



Ageing with grace

Running counter to Western anti-ageing messages, the Japanese philosophy of shibui teaches that beauty, harmony and a simple appreciation of life all deepen with the passing of time

When it comes to the concept of ageing well, the Japanese philosophy of shibui offers a powerful antidote to the modern Western obsession with youth. Shibui places value on change, wisdom, peace, dignity, connecting with nature – even wrinkles! It is an understanding that there is a simple beauty to be found in the passing of time.

In her new book, *Shibui: The Japanese Art of Finding Beauty in Aging*, Seattle-based author and artist Sanae Ishida draws on her own Japanese-American upbringing, as well as her personal experiences of being a woman in midlife, to explore different dimensions of ageing well, namely beauty, health, purpose, wealth, connection and approaching life's natural end. She writes: 'In the shibui perspective, ageing isn't something to conceal and overcome, but rather a natural progression that confers dignity and worth.'

What is shibui?

Sanae's book outlines the seven qualities commonly attributed to shibui as 'simplicity, implicitness, modesty, silence, naturalness, everydayness and imperfection'. She says that although difficult to define precisely, shibui could be likened to a river – a way of living that is active and immersive, but with a 'profound stillness that reigns within and beneath'. Sanae says that she often heard her Tokyo-born mother saying that something 'was shibui', and wondered initially what it meant. 'Shibui is such an interesting word – in Japanese it's more like a feeling,' she says. 'What I love about the concept is that it's very nuanced, and ageing can be very nuanced too. My mother used it to mean sophistication, being down to earth, simplicity and refinement.'

The philosophy is based around the profoundly spiritual feeling you might experience when you come across someone or something that reveals a beauty that only age could create. 'I like to think about trees turning red and gold with the changing of the seasons,' says Sanae. 'We celebrate their beauty – we don't go painting the leaves to make them green again.'

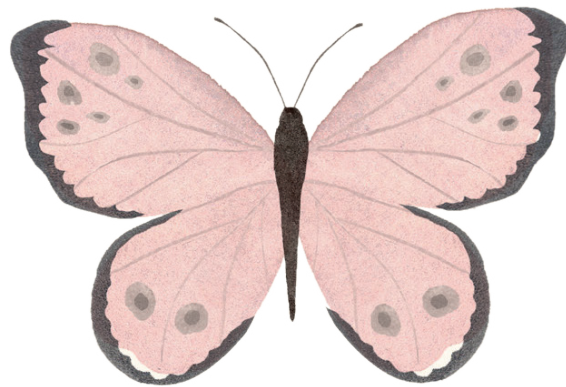
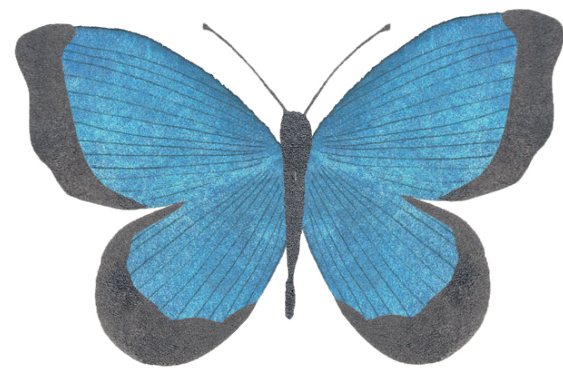
Shibui embraces so-called imperfections, and in her book Sanae discusses the idea of 'wrinkle-reading' to offer 'insights into a person's past and present'. She writes that 'an aged face tells silent stories' and points to the Japanese art of mending broken pottery with gold lacquer, which highlights the cracks as an integral part of the object's history and allure.

Another important aspect is paying attention. Sanae says that as she ages, she finds herself noticing older adults around her. 'I always try to pay attention to what I naturally start noticing, and I've found myself seeking out older women,' she says. 'I'm looking for those stories and those people who inspire me.' Sanae points to the beauty to be found in the laughter lines crinkling the eyes of a person who has embraced joy during their life, or the weathered hands of a life-long gardener 'marked by sun and soil'.

