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## Japan: The Body and its Feet

*This paper aims to gain a deeper understanding of the cultural values attributed to feet in Japan and to find out what we can learn through close observation not only of feet in particular but of the relationship between feet and the body, and, by extension, between parts and a whole. Japanese language materials on the foot both in book form as well as on the internet are discussed, providing insights particularly into questions of training and healing. This first level of approach is expanded in an account of a field study, looking at Buddhist temples and shrines of deities people turn to when they need to focus on the feet.*

### Introduction: The foot as object of fondling and object of training

Asking friends in Japan what came to mind in connection with feet, the most frequent answers implied, „Taking off one’s shoes, relaxing“. Not infrequently the increasing number of *ashiyu* were mentioned, prettily arranged foot baths set up in public spaces such as parks, squares, or even at bus stops. The answers left the impression that people enjoyed being kind to their feet, almost as if feet were animate objects in their own right.

A second line of answers had a stricter ring. The rules of Japanese *sahô* (etiquette), it became clear, demanded close observation of all parts of the body – eyes, fingers, hips, knees as well as feet – and were based on the assumption that both their appearance and their movements were subject to careful shaping (cf. Ackermann 2010). How, for instance, should a foot get out of its shoes? How should a foot move over wooden flooring or *tatami* mats in a Japanese house? Where do the toes point? How is the heel raised? How is the foot tucked under the leg when kneeling in a room? (cf. Ogasawara 1985) (figure 1). The answers in this register of thinking showed how aware people were of every separate limb down to the tip of the toes, and that these limbs were objectified, again almost as if they were animate objects in their own right, here, however, less to be fondled than domesticated.

The two types of answers can be linked in the sense that both create distance between „my self“ and „my foot“. The parts of my body appear to be somewhere „out there“, meriting attention. My foot is not just „me, and that's the way I was created“. Put differently, the position of the foot was neither that of a taken-for-granted part of a human being not meriting much attention, nor was it in any way hierarchically ranked as a less important part, let alone as anything negative, distinguished from „positive“ upper areas of the body, especially the head or the face.

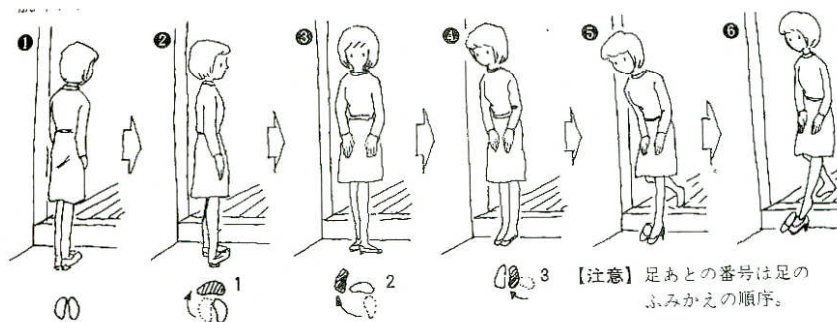


Fig. 1: Correct movement and placement of the feet when entering a house (taken from Ogasawara 1985: 135)

### Extremity and centre: The foot and the belly

Turning to a more abstract level, we can attempt one definition of the foot in Japan by pursuing the extensive present-day debates found on *suri-ashi* (literally, „rubbing the feet along the ground“, walking without lifting one’s heels). From these debates we can gather that the two lines of responses presented above are indeed linked through reference to a common notion about what it is to be a human body.

A continuous stream of arguments about *suri-ashi* (also referred to as *hikizuri-aruki*, „walking by dragging one’s feet along“) can be found especially in diaries, blogs and the like on the internet. Large numbers of people either wonder, but usually fret about the fact that Japanese have this peculiar way of walking, as if they were sliding along the ground. Not only does this type of gait appear grotesque to foreigners, it is also a habit young Japanese themselves would like to get rid of, hence their calls for help (cf. *Ashioto* and *hikizuri-aruki* 2009; *Nihonjin oshare* 2009; *Shisei* 2009; *Suri-ashi* 2009; *Uruwasisan* 2009; *Yamane* 2007).

