



## Introduction

‘Two pilgrims find themselves walking down a long road. One of the pilgrims is wearing a wide-brimmed straw hat. The other is not. It is a scorching day. The sound of the cicadas is deafening. Neither of the pilgrims says a word to one another. They walk slightly apart, giving each other space for their own thoughts. After a few minutes of keeping one another company, the pilgrim wearing the straw hat takes it off and ties it to his pack. They keep walking, side by side.’

– Inspired by *Bushidō*, Nitobe (1908)<sup>1</sup>

## What is *chōwa*?

I have always thought that the English word ‘harmony’ had a slightly false ring to it. For me, it calls to mind beaming smiles and 1970s ‘flower power’ slogans, dusty porcelain angels on the mantelpiece of an elderly relative, or the beauty pageant contestant who says she prays every night for world peace. From religion to relationships, it makes me think of an illusory, heav-

only ideal – not something that many of us aspire to achieve in this world.

The Japanese word *chōwa*, by contrast, although it can be translated as ‘harmony’, is about something far more practical. It is a way of life. It is something that you can actively do. It would be more accurate to translate *chōwa* not as ‘harmony’ but as something more like ‘the pursuit of harmony’ or ‘the search for balance’.

In Japanese, *chōwa* is written like this:

調和  
*chō – wa*

The first character, *chō*, means ‘search’.

The second character, *wa*, means ‘balance’.<sup>2</sup>

*Chō* is a simple character, but it has many layers. *Chō* can be used in a literal sense, such as in the verb ‘to search’ when one is rifling through drawers, and in a metaphorical sense, when one is racking one’s brains searching for an answer or for inspiration. The character can be used in another verb: ‘to prepare’. Here, it means ‘finding order’ or being ready for an upcoming challenge. Finally, like ‘harmony’, *chō* has a musical sense. Think of an orchestra tuning up – the Japanese word for this is *chō-gen*, which literally means ‘readying one’s bow’. The *chō* character is intimately related to this kind of tuning: it means a gradual series of small modifications or adjustments as we search for the right note, until we find that we are in tune.

*Wa* also means ‘peace’. This can be a state of tranquillity

and stillness – think of a peaceful atmosphere or a calm sea. Or, when used as a verb, it can refer to a deliberate act of bringing peace, or balancing two or more opposing sides – whether people, forces or ideas – so they work better together. As a verb, this character is used in an active sense – not just ‘peace’ as a noun, but as an act of softening, moderating and relieving. Finally, the *wa* of *chōwa* refers to the country of Japan itself, particularly traditional Japan. Japanese clothes are *wa-fuku*, Japanese style is *wa-fū*, and *washoku* refers both to ‘Japanese food’ and a ‘balanced diet’. This same *wa* is found in *Reiwa*, the era that began in Japan on 1st May 2019 when the current emperor, Emperor Naruhito, ascended the throne.<sup>3</sup> *Reiwa* means ‘beautiful harmony’ or ‘the pursuit of harmony’.<sup>4</sup>

If we add *chō* and *wa* together, they come to mean ‘searching for balance’ – in a way that is quintessentially Japanese.

In everyday language in Japanese, we talk about *chōwa* as a noun – like harmony in English – but we also talk about *chōwa* as a verb. It is less musical than the verb ‘harmonize’ in English, and it has a less spiritual meaning. It is more everyday, more relatable, more like ‘going with the flow’. Like anything we learn – such as a martial art or playing an instrument – *chōwa* is something we can practise and become better at.

## The land of Wa

*Chōwa* teaches us, above all else, to orient ourselves towards practical solutions. Whether in our personal life, our family life

or in our wider community, *chōwa* is about searching for peaceful ways of finding our balance. It requires us to see our own needs and desires objectively and set them alongside the needs and desires of others to bring about real peace. This approach takes genuine humility. It's about cultivating respect for others while also respecting ourselves.

This way of thinking has, for centuries, been considered quintessentially Japanese. *The Book of Wei*, a third-century history book from Northern China (then called Wei), describes some of the first encounters with Japan, which the Chinese called the Land of Wa. Third-century visitors from China noted in their journals that people from the Land of Wa 'bow to show respect to important people. They are friendly and respectful to visitors'.<sup>5</sup> Journal entries by the Chinese visitors were recorded as part of *The Book of Wei*. They describe the country's reputation for gift-giving, the Wa people's habit of clapping their hands together in prayer, and their fondness for raw fish – customs that all endure in Japan to this day.

