



PHOTO BY TREVE JOHNSON/PHOTO ART BY SPIRALA

# The Way of Kanji

Breaking the code: Our essayist finds serenity on the most unlikely path.

Shopping for a gift on Fourth Street in Berkeley, I dip into stores feeling happy enough. But as I survey shelf after shelf of obsessively arranged, shrink-wrapped merchandise that I'll never need, will never buy and don't even necessarily understand, I am suddenly overwhelmed by a material culture that spits out things that don't appeal to me in the least. (Tell me I'm not the only one astounded by the fact that lime green is popular again.) My breathing becomes shallow and quick, and my head feels far too light for the amount of gravity at hand. A panicked energy sours my stomach as I sense how far out of step I am with consumerist energies and forces. And yet, I came for a gift, and I'm determined to leave with one.

I spot Miki's Paper across the street, and I know I'll feel better inside that store,

surrounding myself with hand-made Japanese items, each one a little work of art. Unfortunately, other people have crowded into the tiny shop, so I gravitate toward the sole empty space, looking for something, anything, to soothe me. If I can't find a calming object here, I won't be able to find it anywhere on Fourth Street—and what will I do *then*?

That's when I spot the kanji. It's just a small display. Well, not a display at all, as the kanji's not the point. Incense is the point. But in neat kanji (one of three scripts in Japanese writing), someone has thoughtfully supplied the Japanese word for each type of incense. I've never seen these words before:

白檀 sandalwood  
石榴 pomegranate  
水仙 narcissus

What joy—I've found some kanji! I've come home!

In every case, I recognize the initial character (白 is “white,” 石 is “stone,” and 水 is “water”), but I'm unfamiliar with their partners. I lean in and study the characters more, trying to tease them apart for bits of meaning. For instance, the second half of “pomegranate” is 榴, which contains “tree” (木) and “to detain” (留). But what could these two parts mean when combined as 榴? Although I'm not getting very far, this puzzle feels like just what I needed. I'm somewhat stumped, but I also have a toe-hold, so I'm perfectly engaged.

The hubbub of shoppers falls away, and I feel alone in the most comforting way, focusing on the written characters as if they're my lifeline to sanity. In a kanji-induced trance such as this, I become rather like my dog whenever she stares down a squirrel. Her eyes fixate on one point, her lips part, her

CONTINUED ON PAGE 12

heart seems to beat through her chest, and she coils her energy as if she's about to shoot out like an arrow in pursuit of prey. When I zero in on kanji, my breathing slows to a normal pace, then slows further to a deep, steady tempo that I can never quite achieve in yoga. If someone called to me now, they'd probably be out of luck. For some reason, kanji allows me to forget the world. And what a relief to focus on something other than myself!

Standing in Miki's, I turn my attention to the last word, 水仙, "narcissus." If 水 is "water," what could 仙 be? The left side of 仙 means "person" (亻), and the right side says "mountain" (山). But what does it mean when they're stuffed together in one character?

**My path to a deep, quiet, interior place happens to involve the strokes and dots of symbols from a foreign land. I could never have anticipated, even five years ago, that these delicate lines would play any meaningful part in my life.**

I grapple with the problem all the way back to my car and my house and then my dictionary, where I find that 仙 means "hermit." Ah, a hermit is a person living alone in the mountains. And when you join "water" with "hermit," you get "narcissus," perhaps a solitary flower in ponds where more social flowers congregate. The world seems like a lovelier place for this discovery. What a thrill to crack the hard shells of characters and to find a pun inside.

For four years kanji has beguiled me. By any measure I'm far from fluent in Japanese. I don't read manga or play video games, so I rarely profit in a practical way from kanji knowledge (though it helps me determine how long to boil soba noodles). But I've been attracted to that culture for years. A visit to Japan at age 13 with my family lit a spark, and then a college course on Japanese literature reignited that fire. Frequent exposure to the Asian aesthetic in the Bay Area has probably done the most to fan the flames.

I spend staggering chunks of time studying kanji. When I'm feeling low, kanji is my antidepressant. It's hard to know why this antidote works so

effectively, but I think it gives my overactive mind something to chew on so it won't devour itself. Kanji presents a compelling challenge: I need to figure out what a character means and why. Because kanji requires me to concentrate fully, it quiets the mind, bringing on a focused, accepting state in which I'm utterly content to be doing what I'm doing.

I should note that kanji can also induce a state close to insanity. After studying kanji for four hours one afternoon, I told my husband, "I feel like I've been in some other world."

"Japan?" he said.

"No," I replied. "It was more like that windowless room in *A Beautiful Mind* where numbers fly by Russell Crowe's head while he tries to find patterns."

**M**y favorite way to relax is by slipping into a steamy bath with a book of Japanese essays, one that could take me years to unravel. I slide my eyes over the characters, seeing whether anything makes sense. Every once in a great while, a sentence jumps out at me, and I grasp it whole without needing the annotation at the bottom of the page. I think, "I'm doing it! I'm actually reading Japanese!" And I can sense all the years of study that carried me to this point, just as a champion runner feels the arduous years of training that throb in her sinews as she crosses the finish line.

