

# No Tipping for Great Service in Japan

by Todd Jay Leonard

*Todd Jay Leonard has had a relationship with Japan for over thirty years. He has written twenty books and numerous academic articles in the areas of cross-cultural understanding, history, language education, religion, and spirituality. He now calls Hirosaki, Aomori home, where he lives, writes, and teaches.*

**A**s an American living in Japan, one of the best aspects I like about Japanese culture has to be “tipping”——or the lack thereof. The custom of patrons tipping service related workers in restaurants, hotels, *etc* is not normally practiced in Japan——if at all. In fact, service related workers would most likely be insulted if one tried to tip them.

An example of this was when a friend came to visit me here from back home. I took her to one of my favorite restaurants where I had become a regular. She was very impressed with our waiter who was especially attentive and friendly throughout our meal. When we prepared to leave, I got up first to pay the bill at the register. As she gathered her things, she noticed I did not leave a “tip” on the table. So to be helpful and to contribute to the meal, she laid down a ¥1,000 bill in the center of the table before leaving.

We left the restaurant and began walking hurriedly to another place where we had a scheduled appointment. Several minutes later, a very out-of-breath waiter came running after us calling my name. I had no idea why in the world he would be chasing us down because I had double-checked before we left to make sure we had all our bags and coats with us. When he reached us, he extended the ¥1,000 bill to me and said, “You forgot this on the table.” I was thoroughly confused because I knew I had not left any money on the table. Since I was speaking in Japanese, my friend had no idea why the money was being returned to me, figuring I had overpaid at the cash register.

I turned to her and said, “How strange...he found this money on our table. I wonder where it came from.” She immediately explained that she had left it as a tip, thinking I had forgotten to do so. I then relayed to our waiter that the money was left on the table by my friend, intended for him, because he was so attentive and friendly during our meal. His first reaction was one of puzzlement, which then

quickly turned to a look of bewilderment, then embarrassment. To him, it is his job to be friendly and attentive because he is serving us in the capacity as a waiter, and the restaurant pays him a salary to do so. To accept money from a customer would be unethical because it is a part of his job.

My friend tried to force the money on him, but he just bowed graciously apologizing until she took the bill out of his hand. I thanked him for going to the trouble to return the money, and explained that in the United States it is a custom to leave extra money on the table after a meal as a “tip” to the person who served the food. He admitted he had heard of the custom of tipping, but was still uncomfortable accepting cash from a “regular” customer (such as myself), and especially from a guest (such as my friend) who is a visitor to his country. He most likely felt like it was his responsibility to make sure my tourist-friend received a good impression of Japan, hence his willingness to be so attentive and friendly during our meal.

**O**n trips home to the United States, I am always perplexed about how much a tip should be, and honestly, I am a bit resentful that I am expected to leave money over and beyond the cost of the meal for service that should be a part of the total dining experience.

I understand the economy behind tipping as a supplement to the workers' income. However, after living in Japan for so long where tipping is not a custom, I like not having to do it. If the service is indeed poor, is it all right not to leave a tip? I think most Americans feel obligated to leave a tip regardless and, in essence, view it as a part of the total cost of the meal and not solely as an award for good service.

I can think of one instance in Japan when a type of tip is given and accepted willingly. In traditional-style Japanese inns called *ryokan*, it is customary to offer money or a gift as an expression of gratitude to the hotel staff. In some Japanese inns today a service charge for this type of individual attention is added automatically to the bill; some of the older, more traditional inns do not. In these instances it is a nice gesture to offer some type of gratuity to the woman. As a high school student, I remember my host mother giving the woman who helped us at our *ryokan* an expensive box of chocolates in lieu of actual cash.

In any case, it is not expected in Japan but very much appreciated. Whereas in the United States, it is definitely expected and seemingly not very much appreciated.

Just one example of the many reason why I love living in Japan!



(弘前学院大学教授。ORBIT English Reading New Edition 著者)