However, traditional presentations of proper posture as they are found in the rules for *sahō* (etiquette), or also, for that matter, in training manuals for classical theatre or the many kinds of techniques for spiritual advancement (from the martial arts to singing) typically start out with a call to understand that all human energy comes from the belly-waist-hip region (cf. *Monbu Kagakushō* 2007; *Suri-ashi* in *Kendo* 2009; *Yomiuri Shinbun* 2007).<sup>1</sup> We can, in fact, draw a kind of political map of the body, in which power is clearly derived from this region. Put differently, the belly-waist-hip region nurtures, and is in turn nurtured by, every other part. There can be no true hierarchy in this configuration, as the centre must be capable of nurturing the parts, which in turn must be capable of sustaining the functioning of the centre and

<sup>1</sup> Also personal experience can be mentioned here. In certain styles of singing bags weighted with sand or beans are tied around the belly, keeping the centre of gravity identical with the belly, both physically and on the level of awareness.

with it of the whole body. Accordingly, the „political map“ of the body is by no means focused on the head, let alone the dominance of the brain.

What is important for our argument here aiming to define „foot“ in the Japanese context is that the teachings for the proper movement of legs and feet place emphasis on keeping the centre of the human body, that is, the belly-waist-hip region straight and having it glide along through space without any up-down or back-and-forth dislocation (cf. Ogasawara 1988: 50). The human body's centre of gravity is thus subjectively felt to lie very much lower than a person accustomed to Western ways of walking would think of it to be, one result being *suri-ashi*.

*Suri-ashi*, it is true, becomes tiresome and outright ugly if not properly trained, it is hard to harmonize it with the appearance of a human body in Western clothes, and it is certainly a source of worry for many younger Japanese. Yet seen in cultural context it points to the fact that the lower part of the body, and with it the foot, is not just some extremity far removed from the (noble) head. We might go as far as saying that a largely subconscious notion continues to underlie the concept of feet, which, just like eyes, fingers or genitals, are both governed by the requirements to maintain energy (which would be the stern side of the Japanese understanding of feet), and at the same time are the object of care and even love so that, together with all other parts of the human body, they may infinitely continue to provide the service of sustaining life. This point will be illustrated more concretely below.

Incidentally, Western-style „box“-like shoes that protect, but above all hide the foot were not introduced into Japan until around 1870, and still in the 1950s and well into the 1960s traditional Japanese footwear exposing the foot (which might or might not be wearing *tabi*, Japanese socks with the big toe separate) was extremely common. Moreover, the custom of removing the shoes when entering a (private) house and many specific buildings like museums, archives or smaller hotels is still completely intact.

### ***Ashiyu* – foot baths**

Obtaining first-hand information on Japanese views concerning the foot, and studying the readily available materials about the training of the foot in the context of aesthetics and etiquette, were two ways to approach the given topic „foot“ from the outside. In addition, use of the internet and of search engines could provide a glimpse into personal and quite private problems and worries associated with the foot that would otherwise have escaped notice. However, I considered it essential also to take a look at forms of public awareness of the foot in Japan itself, starting with *ashiyu* (foot baths) and then going on to gain a personal impression of temples and shrines with areas dedicated to caring about feet.

