

# **A Talk about Denmark: A New View**

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In October 1911, Kanzo Uchimura, an important Christian thinker of the Meiji era (1868–1912), gave a series of interesting talks at the Imai Kan (then in Kashiwagi in north Shinjuku and later moved to Meguro; it is now the Seisho Kodo). The talks were later collected and published as a book, *The Greatest Legacy: Talks about Denmark*, by Iwanami, one of Japan's leading publishing houses. Uchimura's book is rich with insights.

Now I would like to follow in Uchimura's footsteps by writing about my own experiences in Denmark while adding my own insights. Today, under the influence of social media such as Facebook and Instagram, it has become common to post photos with short comments. I too have become a little poisoned by this style, but in this case, I wish to try to express myself solely through the power of words.

## **The Trip to Denmark**

On May 15, I boarded Scandinavian Airways Flight 984 from Narita to Copenhagen. The flight time was about 11 hours. The passengers were a fairly even split between Japanese and northern Europeans. Next to me was a young Swede who had just completed a big two-week tour of western Japan (Himeji, Osaka, Kyoto, Kanazawa, etc.). His favorite site had been the historic village of Hida Takayama.

He worked for an information technology (IT) firm with about 150 employees. I asked about his work hours, and he said they work 40-hour weeks and almost never put in any overtime. But what about when customers ask for design changes? I asked, to which he responded that this rarely happened, and if it did, the delivery date would get pushed back. I felt that this was different from the situation in Japan. Even if design changes result from the customer's own changed specifications, the contracting company sticks to the agreed completion date. As a result, overtime increases.

After landing, I had another surprise when the taxi from Aarhus Airport cost 793 Danish krone. That was a lot, about the same as the hotel bill (equal to about 15,000 yen). Such high prices created a difficult situation throughout my stay in Denmark.

### **Wet Monday Holiday (the day after Pentecost)**

I arrived on a Sunday evening, and the next day (May 16) was the Wet Monday holiday, so the university was closed. I explored the area around my rented apartment, which the secretary at Aarhus University had reserved for me. It was located about a ten-minute walk from Aarhus Central Train Station, in an area full of cafes and restaurants. My street was called Jægergårdsgade. People often responded, “That’s a nice area” after I told them where I was staying. It was somewhat like Tokyo’s Nishi Ogikubo, but much classier.

Among the many stores on my street was a bistro called “Juliette” that looked interesting. I spoke to an older gentleman who was smoking as he emerged from the bistro, and who possessed a charm much like late actor Robin Williams were he 70 years of age. “That is a very special place,” he told me. I felt myself pulled inside and had the pork filet, listed on the blackboard menu for 150 krone, or about 2,500 yen. It wasn’t much different from Japanese *hire katsu*, except that I had never eaten pork that had been grilled without sauce. Unlike sautéed pork, this was served with mashed potato croquettes (brownish) and fig sauce (light reddish-brown in color), producing pleasing balances in both taste and appearance.

### **Aarhus University**

Let me describe Aarhus University, where I was affiliated. First, let me take you through the basics. With a population of 320,000, Aarhus is Denmark’s second-largest city after the capital, Copenhagen, with 570,000 people. The country’s population is 5.7 million, about the same as that of Hokkaido, while Copenhagen is about the same size as Hachioji City or Kagoshima City. On the other hand, Aarhus University, a national university, has about 40,000 students, about the same number as Waseda, and much more than Tokyo University’s 28,000. Viewed from the perspective of Copenhagen (or Tokyo), such a big university is located in a city the size of Kanazawa. By comparison, the population of Kanazawa is 460,000, and Kanazawa University has about 10,000 students.

Aarhus University was founded in 1928, making it the second-oldest Danish university after Copenhagen University, but with a larger enrollment. It is a comprehensive university with departments in the humanities, business, economics,

arts, sciences, and medicine. Aarhus University is a world-class institution, being listed in the Top 100 in just about every global ranking index, and enjoying a rating close to that of Tokyo Institute of Technology. There is abundant greenery, the buildings are all brown, and even in the structure of the rooms one gains a strong sense of northern European traditions. The furniture in the professors' offices is both simple and esthetically pleasing.

One of the university's most appealing features, to my mind, was a lounge for eating lunch on the first floor of the business school. It was not a faculty restaurant, but simply a space for eating. Both professors and graduate students could bring food, homemade or bought at the university canteen, and people would naturally start up conversations or share laughs over lunch. Faculty and graduate students are on an equal footing (although undergraduate students are not allowed entry). This is an approach not used in either Japan or the US, but one we might well learn from. I believe that the isolation of study starts with lonely lunches.

