

To Realize a True *Rita* Going beyond Control

Listening to Other's Voices and Meeting Them with Sincerity

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A rapidly growing number of companies have adopted a management philosophy of resolving social issues such as global environmental problems and improving people's quality of life. Amidst this global trend, Hitachi has set planetary boundaries and well-being as the most important issues for society. What are the perspectives that must not be forgotten when implementing initiatives with a humanistic theme and contributing to society? And what should engineers strive to be in this environment? *Hitachi Review* interviewed Dr. Asa Ito, Director of the Future of Humanity Research Center at the Tokyo Institute of Technology, which explores ethics, *rita*, and diversity through multidisciplinary research using physicality and disability as clues.



In 2010, Asa Ito left the University of Tokyo Graduate School of Humanities and Sociology after earning credits in Aesthetics, the Division of General Culture. In the same year, she earned a Ph.D. in Literature from the University of Tokyo. After completing a Research Fellowship for Young Scientists at the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science, she was appointed as an Associate Professor at the Institute for Liberal Arts, Tokyo Institute of Technology in 2013. She has been in her current position since April 2016. Her books in Japanese include "The Body Theory of Unsighted Athletes" (Ushio Publishing Co., Ltd., 2016), "The Stuttering Body" (Igaku-Shoin Ltd., 2018), and "Ethics of Hands" (Kodansha Ltd., 2020).

Being of Service to Someone Is a Miracle

In recent years, an increasing number of companies have been working to resolve social issues and improve people's quality of life (QoL). How do you view the current social trend of for-profit companies pursuing well-being?

It is very important to think about the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and other humanistic questions such as environmental issues and well-being. On the other hand, I am always wary about such social trends.

Professors at Oxford University in the UK remark that the university has existed longer than the country and they are not easily swayed no matter what the government or ministries say. They are very much aware that they are the "house of good sense." I believe that the proper role of a university is not to blindly follow social trends, but to question them, and that is what the liberal arts are all about. Recently, however, national universities have been increasingly focused on management, and they cannot operate without listening to the wishes of both the national government and industry. The reality is that it is difficult to say to what extent their independence can be ensured.

I also remain concerned that many companies, despite their claims to solve global issues, may be looking at things from a shortsighted perspective. For example, selling reusable shopping bags does not necessarily contribute to the SDGs. In fact, they have even destroyed the environment. It is very dangerous to justify one's actions and righteousness by saying that one's technology and products are useful to society, looking only at a narrow view from one's own standpoint, without looking at the entire picture of the problem.

To begin with, it is essentially quite miraculous when someone can do something that benefits another. There are many factors besides one's own actions, and coincidental factors are always involved. For example, an engineer who has developed a high-performance water-filtering fiber may go to a developing country and ask local people to drink water that has been filtered clean with the fiber, and they may say that it tastes bad. That is to say, it is not dirty, but it doesn't taste good. In the international development field, no matter how genuinely the people on the ground struggle with the local people, if the project is funded by Japan's official development assistance (ODA), a condition of the order may be that a Japanese company must be contracted for school construction, for instance. There is a great deal of uncertainty over whether this is really for the benefit of the local community.

As those who deal with users on the ground are keenly aware of on a daily basis, there are many issues that need to be considered behind the words “for the benefit of others.”

Like Hitachi, the Tokyo Institute of Technology takes as its starting point the philosophy of improving society through technology, but improving society through technology is a complex matter involving many more factors than we can imagine.

The term “*rita*,” altruism in Japanese, which has been attracting attention recently, is the key word for thinking about how complex it is to improve society through technology and how one’s actions can benefit others. When the Future of Humanity Research Center (FHRC) was established at the Tokyo Institute of Technology in 2020, the first topic to be addressed was also *rita*. One of the FHRC’s missions is to carefully look at what events and factors are behind an action, A, when it happens to be for the benefit of B.

If you believe that what you do is for someone else’s benefit, you are probably putting the other person in your own situation. Making others do things within the framework of their own sense of goodness and righteousness can sometimes lead to domination of others. That is why I used the word “dangerous” earlier.

