

Ma Assembly

I have given a number of assemblies that draw upon my interest in Japan and Japanese culture. I am going to share another Eastern (specifically Japanese) insight this morning. The concept I want to introduce today is called *ma* in Japanese. There is no equivalent word in English, but we certainly have the idea. I would not want you to think that the West has nothing to offer in terms of wisdom. Before I go into detail about the Japanese concept, let me share some Western examples of *ma*.

Here is a link to a YouTube clip of David Hockney talking about the importance of space in his painting: [David Hockney Interview: I Am a Space Freak - YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dVfPNQSlulI) .

The great actor Ralph Richardson said that acting was more about the way the actor uses pauses than the way they say the words.

The composer Claude Debussy said: ‘Music is the space between the notes.’

The idea was taken further by Maya Angelou when she wrote: ‘Music was my refuge. I could crawl into the space between the notes and curl my back to loneliness.’

Take a look at Count Basie showing us the importance of space and timing in music.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dVfPNQSlulI>. It’s all good, but the piece I played starts around 14:58.

You will already have guessed that *ma* is something to do with space, time, an interval, an emptiness. All that, and more. *Ma* is an absence that has a profound effect upon the things around it. It is the distance between objects that defines their relationship, the space between notes that gives significance to the sounds.

The Japanese language is written in kanji – pictograms rather than words made up of letters. The kanji for *ma* is interesting. It is this:



This kanji is itself made up of two other kanji: 門 which means ‘door’ and 日 which means ‘sun’. This is meaningful – *ma* is represented as a door, through which the sunlight is peeping in. It is shining into our world from a sunlit beyond, creeping in through the gaps and crannies. *Ma* is about potential and possibility expressed through absence rather than presence. Music is defined and shaped by silence; objects by the empty spaces between them.

Ma is centrally important to Japanese culture. It is found in all aspects of Japanese life – in the way they speak to each other and behave. A deliberate pause at the end of a polite bow shows an appropriately polite amount of *ma*. Similarly, in Japan, conversation is full of deliberate silences – infusing speech and thought with enough *ma*. The opposite of a Western tendency to fill every silence with prattle.

Ma is also central to the arts. Ikebana, Japanese flower arranging, is less about the flowers than about the *ma* between them. Look at these examples:



The point is make us see not just the flowers, but the relationship between the flowers in space. Not things but the spaces between things.

The same is true in Japanese art. Look at the *ma* in this image:



Here is a very famous Japanese print, *The Breaking Wave of Kanagawa* by Hokusai. Notice the *ma* of the upside-down wave contained as a sort of negative image within the actual wave. Notice that the sacred Mount Fuji is at the heart of the *ma*.



So *ma* means ‘time’, ‘interval’, ‘space’, ‘room’ and it has the kanji 間.

That kanji appears in the pictograms that describe other words as well. What about the word *manuke*? here is the relevant kanji: 間抜け. It literally means ‘ma – nuke’ or someone missing *ma*. What does *manuke* mean? ‘Idiot’ or ‘fool’.

Here is another kanji: 人間 *ningen*. This kanji combines the kanji for *ma* and the kanji for ‘place’. What does *ningen* mean? Man, person, human being. A person is *ma* located in a particular spot. Your personhood is defined as a significant absence or space, rooted in a locality. What a wonderful description of what it means to be human.

I hope that the Japanese concept of *ma* will stay with you and prompt further thought. Here are some questions to carry away. What if the most important thing were not objects but the spaces between them? What if it were the silences rather than the sounds that defined the beauty of music? What if you could see the world not in terms of things, but in terms of the relationships between things? What if the real focus is not upon the things that are there, but what is not there - an emptiness full of possibilities, like a promise yet to be fulfilled.

Ma teaches us to leave spaces in our world. To allow room for growth. To cherish a silence.