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**J L C 通信**  
**Japanese Language Center (つうしん)**  
**Newsletter November 2005**

\* **歴史 (れきし)** \* **History 忠臣蔵 (ちゅうしんぐら) Forty-seven Samurai**

The tale of the **Forty-Seven Samurai** is a prototypical Japanese story. Described by one noted Japan scholar as the country's national legend, it recounts the most famous case involving the samurai code of honor, bushido, and vividly expresses a significant part of the traditional Japanese world-view.

The story tells of a group of samurai who were left leaderless after their master was forced to commit **Seppuku** (ritual suicide) for assaulting a court official who had insulted him. They avenged him by killing the court official after patiently waiting and planning for over a year. In turn, they were themselves forced to commit seppuku for the crime of murder, as they had known they would be—the tale being about the honorable fulfillment of duty, especially to an honorable leader.



The story was popularized in numerous plays including **Bunraku** and **Kabuki**; because of the censorship laws of the shogunate which forbade portrayal of current events, the names were changed. Furthermore, those works are dramatic, without pretense to historical accuracy, and the most popular (**The Chushingura**) takes numerous liberties with the events.



In 1701, two daimyo, Asano Takumi-no-Kami, the young daimyo of Akō, and Kamei Sama, were ordered to arrange a fitting reception for the envoys of Emperor of Japan in Edo, during their sankin kotai service of greetings to the Shogun.

They were to be given instruction in the necessary court etiquette by Kira Kozuke-no-Suke, a powerful official in the hierarchy of Tokugawa Tsunayoshi's shogunate. He became upset at them, allegedly because of either the small presents they offered him, or because they would not offer bribes as he wanted. In any event, he treated them poorly, insulting them and not bothering to teach them their duties properly.

While Asano bore all this stoically, Kamei Sama became enraged, and prepared to kill Kira to avenge the insults. However, the quick thinking counsellors of Kamei Sama averted disaster for their lord and clan by quietly giving Kira a large bribe; Kira thereupon began to treat Kamei Sama very nicely, which calmed his anger. Finally, Kira insulted Asano as a country boor with no manners, and Asano could restrain himself no longer. He lost his temper, and attacked Kira with a dagger, but only wounded him in the face with his first strike.

Kira's wound was hardly serious, but the attack on a shogunate official within the boundaries of Edo castle, the Shogun's residence, was a grave offense; any kind of violence, even drawing a sword, was completely forbidden there. Therefore Asano was ordered to commit seppuku that same day, his goods and lands were to be confiscated after his death, his family ruined, and his retainers made Samurai.



Of Asano's over three hundred men, forty-seven -- and especially their leader Ōishi -- refused to allow their lord to go unavenged, even

though revenge had been prohibited in the case. They banded together, swearing a secret oath to avenge their master by killing Kira, even though they knew they would be severely punished for doing so.

Early in the morning of December 15, 1702 in a driving wind during a heavy fall of snow, Ōishi and the Samurai attacked Kira's mansion in Edo. According to a carefully laid-out plan, they found Kira and cut his head off. Then they walked to Sengakuji temple and cleaned Kira's head in a well, and laid it, and the fateful dagger, before Asano's tomb. They then turned themselves in.

The shogunate officials were in a quandary. The samurai had followed the precepts of bushido but also defied shogunate authority. They were sentenced to death, but the Shogun had finally resolved the quandary by ordering them to honorably commit seppuku, instead of having them executed as criminals.

Though this act is often viewed as an act of loyalty, there had been a second goal that re-established the Asano's lordship and finding a place to serve for fellow samurai. Hundreds of samurai who had served under Asano had been left workless and many were unable to find a job as they had served for a disgraced family. The 47 Samurai's act cleared their names and many of the unemployed samurai found a job offering soon after the Samurai had been sentenced to an honorable end. Asano Daigaku, Takuminokami's young brother and adopted son as heir was allowed by Tokugawa Shogunate to establish his name, though his territory was reduced to a tenth of the original.



