Pacific Mercantile, the Japanese supermarket in Sakura Square.

I found two small albums of faded photographs of her cakes, a catalog of her creative output, that I treasure.

She used to make Japanese dolls but quit when manufacturers started selling only bodyforms made of plastic instead of the wood-shaving-stuffed fabric bodies. She made the *shoji* screens in our house in Denver. She began

studying Japanese calligraphy, and ended up teaching classes for appreciative students in our house. She eventually got into *bunka shishu*, Japanese embroidery, and framed a lot of her finished pieces.

My dad died of cancer 26 years ago. My mom lived in our big suburban house until almost a decade ago, when Glenn suggested she should move across the street from the house where he,



PHOTO COURTESY GIL ASAKAWA

Junko Asakawa in the early 1950s.

his wife and daughters live in Lafayette, Colo. a northern suburb east of Boulder, Colo.

After her move, it seemed like she became a smaller person, not just in stature, but in presence, and she seemed lonelier. Her Japanese friends were farther away.

She became, like a lot of older people, isolated. Mostly, in the last few years, she's spent her time watching TV Japan, a satellite television feed of Japanese programming that includes news, kids' shows, game shows,

dramas, music and variety shows all on one channel, all day long.

We took away her car keys about five years ago when state police found her at a highway exit in Wyoming, a two-hour drive away. She thought she was going to Walmart five minutes away.

Her fading memory meant she was cooking less and eating more instant or frozen foods. My wife, Erin, and I got in the habit of buying her a half dozen *unagi donbu*

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*"She's had dementia for a long time... I'm still sorting through how it felt to take her out of her house, and how it feels now."*

American-style dinners. I have vivid memories of eating steak, or hamburgers, or spaghetti—while she had salmon, miso soup and white rice.

We had white rice with every meal, even with spaghetti, turkey or roast beef served with mashed potatoes. There's nothing more delicious than white rice smoth-



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I have spent a lot of time reflecting on this question, especially since leaving my long-term relationship and life that I knew. I wanted to see myself as confident and bold, and I was to a degree, but I was more of a “yes” girl. I wanted people to like me, including my partner, so I never rocked the boat too much when I didn’t agree with what someone was saying or if they didn’t agree with me. I would either be vague or leave the conversation. Saying what’s on my mind and having confrontations was not part of my upbringing and makes me uneasy even now.

I was born into a Japanese household where my mother taught us Japanese cultures and customs of being generous and considerate of others. Even if we had to suffer because it was more important that we accommodated others’ needs first. When my mother’s back was sore, I knew that she needed to have her shoulders massaged. When I was at someone’s house visiting and they asked if I was hungry, I knew that I needed to say “no,” even if I was, because my mother did not want to give the person extra worries or work.

These actions are reflected in the Japanese term *giri*. *Giri* can be defined as a debt of gratitude and a self-sacrificing pursuit of another’s happiness. The Japanese perspective is not the pursuit of individual gain, but one of support and respect for human

relationships. *Giri* implies that we need to anticipate the needs and desires of others and act upon this, in order to make another happy.

Looking back at my childhood, reading my mother’s and others’ minds was important, and it just wasn’t just stated outright. Also, I grew up in a Canadian multicultural society of Toronto, with different cultural and moral norms. At school, we focused on “I” and were encouraged to say what we wanted, or what the teacher wanted us to say, and learned that being extroverted and assertive would make you more popular.

It was confusing growing up as I didn’t know where I fit in exactly and there was much conflict with my mother as she expected me to be more “Japanese.”

In these heated arguments, I told her that if she wanted me to be more Japanese she needed to bring me up in Japan and she would threaten to send me there. Now I see that is not the worst punishment I could have received, but that’s not what 15 year old me thought.

The longer I spent in Japan, the more the concept of reading another’s mind didn’t seem as crazy as I first thought. If we all tried hard to read each other’s minds and be observant of clues in another’s body language or facial expressions, would that not make us more caring and compassion-

ate as individuals and a society? What if we were to adopt some of the Japanese values of *giri* in our lives, which includes good listening skills, keen observation and mindfulness.

When I think about the Japanese reading others’ minds, they may get it wrong at times, but it’s the intention that matters most.

The Japanese want to understand and respect where someone is coming from without words getting in the way. They are always thinking of the other person and this is ingrained in the culture. It’s not a me-first culture, but we-, or—better yet—you-first culture.

Western philosophies and personal development books encourage us to always think of ourselves first. Sometimes I am conflicted with this concept because of my upbringing and feel guilty for not taking care of others when I can. I realize now that doesn’t have to be an either/or situation and that’s part of what makes me Japanese Canadian.

With a Japanese-influenced upbringing and a sensitive soul, sometimes I am good at reading others’ mind and sometimes not. I believe it’s because we have many filters on and it’s hard to get through them to see what people truly want, but mostly because

the filters I have may distort what people say too.

It’s hard to recognize the truth behind the masks and filters and I am often confused. They said this, but they are doing this, where does the truth lie? Or I said this, but am feeling this, so what do I really want? It’s complicated and there are no easy answers, and that’s okay. Everything does not need a solution or an immediate one, but that has taken me some time to learn.

Our actions are the most honest and direct ways to help another, whether we can read minds or not. And our actions toward ourselves, whether kind or critical, tell us how we feel about ourselves.

If you truly want to help someone you care about, I’ve learned from coaching that the best question to ask is, “What do you want?” Then just listen and be there with the person even if the answer is silence or “I don’t know.”

The answer “I don’t know” is highly underrated. We don’t need to always have immediate solutions and answers for others and especially for ourselves. Often asking for other’s advice, I find that I get even more confused and overwhelmed.

Insight meditation, *vipassana*, in Pali, (the language of the original Buddhist teachings) is the simple and direct practice of moment-to-moment mindfulness.

It says, “not-knowing” is emphasized in Zen practice, where it is sometimes called “beginner’s mind.” An expert may know a subject deeply, yet be blind to new possibilities by his or her preconceived ideas. In contrast, a beginner may see with fresh, unbiased eyes. The practice of beginner’s mind is to cultivate an ability to meet life without preconceived ideas or judgments.

Through good coaching and taking time for reflection, I now often ask myself, “What do I want?” At first, I didn’t know, but then moment by moment, decision by decision, it became easier. I am sometimes surprised with my answers. I thought I wanted to do something, but there was often an anxiety or knot in my stomach when I thought about it. When I follow my answer, the knot often disappears.

I have recently added this question to my repertoire, “Is this kind to me?” I may want something but it may not be kind and easy on me. I used to be a terrible boss and friend to myself, so I fired that person and changed.

I believe kindness to ourselves is the magic wand that can transform. It starts with listening to our hearts and responding with compassion and care to ourselves.

From this training, we begin to understand how best to help others. This transcends borders, cultures, and languages. It is love in action, for ourselves and the world around us.

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