A wisdom for modern times

In Japanese culture, conversations about ageing, dying and the passing of time are not taboo, but living and working in LA as a young woman Sanae says she witnessed anti-ageing messages first-hand, and the value placed on the external.

'It's insane the obsession with youth in Western culture,' she says. 'There is so much pressure – especially on women – that they should not age or show that they are ageing.' Sanae says



that when she turned 40, she started dyeing her hair, because 'noticing the grey felt uncomfortable'. Six years later she decided to stop, and now aged 54 she says she loves her half-silver hair, because it looks 'sparkly and festive, like natural jewellery.'

Sanae grew up in LA during the image-conscious 70s and 80s, but she fears today's obsession with screens, social media and selfies has taken things to another level. 'I hope everyone can take something from my book and the ideas of shibui,' she says. 'Although it is aimed primarily at women like me, I also wrote it with my daughter in mind. Young people today face so much pressure and unrealistic expectations.'

A healthier mindset

Sanae first started exploring the ideas of shibui when she noticed signs of ageing in herself. At 39, she was diagnosed with an autoimmune condition called Graves' disease, and when her doctor suggested radical surgery to remove her thyroid, instinctively she decided to follow a shibui path, 'trusting nature and appreciating my body's wisdom'. She focused on caring for her whole self – mind, body and spirit – slowing down, nourishing herself and resting. With her doctor's support, she has managed her condition successfully ever since.

'I changed my mindset completely,' she says. 'It was less about hustling, and more about staying on course.'

Part of Sanae's shift towards a healthier mindset was remembering how much she loved to write, sew and create, and the result was her first illustrated children's book, *Little Kunoichi The Ninja Girl*. 'I published my first book when I was 40,' she says. 'It came about in a very serendipitous way – you could say it was very shibui!'

Shibui: The Japanese Art of Finding Beauty in Aging is Sanae's 13th book. She says it's been a real passion project, and the cumulation of her own journey of self-discovery as she ages. Combining her ethereal watercolour illustrations with a collection of personal stories, short essays and reflections, she hopes it will help readers embrace healthy ageing with joy and grace. 'It feels like it's come from a really intuitive place and I'm very proud of it,' she says. 'There is so much in this book that I have been mulling over for so many years.' For Sanae, anyone can reframe their views on ageing, choosing to embrace it as a season of richness, purpose and transformation: 'I do genuinely feel that the best years are still ahead.'

Words: Jade Beecroft

A SHIBUI LIFE

This acrostic was designed by Sanae to help you keep the philosophy's principles in mind

S – Simple. Try to notice and give thanks for the ordinary, and don't overcomplicate things.

H – Harmonious. Think about moving with the flow of life and savour moments of connection in nature.

I – Imperfect. Allow for flaws and mistakes as part of life, and consider how imperfections can enhance the beauty of the other.

B – Beautiful. Remember this is always subjective, and think about the appeal of the unique. Ask what is beautiful to me?

U – Unpretentious. Place value in the genuine and authentic, avoid posturing and treasure being down to earth.

I – Impermanent. Understand that life is ever-changing and as Buddha said, you can gracefully let go of things that are not meant for you.



On reflection

Insights from Sanae on finding the extraordinary in the everyday

ON PURPOSE

THE JAPANESE CONCEPT OF *ikigai* (a reason for being) has gained popularity, but I find myself more drawn to the humbler notion of *mokuteki* (purpose). If *ikigai* is an all-night hike up Mount Fuji to see the spectacular sunrise, *mokuteki* is the daily 20-minute walk around the neighbourhood. This focus on humility and accessibility is a shift in perspective that embodies the essence of *shibui*.

There's a quiet, understated quality of 'everydayness' to all things *shibui*. Our *mokuteki* – our daily purposes – need not be grand or publicly declared. They can be as modest as tending a garden or practising needlecraft. These unassuming, consistent

actions align with one of my mother's favourite Japanese proverbs, 'Chiri mo tsumoreba yama to naru' (even small particles of dust, when accumulated, can become a mountain).

As we grow older, we can find beauty and meaning in everyday *mokuteki* duties. Tiny, seemingly insignificant actions practised over time are worthwhile in and of itself. It's a gentle reminder that purpose isn't always about achieving great feats (earn a million dollars! Become a social media influencer!), but about doing small things with deliberate, intentional, unconditional love.



