

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.

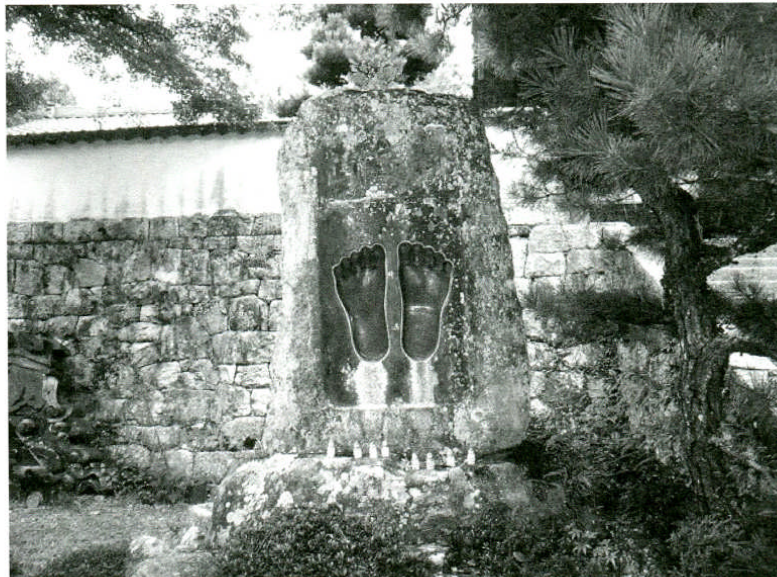


Fig. 7: The *bussokuseki* at Kôgetsu-in temple, Matsudaira, Aichi Prefecture (photographed by P.A.)

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

women“. Another shrine was for the Inari deity providing fertility and growth, one for the Akiba deity, protecting one's home from fire, one called „Mountain deity“, procuring the five basic cereals, and one for the Ashi-ô deity, the „King of the Feet“ (figure 8). It was certainly in honour of Ashi-ô – as well as considering the interests of persons coming to pray to the Ashi-ô deity – that this area had been made more easily accessible, as could be gathered from the brand new stone fencing on which stood: „Works to make the premises barrier free“ (for persons having trouble walking). On each pillar of the fence the name of a company that had contributed was engraved. Also, there were large posters in bright and aggressive blue sporting the letters JFA (Japan Football Association) and advertising for Ashi-ô amulets and support for the *Nagoya Grand pass eight* team.



Fig. 8: Ashiô shrine, Hakusan-gû, Nisshin, Aichi Prefecture; to the left and behind can be seen racks with *ema* (photographed by P.A.)

Taking a look at some of the *ema* (little wooden boards purchased at a shrine, inscribed with a personal wish, and then hung up on a rack provided for presenting the wish to the deity) next to the Ashi-ô shrine we gain some insight into what lies on people's minds when they appeal to the „King of the Feet“:⁴

- Wish

I wish that the right foot of Nakajima Toshio, my father, will heal and he can walk again
January 4, 2009 Ôtani Michiyo

⁴ All names and addresses have here been replaced by fictitious ones.

- Wish

I wish I can become a good football player.
Address: Matsui-chô 1114-5
Name: Maehara Rin
JFA stamp affixed

- Wish

May my feet/legs and hips⁵ become strong
Hiromi

- Wish

May my feet/legs and hip become able to [carry me along] fast and not get injured
Sasaki Taku

- Wish

May the pains in my feet/legs and hips, the cramps, and the tension of my muscles be taken from me and my feet/legs become supple. May my feet/legs and hips become strong and robust, and my knees be healed from pain
September 1, 21st year of the Emperor Heisei (=2009) Miki

- Wish

At the Kuga Kindergarten
I would like to be able to run faster than Papa, Mama, and Elder Brother
Nakamura Hayato

Before leaving the Hakusan-gû premises I took note of a neat little pavilion with a huge automat from which one could buy a wide array of drinks, and a large, invitingly designed lavatory, again driving home the close link between the spiritual and the practical levels of existence and the equality in importance of all parts of the human body.

Like many other towns and villages in Japan the city of Kyoto also has a sanctuary dedicated to a deity caring about feet, namely the Go-ô shrine. Go-ô, literally „Protector of the King“, refers to the emperor’s loyal vassal Wake no Kiyomaro who, in the 8th century, turned lame after an accident but was miraculously helped by wild boars and then found that his injured feet/legs were cured; he was elevated to the status of *myôjin* (the true and not only transient appearance of a deity) in 1851.

The Go-ô shrine is a fairly large arrangement of buildings and groups of trees, well visible from the outside thanks to a board depicting the sole of a foot (figure 9). On the right side of this foot sole the board reads, „cure for illness and injury of feet/legs and hips, prayers for maintenance of good health – the continuation of the text being on the left side: „come to the deity that protects feet/legs and hips, come to the Go-ô shrine“. Inside the big foot sole itself are two small foot soles and the text: „Takes care of curing [persons] suffering from *ashi-nae* (not being able to

5 *ashi-koshi* (feet/legs and hip), cf. footnote 2.

freely use one's feet)". Beneath this big foot sole a short account of Wake no Kiyomaro is given, followed by the text:

For weddings, pacification rites for the dead, prayers, and counseling
GO-Ô SHRINE with its wild boars, telephone number ...



Fig. 9: Entrance board to the Go-ô shrine, Kyoto (photographed by P.A.)

