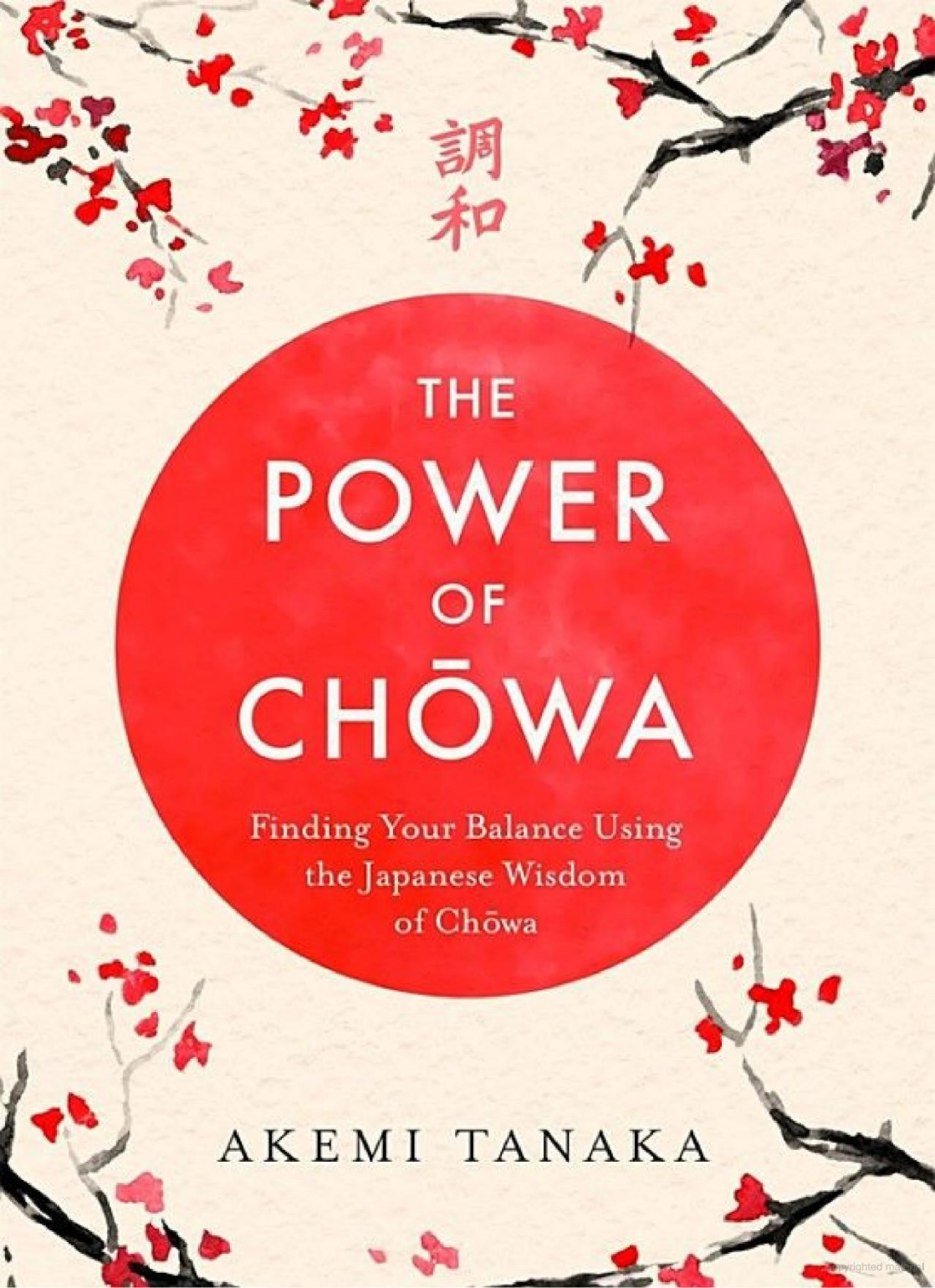
調和
THE
POWER
OF
CHŌWA
Finding Your Balance Using the Japanese Wisdom of Chōwa
AKEMI TANAKA

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About the Author

Akemi Tanaka is descended from a family of samurai who fought alongside the fifteenth-century warrior-poet Ōta Dōkan. She grew up in Japan, but now lives in London with her English husband. Akemi is an established cultural communicator on Japan, regularly leading cultural study tours back to her homeland, and giving presentations at schools, universities and cultural centres. Akemi founded the charity Aid For Japan and was recently given an award by the British government in recognition of her charity work for the orphans of the 2011 tsunami. She is also an expert in tea ceremony, for which she dresses in high traditional costume, and demonstrates this ancient art as a masterclass in mindfulness and gratitude.