Yuda Onsen, where the University of Yamaguchi in Western Japan is located, has long been known for its *ashiyu*. Throughout the town people sit along troughs – usually protected by an elegant roof – with their feet dipped in the warm water

flowing through them. The gently rising steam makes for a truly mystic atmosphere. At many places around the town an outline of the legend about the origins of enjoying this warm water is posted on a board. The main elements of this legend are as follows:

In the precincts of the Ryūsenji temple of the Shingon school of esoteric Buddhism there was a pond with warm water. One night as the moon was shining an old, white fox came to put its injured foot in the water. It did so for seven nights and then vanished. Upon that the temple priest went to the pond, dug into it and pulled out a golden Yakushi Butsu figure („Medicine Teacher“, Buddha of Medicine and Healing and Lord of the Eastern Realm of Pure Lapis Lazuli). He then built a centre for people to come and cure their ailments, while Yakushi Butsu (referred to here as Yakushi Rurikō Nyorai – „The Healing Buddha with Bright Rays of Lapis Lazuli“) protected them and cured their ills. In a nearby inn there is also an image of Yakushi Rurikō Nyorai, which is a *bunrei* (a spirit „branched off“ from that of the main Yakushi Butsu).

The legend of the white fox of Yuda Onsen shows the close link between warm water and the Healing Buddha (Yakushi Butsu or Yakushi Nyorai), and again the close link between the two and caring for one's feet.

In passing, it is interesting to note how the official timetables of Japan Railways (JR) include large size advertisements to travel to places of *ashiyu*, for instance (in the October 2009 edition) stimulating people to visit – apart from famous centres of art, Buddhist scrolls and mandalas, interesting historical spots, or places well-known for special dishes – also the *ashiyu* at Tokachigawa Hot Springs on the northern island of Hokkaido.

At many *ashiyu* – though surrounded as they quite often are by streams of busy traffic or crowds of passers-by – you can see people of all generations relaxing with their feet in the water. Some are reading a book, others are chatting, while children are splashing around (figure 2). In all cases the strict line of „no entrance with shoes on“, and the tidily lined up shoes outside this line, delineate the *ashiyu* as a distinct area of „love for the feet“.

At an *ashiyu* in Takayama in the Hida mountains every small detail was designed to give a feeling of relaxation in nature (figure 3). A board carried the following text:

The blossom-viewing *ashiyu*  
 In the land of Takayama, in Hanasato district  
 there wells up from the ground the blessing of Earth  
 travellers  
 locals  
 people at work  
 all human beings –  
 may by this blessing  
 they be cured  
 in thankfulness



Fig. 2: *Ashiyu* at Dôgo Onsen, Matsuyama, Island of Shikoku (photographed by P.A.)



Fig. 3: *Ashiyu* at Takayama in the Hida Mountains (photographed by P.A.)

### ***Hogusu and junkan* – easing stiffness and boosting circulation**

*Ashiyu* are but one element within a large array of activities provided or undertaken to maintain physical well-being. Of particular importance in this context is massage. The keywords are: *hogusu* (disentangle, ease, relieve stiffness) and *junkan* (circulation). Here are two examples showing the context in which *ashiyu* are spoken about:

- Feet tired from sitting and walking: when we put them in warm water, the air bubbles ease the *tsubo* (therapeutic points) on the foot sole. (Ashi no tsukare 2008)
- If the blood circulation in the feet is hampered because they are cold, this will have a bad effect on the flow of blood in the belly region and through the internal organs. In that case the internal organs will no longer function efficiently. If the blood circulation is not in order, wastes will easily accumulate in the body. [...] By putting our feet into the warm water of *ashiyu* the blood vessels are widened and blood circulation is enhanced. (Ashiyu 2005)

Feet, as we can see, are very closely associated with the concept of flow, that is, the notion that all organs are organically linked, and that illness is caused when these links are severed or blocked. Here again it becomes clear that the foot cannot be thought of as in subordinate position. On the contrary, being at one extreme end of the body (the word for foot used in the text above is *ashisaki* – „end of the leg/foot“) it merits particular attention so that the well-being of the belly region and the inner organs may be secured.

