

***Shoku-iku*(Conscious eating): An Initiative from Japan for Teaching Wise Eating**

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Over the past three decades, efforts to encourage wise eating have been growing in developed countries around the world. In 1977, Dietary Goals for the United States (also known as the McGovern Report) was issued by the U.S. Senate Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs, launching food education in that country. In Italy, the Slow Food movement was founded in 1986 to rethink our modern approach to food and food culture. And in France, the Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Fisheries now sponsors *la Semaine du Goût* ("tasting week"), a nationwide annual event that has grown in scale since its origins in the 1990s as a program to introduce delicious, healthy cooking to primary school students.

Meanwhile on our own shores we have the Shoku-iku Basic Act, which was passed by the Diet in June 2005 and took effect a month later. Far more than an initiative by a single committee or ministry, the act is the world's first full-fledged law to address dietary habits.

It grew out of core ideas I proposed to the government eleven years ago about *shoku-iku*, which literally translates to "food education" but encompasses far more. In effect, it's a blueprint for conscious eating.

As defined by the law's preamble, *shoku-iku* is a foundation of daily living and a basis for achieving the three pillar goals of intellectual, moral, and physical betterment traditionally put forward in Japanese education. Its aim is to provide people with the right experiences and knowledge to choose food wisely and practice healthy eating habits.

The law establishes collaboration by the ministries of Health, Labour and Welfare (MHLW), Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF), and Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), led by the Cabinet Office and assisted as necessary by other government bodies. The three ministries together propose issues of better food and diet to the Shoku-iku Promotion Committee, which is organized by the

Cabinet Office under the chairmanship of the prime minister. The committee—including cabinet members and experts from the private sector such as myself—sets a five-year plan that is then budgeted and implemented. (The first five-year plan, finalized in March 2006, extends from 2006 to 2011; drafting of the second plan, to take effect in 2012, is in progress.) Building awareness of *shoku-iku* around the world is one important part of our activities.

Our aim in creating the Shoku-iku Basic Act was to promote healthful eating habits among Japanese. In particular, my colleagues and I placed emphasis on the family table, where a sound approach to eating, as well as basic manners, are fostered from a young age. We visualized the law as a step toward addressing present-day food concerns and building nationwide involvement in *shoku-iku*. We set forth basic policies on *shoku-iku* in the home, school, and community, and required local public bodies to formulate their

own plans of action, specifying the responsibilities to be fulfilled at national and regional levels. As a result of our initial five-year plan, as many as 74.6 percent of Japanese say they recognize the term *shoku-iku*, according to a May 2009 Cabinet Office report. Still, only 41 percent indicate that they understand its meaning, so clearly we need to do more to build awareness of the concept in approachable ways.

Shoku-iku in Japan: Three Settings, Three Pillars

Promoting *shoku-iku* means raising awareness of food-related concerns in three main settings—the home, school, and the community. In all three, educational institutions, organizations, prefectural and national governments, and others representing both consumers and industry interests (e.g., food manufacturers) must come together to galvanize nationwide involvement on issues of health, food safety, food supply, and more.

In the home: “The spirit of a three-

year-old lasts a hundred years,” or so the old Japanese proverb goes, and indeed, a parent or caretaker’s affectionate bonding and close communication give babies, toddlers, and children up to age three fundamentals that will benefit them years into their lives. The ages between three and eight are formative years for children’s personalities and physiques, when learning basic manners and eating habits through shared meals at home nurtures both the heart and body.

The cerebellum, which controls some emotional functions, matures at age eight, and so the six-year period until then is the critical window for children to absorb a basic sense of right and wrong from their experiences at the family table. Yet families in Japan are sharing only a third the number of mealtimes that they once did, and many children are eating alone. Households nowadays are failing to ground children in ethics by the time they are eight years old, underscoring the need for us to work toward “feeding” children values at the table during this most important

and impressionable time.

In school: *Shoku-iku* initiatives are now underway at all levels of education, from nursery and kindergarten through university and vocational school. Our activities here focus especially on tying lessons about food to lunch programs at elementary and junior high schools. MEXT’s Course of Study guidelines will mandate *shoku-iku* instruction in elementary, junior high, and high schools from 2011, 2012, and 2013, respectively.

In the community: Of our goals in this area, establishing a certification system for *shoku-iku* instructors will be key to promoting awareness of health and food safety among not only the general public, but particularly food professionals including nutritionists, chefs, and cooking teachers. In the roughly sixty years since World War II, many organizations and individuals have stepped in to improve dietary habits in Japan through volunteer activities, training programs, symposia, and the like; but to build further on their efforts, we will need more support

from the state, and we will also need to publicize *shoku-iku* by attracting more television, print, and other exposure. We are therefore working to create, and obtain funding for, a plan of programs tailored to people of varying ages and occupations and organized along three easy-to-understand pillars.

The first of these is developing people’s ability to choose food well—to judge what is safe and nutritious to eat. Projects here involve guiding people to extend their active, healthy life spans by staying fit and free of lifestyle-related diseases. The second pillar is instilling sound social eating habits, including good manners, proper etiquette for chopsticks, and taking pleasure in the communion of the table. Finally comes raising awareness of food supply and environmental issues, for example through teaching people to cook without waste and to eliminate leftovers. These, then, are the principles that give breadth and depth to our *shoku-iku* activities.