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About the Book

The Japanese wisdom of chōwa offers a fresh perspective on how to live, and new ways both to make space and find balance among the many different directions that modern life pulls us in.

Chōwa is a Japanese concept that is often translated as 'harmony', but more accurately means 'the search for balance'. Chōwa is both a philosophy and a set of practices that can help us get to the heart of what is most important to us, and change our way of thinking about ourselves and others.

This book will teach you how to apply the lessons of chōwa to your own life to better focus on what really matters and cultivate an everyday state of equilibrium and calm that will help you feel ready for anything. Chōwa helps us to better balance our priorities and our relationships and find inner strength and flexibility in times of change and difficulty.

Whether you are searching for balance at home, at work, in your relationships or in any other area of your life, chōwa offers new solutions and a way of thinking that we could all benefit from, now more than ever.

To Rimika and Richard

Dear reader,

My name is Akemi Tanaka, and in this book I'd like to share with you a traditional Japanese approach to finding your balance: *chōwa*.

My name, Akemi, means 'bright and beautiful'. Tanaka, my family name, means 'in the middle of the rice fields', which is fitting as I was born in rural Saitama, part of the now vanished province of Musashi, in a small country town on the outskirts of Tokyo. My family are the proud descendants of high-ranking fifteenth-century samurai who fought alongside the warrior-poet Ōta Dōkan, the architect of old Edo Castle, now part of the Tokyo Imperial Palace.

After a traditional upbringing, I studied Western etiquette at a finishing school in Tokyo before studying at university in Saitama. It was an exceedingly busy time – I was studying English Literature and training to be a teacher, and in the evenings working at a cinema in the bustling capital, Ginza. There I met my first husband, a young doctor from Japanese high society. I mixed with diplomats, company presidents and members of the Imperial Family. I was schooled in the art of the tea ceremony and was fascinated by the formal codes of Japan's elite circles. It was a great adventure, like *My Fair Lady*.

I had my doubts about married life. I found myself doing all the little things that have served to keep women out of public life for generations – cooking, cleaning, repairing clothes. I also found myself thinking how I might find the courage to change things, for both me and my baby daughter, but in the end, change took me by surprise. My husband and I separated. The divorce left me a social outcast. Divorce was rare and single-parent families were almost unheard of in 1980s Japan. I felt completely taken aback, unable to decide on a course of action or deal with this sudden reversal of fortune.

At this time, I first felt an idea coming into focus. It was a way of thinking I had unconsciously practised throughout my childhood. It involved being attentive to the balance of my own mind (what was going on with me) and the special balance of a room (what was going on with other people). It stayed with me even when I moved across the world to make a new life in England. This way of thinking, like a sword that had slept at my side but was ready when I needed to wield it, was the wisdom of *chōwa*.

In Japanese, *chōwa* is usually translated simply as 'harmony'. The Japanese characters in this word literally mean 'the search for balance'. *Chōwa* offers problem-solving methods that help us to balance the opposing forces life so often throws at us: at home, at work, in our education and in our personal relationships.

I started to teach others about *chōwa*. I gave lessons to private students in my own home and then to larger groups, to high-school and university students. I started accepting invitations to speak on television and radio. The more I taught, the more I felt that the ideas, techniques and ways of thinking that helped me could be distilled in this concept of

chōwa. I was convinced that *chōwa* could also help others find their balance.

Chōwa is not a mysterious Japanese quality; rather, it is a philosophy, a set of practices that can change our way of thinking about ourselves and others. It's a way of thinking about the world that can be taught – and learned. While learning this age-old concept requires conscious, mindful effort, *chōwa* can teach us practical ways to approach everyday challenges: how to keep our homes clean and tidy, how to achieve a good work-life balance, how to find a love that lasts. *Chōwa* teaches us how to handle other challenges too: how to deal with death and disaster, how to act with the courage of our convictions, how to help others.

