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Toshiyuki Namai entirely guides you to delicately feel and understand two aesthetic concepts of Japanese culture, “subtle taste” and “elegant simplicity.”

Toshiyuki Namai

I shall solemnly lecture upon two abstract aesthetic concepts of Japanese traditional culture. Those concepts I introduce are the two, “subtle taste” (wabi) and “elegant simplicity (sabi).”

Subtle taste is a concept in order to inwardly express a way of silent and calm spiritual state in Japanese culture. This spiritual state was comprehensively pursued by Sen no Rikyū (1522-1591) who sublimely perfected the art of the Japanese Tea Ceremony in Azuchi-Momoyama Period which is currently appreciated and treated as one of the great aesthetic values in Japan.

Historically speaking, tea master and Buddhist monk, Murata shukō (1423-1502) initiated Wabicha (the tea of refined simplicity) in Muromachi Period. Then, tea master, Takeno Jōō (1502-1555) inherited the spirit of Wabicha from Murata shukō and organized the basis (basic framework) of Wabicha.

Sen no Rikyū austerely and keenly practiced the basis of Wabicha and beautifully perfected it as the art of the Japanese Tea Ceremony. He was a tea master to two

powerful warriors, Oda Nobunaga (1534-1582) and Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537-1598) who valued the aesthetics of Wabicha very much.

Elegant simplicity (sabi) delicately pursues well-seasoned value and refined simplicity which profoundly perform an ideal state in Haiku (poems in seventeen syllables) especially expressed by Matsuo Bashō (1644-1694) in Edo Period.

As a matter of literature between the two languages, Japanese and English, there is no appropriate word which exactly expresses the concept, sabi in English. However, you are comparatively guided to know that the concept, sabi exists in the mental state of an individual who naturally enjoys “plain living and high thinking.”

As for you to concern the concept, elegant simplicity some more, you are instructed to imagine a pond in the silent Japanese garden deeply. If you are a delicate person, you will imagine something beautiful aesthetically in your heart.

Two questions regarding elegant simplicity are hereinafter given to you as follows:

- 1) Can you imagine some sort of well-seasoned value in front of the pond in the Japanese garden through experiencing the profound mood of tranquility yourself?
- 2) Do you deeply feel spiritual gorgeousness in your heart in the presence of what is called refined simplicity in the garden imagined?

For you to substantially feel and understand those two concepts, subtle taste and elegant simplicity, it is absolutely indispensable for you to sharpen your “perceptibility” by inches.

Now, you are guided to grasp that “how you refine your delicacy” is entirely commensurable to “how you sharpen your perceptibility.”

I truly tell you the following for your cultural development in the future. You are fundamentally required to have “reasonable life experience” yourself for the sake of delicately feeling and understanding the two, subtle taste and elegant simplicity.

Above all things, you surely need to experience “something bitter,” again and again in your life in order to feel and understand the two. On the other hand, something easy really spoils your susceptibility in your substantial process to feel and understand the two.

Ultimately, what you have as a matter of life experience absolutely ameliorates everything in this matter meaningfully given.