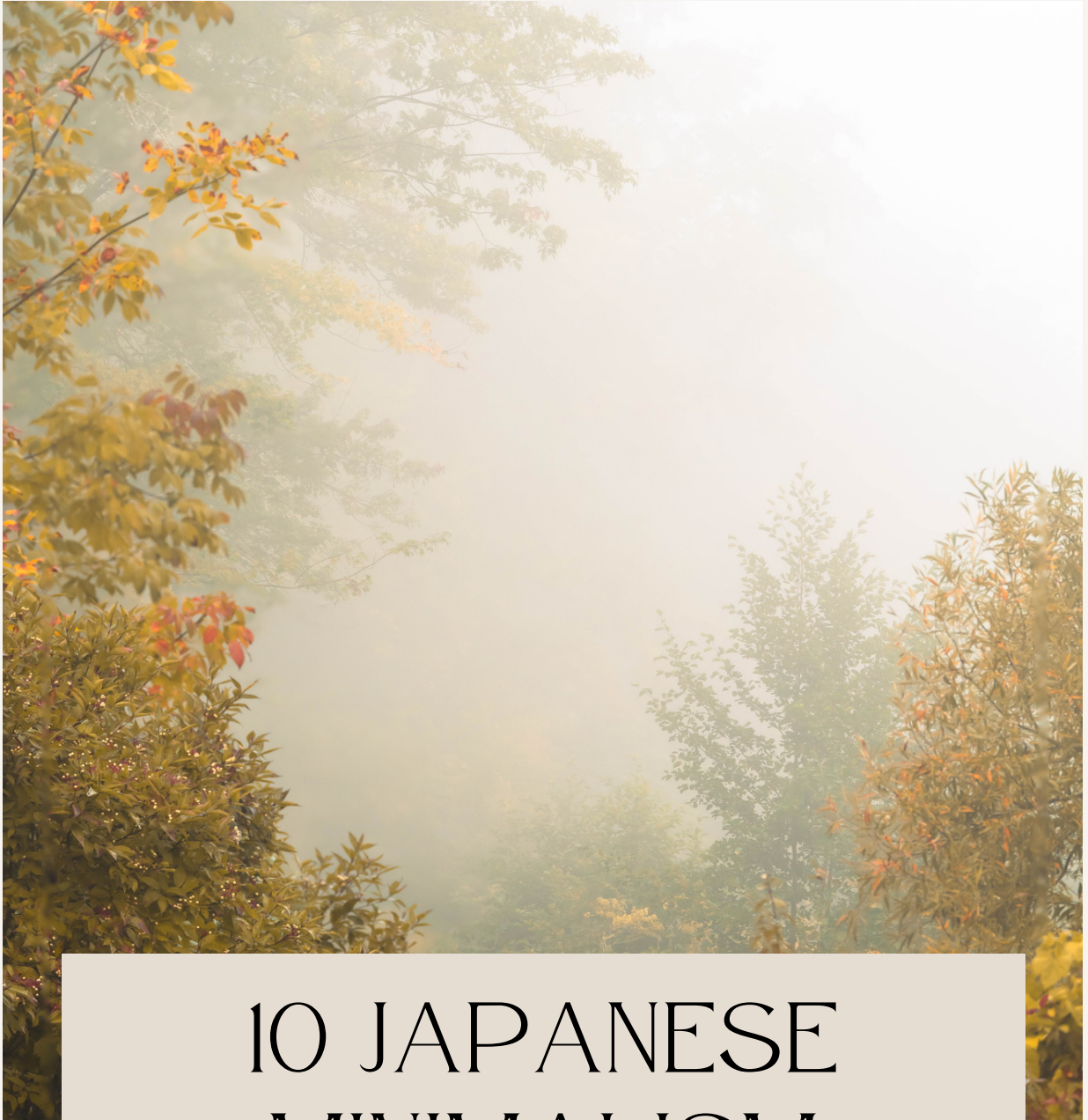




10 JAPANESE MINIMALISM CONCEPTS & HABITS

That Changed My Life



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Joshua M. Smith, PhD is a cultural sociologist, fine art photographer, and Japanese wellness advocate who has spent over 13 years living and working in Japan. Holding a doctorate from Osaka University specializing in Japanese culture, Joshua brings rare academic depth and genuine lived experience to everything he creates. He is the founder of Shizen Style—a brand dedicated to Japanese wellness, minimalist aesthetics, creativity and contemplative photography—and co-owner of the Sato restaurant Group in Buffalo, NY, alongside his wife, executive chef Satomi Smith. His photography, published under the name Gensetsu, has been collected into fine art books including *Thunder & Mist*. Joshua writes, photographs, and teaches at the intersection of Japanese philosophy, slow living, and intentional creativity.

