

“Breaking the Mask”

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Are you hiding under a mask to fit in? I think most of us are because showing our real selves feels scarier than simply fitting in or pleasing others.

Look at our world today. On social media, hurtful comments are everywhere. No matter who you are, no matter what you do, someone is always criticizing. And sadly, it has become normal in our world today.

In Japan, harmony is highly valued. We favor the unity of the group over individual interests. This is Japan’s strength and beauty. Yet on the flip side, it causes us to hide our true thoughts. To “read the air”. To avoid standing out from the crowd. Dochoatsuryoku, meaning the pressure to conform in Japanese, makes it hard for us to express our opinions or act differently.

I have felt this pressure myself. At school, whenever we had guest speakers, I would always ask questions. It was natural — I was curious. But one day, a friend said, “Are you asking questions just to show off how smart you are?” From that moment, I became afraid of standing out and stopped asking, scared of being criticized. I started wearing a mask — pretending so as not to stand out, hiding my curiosity and authentic self.

However, this summer in the US, I saw something surprising: my peers weren’t wearing a “mask.” They confidently asked questions without worrying about what others thought. At first, I was scared, but another friend said, “Don’t worry. Any question is welcome here.” That one sentence gave me the courage to raise my hand. The speaker welcomed my question, and that made me feel overjoyed. It was a small step, but for me, it was the moment I broke the mask — and I felt both scared and free at the same time.

When I returned to Japan, it wasn’t as easy as I had imagined. But then I began to think maybe there is someone just like me, who wants to ask but is too afraid. If I raise my hand first, perhaps they will feel that “I can do it too.”

I learned that being true to yourself doesn’t mean being liked by everyone. What matters is making choices you can be proud of, expressing your opinions respectfully, and finding people who accept you as you are.

The world today is full of jealousy and criticism. That’s why it’s so important not to lose yourself. Being yourself doesn’t mean doing whatever you want without caring about others. It’s not about being selfish or careless. It begins with making choices that you can be proud of inside.

Celebrate your differences. It’s okay to have your own opinions and interests. Everyone is different. Instead of trying to live up to other people’s expectations, let’s focus on what truly makes us happy and gives our lives meaning. Because that’s how we can gain real peace and confidence in being ourselves.

Breaking the mask doesn’t require a huge change. It can start small. Maybe it’s sharing your opinion, even if others disagree. Maybe it’s choosing to wear what you really like, even if it’s different from what people expect. Maybe it’s taking your own quiet path, without pretending to be someone else. Just being your own self is already enough.

The important thing is to face your true self. When you act in a way that feels authentic to you, you will feel more confident. And your small actions might even give courage to someone else who is also hiding behind a mask.

I have heard that “Air is not something to read — it’s something to breathe.” Break the mask. Breathe freely. Your true self is enough.