Today, I live in London. I have appeared on the BBC and on Channel 4, and have featured in the *Guardian* and *Daily Telegraph* speaking about issues relating to Japan. I have given lectures at Oxford and Cambridge universities and at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. I was given a Points of Light award in recognition of the work of my charity Aid For Japan – which I founded after the 2011 tsunami to support orphans of the disaster – by the former Prime Minister of Great Britain, Theresa May.

I hope you will find some of the lessons in this book as useful as I have. While I might once have taken them for granted, the more I've shared and taught about my culture, the more extraordinary I have found the lessons I am about to share with you.

Akemi Tanaka

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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)[1]

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, heavenly 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'.[2]

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.[3] *Reiwa* means 'beautiful harmony' or 'the pursuit of harmony'.[4]

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'.[5] 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)[6]

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.

Part One

Finding your own Balance

第一章

自分の調和を見つける

Opening Doors

'In every doorway
the mud from wooden sandals.
It is spring again.'
– Issa (1763–1827)[7]

Japan is home to some of the oldest wooden structures in the world, including many traditional houses. While some of these buildings have a certain elegance, they aren't always what you might call beautiful. What strikes me as more uniquely Japanese, rather than a minimalist look or a pleasing *wabi-sabi* simplicity, is the way every room, every item of furniture, is an exercise in forethought, planning, seeking and maintaining balance – with nature, with the rhythms of family life, and with the harmony of the house itself.

I want to draw some key *chōwa* lessons for you which I've taken from the wooden beams, the *shōji* paper-screen doors, the *tatami* mat floors and the daily routines that make a Japanese house a home – lessons in living in our homes, as well as lessons in giving back to the places we live in. These

may require us to show our gratitude to our homes in ways that might at first surprise you: cleaning the toilet, making up a room for an unexpected guest, drying your clothes, taking a bath, or coming home.

Some of the key *chōwa* lessons I'd like you to think about in this chapter are:

- **Respect the rhythms of your home.** I'd like you to think about what each space might be asking for, what each daily routine might really mean. By tuning in to what our homes need from us, we can learn to really feel present in our homes.

- **Bring your home into harmony with nature.** *Chōwa* is about accepting the world as it is, which means finding a way to reconcile ourselves with the ebb and flow of time. We have to accept that wear and tear happens. We have to accept that sudden, unexpected disasters may happen. I also offer a few ways you can allow the natural world into your daily life.

Wabi-sabi and *chōwa* – what's the difference?

The Japanese home has fascinated interior designers and architects outside Japan for centuries. Here I don't want to go over old ground, especially as certain concepts – such as Japanese minimalism and *wabi-sabi* – may already be known to some of you. So before I show you around a Japanese home, I'd like to spell out the difference here between *chōwa* – 'the search for balance' – and the concept of *wabi-sabi* – flawed, fragile beauty, or natural simplicity.

Wabi-sabi • What is *wabi-sabi*? It means fragile beauty or

natural simplicity. It is the knowledge that nothing lasts forever and that everything comes to an end. This Buddhist concept has inspired much that is great in Japanese art and poetry, as well as influencing the architecture and design of Japanese homes.[8]

I immediately think of the Japanese writer Jun'ichirō Tanizaki. His short book on Japanese aesthetics, *In Praise of Shadows*, urges readers not to forget the traditional elegance and melancholy beauty of old Japanese houses – he loves the grain in old wooden floorboards, or the sight of rain running across the mossy foot of a stone lantern in the garden.[9]

***Chōwa:* searching for balance** • *Chōwa* means the search for balance. Thinking through *chōwa*, both in relation to our homes and throughout this book, helps us to concentrate on the journey, the *act* of balancing. *Chōwa* helps us to see what it might take for us to feel better prepared, even for the very worst, in our daily lives. It takes hard work. It doesn't happen by itself. We have to go out and actively do something to bring balance to our lives. Thinking through *chōwa* leads us to accept that we will never reach the hallowed state of balance, or harmony. We might even say that *any* kind of balance is always a balancing act.