- To warm the feet and enhance the blood circulation is the very first thing to do to ward off illnesses. [...] After *ashiyu* we recommend the massage of the feet. All the nerves of the body come together in the sole of the foot, so if we relieve the stiffness through massage of that part of the body the blood circulation will keep improving, which in turn will improve the functions of the whole body. (Ashiyu no kōka 2001)

The relationship between the body as a whole and the foot – specifically also the sole of the foot – can be seen in the tables showing how the zones of the foot correspond to the organs of the rest of the body. Thus they can be treated and massaged with the aim of improving health in general, both physically and emotionally.

- The two *tsubo* (therapeutic points) which [can be used to] improve the functioning of the heart are the one on the rear side of the second toe, and the *sokushin* – the „heart of the sole“ – right in the centre (figure 4). [...] The *sokushin* should be worked on by lightly beating it for five minutes with the top of a beer bottle. (Ishizaki 2008: 132)

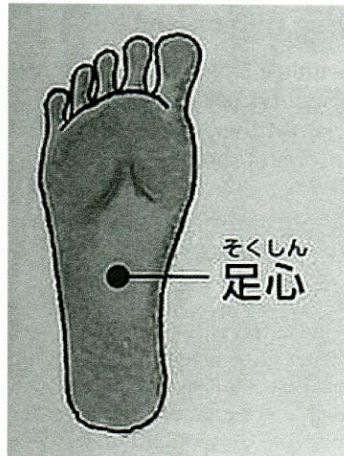


Figure 4: The „heart of the foot“ (*sokushin*) (taken from Ishizaki 2008: 132)

- If you feel anger and irritation (*iraira*), you should put your thumb on the top side of the foot onto a spot at the root of the toes between the big toe and the second toe, and your second finger on the reverse side and massage the region in a pinching way. If you do this every evening you will sleep deeply. This will relieve you from the principle cause for feeling anger and irritation, which is permanent fatigue. Also, stimulating the blood circulation by pressing the middle part of the thumb onto a spot slightly to the rear of the centre of the foot sole and making circling movements will naturally lead your body to feel relaxed. Then your „emotions will find space“ (*kimochi ni yoyû ga deru*, i.e. (in my own interpretation): you will gain „inner space“ to accommodate things you do not particularly like and will thus not get emotionally involved). (Ishizaki 2008: 136)

As an afterthought it should be said that the strong interest in and straight-forward, serious concern for the foot (as much as for any single other part of the body) does much to stimulate unique ideas for the service industry, always seeking innovative ways to make customers feel comfortable. Examples are *ashiyu café* (*ashiyu* coffee shops), *ashiyu izakaya* (*ashiyu sake* [rice wine] bars), *ashiyu-tsuki basu-tei* (bus stops provided with *ashiyu*), where you can sit, drink or wait for a bus with your feet in warm water, or *ashiyu meguri* (cyclic pilgrimage routes to various *ashiyu*).

### ***Bussokuseki* – Buddha’s footprint**

In view of the attention paid to the foot and the non-hierarchical perception of the individual elements of the human body which are all interlinked, it is not surprising that temples and shrines are spread throughout Japan that focus on the foot. In pre-

sent-day Japan „temples“ (*o-tera*, Name+*ji*) refer to Buddhist establishments, whereas „shrines“ (*jinja*, *miya*, Name+*gū*) to non-Buddhist ones, though in historical perspective no clear differentiation can be upheld. In line with Japanese descriptions of what such establishments are there for it would be better to speak comprehensively of „places for *negai* and *kansha*“, i.e. for „asking for something“ and „thanking for something“, but for simplicity’s sake I will here use „temple“ and „shrine“.

A fair number of temples are noted for their *bussokuseki*, a stone with a footprint of Buddha, indicating Buddha’s spiritual presence. It is not possible here to go into historical details about *bussokuseki*, so I will limit myself to the following rough information:

The oldest example of a *bussokuseki* in Japan is kept at the Yakushiji temple in Nara and dates from the mid 8<sup>th</sup> century; it is, in fact, a copy of a *bussokuseki* in China (Chang’an), which in turn was a copy from India. The motif of Buddha’s footprint can be found throughout East Asia and the Buddhist world (India, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bhutan, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Thailand, Laos, Malaysia, Singapore, Cambodia, China, Korea, Japan).

