

How an Overseas Experience Opened My Eyes

Last summer I participated in an educational trip to Cambodia. Before I took part in this program, I did not have a good image of Cambodia. What I could find in Japan was only negative information about the civil war, land mines, and orphans. However, I was completely misled by such information, because it was an extremely bright country in practice. Through the one week program, my perspective on different cultures has changed. Especially, my perspective on cross-cultural communication has changed because of what I learned from the following three experiences.

First of all, it turned out that English is not a universal language. English is the most familiar foreign language for Japanese people who are learning English as a foreign language at school. As a result, when we go abroad, most Japanese think that using English is the minimum requirement needed to communicate with local people. This is what I had thought. However, in Cambodia, even when I greeted people in English, they understood nothing! I realized that I had expected that foreigners could speak English naturally. I reflected on the fact that I had created a selfish image because of my way of thinking.

Secondly, giving donations is not always helpful. When we visited an elementary school, we

donated the pencils we had brought from Japan. However, they had already received a large number of pencils from groups that they had visited from Japan before us. When I heard this, I wondered if what we were doing was probably done mainly for our own self-satisfaction. I realized that we must be careful to prepare what the other party really needs when we make a donation. Also, we should think about the local situation after the donation when we donate things and give technology for free. If we create a cycle of dependency based on accepting donations, the local economy of production and consumption will be broken. Therefore, I believe it is necessary to go to meet the children of developing countries and to find out what the children really need now.

Thirdly, material satisfaction is not proportional to human well-being. We cannot say that Cambodian people are well blessed with modern consumer goods. However, they are making what is necessary out of what they have around them and they were living very happily. On the other hand, Japanese people usually just complain about what they don't have, and don't try to fill the gap for themselves. The people in Cambodia smiled happily and were content with what they had. I could feel a warmth in the people that we cannot see in Japan. I had a good experience to spend time working on solutions to problems with them, and laughing together. I felt that the secret of the richness of the heart is a degree of self-sufficiency.

We tend to think that life in Cambodia is troubled by poverty. However, Cambodians enjoy their life. They appreciate what they have and make the most of it. People help each other and share things. In addition, they are trying to improve their situation by themselves. I met a lot of people trying to restore historical sites and building schools and educational institutes. These people have even encouraged me to act more for the world. Helping people in need in other countries is wonderful, but first we should consider carefully what they really need.

By experiencing the differences between Japanese and Cambodian culture, I have learned that we need to reexamine our customs and stereotypes that we have as Japanese people. We need to be more open and flexible in dealing with the outside world. In addition, spending time in a different culture has shifted my perspective on the world in general. I also realized that there are many hidden problems behind people's happy smiles. I have come to know the importance of understanding the other side of things. By actually going abroad, we can experience many things that we cannot understand just by studying from books. From now on, I would like to not only go abroad for sightseeing, but also to be more aware of the differences between other countries, and my own culture. [695 words]