### **First Time on the Train**

One week after arrival, on May 23, I went to Aarhus University's Herning Campus, using the local train for the first time. The commute time is 90 minutes. Before I bought my ticket, I was told by a station attendant (to my surprise) that the station closest to the campus was a small station just before the final stop, Herning, and that if I didn't push the button to stop the train, it would just pass through.

On the Ome train line from Tachikawa City, the door does not open unless you press the "door open" button. This unusual practice is the way buses typically operate, and its purpose is to prevent heat from escaping during winter. I remembered once hearing a businessman traveling to Nagoya on the Shinkansen bullet train from Osaka to Tokyo exclaim "Damn" after sleeping through his stop—the next stop was Shin-Yokohama Station, so having to double back to Nagoya added more than three hours to his trip. This memory well in mind, I set the alarm on my digital watch.

Anders Frederiksen, the professor who had invited me, had also arranged my academic presentation. My talk, based on a research project that I had conducted for several years, was titled "Product Architecture and Human Resource Management: A Japan-China-Korea Comparison." I was able to learn much from the questions posed by participants from both engineering and economics and business disciplines.

After the lecture, Anders gave me a tour of the campus, which features various

facilities to help students who want to start their own businesses. When I heard the term “student entrepreneur,” I found the concept strange, yet on this campus there were many booths arranged for just that purpose, and for forging ties to business enterprises. Businesses seem to provide a lot of assistance, and I was happy to see Canon’s name featured alongside those of European companies such as Siemens.

### **A Cashless Society**

Denmark (at least the northern European part of it) is a completely cashless society. Purchases are made not by signing one’s name, but rather by using a PIN code. However, small the purchase, everyone uses a credit card, whether at a convenience store, supermarket, or bar. In fact, signing for a purchase isn’t even accepted. That means that people working on cash registers do not even know what signing means, and there are no machines for reading signatures. No one is familiar with anything but PIN codes. Even the machines for buying tickets for surface or underground trains do not take cash (they have no slots for inserting it). The scary part is that making three mistakes when trying to use a credit card renders the card unusable.

On my first day in the hotel, I did in fact make three mistakes when trying to use my credit card, and was unable to use it again. I simply was suddenly unable to remember my PIN number. Salespeople sometimes ask me for it in Japan, but if I say I can’t remember, they just let me sign. So, I had never been concerned about it.

With no credit card, I was going to run short of cash, so I tearfully called the company in Tokyo, but they stubbornly insisted, “We can’t give you the PIN code, so we’ll just have to reissue the card” (although I suppose that’s the correct approach). Since the cash I’d brought with me was steadily dwindling, I was a little worried. Finally, to my great relief, I was able to borrow cash from an acquaintance.

Some Germans that I described my situation to said that they still had a cash society. I then pointedly suggested to some Danes that strong manufacturing countries do not feel the need to use credit cards, but they did not respond very warmly. In any case, there are apparently no PIN codes on American credit cards, so maybe Americans have even more problems with credit cards. Because of this, places in Denmark where American tourists are likely to go, such as hotels or high-end restaurants, generally allow you to sign.

### **My Trip to Helsinki**

During my third week, I took a long-planned one-week trip to Finland’s capital,

Helsinki, and to Copenhagen, staying three nights in each. Having come so far, I thought I needed to visit at least one other Scandinavian country besides Denmark.

Finland is a country of some 5.5 million people, about the same as Denmark. Both countries are members of the European Union, but a big difference is that Denmark, unlike Finland, does not belong to the eurozone, having elected to keep its own currency, the krone.

I don't know either language at all, but just listening, I sensed that Danish resembles German. Finnish does not have Cyrillic letters but is a little like Russian. But maybe that is just my impression since Finnish belongs to the Uralic language group while Russian is part of the Slavic language group.

Getting off the train at Helsinki Central Station, I was astonished to see a single large advertisement that almost completely covered the fronts of two buildings in front of the station. The ad was for the large Chinese communication device maker Huawei, and displayed Scarlett Johansson, the famous American actress (of Danish descent), flashing a beautiful smile. I was surprised for three reasons:

First, Nokia, Finland's own mobile phone manufacturer, is a major force in the country. However, it has come under heavy pressure from recent IT device start-ups. Once near collapse and having been forced to sell off its mobile phone business, it has had to make repeated job cuts. In fact, Nokia's situation looks much like that of some of Japan's electronics firms.

Second, I have visited Huawei's head offices in Shenzhen before, and found that its employees had a very strong sense of the future.

Third, Scarlett Johansson, a world-famous and greatly admired actress, starred in Sofia Coppola's film "Lost in Translation," which was set in Japan.

In short, seeing this remarkable image caused Scandinavia, China, and Japan to all resonate in my heart simultaneously.

