

The Life Journey of a Masseuse *Extraordinaire*

Recollections of Shizuko Yamamoto
as told to Carolyn Heidenry

A bit of Old World Japan, an idyllic childhood, the trauma of eyesight loss, “gypsy” living in a new country — this is part of the life recipe of our best known massage teacher and author of Barefoot Shiatsu.

I was born in a suburb of Tokyo, in a relatively unknown area of the countryside where there were beautiful rice fields, pretty streams, forests and many cherry blossom trees. Everyday I was running barefoot in the fields, playing with the butterflies, caterpillars and bees — it was a beautiful childhood. Being the last of five children, I would sit on the terrace while my brothers and sisters were at school, and look at the sun and play with the cat and the dog. I often had a snack in my hand, the kinds of snacks mothers would give to children then, such as a steamed sweet potato, or rice cracker or bean cake.

My mother was very busy all the time, cleaning, washing clothes or educating my brothers and sisters after they came home from school. She had been a teacher for many years before she married and was very ambitious and active. She was very interested in studying, and was very strict about this with us children. We would sit in front of her and repeat our homework for one hour before going out to play. Though she had five children, she still wanted to do more, and several times she became involved in different activities. At one time she sold fur by raising a hundred rabbits in our garden. Another time she made many beautiful dolls for Father’s business. She also invented many little crafts, like making fancy tea strainers. My father worked for the same company for over thirty-five years. He left early in the morning and came home late. He was a very gentle, quite scholarly type. We were never scolded by our father, perhaps only once in all my childhood.

When my mother cooked we would help her: naturally, we learned how to cook. I still remember that I liked to read a lot, especially cookbooks. Even

when I was only three I tried to read them (sometimes upside down). In the backyard in summer, we would have corn, cucumber, tomatoes . . . my mother was a very, very good cook. Everyday she made good quality foods — rice and miso soup, and many different side dishes such as seaweed, fish, beans and vegetables from the backyard garden. The problem, however, was that we also had too much sugar and meat as well, though fortunately we rarely ate dairy food. But we had too much food, or rather, portions that were too big.

Generally we followed Japanese traditions. At dinner, Father would sit in the best seat, then next to him my brothers, then me always at the end. Father had special dishes cooked for him, and my brothers got the better parts of various dishes and I would get what was left. This sometimes frustrated me and I remember asking my mother about it several times. She would answer that this was so because I was a girl, and also the youngest. She would also tell me that the youngest must obey the eldest. (Traditionally in Japan if an elder person says something, even if it’s wrong, we are supposed to go along with it.) But anyway, I couldn’t figure it out and somewhere I felt frustrated — I thought man and woman were the same, but decided that ordinary people just didn’t think that way.

Our family was more or less upper middle class. In some ways my parents were strict (regarding manners, for instance), but generally speaking they were liberal. My aunt had built a high school in Hokaido and had served as its first president. Grandfather was a scholar on Chinese literature and had many Chinese friends. As a result, I like Chinese culture very much. He was a beautiful person and left behind beautiful writings which we still treasure.

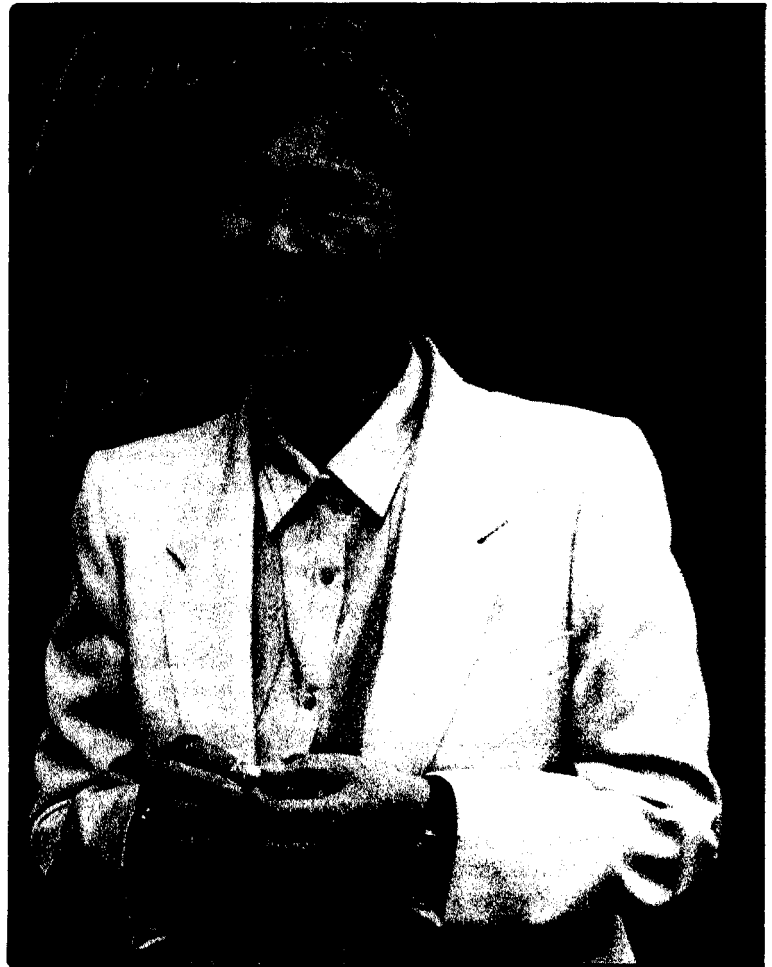
All of us five children were physically and mentally strong. This was a deep source of happiness for my parents. They were given some kind of award for this by the government during wartime.

