

CRAFTSMEN *and* WORKERS

By Masaomi Ise

Labor statistics show that Japan has a total of about 53.9 million “salaryman” workers, including male and female, part-time and temp workers along with fully-fledged employees. These “salaryman” workers make up 84.5% of Japan’s total workforce of 63.8 million which includes the self-employed and entrepreneur. It’s no exaggeration to say that “the salaryman’s misfortune is the misfortune of Japan,” and indeed, the “happiness of the salaryman is the happiness of Japan.” But our society of salarymen has been in poor health lately. The number of young people seeking psychiatric help is rapidly rising, and there has been an increase in suicide among middle-aged salaryman workers. It is easy to blame business or government if the cause of the unhappiness is insufficient income, but is income really the issue? Having to continuously jostle for position, stepping on others while being stepped on oneself, in a world overrun with salarymen like oneself, isn’t this causing people to lose their sense of self-confidence and indeed to lose sight of the very meaning of life? Because people that are unable to have a feeling of significance and enthusiasm about their work will never be more than simple workers (*roudou-sha*), no matter what type of work they do or how much experience they have doing it. On the other hand, those that can gain a sense of meaning and enthusiasm about their work at that point become craftsmen (*shokunin*). Perhaps inspiring such a sense of professionalism can be a shortcut to attaining happiness for the salaryman. Can we prove this? Let’s listen to the following tales of four young workers.

He Threw the Cake at Me

Yumi Tabata (age 20, Saitama Prefecture) showed the chef the cake. It was the first one she had been allowed to finish herself, decorating it with cream frosting. The chef threw it at her. He turned his back. "Am I supposed to put something like that in my shop?!" Yumi was dripping from head to toe with the melting frosting. She felt as though she had been assaulted, and ran out from the kitchen into the storefront, struggling to hold back tears.

"I was in despair, and I know I looked terribly sad, and yet all the customers and children who were looking at the cakes in the showcase laughed. That's when I understood something for the first time. When people come to buy pastry or cake, they do it with special good feelings. Cake has the marvelous power to bring people laughter and joy. That's when I thought, I will not give up. Someday I will become an even better pastry chef than he is."

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Tabata had wanted to become a pastry chef after graduating high school, and this shop was her first job. The chef was very tough, and not a day went by when he did not scream at her, calling her "baka-yarou" (stupid kid) and other derogatory names. The least thing would bring on violent diatribes. She went home crying every night. This went on for a while, until suddenly one day the chef assigned her to finish a cake herself. Tabata thought this was her chance to show the chef all the things she had learned from watching his technique and ideas. But her proud attempt ended in the sad story above. Her rigorous training continued under that chef, but eventually the shop was closed due to an urban renewal plan. On their last day together the chef kindly told her, "Only those left standing have a chance to be the real thing someday." Tabata is still working hard at her craft at her new job with another pastry shop.

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some self-confidence I started to grow bit by bit. And that's when the dream I had of becoming a pastry chef turned into a goal."

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"This Is Good!" the Most Wonderful Words Ever

Atsushi Shimizu (age 38, Tokyo) became hooked on the world of Japanese food after working part-time at a *sushiya* while still in high-school. At first all he did was deliver take-out orders, but after doing that for two or three months he was taught some of the simpler preparations. When the first customer said to him, "This is good!" of something he had prepared, it felt like the most wonderful words ever. This experience gave him the inspiration to pursue the world of traditional Japanese food after graduating high school.

The restaurant world is more complicated than it appears. Starting with subordinate work like cleaning and dish-washing, you then move up to cleaning and prepping of fish and vegetables. When you have learned that, you move on to making salads, *o-shinko* pickles and small fish. Depending on the type there are different ways to cut vegetables. It takes two to three years to master these techniques.

After that you are finally allowed to take a place at the *yaki-ba* or grill station. Each fish and each vegetable has a different method for grilling. The flame has to be adjusted for each type of fish and its size. Plus, the fresh seasonal food menu changes every two months, winter, spring, summer and fall. There is no way to learn it all thoroughly in even two years. Next comes the *age-ba*, fry station where *tempura* and other dishes are made, and when you've mastered that you become a *ni-kata*, the cook who makes the *nimono* boiled and stewed dishes.

"There are no recipes in Japanese cuisine. You are totally reliant on your taste buds. My boss always says, in the cooking world you don't

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become a professional till you have mastered the *ni-kata* cook position. I think I know why. You have to cook everything differently each day, depending on the flavor of that day’s produce, for example, the potato might be different from the previous day, and yet you have to come up with a consistent flavor for the dish each time. It’s quite a wonder how they do it.”