Generally, I don't really like sightseeing. When I go overseas, it is generally to conduct research interviews or to present at international conferences. Thus, I usually have no time for tourism. The reason I came to Helsinki was to conduct an interview at a large heavy equipment manufacturer.

For the Helsinki interview, I used the same questionnaire prepared for use this spring for research on the front-end process of product development in Japan, China, and Korea; the questionnaire had been translated into English. (The starting point was the

process of bringing together a product idea and product concept, along with the processes of meshing them and managing personnel.) What I learned from the answers was that, in contrast to Japan, in the course of developing a new product in Finland, the new product idea is widely communicated to the company's employees through a system similar to LINE (A Japanese instant messaging service), who then help to refine the concept. The idea is developed from the bottom up, and decisions are made top-down. I saw how this differed from typical Japanese corporate practice, in which engineers comprehensively execute every step of the process, from idea creation to design. This may be part of the reason for the observation that Japanese products have great quality control, but are lacking in interest.

In terms of cuisine, Finnish food is somewhat simpler than Denmark's. In personal relations as well as their taste in food, Finnish people are simpler and shyer. Curiosity pushed me on my last day in Finland to sample some sautéed reindeer. I expected it to have a strong odor, but there was almost none. In the middle of the mashed potatoes was sliced sautéed reindeer prepared much like *nikomi* (a sort of stew) in a Japanese *nomiya* (eating/drinking establishment), but with less sauce. To avoid messing up the mashed potatoes, I first ate the reindeer stew with a spoon, and then ate the mashed potatoes. White wine went very well with the food. For some reason, Rui Yoshida's popular television program *Sakaba horoki*, about sampling different inexpensive *nomiya*, came to mind.

## **Copenhagen**

On June 1, I left Finland and arrived at Copenhagen airport. I checked into a hotel five minutes from Copenhagen Central Station. My Helsinki hotel had cost about 25,000 yen for one night, but was good value for money. Unfortunately, my room in Copenhagen was somewhat more expensive, but rather like one of those lonely old business hotel rooms in Japan. Despite its high price, the hotel was steadily fully occupied, so it seems that the area near the train station is popular with tourists.

On the day I arrived, although I had no business, I didn't have enough time to ride a sightseeing bus, so I joined a sightseeing tour of one of Denmark's representative companies, the beer brewer Carlsberg. The shuttle bus, which was free, took about 20 minutes. Carlsberg is well known in Japan, and is the world's fourth-largest brewer (Japan's own Kirin and Asahi are ranked 9th and 10th respectively). Unfortunately, the tour at Carlsberg, unlike tours given by Japanese beer makers, was not of their brewery or factory, but just of a museum. Nevertheless, I was able to learn about Carlsberg's history and enjoy some delicious Jacobsen beer, a craft beer produced in small quantities.

The next day, June 2, my main activity in Copenhagen was to visit a large medical equipment maker known especially for products related to continence problems. Once again, I asked questions in English about product development and upstream processes (personnel management, the generation of ideas, and the execution of product concepts that serve as the product starting point).

The answers were similar to those that I received at the Finnish firm. The subject product this time was a catheter for self-use by women. It is designed for cases where urinary function is impaired, so that a narrow, disposable tube can be inserted into the urinary tract. At present, it is a fourth-generation device. The first- and second-generation devices were dropper-type tubes about 20 cm in length. However, the third-generation device was three-colored and shaped like a compact ballpoint pen. The fourth-generation device is even smaller, and is square instead of round.

When I asked the product development manager about the shape, he countered by asking, “Why do you think we used this shape?” It was such a sudden question that I struggled to answer. The project manager gave me a thumbs up after I answered, “Because it (the round-shaped device) looks like a lipstick when it’s in a handbag.” It is a shape that won’t draw unwanted attention even if a woman gets it out of her purse in, say, a public bathroom. But this also posed a problem. The round device would sometimes roll around and fall out onto the floor. The change to a square device was inspired by comments and ideas received from several hundred users. The comments and frustrations were converted into data that led to the development of the fourth-generation device.

It was a classic case of product development and design process shaped by close attention to user desire. Of course, there were other important factors to consider as well, notably ease of use and price, which could be no more than around 600 yen, since this was a device that would be used several times a day and thrown away after each use. Accordingly, there were heated debates with other departments leading to the final product design outcomes. Overall, this approach to product design struck me as very effective. The person who headed product design was an employee in his thirties.

I believe that many Japanese firms also use this kind of closely user-oriented product design process. It is supposed to be a national specialty. On the other hand, however, the engineers in many firms in Japan are absolutely convinced that they know the customers’ needs, and this may help to explain the lack of appeal of some of the resulting products. In the case of the women’s catheter, the designers tried to make the product as thin as possible, but did not become fixated on the shape. This sounds rather

familiar, but I thought of the song *Ruuju no dengon* (A Message in Red) by Yumin, about a woman who leaves a message in lipstick on a mirror.