As one might expect, the tragedy of the Forty-seven Samurai has been one of the most popular themes in Japanese art. Immediately following the event, there were mixed feelings among the intelligentsia about whether such vengeance had been appropriate -- many agreed that, given their master's last wishes, the forty-seven did the right thing, but were undecided about whether such a vengeful wish were proper. Over time, however, the story became a symbol of loyalty to one's master, and later, of loyalty to the Emperor. Once this happened, it flourished as a subject of drama, storytelling, and visual art.

\* 文化 (ぶんか) \* Culture 切腹 (せつぷく) Seppuku - Ritual Suicide

**Seppuku**, the Japanese formal language term for ritual suicide (*Hara-kiri* is the common language term.), was an integral aspect of feudal Japan (1192-1868). *Hara-kiri*, which literally means "stomach cutting" is a particularly painful method of self-destruction, and prior to the emergence of the samurai as a professional warrior class, was totally foreign to the Japanese. The early history of Japan reveals quite clearly that the Japanese were far more interested in living the good life than in dying a painful death. It was not until well after the introduction of Buddhism, with its theme of the transitory nature of life and the glory of death, that such a development became possible.

Honor for the samurai was dearer than life and in many cases; self-destruction was regarded not simply as right, but as the only right course. Disgrace and defeat were atoned by committing seppuku. Upon the death of a *daimyo* loyal followers might show their grief and affection for their master by it. Other reasons samurai committed seppukus were: to show contempt for an enemy, to protest against injustice, as a means to get their lord to reconsider an unwise or unworthy action and as a means to save others. In the world of the warrior, seppuku was a deed of bravery that was admirable in a samurai who knew he was defeated, disgraced, or mortally wounded. It meant that he could end his days with his transgressions wiped away and with his reputation not merely intact but actually enhanced. The cutting of the abdomen released the samurai's spirit in the most dramatic fashion, but it was an extremely painful and unpleasant way to die.



Although suicide is deplored in Japan today, it does not have the sinful overtones that are common in the west. People still kill themselves for failed businesses, involvement in love triangles, or even failing school examinations, death is still considered by many as better than dishonor.

Women have their own ritual suicide. Here, the wife of Onodera Junai, one of the Forty-seven Samurai, prepares for her suicide; note the legs tied together, a female feature of seppuku to ensure a "decent" posture in death.

## Well-known people who committed seppuku

### Yukio Mishima (1925-1970)

The suicide death of Mishima Yukio, a writer of the Showa era, shocked the world. Much speculation has surfaced regarding Mishima's suicide. At the time of his death he had just completed the final book in his *Sea of Fertility* tetralogy and was recognized as one of the most important postwar stylists of the Japanese language.

Mishima wrote 40 novels, 18 plays, 20 books of short stories, and at least 20 books of essays as well as one libretto. A large portion of this oeuvre comprises books written quickly for profit, but even if these are disregarded, a substantial body of work remains.

While Mishima espoused a brand of 'patriotism' towards the end of his life (and in death), it is perhaps most appropriate to say that he took a position outside of politics. He was neither 'rightist' nor 'leftist': he was hated by true nationalists for his position, in *Bunka Boeiron* (*A Defense of Culture*), that Hirohito should have resigned the throne to take responsibility for the war dead, and was hated by leftists (particularly students) for his outspoken, anachronistic commitment to the code of the samurai. That his politics was in fact dominated by the language of aesthetics evinces this essential quality of 'the outsider,' and suggests that the relationship between said politics and the political reality of the Japanese postwar was at best illusory.

The theatrical nature of his suicide, the camp nature of photographs he posed for, and the occasionally bathetic nature of his prose have surely taken their toll on his legacy and in the Japanese and Anglo-American academies Mishima is today virtually unspoken of, although he is undergoing something of reappraisal amongst critics interested in the critique of Japanese capitalism.



### Sen no Rikyu (1522 - 1591)

Sen no Rikyu is considered the historical figure with the most profound influence on the Japanese tea ceremony. A man of simple taste, he had a cultivated and disciplined lifestyle and defined the term *wabi cha* by emphasizing simplicity, rusticness and other humble qualities in the tea ceremony, which had been revolutionized by Ikkyu a century earlier.