Around that time in Japan there was a major revolution. Japan had been closed so long; then it was opened and everyone wanted to learn and know and study. My parents were quite

liberal in the sense of absorbing western culture. If there was an exhibit from the West, we would go see it right away. Also, when I was a child, many children still wore kimonos and zori, but in my class everyone wore Western-style clothes, shoes, backsacks and berets.

During World War II we were not allowed to wear nice clothes, and we had to carry a sack with emergency provisions. The government rationed food, but since father had a good position, we were able to get enough food. When I graduated from girls college I worked one year as an assistant professor. It was really a happy time. Japanese men really love women. We were well treated at work — all the time playing really, not like working. Traditional attitudes remained, of course, and when I argued with my brother, for instance, my mother would sometimes say, you're a woman, don't talk like that. But our house was both Japanese and Western, so I didn't feel too much the gap as a woman. I think perhaps amongst the poorer classes, life was harder for women, but not in the very liberal atmosphere that I lived in.

Then I entered the university in Tokyo and studied Japanese literature and language for three years. After WWII the Japanese educational system changed. Girls were allowed to enter the university. A few girls began to attend, four or five of us, but otherwise it was all boys. The boys treated us like queens. They were lazy and fooled around, but the boys respected us because we were very good and took good notes. I really enjoyed studying at that time in my life. I went to the library and read many books, and had a good three years of student life. During my last year I had a big ambition to make a report, and for almost one year I sat and read and wrote for many hours. In Japan,



Shizuko Yamamoto

Japanese men really love women. We were well-treated at work — all the time playing, really, not like working.

graduation time is March. Around that time I was exhausted. I finished the report, however, and got good marks. Then I planned to study French literature and possibly go to France. I began studying the language for about a month, though I was still so tired.

One night I went to sleep and when I woke up in the morning and opened my eyes there was a big strong blue color coming in one eye. Many strange things were happening in my eye, and water was dripping around my vision. I called to mother and she immediately arranged for us to visit a very excellent doctor whom we had known for a long time. We found out that the liquid surrounding the eye, which is supposed to be clear, had become dirty, and was causing this trouble. So he gave me salt injections in my eye for one month but it never got better, only worse and worse. After one month he said this is strange, you have to see a specialist. Then I went to a specialist and he said your retina is broken, but unfortunately we cannot fix it. Your pupil is already twisted and we cannot open it. Then I went to many famous doctors all over Tokyo, but no doctor said he could help me.

At that time I was about 23 or 24. I was so discouraged and upset that I couldn't continue to

study. It got worse and worse. Then I began getting very severe headaches — glaucoma. They were so bad I couldn't even think. Much worse than a toothache. They continued for about two years. There was no more study, no more reading. I became so sensitive, irritable and my family was afraid. They worried about me but didn't know what to do. After two years of this a doctor we met at Tokyo University said you must have an operation or you cannot endure it. He had invented a new type of surgical scissors which he used to cut my eye and release the stagnated waters that had accumulated. This relieved the pain of the glaucoma. This kind of operation is used only once in a hundred thousand cases. It was no cure but it helped to relieve the pain. It was the last of twelve operations I had had, and I gradually lost my eyesight completely in one eye. The nerve was troubled. During the operations I had injections to regulate my blood or else they couldn't operate. My blood couldn't coagulate because it was so weak. I'd had plenty of meat and sugar in the hospitals and not enough minerals. I think that my blood was very close to leukemia; every day I had a fever of 102 or 103 for nearly two or three years. The doctors sent me around to different specialists, but

no one could find anything wrong. During this period, little by little, I realized that something was wrong with western medicine. The doctors and nurses were very kind and caring, but they only cared about my eye and how to fix it. They were not concerned about my total person. Having grown up thinking western education was right turned out to be an expensive lesson for me.

