



# A Different Kind of Luxury: Japanese Lessons in Simple Living and Inner Abundance

*Andy Couturier*

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**A Different Kind of Luxury: Japanese Lessons in Simple Living and Inner Abundance** Andy Couturier  
Raised in the tumult of Japan's industrial powerhouse, the eleven men and women profiled in this book have all made the transition to sustainable, fulfilling lives. They are today artists, philosophers, and farmers who reside deep in the mountains of rural Japan. Their lives may be simple, yet they are surrounded by the luxuries of nature, art, contemplation, delicious food, and an abundance of time. For example:

Atsuko Watanabe is an environmentalist and home-schooler who explores Christian mysticism while raising her two daughters in an old farmhouse Akira Ito is an ex-petroleum engineer who has become a painter and children's book illustrator and explores the role of *chi* (life energy) in the universe through art and music Kogan Murata grows rice and crafts elegant bamboo flutes that he plays for alms in the surrounding villages Jinko Kaneko is a fine artist and fabric dyer who runs a Himalayan-style curry restaurant in the Japan Alps By presenting the journeys of these ordinary—yet exceptional—people, Andy Couturier shows how we too can travel a meaningful path of living simply, with respect for our communities and our natural resources. When we leave behind the tremendous burdens of wage labor, debt, stress, and daily busyness, we grow rich in a whole new way. These Japanese are pioneers in a sense; drawing on traditional Eastern spiritual wisdom, they have forged a new style of modernity, and in their success is a lesson for us all: live a life that matters.

**Andy Couturier** is an essayist, poet, and writing teacher. He lived in Japan for four years where he taught, was a journalist, and worked on environmental causes. He lives in the San Francisco Bay Area.

## A Different Kind of Luxury: Japanese Lessons in Simple Living and Inner Abundance Details

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## **From Reader Review A Different Kind of Luxury: Japanese Lessons in Simple Living and Inner Abundance for online ebook**

### **Enso says**

This was a very inspiring book on another way to live from the point of view of Japanese culture. It exposed a lot of facets of Japan that I wouldn't otherwise have seen.

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### **Joshua says**

My kind of book: interviews with Japanese cats (both men and women, married and not, with children & not) who live in the countryside in sometimes-rickety farmhouses, grow their own food, and practice their arts/crafts/writing/philosophizing/flute-playing/activism/etc. What's not to like? Even our colleague Hank Glassman makes a guest appearance!

Consequence of reading this book: I want to make my own miso next winter!

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### **Annie says**

I wish I can go back living simply but I know it will be impossible for me unless I must (ex. if I lose my job, health wise and etc.) But I notice living simply there are things I take for granted (internet, shopping, getting my food on the table and etc).

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### **Katherine says**

"If I'm busy I might look over something magnificent...."

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### **Eddie Hsu says**

I take issue with the romanticism of poverty and underdevelopment championed by the vignettes in the book. Many of the individuals in the book find inspiration while visiting rural India/Nepal/Tibet in the 60s and 70s, and come to the conclusion that development is almost always unequivocally bad. Some even bemoan development work, asserting that the introduction of modern agricultural techniques, technology, and ideas have destroyed their picturesque ideal of the good life: poverty, subsistence farming, and an unhealthy

obsession with ritual and tradition. Furthermore, the lives of the people in the book are fully predicated on the fact that the rest of Japan does not live like they do. These individuals enjoy cheap land because urbanization over the past half century shifted the Japanese demographic out of rural Japan. I'm fine with the central thesis of the book of the benefits of artisanship and living closer to the land, but I'm much less convinced of their dogmatic and philosophical considerations.

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### **Donna says**

A really amazing book which gave such a detailed insight into these 11 peoples lives. So much so that I would love to visit there and meet them. I truly felt that they had made such wise decisions in living simply but so richly. A must read if you want to live simply.

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### **Chris Beal says**

I read this book some time ago after seeing the author at a local reading. It was written, of course, before the nuclear tragedy in Japan but is all the more urgent and timely a book because of that accident. Japanese people, along with those elsewhere who rely on nuclear power for their society's voracious power needs, are asking, "Is there another way?" This book points to that way.

The author, who lived in Japan for four years and originally published the interviews in this book along with others in a series for the Japan Times, sought out a number of people who lived simple and happy lives. Mostly living in the countryside, they had dropped out of the frenetic Japanese way of life, instead preferring an abundance of time for contemplation and enjoyment. Each had a quite different story. Some were artists of various kinds, others were craftspersons, some gardened. Likewise, some lived alone, others had families. Some were off the grid but not all of them. But all shared a sense of wonder in life that their contemporaries all too often lack.