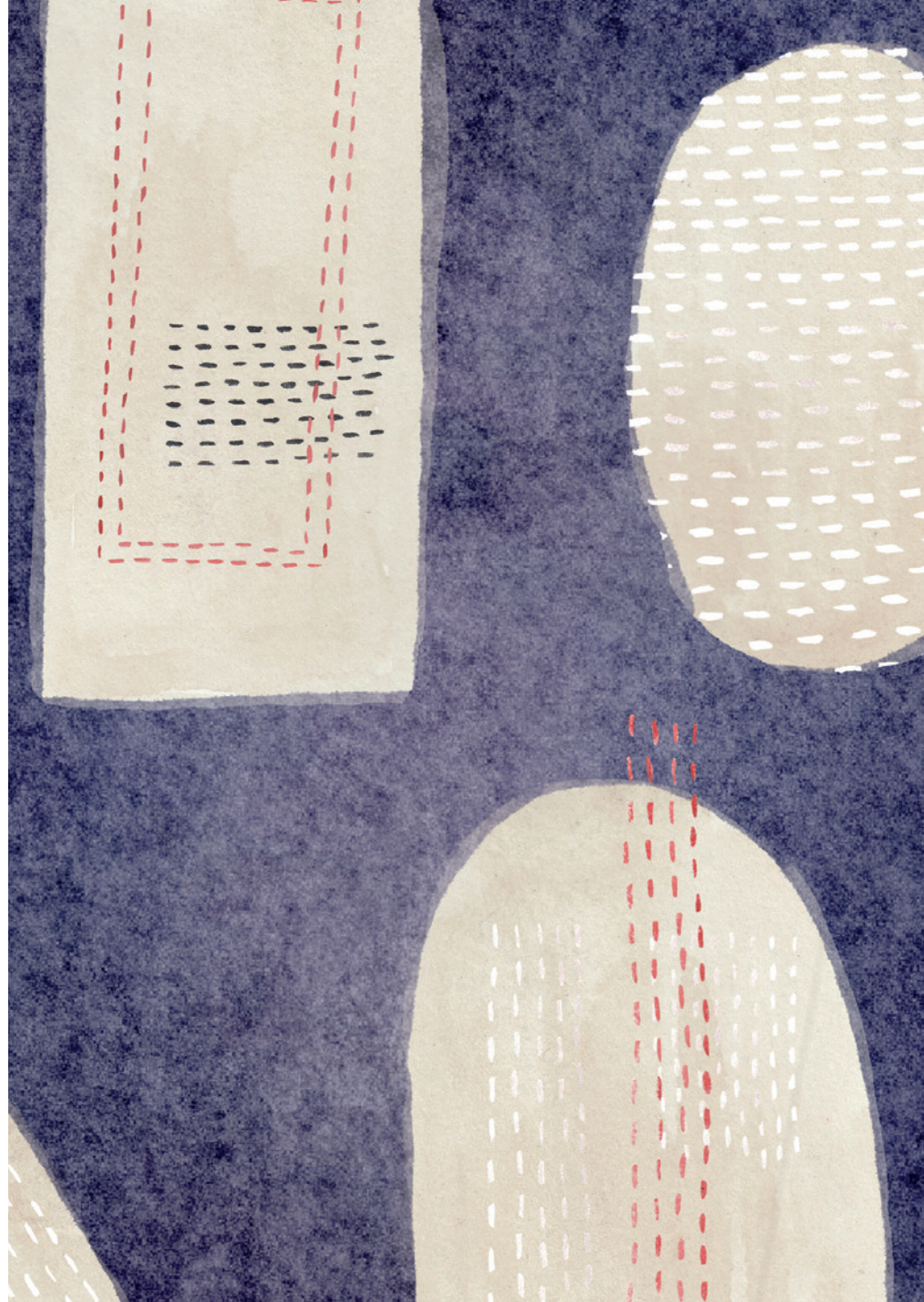
FROM NOTHING TO SOMETHING

ONCE I WAS ASKED, 'What is creativity?' Isn't the whole point of life to create? We give birth to children, ideas, art, gardens, businesses, cities, inventions. After much contemplation, I've settled on, 'Creativity is when you intentionally generate something from seemingly nothing.' The Japanese word *sōsaku* captures this idea, meaning both creativity and creative work.