The next day, I set out to see the Little Mermaid statue and the Rosenberg Slot, and boarded one of the double-decker buses that allow free boarding and reboarding. But really much better than that was the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, which I visited the previous day after finishing the medical device interview. The museum has an outstanding collection of modern artwork. But it also had a large grassy garden, with various sections carpeted with flowers in full bloom and offering a magnificent view of the ocean, with Sweden clearly visible in the distance. Sitting in the museum cafe, drinking a Carlsberg and a white wine as a pleasant ocean breeze washed over me, was one of the best memories of the trip. To say that this is the world's most beautiful museum would be no exaggeration.

Taking my leave of bustling Copenhagen, I returned from the week-long trip to my lodging in Aarhus. There I found the usual people moving around Jægergårdsgade Street.

### **Seminar at the Business School**

On June 7, the day after returning from my one-week trip to Helsinki and Copenhagen, I presented a paper on some ongoing research. Before a smallish group of graduate students and professors, I presented my most important findings. Perhaps to people with no university ties, the differences between a “lecture” (*kogi*), “talk” (*koen*), or “seminar” (*seminaa*) might be hard to understand. A lecture is conducted before a class at a given time, with only students in attendance. An address or talk is a presentation of one's research given in a simplified, easy-to-understand manner; the participants might be students, company employees, or ordinary citizens, and their numbers may range from 20 or so to over a hundred. In contrast, the likely participants in seminars are researchers (or those in training to become researchers), and, with the exception of cases such as Nobel prize winners, attendees rarely number more than 10 to 20.

A seminar is held nearly every day at Aarhus University. In May, for example, 30 seminars were conducted. At Hitotsubashi University, according to the Institute of Economic Research's Web page, there were 19 that month. So the frequency seems to be about the same, or maybe even higher at Hitotsubashi, once you take Japan's Golden Week holiday into account. However, as I noted above, the distance from Copenhagen to Aarhus is about the same as from Tokyo to Nagano, not to mention that transportation is inconvenient. Given these factors, it was surprising to learn that



researchers from all areas of Europe and from the United States come to present seminars nearly every day.

A seminar is an important career event for a researcher. If he or she does not go fully prepared, participants may pick apart any weaknesses in the research findings. My topic was “Product Architecture and Intra-firm Coordination: Theory and Evidence.” I had been engaged in this issue for several years, but progress had been slow. The work of my research partners was going more smoothly, so my delays were holding back the overall project. Accordingly, I wanted to use the seminar as an opportunity to make progress, and made a point of choosing this topic.

Summer break had already begun at the university, so the number of people attending was only about 10, less than I had been told to expect. Nevertheless, I received some valuable comments from the young participants.

In a seminar presentation I did at UC-Berkeley, people often asked questions in the middle of the talk, and more questions followed—people just keep talking. I thought that nearly all American universities did seminars the same way, but at an east coast university, everyone waited until a pause in the presentation to ask questions. Thus, I dubbed Berkeley-type talks the “west coast style.” Fortunately, the Aarhus University seminar was of the east coast type. Once the seminar was over, I emailed the comments to my research partners, and was able to head home fairly early. The post-seminar evening dinner was scheduled for another day.

### **Tapas and Kierkegaard**

At this time of year, it stays light until 10 pm in the evening in Scandinavia. Even around 6 pm, you get a feeling of what we in Japan call *hiruzake* (drinking alcohol in the daytime, i.e., too early), so following the seminar, I went to a tapas restaurant facing my apartment to enjoy a solitary gourmet meal. The restaurant was called (in Danish) “Forwards & Backwards.” The food was delicious and the servings reasonably priced, so the restaurant was always packed.

At the restaurant, I learned that its name was taken from the famed Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, who once wrote, “Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards.” These are words that echo in your soul. Most people look back on life with a lot of regrets, but there is nevertheless no choice than to move forward in living our lives. I was nearing the end of my month-long stay in Aarhus, and this philosophical entreaty caused me to pause to consider not only how I had utilized my time in Scandinavia, but also how I might utilize the time remaining

to me. What might be truly important, and what demanded to be accomplished? It was a very valuable time.

Finally, I would like to conclude this talk by thanking all the people who helped make my trip such a memorable experience. Special thanks are owed, of course, to the people at Aarhus University, who generously sponsored my one-month visit, and to my colleagues at Hitotsubashi University who covered for me in my absence, as well as to the companies and employees in Copenhagen and Helsinki who agreed to interviews, and to others who helped arrange my travel and lodging. And finally, I wish to thank my family for their usual strong love and support during my years of research and exploration.