The author and interviewer chose wisely and edited wisely as well. I might add that the book is beautifully assembled, with pictures that bring the people interviewed to life. If you want to find inspiration that a different, gentler way of life is possible, read this book.

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### **Winnie Shiraishi says**

I first read Andy Couturier's articles in Japan Times and was so delighted when the book came out. Treasure every word. Inspiration for how life can be lived regardless of the naysayers who try to convince you otherwise.

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### **Powersamurai says**

This is the sort of book you read slowly. Not because it is deep, but because the words contained within

make you stop to think about... about... about... It makes you think.

The people featured in the book are people who have left the city behind to make a living, a simple living, in the country. If you are looking for tips on how to slow down and make life more meaningful, this is the book for you. If you are looking for a plain old how-to book on simple living, this is not the book for you. The pearls of wisdom hidden in the chapters describing everyone's life hit you in the face. Sometimes, they creep up on you unexpectedly, and you almost miss them.

I talked with Andy for an article in Kansai Scene. And he talked for SWET (Society of Writers, Editors and Translators in Japan) about the writing and publishing of the book. Not only did this book take many years of interviews, but also many years of writing before Andy felt comfortable to release it. It is a slow book that no matter how much you try, you cannot rush it. I have savoured it over the last 6 months. I know you will, too.

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### **Richard Derus says**

Rating: 4\* of five

**The Publisher Says:** Raised in the tumult of Japan's industrial powerhouse, the eleven men and women profiled in this book have all made the transition to sustainable, fulfilling lives. They are today artists, philosophers, and farmers who reside deep in the mountains of rural Japan. Their lives may be simple, yet they are surrounded by the luxuries of nature, art, contemplation, delicious food, and an abundance of time.

For example:

- Atsuko Watanabe is an environmentalist and home-schooler who explores Christian mysticism while raising her two daughters in an old farmhouse
- Akira Ito is an ex-petroleum engineer who has become a painter and children's book illustrator and explores the role of chi (life energy) in the universe through art and music
- Kogan Murata grows rice and crafts elegant bamboo flutes that he plays for alms in the surrounding villages
- Jinko Kaneko is a fine artist and fabric dyer who runs a Himalayan-style curry restaurant in the Japan Alps

By presenting the journeys of these ordinary—yet exceptional—people, Andy Couturier shows how we too can travel a meaningful path of living simply, with respect for our communities and our natural resources. When we leave behind the tremendous burdens of wage labor, debt, stress, and daily busyness, we grow rich in a whole new way. These Japanese are pioneers in a sense; drawing on traditional Eastern spiritual wisdom, they have forged a new style of modernity, and in their success is a lesson for us all: live a life that matters.

**My Review:** A beautiful book, considered as an object, and an idea that resonates strongly with me: Less can indeed be more. Life's clutter isn't inevitable, and it isn't always desirable. The simple life needn't be spartan or uncomfortable; the means of making a living needn't be soul-killingly boring. Choosing a balance of life, living, and lifestyle can be liberating without being impoverishing. It is telling that the land that gave the world Shinto, the natural world's religion, gives us the exemplars of balanced creativity and productivity shown in this lovely object.

The author lived in Japan for four years. He appears to have that rare quality of being able to become friends with the most interesting person in every room he enters. The eleven people he has selected for this

collection of profiles are each worthy of a book of their own. Meeting any one of them would be a highlight in a four-year period, let alone all eleven of them.

Couturier lives in Northern California, which is unsurprising. His affinity for the simple-life-of-purpose would logically lead him to the home of the American Counterculture. His Japanese friends are all urban escapees as well, though several have lived in major urban centers in their lives. Masanori Oe, for example, was an experimental filmmaker in the New York counterculture of the 1960s. He felt he had to leave Japan after World War II:

“That was the psychological scenery then: everything had fallen apart. Even the folk festivals disappeared. There was no money for that kind of thing, and no interest.

At the same time, the experience I had at the end of the war led me to have no confidence that my mother and father could protect me. There was nothing I could rely upon, nothing I could trust. Later, when...a lot of American culture came in [to Japan]...all of this was locked up inside of me, I began to resist everything, I couldn’t believe in these things that had crumbled before my eyes.”

