

The Difference That Made a Difference in My Life

Muslimah Shamsudin

I remember that during my childhood, I had no knowledge about Japan, but when samurai dramas were shown on Malaysian TV each week, I would sit watching with my family. I cannot remember why I enjoyed them; all I knew at the time was that samurai dramas were Japanese.

As I grew, there were more programmes from Japan, especially cartoons. My brothers and sisters would sit and wait for a long time before the cartoon started. The moment it started, my brothers would sing along with the programme although it was in Japanese. None knew what the song meant, but they learned it by heart and just sang. I wondered why Malaysia showed a lot of Japanese cartoons, but somehow I liked them all.

When my great grandmother was still alive, she would sit outside our house in the evening watching me and my brothers and sisters playing in the yard. We started digging small holes and found some square coins. When I asked her what kind of coins they were, she said they were Japanese. I also learned about the Japanese occupation during the war from her.

I learned more about Japan in history and geography lessons at secondary school. From time-to-time, I admired some of the Japanese culture that I had seen through TV. I always loved to see *ikebana* flower arrangement and Japanese interior design, but at that time Japanese food did not catch my interest. It never occurred to me that I would ever visit Japan.

When my Director of Human Resources told me I would be visiting Japan for training at JR East, my mind was cluttered with questions like, Can I do it? Can I make it? What if...?

I would like to share the experiences that made my life different during my stay in Japan.

At first, I was very worried. As a Muslim, I wondered how I could adapt to Japanese food and culture. While Muslims are forbidden to eat pork, they must also not eat chicken, beef, or mutton that is not slaughtered according to Muslim *halal* rites. It seemed inevitable that food might present problems. This was when I applied some Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP) techniques. In brief, much of NLP is about increasing your awareness of your

neurological system and learning to manage it. In other words, it is the way you filter and process your experience through your senses. 'Linguistic' in NLP refers to the way you use language to make sense of your experience and how you communicate that experience to others. 'Programming' is a series of steps designed to achieve a specific result. The results that you achieve in yourself and others are the consequence of your personal programmes. Thus, NLP is how you make sense of your world and most importantly how to make it what you want it to be.

I knew that most Japanese generally know little about Islam and the practices followed by a Muslim. A friend who had visited Japan, told me just to explain honestly and that once people understand, they will respect your principles and requirements. I was happy that as soon as I explained to my Japanese counterpart about my food restrictions, she made sure there was always something that I could eat at any gathering or function.

Another strict requirement for a Muslim is to pray five times a day. While working at JR East, the staff were kind enough to find a small room on the same floor where I could pray. Whenever I had to attend a programme somewhere else, I requested a room for praying a few days before the programme and all my requests were met. One time I prayed in the beautiful VIP waiting room at Hiroshima Station where the wall is painted with autumnal maple leaves. In the bathroom, I caught the scent of roses and I left thanking Allah (the All Mighty God) for such an experience.

Despite my initial fears, I had many good experiences during my stay in Japan. On one of my study trips to the Sendai Training Centre, I was taken to a *tofu* (soya bean curd) restaurant for dinner where all the dishes (including the ice cream) were made of *tofu*. On one trip to Kyoto, I tried a very tasty vegetarian *tempura* (deep fried food) dish.



Ikebana class with other JR trainees

(EJRCF)

For Muslims, it is important to make sure that no alcohol is used in cooking. My Japanese friends might have been annoyed by my asking the same questions at every meal, but it is a responsibility to ask. However, I soon found that Japanese food offers a lot of choices for Muslims. Being able to adapt to life in Japan did not depend only on believing that I could get through and on making requests and asking. Basically, in using NLP, you need to focus on the good things you want to happen. Then, you need to figure out how to achieve these goals, and finally, you follow the steps to achieve them. For example, I wanted to be able to pray at the right time wherever I was, so I identified the steps I needed to follow. My first step was to pray to Allah (the All Mighty God) so that my requirement could be performed anywhere and that the people I was making a request of would meet my need. Only after such prayers would I request a praying place.

I used NLP to achieve my training too. Before starting, I envisioned myself going through a good training and completing it successfully. I planned the things and steps I needed to take. So although I encountered some problems, I managed to get through.

I had other goals in addition to completing my training at JR East. For example, I wanted to learn as much as possible about *oshibana* (pressed flowers) and pottery. I told a Japanese friend about this, and her grandmother showed me how to make pressed flowers at her house. Some time later, during a trip to Mito City, I learned how to make clay pots.

In general, I believe that my strong faith and guidance from God along with my NLP principles made my stay in Japan a pleasant and fulfilling experience that I hope to share with friends in Malaysia.



Shodo calligraphy class

(EJRCF)



Author learning oshibana with friend's grandmother

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