Buddha’s footprint is made up as follows (figure 5) (a historically solid discussion of the elements in Buddha’s footprint would be far too complex to present here; I therefore limit myself to interpretations that are given to the actual present-day visitor at Jōruriji temple near Matsuyama on the island of Shikoku):



Fig. 5: Buddha’s footprint on a stone (*bussokuseki*) (photographed by P.A.)



- Buddha has a big, flat foot, indicating a solid, firm stand;
- rays emanate from the toes, interpreted as warm, nourishing light;
- a flame on the big toe speaks of Buddha's power;
- on the other four toes there is a *manji* (swastika) sign, marking something that is auspicious;
- below the toes are aligned: the vajra (thunderbolt, weapon, indicating spiritual power), the twin fish (fertility), the vase (full of water of enlightenment) and the conch shell (whose sound is said to frighten bad spirits);
- the heel region shows a large crown, indicating the status of a king.

The most prominent and arguably most important element of Buddha's footprint is a wheel (the dharma wheel, *dharmacakra*). The interpretation of this potent symbol varies, but the most common notions can be said to supplement each other. Thus the wheel is –

- a) a symbol of *rinne tensei* (transmigration and rebirth, the law of eternal growth and decay) and Buddha's admonition to „get out of it“ (*gedatsu*) by seeking enlightenment and achieving inner freedom;
- b) a symbol of eternal change and the impermanence of all things, which humans must face in order to free themselves from clinging (*shūchaku*) to the objective world;
- c) a symbol of perfect balance, harmony and achievement;
- d) an admonition to practice, i.e. pursue step after step (turn after turn of the wheel) on the path to enlightenment and inner peace;
- e) a symbol of Buddha's teaching „rolling“ through the universe.

On my visit to the Jōruriji temple (the „Temple of Pure Lapis Lazuli“) in the mountains of Matsuyama there was a very impressive *bussokuseki* near the entrance (figure 6). Asking how it was used, the priest told me that persons with difficulty walking would stand barefoot on Buddha's footprint and beg for continued well-being of the body from the hip to the feet (*ashi-koshi*).<sup>2</sup> Some persons, he added, also came to pray for safety in today's road traffic.

As with the *ashiyu* in Yuda Onsen, it is noteworthy that we again have a close link between the focus on the foot and the Healing Buddha (Yakushi) and his most salient symbol, the lapis lazuli. However, a temple ground provides all kinds of services and „powerful“ landmarks far beyond Buddha's footprint. So what do we find in the neighbourhood of the *bussokuseki*, apart from the main temple hall dedicated to the Healing Buddha? Nearby is a graveyard, while another larger temple building is there to venerate Kūkai (774-835), the founder of Shingon Buddhism and most famous pilgrim on the island of Shikoku. Accordingly, *waraji* (sandals made from straw rope, formerly standard footwear) of all kinds and sizes brought by visitors and pilgrims can be seen dangling from Kūkai's temple as a sign of rev-

<sup>2</sup> *ashi-koshi* is probably the most frequent way of referring to the lower part of the body. *ashi* translates „leg, foot“, *koshi* translates „the lower back, the region around the waist, the hip(s)“.

erence for this great traveler. Also, at the exit a well visible lavatory adds to the services provided, adorned with a large board reading: „We feel with you the hardships of pilgrimage.

Have you not left anything behind? Stick, umbrella, *juzu* (prayer beads), hat, purse, handkerchief, camera and so on? We pray for your safety as you go on your way.“



Fig. 6: The *bussokuseki* at Jōruriji temple, Matsuyama, Island of Shikoku (photographed by P.A.)