Eventually I came home, with one eye completely blind, and the other eye weak. I couldn't read a book and had no strength, even to lift the pillow. But what could I do? Everyday I just ate gourmet food — even without hunger, just ate; it was my only pleasure. I became fat . . . more and more. Then finally I couldn't climb the stairs, my heart had become enlarged and I would get out of breath. I stayed on the bed all the time wasting time. Everybody treated me very well, but they couldn't help me. I wanted to kill myself several times but I couldn't. I lived in a kind of twilight with nothing to do. At the time I was 26 or 27 — my "dark age" I call it, for I really went all the way to the bottom.

martial arts — like aikido — and became physically very active. For several years we took care of many people through yoga. Then my aunt asked me one day to take a letter to Mr. Ohsawa for her. So I took Aunt's letter to Mr. Ohsawa's home and for the first time met him and his wife, Mrs. Lima Ohsawa. They served me a delicious meal, different from the way I was cooking; it tasted so good! I had the impression that they were very nice people and I began to learn more about diet. Mr. Oki's diet was more vegetarian and included raw foods and raw fruit as well. I had felt progress and improvement but didn't feel this was really right.

Little by little I crossed over to Mr. and Mrs. Ohsawa's way of eating. When Mr. Ohsawa came back from Europe, he was already over seventy, and he would give a lecture once a month at a big Japanese inn owned by macrobiotic friends. I went to his lectures sometimes but whenever I went there I would feel strange. He would talk about yin and yang and give many strange questions to the students. I couldn't understand anything at the beginning, but I felt he was

**I went to many famous doctors all over Tokyo,
but no doctor said he could help me.**

Eventually I felt that if I cannot kill myself then I must do something. If no one can help me, then I must do something. One day I read a book, for by now I was beginning to use the other eye and could read for twenty minutes at a time before having to rest. A yoga teacher by the name of Indira Levy had just had a book translated in Japanese in which she explained about breathing and exercise and diet. I thought — this is wonderful. If I can do this maybe I can help myself. So I asked many people. "What is yoga?" No one knew about it at that time. But one day my aunt came to see me; she knew about yoga for she had studied yoga philosophy in India and cured herself of lung and bone cancer. I asked her to introduce me to her teacher, Masahiro Oki, who was about 30 or 32 at the time and who had once been a student of Ohsawa. I went to see him right away. He said you must change your diet and eat brown rice and vegetables and no animal food at all. Then he gave me exercises to do. From the very next day I cooked brown rice and did breathing exercises. About one month later I felt much better. After that I moved to my grandmother's house next door and lived in a completely different style. I would get up early in the morning, exercise for an hour, cook very well and pray and eat and chew well. I would fix up the garden and the house and my body as much as I could. I became stronger and stronger. But at the same time I was so concentrated on getting well that I became a stranger to my family, a kind of black sheep. I never ate their food and my attitude was different. But I helped Mr. Oki and arranged my activities and classes in my house.

Mr. Oki moved next door, made his dojo there, and formed a yoga society. During that time I also studied seitai (a collective body exercise method) from Mr. Noguchi, also a wonderful person. I studied shiatsu,

very talented and, though cynical, he had much love for people. Mrs. Ohsawa was a beautiful lady. She cooked very well but was always behind him and didn't have much contact with the students.

I gradually became close to them and studied cooking with Mrs. Ohsawa. I had no hesitation about calling them "Papa" and "Mama." I felt that my own mother and father had given me plenty of love — but more material love. Mr. Ohsawa gave me spiritual love. I could talk with him about my private troubles. But he was strict all the time and pushed the students to study. I was a lazy student, however, and though he gave me many books and questions I wrote no reports and gave no answers.

By now 17 or 18 years had passed from the beginning of my trouble (in 1948), and one day in 1965 I got a call from Mr. Ohsawa asking me to please come over right away. I was afraid I was going to get scolded again. Instead he said, "You should go to America to help Michio Kushi's activities. We have selected three girls and you are one of them. Please go." I was surprised, for I had never thought of going to the United States. I had still wanted to go to France and study French literature. Also, my father was building a house for me, but Mr. Ohsawa said, "No, go to the United States, you'll be much happier." I said, "Ok, Papa give me time to think." I went home and told my parents; they were upset and didn't agree at all.