After New York and its wild ways, Masanori moved to Tokyo for the 1970s and created more art, including a translation of The Tibetan Book of the Dead into Japanese. Coming to a Buddhist understanding of illusion, Masanori stepped out of the culture of possession and creation of possessions, moving to Japan’s Alps in a statement of intent to simplify his life and his world. His hectic life of bringing alternative awareness to the urban Japanese culture gave way to a pastoral life of harmony with the seasons, marking passing time with harvests and childrearing milestones, and moving slowly to write and publish his own philosophical view of the world.

His story is archetypically Countercultural, whether for Japan or the US. The outlines of the tale are out of Thoreau, leaving the hurlyburly of the nineteenth century behind as he travels to Walden. This is a seductive, beguiling dream, this laying down of the world’s imposed cultural burdens to take up those of a harder, older tradition, and finding in that trade for a harder way of making a living a tremendous ease of life.

The ten other people profiled made very similar choices, and followed reasonably similar courses. This is the weakness, if it can be called that, of the book. It is repetitive if read as a single experience, as most books are meant to be read. Far better, in my view, to dabble, to shop among the profiles for the one that best suits one’s mood of the moment. Each iteration of storytelling has some unique moment, some wonderful phrase or essential insight, that could easily get lost if the book is gobbled. Approach the experience of reading as you would a bento box meal. The rewards will be commensurate with your patient, inviting effort.

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### **Sweetmongoose says**

I loved this book. I read it over a long period of time, in short pieces. There are 11 people profiled in the book in separate chapters. The profiles are based on interviews and time the author spent with these inspiring

people. There is a feeling of friendship and intimacy between the writer and the people he profiles; it is a profoundly respectful approach. Each lives in a different way from the Japanese mainstream and most (perhaps all?) have spent time in India. There are reflections on spirituality, organic farming, freedom, art, meaning of life, how to live day-to-day, and activism, among other fascinating topics. It is hard to sum up the total effect of this book, but I found it inspiring. The title is apt: simple living gives a different kind of luxury from a materialistic approach to contemporary living.

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### **Tom Mitchell says**

This was a wonderful account of the lifestyle of eleven artisans of rural Japan.  
Highly recommended.

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### **jen says**

Despite the subtitle that sounds like this is a self-help book, it is actually a collection of profiles of Japanese artists, activists, and others who have chosen alternative lifestyles in Japan. I read this a few month ago and am waiting to write a full review until I go back to the book and take some notes from the stories. However, a brief note that some of the people profiled in this book are anti-nuclear activists and speak in detail about the dangers of nuclear power in Japan. It may be too difficult to read these sections right now; on the other hand, some successes are noted in the book - and it is a valuable source for alternative viewpoints and history of nuclear issues in Japan.

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### **Chuck T says**

I loved this book. There are many things one can go back and reread and ponder. I find artists and crafts people who strike out on their own, forego the "normal" path for the road less travelled and find a way to survive and thrive to be fascinating and inspiring. As one who feels trapped in the "corporate world" to "pay the bills" but whose heart always longed to join the ranks of the artists and craftsmen & women I so admire, I feel a longing to join their ranks. But - I am torn. I have not developed the skills to do so, and I have a responsibility to wife & children to support them. But the reality is - I lack the courage to do so. I admire the courage these people have.

There are things about this book that you may find irritating. The author seems to be writing about a group he knows and is acquainted with as a friend so they are all somewhat similar and have similar backgrounds and leanings. Eastern spirituality, left leaning socialist & green politics, experiences in India, etc. So there isn't the breadth of diversity of world views I would have liked to see. But none the less I found them all interesting and enjoyed reading about them. (This from a primarily conservative, Christian, Western, corporate male.)

At times the author's own admiration and attempts at glowing prose about them can start to intrude on the most interesting aspect of the book - THEIR stories. Everyone has their flaws, so there is a danger in overly romanticizing them, their lives, and their lifestyle. But - none the less - well worth the read. It certainly is thought provoking and an interesting contrast to life here in the US.

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### **Suzanne says**

Around fifteen years ago, when Andy Couturier first conceived of this project, Americans were looking to Japan for ideas on how to run businesses and educate children. In light of the recent economic downturn and an increasing concern for the environment - even among conservatives - it seems that we would have been better off listening to the eleven individuals profiled in this book. These Japanese men and women have learned to live lightly upon the earth, with as little money as possible, and with an abundance of time. Having time allows them to grow their own food, revel in the beauty of nature, pursue creative endeavors, and contemplate the meaning of life and death, and the mysteries of the universe.

At best, this book will convince readers to make changes for the better in their lives. At the very least, anyone who dips into these pages will meet some fascinating people.

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