Most conspicuous of all arrangements on the temple premises, particularly against the very masculine *bussokuseki* and the tall stone placed next to it, is a mysterious grotto-like area surrounded by trees and with a sanctuary for Benzai-ten (the Japanese name for the Indian Saraswati, the goddess of everything that flows: water, speech, eloquence, music). In front of the sanctuary stands are set up for offerings of fruit, water and eggs.

At Jōruriji temple I was also presented with a booklet introducing a group that calls itself Sokushindō, „The Way of the Centre of the Foot Sole“. This school propagates the Path to Good Health by concentrating on the wheel in Buddha’s footprint and paying particular attention to the fact that „with ageing, decay starts from the feet“ (*rōsui wa ashi kara kuru*). For practitioners of Sokushindō it is especially important to realize that, according to the oldest extant Chinese medical text,<sup>3</sup> the big toe is directly connected with the liver, the spleen, and the pancreas,

3 Kōteinaikyō (in Japanese pronunciation), 1155, but going back to much more ancient knowledge.

the second and middle toe with the stomach, the fourth toe especially with the entrails, and the little toe with eyes, ears and the sexual organs.

I encountered another remarkable *bussokuseki* in the Kôgetsu-in temple (built in 1641 and venerating Amidha Buddha [the Buddha who promises paradise] in the main building) in the dark forest region of Matsudaira in Aichi Prefecture. Here, however, the stone with the footprint was placed vertically, so that the two feet faced the visitor as he approached (figure 7). A young priest sold pretty amulets of Buddha's foot soles and a little golden plate reading, „opening up good luck – warding off evil – traffic safety“. As at Jôruriji temple, here too was a little shrine dedicated to the goddess Benzai-ten.

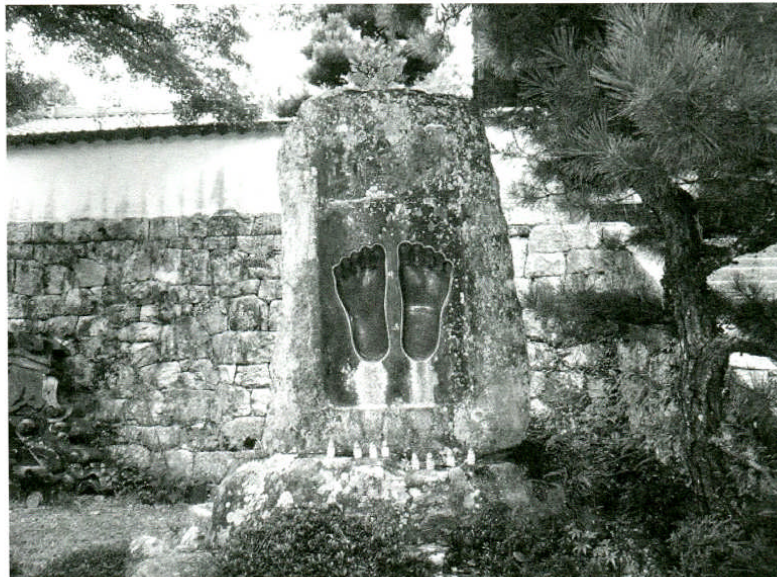


Fig. 7: The *bussokuseki* at Kôgetsu-in temple, Matsudaira, Aichi Prefecture (photographed by P.A.)

### Foot healing deities

Quite a different atmosphere surrounded the shrine dedicated to the „King of the Feet“ (Ashi-ô) at Hakusan-gû in Nisshin near Nagoya. Here I first arrived at a couple of large buildings from which the voice of a priest could be heard reciting a shintô prayer before a group of visitors who had requested and paid for it. At the entrance there was a special parking lot where cars can be blessed. At the far end of the string of buildings stood over a dozen small and medium sized shrines, not all of which could be identified as to the deity they stood there for.

A somewhat larger shrine drew one's attention through a delicately designed poster reading „Shrine of the Karasu deity, protecting wives – protecting young