Society often expects creative output to diminish with advancing age. But the *shibui* perspective challenges this notion, suggesting that our creativity can flourish and become more nuanced with time.

An investment banker friend once claimed she wasn't creative at all. I hear this too often, a misconception that stems from a narrow definition of creativity, often limited to visual, musical or written arts. But creativity, like the concept of *shibui*, is far more encompassing. It's present in how we solve problems, in how we adapt to the changes ageing brings and in how we find new ways to connect with others.

The moment we make nothing into something, we perform a distinctive alchemy, a magic that doesn't dwindle with age. This is the crux of *sōsaku* and it's a vital part of ageing with grace and purpose.



IMPERFECT BEAUTY

JAPANESE CULTURE OFTEN TENDERLY accepts the ageing of things. Crafts such as sashiko (embroidery), boro/tsugihagi (mending textiles) and kintsugi (mending broken pottery) focus on giving new life to damaged items.

Simple sashiko stitches transform torn and threadbare textiles. Boro and tsugihagi developed from patchworking sashiko-embroidered pieces. In the art of kintsugi, lustrous lacquer bonds and repairs broken pottery fragments, creating lovely designs born from the damage. Wabi-sabi and shibui form part of an overarching ethos of

celebrating so-called flaws and include these mending practices.

Wabi-sabi is the Japanese idea of finding beauty in imperfection; shibui offers a similar viewpoint of appreciating beauty in maturity, simplicity and subtlety. They are both slow by nature and encourage a deep awareness. They say, 'Let's not hide our worn, fragmented, imperfect selves. Instead let's attend to the parts that can be mended and refined and make them even more exquisite.'

What would it look like to do that for our ageing human selves?

PUT YOUR HANDS TOGETHER

JAPANESE PEOPLE AREN'T GENERALLY considered religious in the way communities in other parts of the world identify with one faith or another. Japanese culture seems to embody the oft-touted phrase, 'I'm not religious, but I am spiritual.' A mashup of Shintō and Buddhism and even some Judeo-Christian ideologies pepper the Japanese lifestyle. Decorated trees pop up for Christmas in most parts of Japan, the New Year is celebrated at Shintō shrines and Buddhist tea ceremonies are performed on various occasions throughout the year.

If there is a type of faith aligned with the Japanese, gratitude might be it. Every meal

starts with putting the hands together and saying, 'Itadakimasu', a declaration of thanks for the food, directly translated as 'I humbly receive', but with a sense of festivity and bon appétit.

After a meal, the hands kiss again with the utterance of 'Gochisōsama', meaning 'thank you for the meal' or 'it was a feast!' What a wonderful devotional act.

Cultivating gratitude becomes even more poignant as our lifespans shorten. The beautiful Japanese practice of expressing thanks could bookend each day. Thank you for this life. I humbly accept. What a smorgasbord!





ON MEASURING WEALTH

THERE ARE SEVERAL WAYS to say 'rich' in Japanese, just as the English language offers 'wealthy', 'affluent' and 'prosperous'. In Japanese, *tomi* translates directly to material wealth, but it also means general abundance. The exploration of true wealth is a perennial human conundrum. It's clearly more than material accumulation, yet we increasingly use money and status as primary measures.

As we age, our relationship with wealth transforms. What seemed valuable in youth – possessions, status symbols, external validation – gradually gives way to seeking and finding more ineffable richness. *Shibui* eschews

glorification of gaudy displays, favouring simple elegance instead. There is a heartfelt gratitude for intangible wealth: the transitory beauty of seasons, the slow ritual of a tea ceremony and other quiet celebrations of a well-lived life.

The *shibui* perspective recognises the unexpected abundance that comes not from having more, but from wanting less and appreciating what we already have. True wealth is measured by what we've come to value: moments of connection, quiet contentment and subtle joys often unnoticed in our earlier years.