

# YOH KIKUCHI



## THE MEANING OF A WEALTHY LIFE

One reason why Yoh Kikuchi decided to take part in the 2007 JELA Artificial Limb Work Camp in Jamkhed, India is that she wanted to experience a non-wealthy lifestyle.

For the difference in affluence seemed sharp.

On one hand was Japan, with its skyscrapers, fashion boutiques, high-tech industries and thrown-away food amounting to over 11 trillion yen per year. 1 And on the other was Jamkhed, where most homes have no electricity or plumb-

ing, meals are often prepared outside over open fires and the poorest of the poor sleep blanketless under the stars.

If defining wealth in monetary terms, there can be no question Japan is rich and Jamkhed is poor. So Kikuchi, a student at Sophia University and a member of Tonan Lutheran Church, wished to see what being poor was like.

Yet in Jamkhed, Kikuchi learned that there are many kinds of “wealth” and that money alone may not be the best of measurements.



pan to wind-down after long days of helping to make artificial limbs. CRHP also serves three tasty meals of filling Indian food per day.

Through its 38-year history, CRHP has also managed to raise the local poverty level through persistent instruction in health, nutrition, hygiene and agriculture, with one program providing lightweight and affordable artificial limbs to handicapped farmers. The limbs are easier to use than heavy-duty Western prosthetic devices, but wear down faster, thus necessitating replacement every few years.

JELA has sent volunteers to help build limbs since 2005. Yet the presence of the program itself signifies that Kikuchi and her fellow volunteers would be meeting people rising from poverty and not the desperate poor that so often gaze out from TV documentaries.

In truth, JELA volunteers are never required to live as regular residents of Jamkhed. Kikuchi and other volunteers stay in dormitory housing provided by the Comprehensive Rural Health Project, which sponsors the work camp with JELA. The barebones housing still provides private rooms, beds, showers and toilet facilities, enough “luxuries” to allow the guests from Ja-

Still, as Kikuchi hammered to mold aluminum into the shape of an artificial leg, chatted with limb recipients and yanked weeds on CRHP’s training farm, she came to question the very idea of “wealth.”

“They have no electricity,” she says, “But the people themselves are bright.”



“I looked into those young, beautiful, and gentle faces,” she continues, speaking especially about the CRHP farm staff, composed mostly of battered housewives and HIV/AIDS sufferers, “And I find it hard to believe they’ve had such hard experiences.”

“We have so much. They have so little. But their lives made me question the meaning of wealth. I felt my values changing.”

This she learned from the grace and friendliness of the people and the peace of their lifestyle. Wealth, she observed, may be a matter more of the heart than of the pocketbook.

As for the work camp itself, she makes this comment about her hammering skills:

“I think I was more of a burden than a help!”

Yet, she felt the CRHP staff very kind and patient in instructing her. She also enjoyed talking and laughing with young limb recipients, one of whom could speak English and translate for others.

Kikuchi says she used to look upon India as a faraway land, but not anymore. Now she knows India as a place with friends.

“The people here are not to be pitied,” says Kikuchi, “But rather to be cared for and loved as individuals.” This sense of empathy with a distant

community became one of her dearest memories of the camp.

An education major, another of Kikuchi’s top interests was to visit an Indian primary school. There she attempted to teach Japanese paper-folding, but panicked when she couldn’t communicate with the excited children.

“I wanted to say, ‘Let’s do it together!’ but I didn’t know their language and they were too enthused to pay attention.”

Yet, when their teacher spoke, all the children stopped at once to listen. Kikuchi felt the Indian youngsters more respectful and obedient than their counterparts in Japan, where discipline and bullying issues remain social problems.

So again the question comes: What is the meaning of a wealthy life? One week at JELA’s work camp in Jamkhed has given Yoh Kikuchi much to think about.



1 From Andrew DeWitt’s Peak Oil and Japan’s Food Dependence  
HYPERLINK “<http://www.japanfocus.org/products/details/1662>”  
<http://www.japanfocus.org/products/details/1662>.

DeWitt, a scholar at Rikkyo University, takes his figures from Japanese Government data from 2002.