Wabi-sabi and *chōwa* do have some points in common. To feel balanced, it is important to see the world as it really is. This may well mean embracing the perfectly imperfect harmony of nature. But I want you to remember that *wabi-sabi* is far from the whole story (even if this loan word is used by some Westerners as a substitute for 'Japanese-y'). Particularly when it comes to the more aesthetic ideas behind *wabi-sabi*, we should remember that our attitudes to our home – in Japan, or wherever we live in the world – are not merely

about cultivating this Japanese idea of melancholy beauty. After all, we need to actually live in the place we call home.

Bringing *chōwa* home to you • As you are being shown around a Japanese space, you might think, 'This is all very lovely, but how can I apply these lessons to my own life?'

A house is like a language. It has its own grammar. If my teaching of Japanese has taught me anything, it's that explaining grammar to a non-native speaker is no small challenge. When you think about bringing *chōwa* to your own home, I am not asking you to throw out your routines – whatever you do to relax, express your appreciation to the people you live with, and how you take care of your home. There will be things about your home life that you can't change even if you wanted to: we choose our homes because they are affordable, or because they are close to work, or because they are big enough to house our families.

Neither am I suggesting that you overhaul the design of the home you live in – to replace your carpets with *tatami* mat flooring or your windows and doors with sliding *shōji* screens. But I will explain some *chōwa* lessons from the Japanese home. They include learning to be as prepared as we can – for unexpected guests as well as for more dramatic life changes. Because, wherever we happen to live, we are all capable of bringing *chōwa* home with us: to listening more carefully to what our homes need, so they are ready to give us what we need in return.

Please allow yourself to be guided around these spaces, with the knowledge that they might be a little different from the spaces you usually spend time in. I will do what I can to help you bridge the gaps, to help bring the spirit of *chōwa* home to you.

The Tanaka family home

I am going to invite you to travel 50 years back in time with me to visit my childhood home in rural Musashi province, north of Tokyo. The province no longer exists today. The area where I grew up is now in modern Saitama.

Walking towards the house from the train station, all you can see are fields and more fields. You pass a small farm. It's still early in the year, but you can see from the fronds of dark green leaves spreading across one small plot that the *daikon* (winter radish) has been planted in anticipation of the coming spring. You pass a temple graveyard with an overgrown willow tree. You hear the striking of a gong and two loud claps. Someone is saying a prayer.

Just beyond the temple and the graveyard, you turn up a rough track and approach a large wooden building. On your left are some tumbledown stables. Sitting just outside a hut on your right is a basket of what look like small, fluffy eggs. These are the cocoons of silk worms. The small hut is a silk-worm farm which produces silk for kimonos. You continue up to the entrance of the large wooden building. Its overhanging eaves are covered with *kawara* clay tiles and supported by pillars of dark wood. You climb three stone steps to the entrance. You look for a knocker or a bell, but there is none. Cautiously, you slide open the wooden door and step inside.

Step up: achieve positive momentum and readiness at the door

• You are now standing in the small *genkan*, or entrance-way. The *genkan* can still be found in modern Japanese apartment buildings today. It's a place for guests to take off their shoes and for the owners of the house to receive visitors. As this is a

traditional house, you can see that, on top of a cabinet for keeping shoes – a *getabako* – is a vase containing a sprig of plum tree blossom. It reminds you that, while it is still cold outside, you can already feel the first stirrings of spring.

You hear a voice from the end of the corridor. As I've been expecting you, I call out,

'*O-agari kudasai!*'

This greeting means 'please come in' – it literally means 'please step up'. This is because, when a person enters a traditional Japanese home, they step up from the *genkan* into the hallway. As you step up into the house, you are expected to take off your shoes – in one movement. If you are unused to this, you may end up stepping on the ground by mistake. Over a lifetime this movement becomes second nature.

You notice that all the other shoes in the *genkan* are lined up against the step, facing the door. You do the same, turning your shoes so their toes point towards the entrance. Now you will be able to slide your feet straight into your shoes when it is time for you to leave.

This is a little example of *chōwa* in action: *chōwa* is about being ready each moment to face the next – small acts that prepare us for an uncertain future.

Make care conscious: 'please go safely, and make sure you come back' • When a family member leaves the house, they say '*I-tte-ki-ma-su.*'

This means 'I will go and come back.'

The person who remains in the house will say '*I-tte-rassha-i.*'

This means 'Please go, and make sure you come back.'