Shoku-iku and the World

In addition to these goals, I have one

more ambition: making *shoku-iku* and all that it implies a familiar watchword around the world. Food is a personal, but at the same time very global, concern. There are 6.9 billion people in the world, a number that is expected to rise to 9 billion by 2050. The Earth is said to be able to sustain an ideal population of about 5 billion; already we have exceeded that limit by more than 25 percent. Today, 1 billion people are suffering from malnutrition. Forty years from now that figure will double or perhaps triple. Some 1.2 billion people live without safe water, a number projected to increase to 2 billion in forty years.

At the other extreme, overeating and overly rich diets are causing a surge in lifestyle-related illnesses. Obesity, diabetes, cancer, and cardiovascular and cerebrovascular diseases are all on the rise. To us in Japan, this point was driven deep ten years ago by startling news from Okinawa.

By this I refer to what is called by some the Okinawan “Y2K shock”—the

release of the 2000 MHLW Prefectural Life Tables and the revelation that Okinawa had relinquished its accustomed place as the longest-lived prefecture in the country. Whereas Okinawan female average life expectancy remained in first place at 86.0 years, that of males tumbled from fourth place in 1995 (the previous iteration of the report, which is published every five years) to twenty-sixth, falling below even the national average of 77.7 years. Lifestyle-related illnesses resulting from obesity were to blame for this disturbing drop.

Okinawans had once been known for their plentiful diet of fruits and vegetables farmed in the islands’ warm climes, including goya (bitter melon) and nabera (loofah gourd), dubbed the twin “kings” of summer vegetables for their rich vitamin and mineral content. Yet at the time the 2000 MHLW National Health and Nutrition Survey was released, Okinawa ranked thirty-sixth out of all forty-seven prefectures in dietary intake of brightly colored vegetables and last in terms not only of



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other vegetables but of fruit as well.

Okinawans moreover ate the least amount of fish and seafood. Where they did top the list, however, was consumption of meat. Unlike mainland Japanese, who generally did not consume meat until modern times, Okinawans have eaten pork since the fourteenth century, when the practice was introduced through trade with China. Traditionally islanders were careful to waste none of the pig, from the skin and intestines down to collagen-rich parts such as the ears (which locals call *mimiga*) and head (*chiraga*). They also blanched the portions to take away excess fat before cooking, a step often abbreviated nowadays.

In short, Okinawans today are eating fewer fruits and vegetables and more fatty meat, and these factors are taking their toll on life expectancy. Okinawa was occupied by the United States after World War II, and with the influx of American-style food choices, lifestyle-related illnesses typical of the West supplanted infectious diseases as the primary medical concern.

American steaks, hamburgers, corned beef, and canned pork flooded Okinawa, greatly impacting islanders' eating habits. Traditional cooking such as *chanpuru* (tofu-and-vegetable stir-fry) or *konbu* dishes was cast aside in favor of ready-made hamburgers, and young people began eschewing pork that had been painstakingly drained of fat in the old-fashioned way. Today, Okinawa individually ranks highest in its concentration of fast-food shops, bars, and restaurants per 100,000 people in all of Japan.

In the subsequent MHLW Prefectural Life Tables issued in 2005, life expectancy for Okinawan males rose one

slot to twenty-fifth place, with women retaining their first-place ranking. Nutrition experts have recently been focusing on Okinawa, and now interest is turning to whether Okinawan men will return to the top ten in 2010—since if they do, that will mean that dietary guidance in the prefecture is having an effect.

As this account shows, examples underscoring the importance of *shoku-iku* are easy enough to find close to home. Even so, it is my goal to approach *shoku-iku* from a global perspective. After all, the enjoyment of a healthy and long life is a dream shared by all of us, regardless of where we call home.

The heart of *Shoku-iku* since the *Shoku-iku* Basic Act

We have successfully achieved about 75 percent of the goals that we put forward in the five-year action plan. Yet there is still much to be done in order to build awareness of the term, its full meaning, and the significance of its reach. When asked to describe it, many people cannot go beyond listing surface activities such as parent-and-child cooking classes or hands-on farming programs. And so I close by touching on what *shoku-iku* is at its core: namely, the education of the whole individual—in mind, body, and spirit—via food.

Parents have a crucial part to play in this endeavor. Turning for a moment to the animal world, it's clear that the role of a parent is to give children the power to live on their own. This applies to all species on the planet. A lioness hunts to feed her cubs while they are young, but when they grow to a certain point, she takes them along. She teaches them the skills they need, and, once they become able to secure their own food, they either

disperse to new territory or stay on to hunt for the home pride.

Training children to provide for themselves and their families is a natural and instinctive process.

In the old days, a family gathered around the same table and children absorbed social norms and life's lessons through those shared meals. This was once true of any household, but not anymore. Though parents are still feeding their children, the table is no longer a place to learn. Not surprisingly, more and more young people are failing to become independent because they do not know how to look after themselves. This is surely contributing to the rising number in our society of NEETs (young people not in employment, education, or training) and so-called parasite singles, or grown children who continue to live at home and depend on their parents.

Norms instilled at the family table impact how children go on to live their lives. As stated above, the optimum window for this early training is up to age eight, when the cerebellum matures. It is crucial that *shoku-iku* be formally incorporated as part of the three traditional educational goals of intellectual, moral, and physical betterment—because the difference is made while a child is still very young.

What children truly need as they prepare to voyage out into society is (to paraphrase the Chinese proverb) not to be fed a hundred fish, but to be taught how to use a hook and line. That is the role of parents and the purpose of education in the home. I might venture to say that as much as 80 percent of what we show and teach children at mealtimes significantly shapes their later lives and lifestyles. *Shoku-iku*—conscious eating—starts at the family table.