In reality, however, others do not always behave the way we want them to, nor can they always be pleased. Others may not share our own sense of values, and they have different situations, environments, and cultural backgrounds that we cannot all see. This is even more true when the term “others” refers to nature or living creatures. You cannot make that assumption unless they are in your own frame of reference. And, by nature, we cannot control the consequences of our actions, nor can we control others.

This sense of not being in control is very central to *rita*, which is to say, it should not be easy to say that what I do helps someone else. How we creatively deal with what we cannot control is a very important point for *rita*.

Listening to the Unheard Voice

You cannot measure how another person perceives your actions by your own indicators alone. The challenge is how to imagine worlds that are outside your mindset.

One hint for how to do this is provided by Yoshiharu Tsukamoto, a professor of architecture at the Tokyo Institute of Technology and co-chair of the architecture firm Atelier Bow-Wow.

The act of raising a building, he said, is a series of meetings, bringing all parties involved to the table to reach a consensus. The parties involved here are not only humans, but also the trees that grow there, the insects and birds that inhabit the land, as well as the dead who have lived there, and those who will be born in the future. We listen to the voices of those who cannot speak, such as nature and the deceased, and together, the people who are alive today think about how they can come to the table to reach a consensus. I believe that the human relationships that are built in this context are in fact as important as the physical architecture of the building.

Takeshi Nakajima, a professor at the Institute for Liberal Arts (ILA), also points out the importance of listening to the voices of the deceased. “We have already received so much from our predecessors, the deceased, and being aware of this makes those who have passed away altruistic beings,” he says.

When we humanities researchers alone discuss “encountering others who do not exist here and now,” it seems to revert to a religious issue, but what is interesting is that, when we talk with science professors, it is replaced by the issue of “sensing.” Science professors love sensing, and they get very excited when they are able to sense things that were previously impossible, such as predicting thunderstorms (laughs). And when they sense something, they may sometimes express it as “hearing a silent voice.” Unlike the previous discussion, the goal is only to “control” the subject, but at the bottom of their hearts, they know that just because they cannot hear the voices, it does not mean that they are not there. We feel that this sentiment is very close to *rita*. In March 2022, a symposium focusing on the silent voices was held at the initiative of a science professor.

In order to encounter these silent voices, we need to get beyond the frame of reference in which we are trapped. People often talk about unlearning, but I think that more learning is to be found in discarding what you are trapped in and what is unnecessary in your organization, rather than in building up certain capabilities and becoming more macho and powerful, which is often seen in corporate training programs.

Professors who study the universe and extraterrestrial life attend every liberal arts workshop at the FHRC because they are always looking to get beyond the image of life that they are trapped in. If you are looking for what you already think life is, you will never find it. I suppose one must see beyond one’s own perspective in order to pursue certain truths.

Possibility of *Rita* Not Based on Empathy

Like "*rita*," the term "well-being" has been drawing a lot of attention in recent years.

Did you know that there are cultural differences between how we perceive things in the West and the East Asian region? Japanese people, in particular, do not think of everything in terms of individuals. One finds greater joy in the realization of the possibilities of those close to oneself, such as one's family and friends, than in the realization of just oneself. Various studies have shown that well-being is highest when the boundary between the individual and the others is blurred.

Similarly, the *rita* that we Japanese imagine is completely different from the *rita* imagined in the USA. In the USA, there is a tendency to thoroughly quantify happiness and goodness, and to seek efficiency even in *rita*. There are many websites that allow you to find out where and in what name your donation will be most effective, and you can easily narrow your search to the most appropriate recipients. *Rita*, however, does not work only with empathy.

This is a good thing in some respects, although it is disconcerting to hear such things. If we, as Japanese, act based on sympathy, we tend to donate only to those who are close to us or related to us. This is not a way to approach people who are truly in need and the critical issues of the earth that we are not aware of. Only by quantifying it can we break free from our own assumptions.

Some organizations are experimenting with new forms of giving, such as the "new theory of giving." They donate the dues collected each month to a charity somewhere, but they separate this from empathy and choose a theme that has nothing to do with *rita*, such as "laughter" or "points," and members vote among themselves to select a charity from among the candidates they associate with that theme. It is a system where I cannot control where my money goes, but listening to the explanation, I think it is nice how natural the process is for the recipients of my donations, who I would not have considered before. We believe that this change in the giver is also an important element for *rita*.