My yoga teacher reminds us that water eventually carves a rock, drop by drop, and that with consistent practice, our bodies will also change, slowly but surely. Kanji comprehension comes at that kind of glacial pace. Day after day, the rock looks just the same: solid and unyielding. And then—a small change. Maybe a big one. The brain is capable of progress.

Occasionally, by the time I slip into a bath after a day of hunching at my computer to write about architecture, I'm so worn out that I absorb little to nothing from a page of Japanese. I can't tell 未来 from 本来 ("future" and "naturally") or 失笑 from 矢先 ("sarcastic laughter" and "arrowhead"). No matter. In that depleted state, I'm content to admire the shapes of characters. The other day I spotted *suimin jikan* ("sleep hours") written vertically, as is typical in Japanese books:

睡  
眠  
時  
間

I couldn't go any further; the characters arrested my attention entirely. Had I ever seen such a geometrically perfect formation? It didn't seem so. Just look at the repeating patterns. There's an "eye" (目) on the left side of

睡  
眠

and a "sun" (日) in both of these:

時  
間

Do you see the 日s? There's one on the left side of 時 and

another inside 間, though in a sense 間 contains three. If this architectural perfection doesn't rank up there with the best of Frank Lloyd Wright's geometric creations, I don't know what does.

Does my kanji fascination seem a little crazy? Sometimes it bothers me a little, the randomness of it all. I like to think I'm a rational person. I pride myself on planning my life and taking control of my decisions, so I never expected kanji to sidetrack me as it has. What if I had encountered Swahili or Sanskrit first? Would those shapes have swept me off my feet? I don't think so. After all, I studied Hebrew as a kid, and it left me cold.

Part of my attraction to kanji lies in the immense challenge, of course. To get by in Japanese, you need to know a few thousand characters. "A few thousand" may seem small in terms of dollars (a short stack of \$100 bills) or urban population (a scattering of apartment buildings).

**My yoga teacher reminds us that water eventually carves a rock, drop by drop, and that with consistent practice, our bodies will also change, slowly but surely. Day after day, the rock looks the same: solid and unyielding. And then—a small change. Kanji comprehension comes at that kind of glacial pace.**

But when you encounter 機械, 凝議 and 虛偽 ("machine," "consultation," and "falsehood," respectively), "a few thousand" swells to mountainous proportions.

And it's not as if I spend three minutes with a character and move on to the next. That would seem coldly promiscuous. Instead, I romance characters as passionately as a wine enthusiast makes love to the layers of a pinot noir, admiring the earthiness in the bouquet and the oak and cherry undertones, all while drifting back to a pinot enjoyed on the shores of a river 30 years before.

Kanji characters change each other almost alchemically. You generally read a character one way unless it's positioned next to another. Then the

pronunciations of both characters can change radically. Meanings can be just as slippery and unpredictable. You place "big" (大) next to "change" (変), and what word do they form? "Very," "serious," "immense" or "terrible," depending on the context.

I may have small kanji victories from time to time, but I'll never know a sense of mastery. And much to my surprise, I find that it feels OK not to master life in this one arena. In fact, I enjoy feeling a little lost. Our culture puts an extraordinary amount of emphasis on the knowledge we've acquired. We're always stuffing more into our minds and displaying that "wealth" in the showiest of ways. But kanji makes it clear who the master is.

**O**f course I sometimes feel frustrated by my failures with kanji. But in general I feel pleasantly humbled by its vastness, as when standing at the base of a redwood tree, gazing up to heights I can't fathom and sensing my smallness in the most delicious of ways. I've come to believe that spirituality is whatever you need regular contact with for a sense of sanity, a touchstone without which you'll feel out of sorts, the piece without which you're not fully yourself. It's the *sine qua non* of your life—the essential thing, the rudder without which you would simply be adrift. Some people find that kind of guidance in a positive thought for the day, others in meditation or prayer. Many rebalance themselves through peaceful contemplation in the wilderness. As soon as they arrive at a clearing in the woods, deeply inhaling the scent of cedar, they remember how they're meant to feel, how they want to feel at all times.

My path to a deep, quiet, interior place happens to involve the strokes and dots of symbols from a foreign land. I could never have anticipated even five years ago that these delicate lines would play any meaningful part in my life. And yet somehow they have become the path to my inner sanctuary. Maybe the actual path matters little; the destination turns out to be far more important than the journey. Or not the destination so much as the strong pull toward that place. Sonoma County writer Sam Keen said it well in *Learning to Fly*, a book about finding freedom through the flying trapeze: "All I know for certain is that I am being beckoned, and that at the core of my being there are good, if mystical, reasons known only to my inarticulate heart for persisting in this strange behavior."

Yes, "beckoned" is just right. When kanji beckon to me, I have no choice but to follow their lead, all the while blithely amazed at their mystical power over my soul. ●

*Eve Kushner is a Berkeley freelancer. Her book Crazy for Kanji: A Student's Guide to the Wonderful World of Japanese Characters is forthcoming from Stone Bridge Press in July. Visit her at [www.evekushner.com](http://www.evekushner.com).*