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The important things I discovered in Japan by Hans Brinckmann

Maintaining one's inner balance under ever-changing conditions: that's what we all want, right? But it's one of the most difficult challenges we are faced with, especially if we are confronted with frequently changing external circumstances, people we don't share any common ground with, or get involved in situations that we can't control, or didn't intend to be part of.

But there is one obvious question that you may already want to ask, and that I want to get out of the way right now: How can balance be *moving*? Isn't that a contradiction in terms, like controlled chaos, or a silent cry?

I will try to explain this contradictory concept which I discovered in Japan and how I apply it to life's many challenges and possibilities.

To begin with, I want to make one thing clear: this is not a creed, nor philosophical dogma, aimed at replacing rational thinking. It is nothing more than a way – *my way* – of dealing with life in all its forms and experiences. At its heart, it is a way to avoid conflict and confrontation where possible, and strive for a peaceful – or at least a balanced – coexistence with the myriad competing forces in one's life.

Given my long residence in Japan from a very young age, my way of thinking is undoubtedly heavily influenced by the Japanese traditional concept of *Wa*, usually translated as “harmony”. It refers to the importance of unity in society, especially within a social group, by placing peaceful relations above personal interests.

I do not regard my inner balance – whenever I attain it – as a static, unchanging condition, but a temporary truce or balance between the competing forces to which I am

exposed. My inner balance can only exist as long as there are no radical shifts in the make-up of the elements between which the balance was achieved.

For me the process of timely adjustment has been no more than a personal, largely intuitive way of dealing with life rather than a rationally conceived method or system. It worked for me, and still does, and that's all that matters. Why then do I now feel compelled to try and convey in words what to me has been my long-standing intuitive response to the never-ending challenges and complexities of living?

From time to time I have been asked why I am the way I am – or words to that effect. Some called me “mysterious” or “different” and wanted to know how I came to be that way. The questions puzzled me, the more so as my inevitable response “what do you mean?” seldom elicited more than an enigmatic smile, embarrassed laughter, or words like “You know what I mean.” There were times that I wondered if I had offended the questioner with a careless remark, or whether my “way of being” somehow unsettled them.

Yet over the years there were moments when the light began to shine through. What these people were expressing was clearly not of a negative or critical nature, but an indirect way of saying that they couldn't “place” or pigeonhole me. I apparently did not conform to any preconceived type, nor did my behaviour chime with what they were used to in their relations with other people.

Now this *really* had me worried. What on earth were these people talking about? I did not in any way consider myself unusual. Save for the fact that in the course of my life and 39-year-long international banking career I had lived in six countries, my life had been unexceptional. I had married only once and held moderate political beliefs. I had been reasonably successful in my banking career, but that could hardly explain the prying eyes. Slightly embarrassed as I felt by the attention, I was inclined to ignore it and get on with my life, and for a long while that's exactly what I did.

But in the end, I couldn't sustain this attitude. The impression I evidently made on others and the intermittent probes into my mental make-up set me thinking. Was I really

“different” from the norm? If so, what norm did others use in evaluating me? How could I, who belonged to no church or party and never pursued any goal with heated enthusiasm, let alone fanatical fever, stand out from the crowd? Looking around me I always felt rather deficient compared with friends and colleagues who were wholly into business or politics or sport, or who personified loyalty to career, class, creed or country in everything they did.

All this seemed to add up to a character that lacked something vital: a man without strong passions or commitments, a colourless specimen of Homo Sapiens, destined to be forgotten as soon as his heart stopped beating. That at any rate is how I must be seen by others.

Yet I knew there was something fundamentally wrong in this assumed assessment. After all, I did feel deeply passionate about *life* – life in its entirety. To me every day-break held promise, every encounter the possibility of discovery. The sense of wonder that is part of youth had never quite left me. Even now, in my early nineties, I can gaze at a wildflower peeking out from under a fence and marvel at nature’s tenacity. I’ve always cherished the little attentions from others. And I’m sensitive to the power of poetry or a well-turned phrase. But these things never made me a softy. I was and am equally alert to sharp minds and strong leaders; always take seriously the duties I have accepted and the promises I have made; and keep up my guard against the facile claims of salesmen and the pledges of politicians.