Draft Beer Controversy and Attitude toward *Nama* Beer

By the way, I heard that the Japanese word *nama* (raw) is a concept that you have been focusing on recently.

The word *nama* is a very strange word, sometimes used in a good sense, as in *nama* chocolate, ganache, and sometimes used in a bad sense, as in *nama-hanka*, half-baked. In other words, we call *nama* something that is not fixed, something that is highly indeterminate. I think that this rhetoric has become popular in recent years to commercialize products having a once-in-a-lifetime quality.

Some time ago, I did some research on how the concept of *nama* beer, or draft beer, came about. In the olden days, beer was something you drank at a beer garden, not at home. This is because consumer beer was pasteurized to inhibit yeast activity in order to prevent deterioration, and it had a strange odor and did not taste good.

Company A wanted to change that, so they used a special filter used for filtering rocket fuel to filter out yeast and bacteria and other impurities. They developed unpasteurized, yeast-free beer and marketed it as *nama* beer.

Company B, in response, argued that if the yeast was not alive, the beer was not *nama*, and developed a new *nama* beer with live yeast through major reforms in their entire production process, including distribution, by reviewing the processes to prevent the introduction of bacteria and building refrigerated vehicles exclusively for transportation in order to handle live yeast. Even so, the expiration date was only two weeks, and so they even created a system of beer coupons for the midyear gift-giving custom to ensure that the large quantities of beer given would still taste good.

This fierce battle, known as the *nama* beer controversy, was settled when the Fair Trade Commission ruled that "*nama* beer is unpasteurized." Company B's attitude of "doing whatever it takes for the sake of the yeast" is in a sense correct in how they strove to accommodate the live yeast, and I think it is very good.

Even now, when we buy raw food, we give a priority to freshness, don't we? Like, "I bought *sashimi* today, so let's go home early." *Nama* requires us to be attentive to things that can easily change.

Nature and living creatures, as well as humans and various conversations and relationships among humans, are in a sense *nama* and changeable. I think it is very important not to control this change too much, but to stay close and accompany it as something that can change on its own. This is a viewpoint that is also pertinent to caregiving, such as the attitude of those who care for the elderly.

On the other hand, because of the large number of uncertainties involved, the people involved must also be in a precarious situation. For example, if you respond in real time to another person's questions, rather than reading from

a prepared script of potential questions and answers, you must begin speaking without having your thoughts in order, and that always entails risk. But that is the meaning of “encounter,” and I think it means to face and respect the *nama* other person, rather than setting up the other person in your own scenario.

Rita, such as listening to the voices of the unseen, facing and approaching the *nama* other person, may be more passive than we think.

The Power of Trial and Error Together

Recently, there have been calls to respect diversity from various perspectives. Under the theme of “physicality,” you have been engaged in fieldwork where you talk directly with people who have various disabilities and work together with them. What insights have you gained from these experiences and what expectations do you have for companies based on these insights?

Once you dive into a constantly changing, or “*nama*,” interpersonal relationship, there will be plenty of times when your own ways and rules will not work. The problem with people being together is that it is really full of problems. But it is only when we have to change our ways that we gain new insights, and when confronted with small problems, we are naturally creative. One of the interesting things about researching disabilities is that having just one disability on the table can create a situation where everyone is forced to be creative.

In this sense, rather than observing the subject matter as fieldwork, we can find more hints and discoveries by interacting with people as if we were friends and trying to do or create something together.

At this point, it is important not to quickly seek the correct answer out of the blue, but to find a solution for that specific case and a rationale for the situation through trial and error by being hands-on and trying different things. That is what I consider ethics to be.

When we create a new concept, it tends to quickly morph into a command from above, that is, become a moral obligation. The diversity that we hear everywhere is one such thing, and the more we talk about it, the more it seems to be losing its substance. In order to realize *rita*, to improve society through technology without falling into this kind of tokenism, we must put aside our desire to impose control, listen to the voices of others, and continue with trial and error together to find a solution that suits the situation. I hope that many companies will keep this in mind as they work to resolve social issues.