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A Person, Beyond the Label "Foreigner"

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"I want to work in Japan for a long time."

These were the words of a technical intern trainee I met while volunteering as a Japanese language teacher at a multicultural center in my city. He left a strong impression on me because he was highly motivated in his Japanese studies, and he explained that he was working hard to obtain a national qualification or pass the JLPT N1, as doing so would allow him to apply for permanent residency or extend his period of stay.

Another trainee from Vietnam, whom I taught at the same time, had been in Japan for only a short period and was not yet good at speaking Japanese. Nevertheless, he showed strong interest in life in Japan and asked me many questions about school life, seasonal events, and other everyday matters. He told me that he wanted to become fluent and to learn about aspects of life in Japan that cannot be found in textbooks or on the internet.

Shortly after these conversations, the Upper House election began, and rhetoric about building a nation that places Japanese people first became widely heard. I think that almost everyone heard this phrase at least once during that period. When I first heard it, I began to wonder who exactly was meant by "Japanese." At the same time, I felt a sense of unease about the future of the trainees.

Non-Japanese people living in Japan have diverse backgrounds. Some have married Japanese nationals, some have obtained permanent residency, and others have lived in Japan for many years and become fully integrated into Japanese society without either. In addition, except in limited cases, such individuals are generally regarded as being treated in the same way as Japanese citizens in most situations. For example, some people who have obtained permanent residency work as public servants.

On the other hand, determining how technical intern trainees should be treated is more complicated. They are now indispensable to Japanese industry, and there are said to be

factories and nursing care facilities that cannot function without them. However, despite the advancement of globalization, it is also true that some people look at them coldly simply because they come from other countries. Is it right to subject those who contribute to Japanese industry to such harsh treatment for that reason alone? These trainees do not have permanent residency or Japanese citizenship, and many of them return to their home countries after completing their training period. I cannot go so far as to say that they should be treated in exactly the same way as Japanese citizens or permanent residents. However, I believe that, regardless of nationality, as long as they live in Japan, it is necessary to make efforts to treat them in the same way as Japanese, as fellow human beings, and to protect their human rights.

Through my volunteer work as a Japanese language teacher, I have been involved with many technical intern trainees, and I have found that most of them study Japanese diligently and enjoy Japanese customs and seasonal events. At the same time, I fear that Japanese society is becoming increasingly strict toward them. This led me to wonder what might happen if a society were to accept a large number of people from abroad. To explore this, I examined the situations in other countries that have accepted many people from overseas. In the following sections, I will introduce two countries as examples.

First, Germany. Since World War II, the country has accepted many immigrants and refugees for both humanitarian and economic reasons. However, insufficient understanding of the cultural and historical backgrounds of those who were accepted mainly as labor, among other factors, has contributed to an increase in crimes related to race and religion. Differences in opinion between lawmakers and the general public have led to growing support for anti-immigrant and anti-refugee political forces. The administration launched in May of this year is working to address these challenges, and the issue still seems to remain deeply divisive in society.

Second, Sweden. Known as a country that has been generous toward immigrants, about 20 percent of its population consists of immigrants. However, in recent years, issues such as social isolation and an increase in crime have often been discussed. Sweden also has a comprehensive social welfare system, which, conversely, is said to hinder the independence of immigrants. These issues have led to growing frustration among the public, and in recent years, return has been encouraged through a policy of offering benefits of about five million yen to immigrants who choose to return to their home countries.

These cases suggest that the haphazard acceptance of people from overseas can disrupt a nation’s long-held social atmosphere and political balance. Given that the labor of the trainees has come to be taken for granted, it is unrealistic to eliminate all foreign workers. Instead, society as a whole should work together, regardless of whether people are Japanese or non-Japanese. I believe that such an approach will lead to genuine international cooperation.

I examined definitions of international cooperation and found one that describes it as “the principle of managing policies from a global perspective, rather than focusing solely on national interests.” I believe that the Technical Intern Training System closely reflects this ideal. According to the Japan International Trainee & Skilled Worker Cooperation Organization (JITCO),

> “The objectives and purpose of the Technical Intern Training Program are to transfer skills, technologies, or knowledge (‘Skills etc.’) accumulated in Japan to developing and other regions and to promote international cooperation by contributing to the development of human resources who can play roles in the economic development of those developing regions.”

I understand this to mean that, as an industrialized nation, Japan has a role in the international community to accept these trainees and provide conditions that allow them to live at a level comparable to Japanese residents. By doing so, they can later contribute to the industries of their home countries and apply the skills they have acquired, ultimately supporting broader global development.

Of course, providing a comprehensive living environment for foreign residents may create situations that cause the general public to feel resentment, as seen in Sweden. At the same time, forcing them to live under harsh conditions or failing to understand cultural differences may foster ignorance and mutual distrust, pushing foreign residents away. It may be unavoidable that some people develop feelings of aversion toward particular races or toward foreign residents as a whole due to the misbehavior of a small number of individuals. However, through my volunteer work as a Japanese language teacher, I have learned that, wherever people come from, there are good people and those who genuinely care about Japan. Focusing on individuals rather than viewing people only through the broad category of “foreigners” can, I believe, help us accept diverse cultures. This, in turn, can support genuine international cooperation. I hope that we will engage more actively with people from various backgrounds, build relationships based on personal understanding, and create a society in which everyone is respected as a person, free from prejudice and bias.