Inside the shrine grounds was a similar board, this time, however, indicating the price for special prayers: 5000 or 10000 Yen. When I asked at the priests' office what the difference was between the two, he answered: „There is no great difference, it is a matter of how you feel.“

At the Go-ô shrine there were several forms of presenting one's wishes to the deity. Many wrote wishes on little papers pinched between two small sticks and stuck in the ground, and again there were many *ema* hanging on a rack. Citing three of them, they read:

- I wish that little Mitsu's feet will heal quickly.
September 9, Toshiko and Haruko

- I wish that my feet will become more robust than they are now, and that I will be able to walk more vigorously
Sakamoto Shizuka, age 81

- Please cure my hernia
Tanabe Makoto

The last cited *ema* is one example showing the assumption that the deity will, if asked, also take care of problems outside its special field of operation.

The Gamba Osaka shrine

Going to the Gamba Osaka shrine in Kita Senri in the northern part of Osaka I was not certain what to expect. *Gamba Osaka* is the name of a very successful professional football team in the district of Suita. „Gamba“, which in Italian means „leg“, is clearly also associated with the Japanese verb *gambaru*, „doing one's best“, or its imperative *gambaru*, „do your best!“

I had seen the Gamba Osaka shrine advertised as a deity of the feet and found the following message on the internet:

On April 12, 2008, a new deity of the feet⁶ was set up at the Dios Shopping Centre in Kita Senri inside the Gamba Osaka shrine. Being taken care of by supporters, the ceremony of giving the figure a spirit was performed without incident. The revered deity's body is shining gold, and if you touch the sole of its feet it is supposed to grant favours. It is really a charming, lovable deity. How about going to see whether it really grants favours? ...

Certainly, the Dios Kita Senri Supermarket will continue to warmly back Gamba Osaka and their supporters.

The little Gamba Osaka shrine, situated on the 4th floor of a shopping centre, is located in a corner at the end of a sales department selling toys and goods for school children. It stands out because of its *torii* (a gateway marking the entrance to the sphere of deities), which is unusually painted vividly blue, and it boasts a large number of photographs as well as stone statues of football players, depicted as one of the Seven Lucky Gods. There is also a rack for hanging up *ema*, while zigzag shaped paper streamers delineate purified ground (figure 10).

Like every shrine, Gamba Osaka shrine has a *go-honzon*, a principal object of veneration and devotion. In this case it is a jolly looking figure called Gamba Boy, painted all in gold and stretching its feet out towards the visitor, who stands facing Gamba Boy's foot soles. These are obviously an important element of a football player's body, but also, as discussed earlier, one of the most sensitive areas of the body and directly linked to every other part of it (figure 11).

Though Gamba Osaka shrine appears more like a gag than a true shrine, I nevertheless maintain that it neatly sums up the characteristics of „feet“ in a broader cultural context:

⁶ Here *ashi* (foot/leg) is not written with its usual character, but with that which also reads *kyaku*, putting emphasis on the lower part of the leg from the knee downwards.



Fig. 10: The Gamba Osaka shrine, in a department store, Osaka, Kita Senri (photographed by P.A.)



Fig. 11: Gamba Boy (photographed by P.A.)

- 1) All parts of the body, including the foot, are perceived and esteemed for their function, which is always understood to be the maintenance of life's energy. As the feet contribute to life, human life reciprocates this favour by nurturing the feet and bringing them to the attention of Buddhas and deities. In other words, body parts are elements within a closed circle of flowing energy and thus could never be fitted into a hierarchical order which, for instance, would focus on the head, face or even brain of a human being. This fact is so basic that it makes no difference whether it is reflected upon at a Buddhist temple, before a shrine deity, or praying for the good luck of a football league at a „gag“ shrine.
- 2) The organic and not hierarchical understanding of the relationship between feet and body underlies both the stern approach to the feet (shaping and training them to move correctly) as well as the worrying, loving, and caring approach. Thus Gamba Boy can be associated with feet which are both the object of serious training as well as playful fondling.
- 3) As feet, like any other part of the body, are directly linked to the idea of investing energy to maintain the flow of life, they naturally become objects of special focus, brought to the attention of healing deities like Ashi-ô or the Yakushi (medicine) Buddha, reflected upon as symbols of Buddha's teachings as in the *bussokuseki*, or venerated so that they may win football games as in Gamba Osaka shrine, which structurally does not basically differ from a „serious“ shrine.
- 4) The emphasis on the aspect of life's energy, and at the same time on caring for, and asking for protection of, the parts of the body needed to provide this energy allows the transfer of feelings of reverence onto any number of recipients, from Buddhas and better or less known deities to joyful Gamba Boy. It is no blasphemy to pray to such a gag, as it too serves to channel intense wishes (*negai*) and subsequent feelings of thankfulness (*kansha*) so that life-sustaining energy continues to flow, in our case, thanks to the feet.

Studying the foot, and the apparent assumptions that relate the foot to the body and speak of a world view focused on the concept of „flow“, I think we should reassess many of the notions we hold on how in Japan processes of linking separate elements to an overall frame of reference function as we find them operating in communication, politics or rules of social order.

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General information to give a rough outline of the meaning of Japanese terms and the implications of concepts relating to belief systems was taken from: Encyclopedia Heibonsha (1986), Tokyo (Heibonsha).

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