Once I started looking into my own values I discovered they were not carved in stone. Which is not to say that I *lacked* values, rather that they were malleable, in the way metal can be shaped or bent without breaking, especially when exposed to heat. I realized that while I had a generally happy childhood I had never had a hero or a role model to help me through adult life. To use a well-worn cliché, I had always sailed by my own compass and weather vane, taking care to avoid storms without losing track of where I was going.

My main concern through the decades had been to maintain my inner balance under all circumstances. And as circumstances kept changing I had to move my “mental feet” to avoid losing my balance.

In retrospect, I had known about these things at least as far back as 1978, when I was working as the Managing Director of a Dutch bank on the island of Curaçao in the Antilles, and trying to expand our business with the United States and parts of Central and South America. This involved much travel, and meeting a great variety of people with different social, ethnic and economic backgrounds and interests.

One of those trips took me to El Salvador, where I was greeted at the airport by Peter Greidanus, the head of the local manufacturing plant of the Dutch electronics giant, Philips. His brother, a banking colleague of mine at the bank’s Amsterdam head office who provided the introduction, had told me that Peter was well-connected in San Salvador business circles and could be helpful to me.

Peter escorted me to his parked car, made me get in and drove away. Within a few minutes he turned into a side road and stopped. While keeping the engine running and frequently glancing into his rear-view mirror, he told me, in a calm voice, that he had recently received a death threat from FARN, a Marxist revolutionary movement that included, among their highly publicized activities, the kidnapping of foreign businessmen for ransom. They already kidnapped a Japanese president of a textile company there, and killed him when the ransom wasn’t paid soon enough, and warned Peter that he would be next. “So, I had to change my routine, to stay ahead of them,” Peter said. “No more chauffeured cars. I drive myself, observe irregular hours, change the route between home and office frequently, and change cars, too. But I’m in danger, and so are you while you are with me. It’s your choice. If you want to part company now, no hard feelings. There are taxis over there.”

I didn’t have to think. “No, I’ll stay with you,” I said. “I’m sure we’ll be all right.” It was an impetuous, even reckless decision. But something compelled me to stick with my host, perhaps no more than a primitive sense of solidarity. Peter accepted my decision, and invited me to a party at his home, where I could meet local businessmen.

He had arranged armed guards for security, and would pick me up at my hotel. “But mind you,” he added, “nobody knows anything about the death threat. Not even my wife.”

The party was lively, but produced no useful contacts. And I couldn’t help feeling burdened by information no one else was privy to. I thanked Peter, returned to my hotel by taxi, and left the following morning. (I later learned that Peter had survived the threat, and left El Salvador shortly after our meeting).

On the flight from San Salvador to Miami, it all came together. The calm manner in which this man was dealing with the emergency impressed me, and it confirmed something that I had long known: that one must always be prepared for sudden shifts of fortune, and that maintaining one’s inner balance is paramount in dealing with them.

In the decades since, I have seldom given much thought to the subject. I was too preoccupied with my work (and adjusting to many different countries I lived in over that period) to pay much attention to what made me tick.

But in recent years the probing comments from others began to pique my curiosity. I still doubted if I had anything original to offer, but I wanted to discover my own *modus operandi*. This is what I wrote.

1. We are on our own. There is no cogent God to guide or judge us. The deities we worship are human creations. But even if it is not 'God-given', man's spirituality is as undeniable as his corporeality. We owe respect to those who need organized religion as long as they tolerate others' need to be different.

2. Prejudice against the unknown, though often understandable, must be resisted, both out of our humanity and for our own enrichment. A degree of pluralism enhances the quality of a community's life, and must therefore be protected, encouraged, and pursued responsibly by all concerned.

3. Shaping our lives in keeping with our talents and inclinations is a first duty and the primary key to personal fulfilment - greater than financial success. But this quest must be tempered by reasonable attention to family and social responsibilities.

4. Life's energy and meaning is to be found neither in total repose nor in aimless restlessness nor in the single-minded pursuit of one unchangeable goal, but in the never-ending quest for the apparently unattainable balance between movement and inner stability, between the dynamic and the static.

Maintaining one's inner balance under ever-changing conditions is most important in our life. That's what I try every day. It has helped me finding a peaceful and effective life in Japan, avoiding confrontations and misunderstandings, and focusing on what we have in common.