It was then that Rikyu composed the poem which dates from that time: "Though many people drink tea, if you do not know the Way of Tea, tea will drink you up." Without any spiritual training, you think you are drinking tea, but actually tea drinks you up. Another well-known saying of Rikyu is: "The Way of Tea is naught but this: first you boil water, then you make the tea and drink it." However, this can only be appreciated after strict training in the Way. It was Rikyu who synthesized a unique way of life combining the everyday aspects of living with the highest spiritual and philosophical tenets. This has been passed down to the present as the Way of Tea.



From the age of 58, he served a daimyo, Oda Nobunaga, as a tea master. After the death of Nobunaga, he became the head tea master of Toyotomi Hideyoshi, the de facto successor of Nobunaga. Hideyoshi continued Nobunaga's conquering policy and unified Japan after several ten years civil wars. Ostensibly, in charge of tea, he actually wielded great influence with Hideyoshi in other matters as well. When Hideyoshi hosted a tea at the Imperial Palace in 1585, Rikyu received the Buddhist title of koji from the Emperor Ogimachi, thus establishing his preeminence among the practitioners of tea in Japan.



### \* 諺 (ことわざ) \* Proverb

「仏の顔も三度まで」(ほとけの かおも 3ど まで) **Hotokeno kaomo sando made.**

It means Buddha condones no more than three times. We are human and nobody is perfect. Anybody makes mistakes and it will be forgiven. However, there is limit. If you make the same mistake three times, even Buddha who is very benevolent and tolerant would refuse forgiveness.

🌸 **クイズ** 🌸 Quiz The followings are Kansai-ben (language of Western Japan). What does it mean? What do you say that in Standard Japanese? The answer is on the last page.

1. もうかりまっか
2. ぼちぼちでんな
3. おおきに
4. あかん

📅 **コーススケジュール** 📅 Course Schedule

A Group course consists of 110 minutes lessons and 8 sessions. Registration & Lesson fees are due 72 hours prior the first lesson. The schedule may change without notice, so please visit the website for the updated schedule.

🌟 **レストラン** 🌟 Restaurant **鮨やま Sushi Yama**

Sushi Yama is less crowded, much cleaner, and has a more appealing decor than nearby Marineopolis Sushiland in downtown Bellevue. Can't beat the prices, but sushi selection was not diverse the two times we were there.

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🌟 **自己紹介 (じこしょうかい)** 🌟 Student of JLC

Hi, I'm Jeff. I am taking the More Advanced Course. It's a tough course but I enjoy reading Japanese classic novels in this small class. I am going to take JLPT Level 1 in coming December. I have not prepared for that specially but I believe to pass it. The More Advanced course requires JLPT Level 1 so I will take it.



🌸 **おしらせ** 🌸 Remarks

- Lesson fees for Group Lessons are \$220, however an early registration with payment by check/cash before your present course ends can get \$7 discount.
- Please bring your friends to JLC. Any referrals signing up for a class results in a 20% discount of your next block of lessons.
- JLC supports a Japanese Language conversation group in the community and JLC's instructor Junko is the organizer of Bellevue-Factoria Japanese Language Meetup. The regular monthly meetup session is on the second Tuesday at the Bellevue region Library. Our monthly Field Trip is on the 4<sup>th</sup> Tuesday. Please visit the website, <http://japanese.meetup.com/17> for more information.

Answer of the quiz: 1. How is your business? (お仕事はいかがですか) 2. So so (まあまあですね) 3. Thank you (ありがとう) 4. No/Never (だめです)

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**Japanese Language Center provides**

**Japanese Language Instruction**

**and Translation Services**

Course	Day	Time		Term
		Start	End	
JPN 101	Mon	7:10	9:00	12/12
JPN 102	Wed	7:10	9:00	11/30
JPN 103/104	Mon	7:10	9:00	12/12
JPN 201/202	Sun	10:10	12:00	11/20
JPN 203/204	Sat	9:10	11:00	1/7
JPN 301/302	Mon	7:10	9:00	1/9
JPN 303	Sun	7:10	9:00	11/27
JPN 304	Sat	7:10	9:00	11/19
Teens 101	Wed	4:40	6:30	12/7
Teens 102	Sat	11:10	1:00	12/3
Teens 200	Fri	4:40	6:30	12/9