There is a heartbreaking tension in this daily ritual – between

our desire for our loved ones to return to us and our awareness of the possibility (one which many people find too terrible to imagine) that they may not. If you have ever stayed up late waiting for a loved one to call you or to arrive home after they have been away for longer than expected, you will know what I mean. This ritual signals a commitment to prepare for whatever the world outside throws at us. Since natural disasters are so common in Japan, we have to be ready for the worst. That is partly why we say 'please make sure you come back'. It is why we keep an earthquake survival bag in the porch of our house, and designate a meeting point where the whole family will meet in an emergency.

This is a central message of *chōwa* that will come up time and time again in this book: living in balance with ourselves, as well as one another, is about matching up the things we say and the things we do. The search for balance with our families and in our homes can begin with stating our hopes and fears aloud, making the way we care more conscious.

This is something I have had to think about more recently, now that many of my family members don't speak Japanese. I can no longer rely on these rituals; I have had to think of ways in English to put into words just how lucky I am to live with the people I care about. Sometimes it is difficult. But since you never know what tomorrow will bring, I would encourage you to do the same.

Tatami: finding our balance at home, finding our balance in nature • Once you step up into the house, you pass along a corridor. At the end of the corridor is a room with a *tatami* floor. Setting your bare feet on a *tatami* mat feels a little like you are walking on dry grass. In fact, *tatami* mats are made from finely woven rice-straw. The smell often reminds me of

tea, partly because tea ceremonies should always take place in a *tatami* mat room, and partly because the smell of rice-straw reminds me of *gen-mai-cha* (brown rice tea). When walking on *tatami*, people either do not wear anything on their feet, or – as I do – they wear small white traditional *tabi* socks (wearing shoes or slippers is not permitted).

Focusing on the soles of one's feet, placing them on the ground shoulder-width apart, whether sitting down or standing up, rooted to the floor as one breathes, is a common meditation technique. It makes us feel balanced. I think this is one reason it gives such a feeling of peace to walk barefoot, or wearing *tabi* socks, across a *tatami* mat floor, just like it does to walk barefoot outside in a field or through a forest.

In my home in London, while I no longer have a *tatami* mat room, I do have a small garden. When I want to practise feeling grounded, more connected to the earth, I go outside and practise this simple meditation technique. If you want to feel grounded in your home and more in touch with the natural world, you can do the same. Stand or sit in a quiet space and pay attention to your breath. Try standing outside, in your garden, in a public park, or simply opening a window and letting in the fresh air.

As you inhale through your nose, focus on the feeling of coolness and pleasantness of your breath. You may feel your breath filling your body with vitality and energy from the ground and from the sky.

Exhale slowly through your nose. The exhalation relaxes the body. You may feel the sensation of tension being expelled.

Focusing on breathing in for a slow count of eight, and out for a count of eight, allows you to feel a gradual, natural kind of relaxation. Try to do this for five minutes. It really helps to

focus your attention on your breath and on the present moment. As your breath calms and becomes orderly, so does your mind.[10]

Shōji screens: expect the unexpected • Let's suppose I have invited you to the Tanaka family home for a celebration. The main *tatami* mat room is a large one. Ten people or more could comfortably sit down cross-legged or kneeling to dinner at the large, low table in the middle of the room.

On the ground, a few metres apart, are small wooden tracks that run across the room and divide the *tatami* mats. These are tracks for the screens, made out of paper and wood, that usually divide this large room into separate spaces for family members. They can be taken off their tracks and stored to suit various layouts of the room.[11]

They are part of the architecture – not just of the home but of Japanese hospitality: a commitment to welcoming an unexpected guest at a moment's notice, or accommodating a family member who might need some space to work late into the evening.

Shōji screens have an additional practical function. When the last guest enters the room, for a tea ceremony for example, they will close the screen door firmly and deliberately. It makes a very satisfying thud, audible to the guests gathered around the table. They will have been listening for this sound and they now know that everyone is present. The host will also have been listening for the thud of the closing screen, waiting to begin the tea ceremony.

Expecting the unexpected and responding to life as it unfolds, moment by moment, is what *chōwa* is all about. It starts with how we treat our homes.