It has been 20 years since Shimizu first embarked on the road to becoming a chef. It took about 10 years to become a *ni-kata* cook, the first level of professional in the restaurant world. He has spent more than a decade as a *ni-kata* cook. He has never yet been received unqualified praise from his boss. This is the boss that yells at him if he drinks coffee or even juice at lunch—“You’ll ruin your taste buds for the night!” Shimizu’s boss is tough and even scary. But he feels proud to be an apprentice to this man, and is grateful for the experience.

Most of the fancy *ryoutei* Japanese traditional cookeries that flourished during the bubble years as *settai* entertainment spots for big money corporations have gone out of business. “Cheaper, good quality restaurants are where it’s at today. I am truly grateful to be working under

someone like my boss who has been able to go with the flow, and yet stay true to the traditions of Japanese cuisine. One of his favorite sayings is ‘In cooking, you never stops learning all your life.’ If you don’t understand what he means by that I guess you will never been seen as a professional.”

“And if you have feelings of sincerity, love and gratitude for your customers, even if cooking techniques have advanced, when it comes to carefully prepared home cooking, I think that’s the way you return sincerity to your customers. How many stubborn chefs like him are left in today’s world, that refuse to change the ways they know are right? I hope the day is coming when I will get to become a stubborn chef like him.”

When You Really Know What a Bucket of Plaster Weighs, You’ll Be a Man

Since he was a little boy, Hiroyuki Ohtsuka (age 25, Tokyo) had watched his father work at his plastering business. He had always wanted to become a professional or craftsman with an even greater level of skill than his father. After graduating from middle school, he took a job at a different plastering business about 30 minutes by train from home. Ohtsuka felt that his father would be too forgiving as a boss, and he wanted to get all the training he could. He got on the train every morning before 5:00 a.m. He would open up the storehouse and clean up, and then serve tea to the professional craftsmen once they got to work.

Once the pros got to work, all Ohtsuka had to do all day long was carry around buckets of cement. He wasn’t yet fully grown, being just out of middle school, so it was very hard for him to have to carry 20 or 30 buckets each weighing 25 kilograms in a day. They were so heavy it was painful. There were days when he wanted to run away and never come back.

His boss would say to him, “When you really understand how much those buckets weigh, then you’ll be a man.” But 15-year-old Ohtsuka had no idea what he was talking about. As for plastering, he was allowed to practice for about half an hour a day during his lunch break. The boss would always tell him, “Money is important too, but remember that our work is making something, you’ve got to put your heart into it.”

One day in his third month as an apprentice, the boss told him to try plastering a whole wall



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“If you don’t think you can do it before you even start, you might as well go home now! If you don’t try you’ll never do anything but carry buckets! If you’re too upset to do it, tell me now!”

by himself, even if it took all day. When Ohtsuka said he didn’t think he could handle it, the boss cried out, “If you don’t think you can do it before you even start, you might as well go home now! If you don’t try you’ll never do anything but carry buckets! If you’re too upset to do it, tell me now!” These words inspired Ohtsuka to give it a try.

“Though it got late, the boss stayed with me till the end. The joy I felt when I finally finished, I can still remember as though it were yesterday. He said as he looked at my finished wall, ‘You can do it once you set your mind to it. Don’t forget that confidence you feel, and I hope you plaster plenty of walls in the years to come.’”

When he first started to learn, Ohtsuka was confused by the different plastering styles each craftsman had. Even though the finished result was the same, each one had a different way to get there. Eventually Ohtsuka found the way best suited to his working style. As time went by, Ohtsuka was put in charge of an entire worksite, where he was in charge of ordering supplies and arranging the workers’ schedules. He was good enough to take over for the boss. That’s when the boss finally recognized him as a man.

“He asked me if I remembered what he had said to me when I complained how heavy the buckets were. He asked if I now understood his answer. I answered confidently, saying that the weight of those buckets had made me into what I now was. If I ever have an apprentice to teach, I will understand what he is going through. I had to carry that weight too, and that’s what made it possible for me to be inspired to learn. I told him, thank you for everything you have taught me.”

It’s been 11 years since Ohtsuka took his first job at the plastering business. He is now interested in learning the traditional plastering techniques that are still used at Kyoto’s temples. He says, “I

believe the life of the professional craftsman is one of bettering his craft every day.”

I Want to Make Things That Touch People’s Hearts

Born in Yamagata Prefecture, Tsutomu Sato (age 29) was in his sixth year working at a company in Saitama. He had always wanted to make things for a living, but had been unable to find a job that would let him do that. A turning point came when he paid a visit to Kamakura on a day off. Coming upon a standing Buddha *nobotoke* (wayside statue), he was deeply moved by its gentle expression. “That’s it, I thought, I want to make nobotoke statues like this. I want to carve objects that can touch something inside people’s hearts. The nobotoke I saw was made of some kind of stone, but for some reason at that moment I felt I wanted to work in wood. I wanted to become a woodcarver. I wanted to find a job where I could make Buddha and Jizo statues.”

