

Making the Pilgrimage

Cameron Bishop, MAc, AP

Some 20 years ago, I left Japan after spending four years studying healing and martial arts. I lived in conservative southern Japan where men did not wear shorts, walk barefoot outside, foreigners were a rarity, tattoos were only on criminals, one rarely protested, and drinking to excess was a norm. Well, the last one has not changed.

Although I have returned for a week or two here or there over the years this last trip was the most dramatic change I have seen in Tokyo. Due to the earthquake, tsunami and nuclear power meltdown creating electrical shortages the thermostats all seemed to be set at 80 degrees (27 F), and as a transplant Floridian it phased me a little. I was happy to be mostly ignored as foreign faces fade in especially with the variety of new hair colors in Japan. I miss the "mountain of black" that referred to looking over a crowd all with black hair. The frequency of tattoos of obvious Western and non yakuza origin was impressive. I guess I too have changed, as I tacked on a couple days extra to enjoy myself alone in Japan rather than to rush home to work.

Something every acupuncturist should do is to make the pilgrimage to the grave of Waichii Sugiyama, the father of Japanese Meridian Therapy. I had to push myself to go and I was so glad I did.

Heading out of Shinjuku on the Odakyu line to Enoshima I realized it was Natsuyasui or summer school break. The train was full of happy teenagers on their way to the beach. It was nice to see a more relaxed crowd of Japanese. Board shorts, flip flops, surfing tee shirts, body boards, smiles, laughing, and lots of texting. This generation seemed actually happy. We all parted ways with them heading to McDonald's while I took the long bridge to the Island. My intentions were to see his grave, the cave, the "Lucky Stone" and the Shinto Shrine Hetsunomiya associated with this famous founder.

Kengyo Sugiyama (born Waichi Sugiyama) was born in 1610 in Ise to a Samurai family, and lost his sight as a child. He died very well honored, wealthy and famous in 1684 having gained the confidence of the Shogun Tsunayoshi Tokugamwa by curing him when no others could.

There are a few variations to the story to the rise of his abilities. He studied under the famous acupuncturists Kengyo Yamase and Toyoaki Irie. The first of which threw him out as having no talent or skill after many years of apprenticeship. Crying he stumbled on his way home when a stranger asked what was wrong. That stranger turned out to be his former teacher's teacher, and he was started up tutelage under him with great hopes and reassurances that this teacher would not fail him. Years later the teacher agreed with his student's assessment of Sugiyama as useless and without talent.

Once again dejected he headed home. Along the way he decided to pray in the Iwaya cave for 21 days to the Goddess Benten. And nothing happened. Dejected he left the cave and tripped over the "Lucky Stone." A pine needle inside a bamboo piece pierced his leg. The idea of the insertion tube was

inspired, invented and led to acupuncture becoming the leading profession for the blind. Sugiyama founded many schools for the blind and his presence is still felt 400 years later in Japan, Australia, Europe, and North American through various practicing groups of meridian acupuncture therapists.

I wandered the island, and eventually I found my way to an escalator, which led to the "Lucky Stone."

Near by was the Hatsunomiya Shrine, which I foolishly asked the priest if it was Buddhist and he corrected me saying it was Shinto. Next I headed to buy a beer and to see the O Haka (grave). It was a beautiful little walk. I came across a little sign and open gate with stairs leading down to a cliff beautifully over looking the water. Under a canopy of trees was a prominent grave with signs in English, Chinese, Korean, Braille and Japanese. I opened the beer and set it with the other offerings- which to my surprised included many needles and tubes.

I felt a little dumb that I am an acupuncturist and had no needles with me. I would like to report something mystical happened. I could probably make up something good like my feet glowed blue, or my hands pulsed gold, but on reflection of the beauty of the spot I knew any place outside of ourselves for mastery is not where to go. I gave my thanks and bowed.

This amazing hero to our profession persevered lack of sight, lack of accomplishment, rejection, miscalculation to create a legacy across the world. Here his bones listen to the wind, the water, enjoy the snow, sun and a cold beer on a very hot humid day.

NOVEMBER 2012