Could foldable tables and chairs help you to better use the

- Do you generally read, listen to music or use your phone in the bath? Try turning off all distractions – even put down your book. Slow down and listen to your inner voice. This is the best way I know of finding my balance at the end of a busy day.

- Try washing at the end of the day, instead of in the morning. This small act of *chōwa*, of going with the rhythm of our day, has more than one benefit – it allows us not to have to rush in the morning, and to keep our bed clean. After all, if you go to bed with dirty hair, you will make the pillow dirty.

Tadaima: ***practise saying 'I'm here now' when you come home***

• When a family member returns to the house, they say '*Ta-dai-ma.*'

This means, literally, 'I've just got here' or 'I am here now.'

The person who is at home in the house will say '*O-ka-eri-na-sai*' or just '*O-ka-er-i.*'

This means 'welcome back.'

We live in a world where we are expected to be always on – responding to emails, checking our phones for messages, on social media, where we are often 'friends' with our work colleagues, old schoolfriends, family members and strangers. The boundaries between home and work and our social lives seem like they have changed forever. But the least we can do is make a proper commitment to being at home when we are at home.

Making this commitment, which we always used to give so easily when we were small – 'I am here, now' – can be very important. To a Japanese person, these words sound like a kind of singing, a musical sound that we associate with our family's love for us. We would come home, step out of our shoes and yell 'I'm home', before breathing a sigh of relief

and leaving the day behind. It wouldn't be long before we were eating dinner with our family, reading a book or relaxing in the bath. There is something powerful about this reminder – this daily commitment to being in the present moment – at least when we are at home: 'I am here, now.'

Homes in harmony with nature: taking better care of our homes

Today, Japanese people's lives are still closely tied to the rhythm of the seasons, and this is also true of life in the Japanese home. When it comes to finding our balance, we must not forget that this also means being in balance with nature.

Chōwa, living in harmony, is not about making a bubble for ourselves and forgetting that we, like everything else in this world, are natural beings. No matter how much plastic we use and how much time we spend in cities of concrete and steel, we are nature, and nature is us.

Like all natural things, we – and our lives – are subject to change.

Like all natural things, we will eventually fade away.

This is not supposed to sound depressing; it's just a fact of life. Accepting this can help us accept the rhythms of nature – and the inevitable wear and tear that happens to our homes. I'd like to show you what *chōwa* can teach us about living in balance with the natural world and paying more attention to what our homes really need from us.

The fact that Japanese homes are largely made out of

natural materials – paper, wood and packed earth – reminds us of these simple but important truths. If you look more closely at the *shōji* screens in the Tanaka family house you will see that, although the house is old, the paper screens look brand-new. The paper in the screens is usually changed once a year, on the 30th or 31st of December, before the start of each new year. When I was small, I would love going about with my mother and my aunt, helping to change the screens in my uncle's house. I would punch my hand through the paper, leaving a hole where my fist had gone through, the torn edges curling like white flames. The paper was replaced in time for the New Year celebrations and the house would be left feeling rejuvenated – a natural clean slate.

Taking care of our homes, inspired by Shinto (the way of the spirits) • As you walk around the Tanaka family house, you'll see that the wooden corridors are spotlessly clean and so shiny that you can see your reflection in the dark wood.

Some of the methods that Japanese tidying-up guru Marie Kondo has taught readers around the world – folding clothes, organising one's home, discarding or giving away what you do not need – have been passed down through Japanese families for generations.[12] I think one of the reasons why tidying up, the Japanese way, has become so popular is our often unspoken connection with the natural flow of things: there is an intimate relationship between cleaning our homes and finding our balance. The act of keeping one's home clean is a way of tuning in to the rhythms of nature.

The traditional Japanese religion, Shinto ('the way of the gods [or the spirits]') includes the belief that *kami* (spirits) exist in everything in nature – rain, mountains, trees, rivers. This extends to human-made objects in our homes. Being

aware of the spirits in the items we are cleaning, thinking of these items as having their own existence, their own needs, makes us mindful of the care they require from us. Even inanimate objects, from fans to shoes, chairs to cars, may have a *kami* – after all, everything we own came, at one point, from nature. Even items made out of plastic or steel are the work of human hands. Shintoism teaches us that all things, human-made and natural, have an inherent value.

