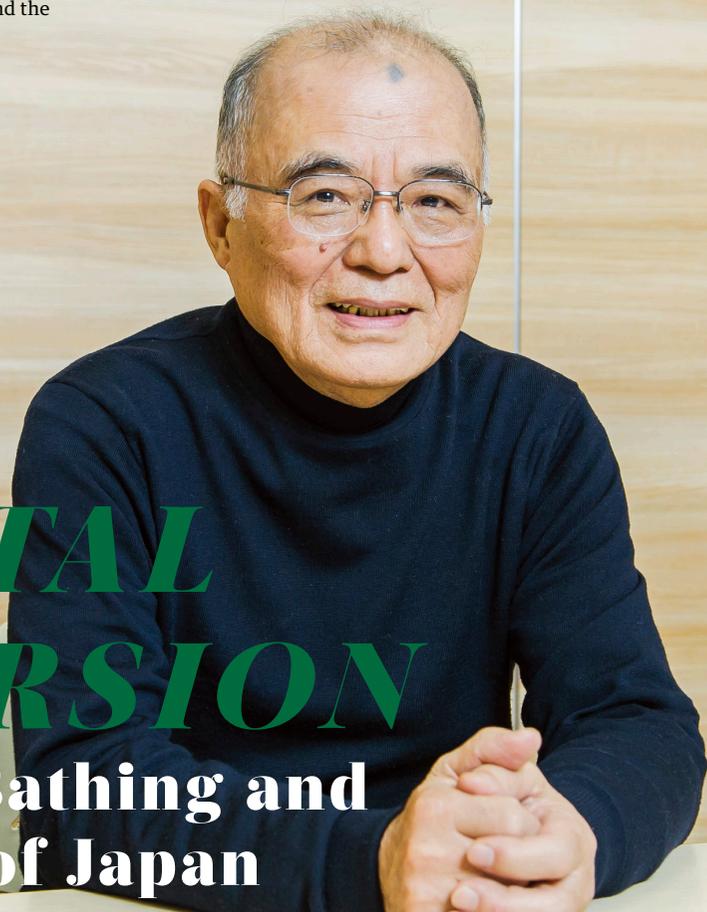


Koushi Shimokawa, expert on public customs and the history of bathing



TOTAL IMMERSION

Buddhism, Bathing and the Rise of Japan

TAKAYOSHI YAMABE

Buddhism was pivotal in spreading bathing customs to urban areas of Japan through the baths that temples provided to the public, and Buddhism and bathing culture were in turn integral in the development of the Japanese state. Historian Koushi Shimokawa, an expert on public customs and the history of bathing, provides insight into this unusual form of influence.

ACCORDING to historian Koushi Shimokawa, Buddhism strongly influenced the popularization of baths in Japan's urban areas, and Buddhism and the bathing culture it inspired went on to do much more. A religion born in India, Buddhism came to Japan from Mainland China via the Korean Peninsula, brought from Baekje—a kingdom in southwestern Korea—to Japan in the year 538, as part of official negotiations between the two lands. The Imperial Court, which was at the center of Japanese politics and administration, sought to stabilize national polity under the teachings of Buddhism. They also constructed temples around the country, spreading Buddhism throughout Japan.

“Within the teachings of Buddhism are ‘the virtues of ablutions,’ which encouraged pouring cold or hot water over the body or immersing oneself in baths to wash away worldly uncleanness,” Shimokawa explains. “Buddhist virtues denote particularly good actions, and a sutra about bathing at temples notes that performing this virtue dispels the ‘seven illnesses’ and allows the bather to obtain the ‘seven merits.’”

The great public bath of Todaiji Temple is an Important Cultural Property



“With this in mind,” he continues, “the priests of temples not only purified themselves but also gave the public the opportunity to bathe, giving rise to a custom of ‘virtuous bathing.’ Monks assisted in the baths as part of their training. The great public bath at Todaiji Temple, a World Heritage Site, is thought to be the birthplace of the practice, and a place where both monks and the public performed ablutions.” Shimokawa also notes that these public baths brought about the custom of bathing.

“Of course, people bathed in natural hot springs before that time, and hot spring bathing makes appearances in regional records of local history and customs, such as the *Izumo Fudoki*, published in 733,” Shimokawa notes. “Japan’s native Shinto religion also had the custom of pouring water on the body for purification. Permanent bathing facilities were built in urban areas far from hot springs. From surviving materials on the topic, it appears that Todaiji Temple’s public bath is the oldest.”

While it is unclear exactly when Todaiji’s public bath was completed, Shimokawa believes it was between when construction of the temple began in 745 and when the department in charge of construction was abolished in 789. It is worth noting that baths in that era were similar to Turkish baths, where patrons could warm themselves in a

steam-filled room, or pour cold or hot water over themselves. Both differed from the modern method of partially or fully immersing the body in bathtubs.

At the time, the Imperial Court issued nationwide legislation and worked to build a national political system, including managing land and the family registers of residents. The concept of avoiding disaster and striving for national stability through the power of Buddhism was one of the major pillars of spirituality. Temples had the duty to spread Buddhism far and wide, and bathing was an important measure for gaining popular support. Before long, many temples besides Todaiji were offering virtuous bathing as well.

“Bathing was also beneficial for the public, since cleansing the body in baths helps prevent infectious diseases and has significant benefits for overall health,” Shimokawa explains. “Many felt that this was a tangible example of the benefits that could be gained in this world through observing Buddhist teachings.”

The popularity of the baths among the public facilitated the acceptance of Buddhism and also helped prepare the way for a new political system. Who knew that the humble bath is so deeply linked with Japanese leadership and policy? **7**