I thought, well, maybe I'll try. I applied for a visa, but it was not given because immigration didn't like the idea of girls going abroad alone. I needed to have a sponsor. So I obtained a letter from Michio Kushi and also from my father, who finally agreed to give me permission to stay two years only. I didn't know Michio Kushi, but I had heard about him at lecture and wrote him a long letter telling him about myself.

I applied for a visa again. I didn't want to ask travelling money from my parents, so I sold my kimonos and books and made my travel fee plus \$300 extra. At that time I had a business in a new apartment building which my father had built — a beauty and health center where we taught yoga, diet and cosmetics together with Mrs. Michi Ogawa. So I closed the business and waited for my visa. Then in February of 1966 my mother died of a heart attack. My mother and father were very close, so my father soon became very "low energy." We thought he might die. Then in April of the same year, Mr. Ohsawa died. It was Sunday, I remember, and I received a call from John Fountain, an American macrobiotic friend who said come over right away. Mr. Ohsawa was on the bed, his face very clear and beautiful. We tried many things to make him come back, but he never came back. Many students got together and kept vigil. Everybody was so tired, but I kept vigil all night as is our custom. Later I asked Mrs. Ohsawa and the head of the Japan macrobiotic center whether I should go

never advertised once — just by word of mouth. Three macrobiotic men helped me out very much and sent me many customers. Eventually I got my own apartment and was so happy. Later, several friends got together and we tried to have a center. It went very well at the beginning but there were so many robberies (six times) and the overhead was costly. Then we closed down and moved several times and finally decided to dissolve because no one could manage it. I kept on treating people and, as much as possible, tried to give information. About one year later, I received a letter from my brother that my father was not well. But I didn't go back, there wasn't enough money yet. So my father remains alive in my memory. He couldn't survive long without Mother. I didn't go back to Japan for a long time, but I went just recently. My brothers and sister could understand more than before what I am doing. My eldest brother had died of leukemia at the age of 56. He was so successful, so strong, so active, but he couldn't stop the sugar and ice cream. One month after he found out about the

I came home with one eye completely blind; I couldn't read and had no strength, even to lift a pillow.

to America or not. They said you are all ready to, so you'd better go.

My father was so weak I felt I may not see him again. I arrived at Los Angeles airport on June 12, 1966. My new life began on this date. From the airplane I saw a big land — so huge! I stayed ten days with macrobiotic friends, then flew to Boston. Mrs. Kushi was supposed to pick me up at the airport. Because Mr. Ohsawa had said that Aveline Kushi's nickname was masakari (which means ox), I was looking for a big strong lady. Instead I found a tiny sensitive lady, waving her hand to me. Though I was disappointed to see this tiny body I found out later she was really a strong person. I stayed at the Kushi's home for many weeks that summer, but at that time they had difficulties and there were not many activities going on. I felt guilty to stay there and eat their food and do nothing. I said to him I better go to work someday. Gloria Swanson was looking for a cook, so I offered to go to New York. (I had seen the movie *Sunset Boulevard*, when I was in high school and wanted to meet her). She hired me, and I was supposed to be the chef. However Bill Dufty was there and she liked to eat Bill's food. Then they had to go to Hollywood so I moved to friends' house and started my life in New York — really just by circumstance. I moved from house to house with macrobiotic friends and people called me the Japanese gypsy with my one suitcase. I was never afraid, though, and never confused. Everybody was kind to me and gave me clothes. Then I worked at Michael Abesara's restaurant as a cook for about one year. During that time many customers said to me, "My shoulder hurts" or "My neck hurts," so I would treat them with shiatsu, rubbing their shoulder, banging their head (no charge). Then Abesara closed his restaurant and I needed to have an income. I started to treat people at friends' homes. I

leukemia he was dead.

Perhaps the biggest lesson of my life has been patience. I rarely see a person who really has lots of patience like Michio Kushi. When I see Michio I feel I should be patient and that's why I respect him very much, though of course, for his intellect also. Though I was spoiled as a child (very happy, but spoiled) sickness made me patient. I really feel that I am a lucky person, in spite of my "dark age," because my parents loved me so much. I couldn't go in a strange direction for they loved and supported me. It was so important. I received a strong body and constitution from my parents. My bones were strong so I could endure much, and much stress.

In addition I grew up in the countryside, in nature, and have a beautiful memory of sunshine, flowers, and water. I could talk with the sun, I was a child of the sun, I belonged to nature . . . such were the impressions that I had. I still have this even though I live a busy life in the city.

My message to young people today is that childhood education is the most important thing in life. Not only embryonic education but also if a mother takes care of the children well, with love, until three or five years of age, children won't go in a wrong direction their whole life.