

Reflections on My Learning Journey with ICPA

When I enrolled in the ICPA Specialist Qualification Programme in September, my motivation was driven by both professional curiosity and a longstanding admiration for Japan. As an etiquette consultant specializing primarily in Western etiquette and protocol, I had already visited Japan twice and was continually fascinated by its culture, traditions, and way of life. Each visit left me with a desire to understand more than what could be observed as a traveller.

I wanted to move beyond the perspective of a visitor and gain a deeper understanding of the values, customs, and social principles that shape Japanese society. My goal was not only to enrich my own knowledge but also to better support clients who travel to Japan or interact with Japanese people. I believe that understanding a culture requires more than learning its customs; it requires understanding the mindset and philosophy that give those customs meaning.

Over the course of the programme, from September to March, I had the privilege of learning under the guidance of Hakuba-sensei. Each week brought new insights into Japanese culture, etiquette, and ways of thinking. What impressed me most was that every topic extended far beyond rules and formalities. Instead, we explored the cultural principles that underpin daily interactions and social relationships, allowing us to understand not only what is done in Japan, but also why.

Among the many concepts we studied, two left a particularly profound impression on me: harmony and hospitality.

The Japanese concept of *wa* (harmony) fundamentally changed the way I think about human relationships and communication. In many Western societies, success is often associated with standing out and asserting individuality. Through this programme, I came to appreciate a different perspective: that true greatness often lies in creating balance, fostering mutual respect, and contributing positively to the collective. Harmony is not passive; it requires awareness, empathy, self-discipline, and consideration for others. This understanding has influenced not only my professional perspective but also my personal approach to communication and relationships.

Equally inspiring was the concept of *omotenashi*, the uniquely Japanese approach to hospitality. I learned that hospitality is not merely a service provided to guests, but a sincere expression of care and anticipation of another person's needs. The thoughtfulness embedded in even the smallest gestures reflects a remarkable level of respect and attentiveness. As someone working in the field of etiquette, I found this philosophy particularly meaningful and relevant.

One of the most valuable lessons from this journey was the realization that communication does not always require words. Japanese culture places great importance on observation, subtlety, and the ability to read the atmosphere of a situation. Through this programme, I became more aware of how gestures, silence, timing, and sensitivity to context can communicate meaning just as effectively as spoken language. It opened my eyes to a more nuanced understanding of human interaction and reminded me that some of the most meaningful communication happens beyond words.

Hakuba-sensei's knowledge, dedication, and passion for sharing Japanese culture made every lesson both engaging and memorable. Her ability to connect historical traditions with modern-day practice transformed cultural concepts into living lessons that could be applied in everyday life. I am deeply grateful for her guidance, generosity, and encouragement throughout this journey.

Looking back, I realize that this programme offered far more than cultural knowledge. It provided a deeper appreciation for the principles that underpin Japanese culture, including harmony, respect, attentiveness, and genuine consideration for others. These lessons have enriched not only my professional understanding of etiquette but also my personal perspective on human interaction.

I am deeply grateful to Hakuba-sensei and the ICPA team for sharing this knowledge with such generosity and authenticity. While my studies have come to an end, my appreciation for Japanese culture and the values it embodies will undoubtedly continue to grow. The programme concluded with a beautiful graduation ceremony that I thoroughly enjoyed. It was a meaningful and memorable way to mark the end of this journey, and I was especially touched to celebrate the occasion together with a toast.