“While searching for a place that would take me as an apprentice to a woodcarver, I found an article in a magazine about the traditional Edo wood carving done in Asakusa. This is it, I thought, and got over there as quickly as I could, but there were already a number of people there with exactly the same idea as me. The master in appearance was like some kind of sea monster, a fearsome personage exactly as you might expect a Tokyo *shitamachi* craftsman to be. He spoke for a little while with me, and without saying whether he could use me or not, he just said, if you want to observe, you can come whenever you want. I didn’t seem to have any other prospects, so starting the next day I would go there every day with my *bento* (lunch) box. First I was just observing, then I was allowed to do miscellaneous chores. Eventually I would be given a woodblock and told what to carve, then have to show it to him. After about a month and a half, I was accepted as an apprentice. There were only two of us left of the 40 or so that had showed up the first day. We got yelled at all the time, and getting whacked with a chisel handle was an everyday occurrence. I don’t know how many times the master told me to get out!

“Five years passed in this way, and finally I was allowed to make first small items like cats and the *Shichi Fukujin* Seven Gods of Fortune, and

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eventually on to shrine and temple sculptures. The first time I saw something I had carved myself built into a temple by a shrine carpenter, I felt an indescribable warmth rise into my chest. Till then all the shrine and temple sculptures I had made were just sent to the shrine contractors, and I had never actually seen one installed. But this time through the solicitude of my master, I had come all the way to Azumino in Nagano Prefecture with the other *shokunin* craftsmen to see it. It had been five years since quitting the salaryman life and entering my apprenticeship in Edo woodcarving. I felt like I had finally arrived. I just stood there staring at it. ‘It’s almost time to go.’ My master had to tap me on the shoulder, as I stood lost in thought of all the things that had happened over the last five years.

“In the world of the professional *shokunin*, five years is just a drop in the bucket. I am still far from the day when I can carve an object that can really touch someone’s heart. ‘Now is the time to work harder than ever.’ Right now, I am half-way to my dream. Even now I can feel how wonderful the cold Azumino air that smelled of snow felt on my upraised face.”

The Difference Between a Craftsman and a Worker

We have found out something about the lives of these four young people who are on the road to becoming professional craftsmen. Tomohiro Ozeki, who has depicted the life of the craftsman in novels and non-fiction such as *The Knowledge of the Craftsman* and *The Power of the Craftsman*, says, “The craftsman is someone who thinks of the method to make something, and devises the means to do it.” And, “If it’s OK to just do as you have been taught to do the job you have been given, then that is just a worker.”

Certainly the young people in this article are working hard to devise ways to do each of their jobs. They are not just workers, getting a salary

just for learning how to do their job from a manual like a robot. What also stands out about the lives of these young people are two other points that make them different from workers.

The first is the existence of the boss or master. While alternately being yelled at and encouraged by their master, these young people are being guided on the road towards professionalism. The second is the existence of the customer. The object or service that the craftsman creates from the heart is passed on directly to the customer. The happiness and goodwill that direct contact brings is the greatest encouragement to the craftsman.

In his connection with the master and the customer, the craftsman polishes his skill. Both the meaning of life and happiness itself exist only within the connections among people. Pursuit of knowledge in one’s job, considered in other words as the lifetime pursuit of knowledge by Japan’s tradition of the professional craftsman, is truly a profound philosophy of life.

The word “*shokunin*,” meaning literally craftsman or artisan, tends to be used to represent only manual work like the chefs and sculptors depicted here. But if we think about the *shokunin* craftsman as being someone who makes something himself, who has a master/teacher, and who seeks the happiness of his customer, then there can be a distinction between a “worker” and a “craftsman” or “professional” even in a Seven-Eleven part-timer. The convenience store employee who does no more than what he has been instructed to do is the worker, while the one who thinks about how best to display items for optimal sales, or what kind of demeanor gets the best reaction from customers, in other words the one who continually devises the means to achieve his goal, is the professional. The same can be said about the world of the salaryman, the teacher, or the government bureaucrat.

If there were more craftsman-style professionals, people who really have their hearts in their work, in whatever kind of work they do, one by one they will become happier citizens, and our nation will be enriched by their work. ■

This article is adapted from the mail magazine, JAPAN ON THE GLOVE (536), February 24, 2008. Masaomi Ise is editor-in-chief of the magazine. URL: <http://come.to/jog>