

Ma Assembly

I have given a number of assemblies that draw upon my interest in Japan and Japanese culture. I am going to share another Eastern (specifically Japanese) insight this morning. The concept I want to introduce today is called *Ma* in Japanese. There is no equivalent word in English, but we certainly have the idea. I would not want you to think that the West has nothing to offer in terms of wisdom. Before I go into detail about the Japanese concept, let me share some Western examples of *Ma*.

Here is a link to a YouTube clip of David Hockney talking about the importance of space in his painting: [David Hockney Interview: I Am a Space Freak - YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dVfPNQSluII).

The great actor Ralph Richardson said that acting was more about the way the actor uses pauses than the way they say the words.

The composer Claude Debussy said: ‘Music is the space between the notes.’

The idea was taken further by Maya Angelou when she wrote: ‘Music was my refuge. I could crawl into the space between the notes and curl my back to loneliness.’

Take a look at Count Basie showing us the importance of space and timing in music.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dVfPNQSluII>. It’s all good, but the piece I played starts around 14:58.

You will already have guessed that *Ma* is something to do with space, time, an interval, an emptiness. All that, and more. *Ma* is an absence that has a profound effect upon the things around it. It is the distance between objects that defines their relationship, the space between notes that gives significance to the sounds.

The Japanese language is written in kanji – pictograms rather than words made up of letters. The kanji for *Ma* is interesting. It is this:



This kanji is itself made up of two other kanji: 門 which means ‘door’ and 日 which means ‘sun’. This is meaningful – *Ma* is represented as a door, through which the sunlight is peeping in. It is shining into our world from a sunlit beyond, creeping in through the gaps and crannies. *Ma* is about potential and possibility expressed through absence rather than presence. Music is defined and shaped by silence; objects by the empty spaces between them.

Ma is centrally important to Japanese culture. It is found in all aspects of Japanese life – in the way they speak to each other and behave. A deliberate pause at the end of a polite bow shows an appropriately polite amount of *Ma*. Similarly, in Japan, conversation is full of deliberate silences – infusing speech and thought with enough *Ma*. The opposite of a Western tendency to fill every silence with prattle.

Ma is also central to the arts. Ikebana, Japanese flower arranging, is less about the flowers than about the *Ma* between them. Look at these examples:

So 空 means 'time', 'interval', 'space', 'room' and it has the kanji 空 .

That kanji appears in the pictograms that describe other words as well. What about the word 空? here is the relevant kanji: 空 . It literally means 'ma - nuke' or someone missing . What does 空 mean? 'Idiot' or 'fool'.

Here is another kanji: 空 . This kanji combines the kanji for 空 and the kanji for 空