

# The Ten Virtues of Ikebana

Zen and the Way of the Flower

## Shoso Shimbo, PhD

Ikebana Artist; Visiting Researcher, Japanese Studies Centre, Monash University

[www.shoso.com.au](http://www.shoso.com.au)

Ikebana, the Japanese art of flower arranging, is also known as *Kado* 華道, the way of the flower. This name comes from two characters, one meaning flower and one meaning road or way, following a naming system common to many Japanese disciplines. *Sado* 茶道 is the Way of Tea, *Kendo* 剣道 is the Way of the Sword and *Koudo* 香道 is the Way of Perfume.

Like many of the traditional Japanese arts, *Kado* is a system of aesthetics, philosophy and practice with a focus on personal development as well as artistic achievement. The goal of Ikebana is not just the creation of beautiful arrangements; the journey is as important as the result.

This idea of spiritual enlightenment through concentration and practice is central to the Zen Buddhist philosophy. For many of its practitioners, Ikebana is a lifelong lesson, a way to achieve a little inner stillness in which to work towards a richer spiritual understanding of the world, just like the Zen monks do through their meditation techniques – luckily with Ikebana you don't have to sit so still!

How does Ikebana help people develop their spirituality? The best answers to this question can be found in a classic Ikebana text, *Rikka-Imayo-Sugata* (1688). This text is well known for its first usage of the term, *Kado*. It lists the ten virtues of a true Ikebana Master. Because this is such an old text, word-to-word translation does not make much sense, so I'm going to use a little poetic licence to try and explain these teachings on spiritual aspects of Ikebana.

### 1. No discrimination.

Nature does not discriminate; neither should the Ikebana practitioner. Through contemplating the capacity of nature to just exist, we learn to interact with all people and all things equally.

Historically, Ikebana provided the low class artists with opportunities to mix with the aristocrats and even the emperors. Teaching Ikebana in a multi cultural society like Australia gives me wonderful opportunities to meet people from many cultural backgrounds.

### 2. Selfless mind.

When we face flowers, we are free from any concerns and we can clear our minds. The first goal of Zen meditation is to achieve such a clear mind, free from the chattering self. This first step is often the hardest for any student of meditation. But

with the help of the natural elements in their arrangements, many Ikebana students come to experience this state of mind almost without realising it.

### 3. Making friends without words.

Facing flowers, we feel a joy beyond words. When we share this joy with other people, we can form a bond that transcends language. Through our arrangements we can communicate on a deeper level with people no matter what language they speak.

### 4. Learn plants.

Ikebana helps us learn about many kinds of flowers and trees with very little effort. We learn their names and we become in tune with nature of each plant and its cycle.

In particular, we learn how short the life of a flower is. This in turn, makes us realise how short our life is. We hope for wealth or fame or success in our short lives. In Buddhist thinking these attachments and desires are the cause of our unhappiness. Once we realize that our life as well as our desires is transient, it's easy to develop negative attitudes, to start thinking that life itself is meaningless. But through the simple beauty of a flower, so content with the nature of its own short life, we can come to appreciate the transience of life rather than being depressed by it, and accept our place in the universe. This is one of the most important steps towards spiritual growth in Zen and it's easy to see how the two philosophies complement each other.

### 5. Gain respect.

Through meditation, no discrimination and working towards the selfless mind, Ikebana helps us develop our best character. As a result, many people respect Ikebana artists. If you visit Japan, you will find how well respected Ikebana teachers are in their communities.

### 6. Scents all the time.

We can be always surrounded by the nice scents of flowers. As any aroma therapists will tell you, scents really affects our moods and feelings. Even when we feel a bit depressed, the scent of flowers always cheers us up. Ikebana artists know which flowers work best for him/her and his/her family and friends. My favourite is a sweet olive, *osmanthus fragrans*. I was so delighted to find this plant is available in Australia as well as in Japan and it's growing so well in my newly planted garden.

### 7. Departing from any harmful thoughts.

We may sometimes have evil or negative thoughts. When we face flowers, however, these thoughts disappear instantly. Ikebana can help keep our minds calm – a real bonus in today's world!

### 8. Peaceful mind.

As we acquire peaceful mind through Ikebana, we can nourish ourselves and live longer. Obviously the author of this text in the 17<sup>th</sup> century was intending to promote Ikebana and he knew how to sell his product: this makes you live longer! In actual fact, statistics show that even today Ikebana teachers are one of the occupation groups that live longest in Japan, a country with some of the oldest people in the world.

### 9. Graceful mind.

Maintaining a peaceful mind from morning to evening, we can develop an understanding of the elegance of the natural world. We can nurture our gentleness and

come closer to feeling at one with the universe – the experience of *Satori* (enlightenment) in Zen.

Many Japanese seem to find ultimate peace in realizing that they are a part of the nature. This also relates to *Shinto* philosophy. *Shinto* is Japan's native religion, whereas Buddhism came to Japan in the 6<sup>th</sup> century. I may write more about the relationship between *Shinto* and Ikebana in the future.

#### 10. Close to the Divine.

We have more and more divine experiences in which we feel close to Buddha, or Gods or the Divine Spirit, depending on your own personal philosophy. Strengthening ties with the Divine was probably the most important value in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, although it is very hard for us to imagine how spiritual their daily life was. All of us could use more divine experiences in our lives, and Ikebana is one way to help us make contact with the elements of nature and the laws of the universe.

These ten virtues of Ikebana remind us of this: if we have a chance to learn Ikebana, it is important to be aware of the therapeutic and spiritual aspects that Japanese people have valued for centuries. If you are learning only the basic patterns in design and skills to manipulate plants, you are not learning the essence of this wonderful art, the practice of which can lead you to make connections with your spiritual self in the same way the Zen monks seek enlightenment through their meditation. Find peace in your flower arrangements.

#### References

- Herrigel, G.L. (1958&1999). *Zen in the Art of Flower Arrangement*. London: Souvenir Press.
- Ooi, M. (1964). *Seikatsu kara Mita Ikebana no Rekishi (History of Ikebana)*. Tokyo: Shufu no Tomo.
- Steere, W.C. (1972). *Flower Arrangement: The Ikebana Way*. NY: Madison Square Press.
- Suzuki, D. (1981). *Zen to Nihonbunka (Zen Buddhism and its Influence on Japanese Culture)*. Tokyo: Iwanami.

Note: This article was published in *Living Now*, September – December (2007).