

Issues and Prospects for Massage Education for the Visually Impaired in Asia

- Aiming for the development of an education system of coexistence and co-prosperity –

Fujii Ryosuke

Tsukuba University of Technology

It is easier for an elephant to pass through the eye of a needle than finding work that can be accomplished by persons with visual impairments but not by fully sighted persons. However, if asked if there is any work that can be accomplished even in competition with fully sighted persons, Japanese people would likely respond without hesitation: “massage (including shiatsu massage) and acupuncture.” That is after all eloquently expressed in the occupational history of the visually impaired in Japan. That, of course, does not imply any denial of the importance of developing other occupations or the diverse potential of the visually impaired. What I mean rather is that massage and acupuncture are rare technologies that do not impose barriers to the disability of visual impairment. In other words, since the sense of touch is an absolute requirement in the technology of massage and acupuncture, as long as visually impaired persons who have a certain degree of skill and enthusiasm are willing to make the same or greater effort than physically unimpaired persons, they will be capable of demonstrating their own skills to the same or greater degree. Instructors, schools and teaching materials are essential in order to expand this technology as a general occupation for the visually impaired. I refer to these three factors as the “power of education.”

Fortunately, schools had been set up in Japan by the end of the 17th century thanks to the distinguished instructional achievements of Sugiyama Waichi, who was blind himself, and systematic education in massage and acupuncture was initiated using teaching materials of a quite sophisticated level. That was more than 300 years ago, a prodigious feat predating occupational education for the blind in Europe by a century. Schools were subsequently established in rapid succession at about fifty locations nationwide, a course of events that spread the custom of massage therapy as an occupation for the visually impaired to every corner of the nation. With this as the foundation established through the efforts of our predecessors, the training and education of acupuncture, moxibustion and massage therapists incorporating anatomy, physiology, pathology and other elements of western medical science flourished at schools for the blind from the late 19th century through the early 20th century and the training of teachers also started. Business regulations (national laws) governing acupuncture, moxibustion and massage therapy were established in 1911, ultimately developing into the Acupuncture, Moxibustion and Massage Therapist Business Law in postwar Japan. This law enabled massage therapists in Japan to acquire the status of medical caregivers while also realizing the modernization of the educational system (five-year course). Today, Japanese massage therapists are guaranteed a status by the national government equal to that of physical therapists, nurses and other co-medical staff members and, based on that, many visually impaired persons realize occupational and economic self-sustainability while also active in the public health, medical treatment, occupational health and other fields and contributing to society.

Meanwhile, focusing on other areas around Asia, though most countries and regions

indicate strong interest in the appeal of massage that would enable the occupational independence of the visually impaired, there are both quantitative and qualitative insufficiencies, though some regional differences do exist, in the educational groundwork (instructors, school, teaching materials, etc.) for realizing further expansion. The expertise of massage education for the visually impaired that has been fostered and built up over the years in Japan would probably be greatly beneficial in overcoming such issues in Asia. There are hopes that cooperation by Japan in achieving that end would serve as a trigger to engender a cycle of mutual development that would vitalize massage education in Asia, urge further progress in massage technology and then, in turn, also stimulate massage education in Japan. With this awareness, the Tsukuba University of Technology is launching a five-year project for new assistance in Asia with the financial support of the Nippon Foundation. It is a project founded on efforts to organize a network consisting primarily of foreign students who come to Japan to study acupuncture, moxibustion and massage technology at schools for the blind, acquire a license in Japan and then return home as well as trainees who return home after completing a six-month training course in the Okinawa Project and provide support for their activities. Specifically, it consists of support for the development of bases in the various countries (equipment, facilities, etc.), dispatch of teachers for the training of instructors and the development and provision of teaching materials and technical glossaries (in local languages). The continued development of Asia is essential for growth in Japan. Through this project, we look upon the demonstration of leadership by us in the development of systems for coexistence and co-prosperity of the visually impaired in Asia to be a mission that should be achieved by Japan, which most enjoys greater economic benefits than any other nation within the context of postwar international relations.