### **Our most precious treasure**

Around 300 years later, the Prince of Japan, Shōtoku Taishi, ruled over a divided country. He had introduced a Chinese-style system of modern government, up-to-date agricultural technology and a new religion, Buddhism. Followers of the native Japanese Shinto religion clashed with this new faith. Shinto – 'the way of the gods' – was all about appreciating natural

beauty and the ritual worship of the spirits, or *kami*. Buddhism, with its concept of enlightenment and its strong ethical expectations, was really only understood by the educated elite. But Prince Shōtoku was able to bring compromise to his country by imposing a peaceful constitution. Buddhism and Shintoism could be practised alongside one another.

The first article reads:

以和爲貴、無忤爲宗。  
人皆有黨。亦少達者。

‘Harmony is our most precious treasure, disputes should be avoided. We all have our own views, but very few of us are wise.’

– Shōtoku Taishi (AD 574–622)<sup>6</sup>

To this day, Shintoism and Buddhism do more than coexist in Japan; they complement each other. Many Japanese people see themselves as Shinto or Buddhist, as neither or as both. The soul of modern Japan was forged from this peaceful, positive response to what could have led to war and disaster – putting harmony before personal preference or self-interest, even before strongly held beliefs. The maintenance of these two belief systems led to the development of a single culture combining an appreciation for the forces that create and govern our natural world with an ethical commitment to other people.

## Why is *chōwa* relevant today?

Much of what visitors to Japan find so beguiling, but also so attractive, about the country can be distilled in the lessons that *chōwa* has to teach us. You may have heard stories about Japanese football fans making sure a stadium is spotless after a game, or seen videos of Japanese trains where each and every person, even in the heart of the busiest city in the world, commits to cultivating an atmosphere of quiet and stillness.

Since leaving Japan and making a new life for myself in England, I have seen some aspects of Japanese culture in a new light and have even looked at some with a more critical eye. Yet when I tell people about my culture, I find myself coming back again and again to these simple lessons in finding balance. There are practical things we can all use in our daily lives to help us find our balance.

Today, searching for balance, let alone finding it, is easier said than done. We may feel that we have no time to stop and think. We may feel like we are moving through the world mechanically: going through the motions with our families, hoping any difficulties will simply go away; working long hours at our jobs, where we've stopped caring deeply enough about the people we work with, without giving enough time to ourselves or our loved ones; frantically buying things in the hope that they will make our lives a little easier, that they will bring us a kind of 'instant balance'; trying to forget the effects our choices have on our natural world, choices that are disturbing

the stability of the planet itself. It is high time we checked in on one another, that we all took a deep breath and introduced a little quiet into our lives. Only then can we take a proper look at what is going on with us – and what is going on with those around us. The *chō* of *chōwa* – ‘to search’ or ‘to prepare’. This is the first step in finding our balance.

And then there’s the *wa* of *chōwa*: a way of bringing about ‘active peace’. At the beginning of this introduction, I talked about harmony as a noun. It is when we see harmony as a far-off state, a concept or an ideal that it takes on the air of something impossible, even make-believe. But when we see harmony as a verb – living in harmony with ourselves, or living in harmony with others – then we see that there are things we can all do. We come to see that finding our balance – in our places of work, in our personal relationships, in our society – is about actively searching for solutions, never forgetting that we all live on this planet together.

I believe *chōwa* is a way of thinking that we could all benefit from – now more than ever.

Finally, I would like you to remember throughout this book that, as in the parable at the start of this introduction, *chōwa* is a commitment to responding as generously and as bravely as we can to the world around us. It is about being open to others so we can share in their suffering as well as their joy. And it is understanding that we are all on the same journey: the search for balance.

## Chōwa waypoints

I don't think that any of the ideas I share with you in this book require much extra explanation. But I'll do my best to explain sometimes rather knotty Japanese proverbs as clearly as I can, and when I do give examples from my life, or share stories from family members or friends whose lives in Japan may seem distant from your own, I'll try to relate these experiences back to something more universal. I will also give you a chance to pause and reflect along the way by asking you questions to consider, or summarising the ground we've covered together. Let me sum up briefly what this book is all about.

- How to cultivate an everyday state of readiness, flexibility and endurance to help us find our balance.
- How to engage in a spirit of open-heartedness with others and better manage difficult emotions.
- How small changes in what and how we eat, and how we treat the natural world, can bring balance to our minds, bodies and souls.
- How to face up to death and disaster, to prepare for the worst, knowing that it will come, and how to pick ourselves back up again.