

Preface

Several years ago, I stood on the stage at TEDxFukuoka 2018 to talk about how finally understanding the Japanese worldview after many years in Japan changed my life. Although I had attained fluency in the language many years earlier and had written many books about Japan, I found that I really didn't understand Japan at all. I set out on a journey to take off the glasses of my American and Christian worldview and put on the glasses of Japan. What I discovered was that when I did that, it changed how I saw Japanese culture, how I interacted with Japanese people, and how I saw my place in Japanese society. Understanding the Japanese worldview rocked my world and changed my life, and it is still changing it today, almost seven years later.

One thing that I realized, and that I still deeply believe today, is that humans are generally self-centered. This is not a conscious behavior or necessarily a bad thing in some cases, but it can cause many problems in a cross-cultural setting. It may lead people from one culture to think that their country or culture is better than another. Because we are looking at the world through the lens of our own worldview, we tend to judge whether something is good or bad, right or wrong, based on our own experiences, morality or opinions. In other words, we are seeing the “what” of what people are doing. And that “what” seems strange or wrong to us, because, well, we wouldn't do it. But what if you took off your cultural lenses, and with them your unconscious prejudices and preconceptions, and put on the lenses of the culture you are studying or living in? You would be able to understand not only the “what” but also the “why.” You would see things much more clearly. As a result, the tendency to criticize or look down on others will fade away, and instead of

seeing another culture as “right” or “wrong,” you will just view it as “different.”

My biggest goal in life is not to be a great teacher or writer, although I am striving for that too, but to be a person of understanding. I want to be someone who can see all people and cultures through their lenses, not mine, and to respect their differences and be inspired by them. I have learned that it is through being surrounded by people who are different from you that you grow as a person. I for one, want to be a person who is always growing in compassion and understanding. I invite you to join me on my journey to become that person. I think you will be glad you did!

Anne Crescini



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What in the World is Worldview?



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Recently, many Japanese young people have been using the word *sekaikan*, particularly in regard to music. For example, “I really like that artist’s *sekaikan*.” Here, *sekaikan* means “vibe,” but usually in English, this word would be translated as “worldview” or “view of the world.” We often use this word in daily life, but have you ever thought deeply about what it really means? What is a worldview and how does it impact how humans live their lives?

One dictionary defines worldview as “a person’s way of thinking about and understanding life, which depends on their beliefs and attitudes (Oxford University Press, 2024).”

Simply put, a worldview is how a person sees the world and

their place in it. Who am I? What is my purpose? How do I relate to others? Is there a god? How should I live my life? And what happens after I die? Everyone has a unique worldview, and that worldview shapes how a person lives. But we don't usually consciously think about our worldview, and many times we have no idea that that worldview impacts how we think about the world around us and the decisions we make. 5

While every person has a different worldview, there are often common worldview traits shared by people in a culture. For example, the Japanese people tend to share a common worldview that shapes Japanese culture and behavior. So, how are culture and worldview different? Imagine you are looking at a house. The parts of the house that you can see—the roof, the walls, and the furniture—are culture. These are very easy to see and understand. Worldview is a lot harder to understand because you cannot see it. It is like the foundation of the house. You cannot see it and you don't often think about it, but without it, the house could not be built. 10 15

To put it another way, let's imagine that culture is the “what” and worldview is the “why.” Let's illustrate this with the Japanese word *itadakimasu*. Japanese people say the word *itadakimasu* before they eat a meal. This is an important part of Japanese culture. People who move to Japan from overseas learn this word soon after they arrive. I doubt there is anyone living here who doesn't know the word *itadakimasu*. 20

But have you ever thought about WHY Japanese people say that word? For the first 16 years of my life in Japan, I thought it just meant “Let's eat.” because Japanese people say it right before eating. But does it really only mean that? Several years ago, I learned the word *itadakimasu* also means “I am thankful to the animals and plants for sacrificing their lives for me. I am also thankful to the 25 30



people who grew the food and prepared it for me.”

It was a life-changing experience for me. I realized that I had lived in Japan for 16 years and never knew WHY Japanese people say *itadakimasu*. But understanding the WHY helped me to also understand WHY the Japanese are so crazy about food and eating. It seems that there are so many shows on Japanese TV about food! And now I know why. It is from the worldview that teaches them to value food deeply and be thankful for it.

In other words, saying *itadakimasu* before eating is Japanese culture. This is the WHAT. The idea that they are partaking of life is Japanese worldview. This is the WHY.

But perhaps as a Japanese, you haven't thought deeply about this. Why is that? It is because worldview is something that shapes who we are but we don't think about it much. I doubt that you think deeply about the meaning of *itadakimasu* every time you say it, and yet, that worldview influences much of how you see food and eating. People in every culture and every country are influenced deeply by their worldview, even if they don't realize it.

Many students all over Japan are passionate about studying language and culture and spend much time doing that. Of course, this is very important. However, I don't think that it is enough. If you are interested in learning about the United States, but if you only study the language and culture, I think you are only seeing half of the picture. But if you delve deeper, learning not only the WHAT of American culture but also the WHY that comes from the American worldview, you will understand it in a way you never have before. Why do Americans have such lenient gun laws? Why are there not many school rules? Why do they value diversity so much? Why is abortion such a hot topic? It is impossible to understand U.S. culture without understanding the WHY.

Of course, not every American or every Japanese has the same worldview. As mentioned earlier, each individual has their own unique worldview. But there are some common points shared by many in a culture, and that is what we are going to study in this textbook.

Understanding worldview will change how you see yourself, others, and the world around you. It will make you a more compassionate and understanding person. When we only see the WHAT, we tend to compare and criticize, but seeking the WHY helps us to respect differences. It also helps us to grow as people, as we see that our thinking is not the only way. So, let's strive to be people of understanding by understanding the WHY and the worldview of those around us!

Exercises

A Key Words

Match each word with its definition as it is used in the essay.

- | | |
|--------------|--------------|
| 1. worldview | 4. sacrifice |
| 2. trait | 5. delve |
| 3. culture | 6. criticize |

- a. to look into; to search
- b. to give up something for a specific purpose
- c. the customs and beliefs of a group of people
- d. quality or characteristic
- e. how one sees the world and their place in it
- f. to speak negatively about

B Comprehension Questions

Choose the best answer to each question.

1. According to the author, what is the difference between culture and worldview?
 - a. They are exactly the same.
 - b. Culture is what people do, and worldview is why they do it.
 - c. Worldview is what people do, and culture is why they do it.
 - d. None of the above
2. Which is an example of culture?
 - a. Taking off your shoes in the house
 - b. Visiting a shrine
 - c. Saying *gochisosamadeshita* after eating a meal
 - d. All of the above

3. What does the author say about the word *itadakimasu*?
 - a. It only means “Let’s eat.”
 - b. It helped her to understand Japanese food culture better.
 - c. It expresses thanks to animals, plants and people.
 - d. Both b. and c.

C True or False

Choose “T” if the statement is true and “F” if the statement is false.

1. All people in a culture have the same worldview. [T / F]
2. The author says people tend to criticize things they don’t understand. [T / F]
3. Culture is how a person sees the world. [T / F]
4. Worldview shapes how people live and how they interact with those around them. [T / F]

D Discussion

Discuss these topics with your classmates.

1. When you use the word *seikaikan* in Japanese, what are you referring to?
2. Why do you think Japanese people tended to wear masks more often than Americans during COVID? Why did you?
3. Think of two more examples of Japanese “culture” and Japanese “worldview.”

E Writing

Choose one of the above discussion topics to write a short essay.