JOSHUA M. SMITH, PHD

1. MA (間) – THE POWER OF EMPTY SPACE

CONCEPT:

Ma is the Japanese appreciation of negative space—the meaningful pause between notes, the empty corner of a room, the silence between words.

HABIT:

Before adding anything to your home, schedule, or creative work, ask "what can I remove?" I apply this in photography: the most powerful image is often the one where I take something out of the frame.



2. WABI-SABI (侘寂)

– EMBRACING IMPERFECTION

CONCEPT:

Finding beauty in things that are imperfect, incomplete, and impermanent. A cracked tea bowl, weathered wood, a fleeting moment.

HABIT:

I stopped chasing "perfect conditions" for photography. I shoot in fog, rain, low light. The flaw often becomes the feeling.



3. DANSHARI (断捨離) – CUT, DISPOSE, SEPARATE

CONCEPT:

A decluttering philosophy from yoga—断 (refuse), 捨 (discard), 離 (detach). More radical than just tidying.

HABIT:

Once a season, I go through one category of possessions and ask: does this serve my life now? Not my past self, not my future self—now.



4. MOTTAINAI (もったいない)

– ZERO WASTE. DEEP GRATITUDE

CONCEPT:

A deep sense of regret over waste—of objects, food, time, talent. It encompasses reduce, reuse, recycle, and respect.

HABIT:

I finish what I start before beginning something new—whether that's a notebook, a project, or leftovers in the fridge. It sounds small but it rewires how you consume.



5. KAIZEN (改善) – CONTINUOUS SMALL IMPROVEMENT

CONCEPT:

The philosophy of 1% better every day. No dramatic overhauls—just consistent, small refinements over time.

HABIT:

I apply this to my judo training and fitness. Rather than chasing big results, I focus on one small technical fix per session. Compounded over months, the change is profound.



6. IKIGAI (生き甲斐) – YOUR REASON FOR BEING

CONCEPT:

what gives you purpose and meaning in life. What gets you out of bed in the morning. Not a destination—a daily practice of alignment.

(If this is something you want to go deeper on check out my [“21 Days to Ikigai”](#))

HABIT:

Each morning I spend a few minutes in stillness asking: what am I doing today that actually matters? It's not journaling—it's more like a quiet calibration.



7. SHIZEN (自 然) – LIVING IN HARMONY WITH NATURE

CONCEPT:

Naturalness, spontaneity, and alignment with the rhythms of the natural world. Not forcing things into an unnatural shape.

HABIT:

I structure my creative work around light and seasons rather than arbitrary deadlines. Walking outside before I shoot—even briefly—changes what I see.



8. MONO NO AWARE (物の哀れ) – THE GENTLE SADNESS OF THINGS

CONCEPT:

A bittersweet awareness of impermanence. Cherry blossoms are beautiful because they fall. The awareness of an ending makes the present more vivid.

HABIT:

I photograph things I know will change—old buildings, aging faces, seasonal landscapes. It's taught me to be present rather than archive-minded.



9. ENSŌ (円相) – THE CIRCLE OF COMPLETENESS

CONCEPT:

In Zen, the ensō is a hand-drawn circle representing the moment when the mind is free to let the body create. It's about releasing the need for perfection.

HABIT:

I keep a simple daily creative practice that has no audience—a photo I take just for me, a sentence in a notebook. No editing, no posting. Just the act.



10. HARA HACHI BU (腹八分目) – EAT UNTIL 80% FULL

CONCEPT:

A Confucian teaching practiced in Okinawa—one of the world's Blue Zones. Stop eating before you're full. It's a form of mindful restraint that extends beyond food

HABIT:

I apply this principle beyond eating—to output, to spending, to screen time. Stopping just before saturation keeps appetite alive and energy high.



PUTTING IT ALL INTO PRACTICE



The temptation with a list like this is to try everything at once—and that's exactly what Japanese minimalism would caution against. These concepts aren't a checklist. They're lenses. Pick one that resonates and sit with it for a week. Notice where it shows up in your day, your home, your decisions. Let it do its quiet work before reaching for the next. Real change in the Japanese tradition doesn't announce itself—it accumulates, slowly and steadily, until one day you realize you're living differently.

If you're ready to go deeper, I created 21 Days to Ikigai—a structured course designed to help you uncover your own reason for being and build a life around it, one intentional day at a time. Rooted in Japanese philosophy and practical daily practice, it's the closest thing I've built to a guided path through everything I've shared in this guide. If these ten concepts sparked something in you, this is where the real journey begins.

👉 [Start 21 Days to Ikigai](#)