Whenever I clean my *kiri-dansu*, the wooden chest of drawers I keep my kimonos in, I often say, 'Thank you for coming from Japan with me, thank you for providing me with such good service.'

- Do you have any items you use regularly – an armchair, a desk, a watch – that you would like to express your gratitude to for the years of service they have given you? I wonder if expressing your gratitude would encourage you to take better care of the objects – such as finally getting round to having your favourite armchair reupholstered?

- How could you take better care of the natural materials in your home? Do you know what kind of wood your dining table is made from? What are your bed linen and cushion covers made out of? Being more mindful of the materials that surround us not only makes us better able to care for them, but also makes us more grateful to the objects that give us such excellent service.

Recycling and reuse in the home • Doing right by the materials in our home also means using them for as long as possible, serving them so they can live out their lifespans healthily and happily. I always feel a twinge of sadness at Christmas in the UK when I see all that wrapping paper ripped off and thrown aside, or stuffed into black bin bags, especially as it has only been used for one day. I always think '*mottainai*' – what a

waste.

In Japan, gifts are sometimes still wrapped in a silk-patterned cloth called a *furoshiki*. Traditionally, these cloths have many uses. They are used to wrap clothes, which can then be kept neatly folded in a storage cupboard. They are used to carry things (they were once as common as bags or satchels are in the West). They can be used to carry vegetables, bags of rice, lunch-boxes, even small infants. When it comes to wrapping gifts with *furoshiki*, after the person receives the gift – which they would usually open privately at home, not in the presence of the giver – they would make sure that the *furoshiki* was returned to its owner so they could use it again. Wrapping a gift in cloth, as well as being an elegant way to give someone a present, is ecologically friendly.

Even if you don't invest in a *furoshiki*, perhaps you could still practise the spirit of reuse the *furoshiki* teaches us by taking a little more care over the paper your gifts are wrapped in, so you can use it again. When wrapping gifts, if you do so carefully, without using sticky tape but string or ribbon instead, it encourages others to reuse the wrapping paper too.

Taking care of our homes to show gratitude and love • Inspired by Shintoism, there is a belief in Japan which seems to capture an important *chōwa* lesson in balance: that taking care of our homes is a kind of bargain, if you like: the better care we take of them, the better care they will take of us.

I remember my grandmother telling me that there was even a *kami* in the toilet. If you clean the toilet, she would say, the god of the toilet will be sure to grant you good health, and maybe even good fortune. Not only this, she would say, but if

Chōwa lessons:

finding your balance at home

Making your care more conscious

- Do you have a family custom for leaving your home and arriving home?

- Do you wish you could express your love and gratitude to your loved ones more often?

- Are there any small things you could do (such as keeping a torch near the door in case of a power cut, or printing a sheet of emergency numbers and placing it where the whole family can see) to help your household be prepared for anything?

Cleaning your home to find personal and family balance

- What was your attitude towards cleaning when you were young? How did this change as you got older?

- Who taught you to clean and tidy up after yourself ? A parent or grandparent? A sibling? A partner?

- What happens if you try to think of the act of cleaning as a way of honouring the person who taught you how to do it?

Your home in harmony with nature

- Like the sprig of plum blossom you saw when you entered the Tanaka family house, why not place a vase of seasonal flowers in your hall to welcome you and your guests?

- There are many fun ways to find our balance with the natural world. When I was younger, my sister and I would practise an annual tradition called *momiji gari* – hunting and collecting beautiful fallen leaves. Could you go on your own *momiji gari* expedition? What would you collect?

2

Playing our Part

'The unsung pillar has the power to hold up the house.'
– Japanese proverb

Mother. Father. Wife. Husband. Daughter. Son. Today, the parts we thought we were born to play in our families are changing before our eyes. Many of these changes feel like changes for the better – for example, more and more of my friends are sharing childcare responsibilities equally, and it has become a lot easier for women to achieve a balance between a busy career and raising a family. But for some people it is still hard to manage all the demands modern life places upon us, to reconcile our true selves with our responsibilities to our families.

Chōwa can help us manage these contrasting responsibilities. Family harmony in a traditional Japanese sense means asking ourselves, 'How can I serve?' It means doing our best to complement one another in the roles we play and the things we do. It means seeing ourselves as part of a larger whole. But while I learned a great deal from my