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Soul Work

How A Swiss Priest Popularized Reflexology Throughout Asia ... And Beyond

BY KATHRYN TREECE

In 1977 Father Josef Eugster, a Swiss missionary to Taiwan, was suffering from severe rheumatoid arthritis in his knees. Medicine was of no help, and his physicians piously told him, a young man of 37, that the disease was "the cross you have to carry." A colleague begged to differ, "No, this is not your cross," he said. "It is your stupidity. If you learn reflexology, you can easily get rid of the problem." His friend also suggested that internal organs, especially the adrenal glands and the kidneys, both of which could be addressed by reflexology done on the feet, were causing his knee condition.

Fr. Josef didn't understand how a method used on the feet (reflexology involves pressing reflex zones on the feet and, sometimes, the hands, to induce relaxation, ease pain and increase circulation throughout the body) could help his knees, but he began studying a book on reflexology, *Good Health for the Future*, by Swiss nurse Hedi Masafret. When he first used reflexology on himself he could barely stand the pain, but he kept at it. Within two weeks, to his amazement, the arthritis disappeared, never to return.

"I suddenly got the insight that reflexology could be my new mission method, an easy way to approach people and help those in need," says Fr. Josef, now 61.

With such a dramatic and successful introduction to bodywork, it might come as no surprise that Fr. Josef proceeded to popularize reflexology throughout Taiwan and other Asian countries. However, the road to this accomplishment was filled with obstacles and detours.



Fr. Josef Eugster who popularized reflexology throughout Asia. Here he shows he uses his knuckle to administer reflexology.

Public favor, government pressure

Soon after his own healing, Fr. Josef offered to work on parishioners with chronic diseases, people on whom doctors had given up. Though he worked quietly and locally, word of his success spread. Eventually he taught what he knew to 10 Taiwanese people, who helped him give reflexology sessions. There is no record of reflexology having been practiced in Taiwan prior to Fr. Josef's work.

A drama unfolded when, in 1981, a woman with hyperthyroidism, signified by her bulging eyes, came to him. After receiving daily sessions for two weeks, her eyes slowly moved back into their cavities. After three weeks, she had recovered.

The woman was Li Wen, a well-known Taipei broadcaster, and she taped a radio interview with Fr. Josef, which led to a television interview. The programs received a tremendous response in Taiwan, and soon thousands of people were streaming into Fr. Josef's small parish near Taitung, located in the southern part of the country. All the local hotels and churches filled; lines of hopeful patients started at 3 a.m. Fr. Josef and his helpers worked day and night. They didn't realize, however, that what was happening in Taitung had an immediate effect on drugstores and in physicians' offices around the country—the sale of medicine dropped precipitously, and people lost faith in their physicians. Swiftly, the medical establishment reacted by pressuring the government to stop Fr. Josef immediately. He even received anonymous death threats.

During this intense period, still in 1981, he and his workers were forced to quit their practice. Thousands of letters from the public, angry with the government for banning reflexology, poured into the offices of the president and vice president of Taiwan.

The controversy came to somewhat of a conclusion when Fr. Josef was invited to speak to the vice president in Taipei and explain what was going on. With the reluctant cooperation of the health minister, Fr. Josef was subsequently allowed to continue his work in a hospital setting for two years, not as an endorsement of reflexology but as a way to contain it.

Fr. Josef explains, "The vice president proposed the hospital idea as a means to make the work 'legal' and to console the public. As such, it was a good temporary solution. I worked in the hospital for two years. Some of my students continued there while I took my sabbatical, but later they also left."

Given that working in a hospital setting allowed the government to keep him under a watchful eye, rather than being a venue to promote reflexology, Fr. Josef tolerated the situation but did not consider it ideal for the future of reflexology.



Father Josef shows Korean parents his reflexology techniques, in Taego, Korea, in September 2000.

Reflection and change

At about the same time, the Church hierarchy was also pressuring Fr. Josef to stop, saying that reflexology was not his proper work. Though he firmly believed that he was simply doing what Jesus did in helping people, the strain was great. He finally took a leave of absence, resting, praying and meditating at a Benedictine convent in Israel.

There, he came to some important realizations. One was that every reflexologist must first take care of his or her own health.

"This must be taken seriously," he says. "We can only do as much work for others as the amount of good health we are in."

Secondly, he decided that the future of reflexology in Taiwan would be best served by placing his work into the hands of others. He turned to his "adoptive" brothers, Joseph and Thonet Tschen. (It is a tradition in Taiwan that a foreigner will be "adopted" by a Chinese family. Mr. and Mrs. Tschen were Fr. Josef's Taiwanese adoptive parents. Their sons, Joseph and Thonet, had known Fr. Josef since they were in their teens.)

In 1982, just a year after his work with Li Wen had created such publicity, the brothers started the Rwo Shur Institute. (By that time, Fr. Josef had become so famous in Taiwan that his associates insisted the institute must be named for him; in Chinese his name is Rwo Shur.) Both of them were trained by Fr. Josef.

Gradually, Fr. Josef's technique has become widely known in Asia as the Rwo Shur Health Method, although Westerners usually refer to it as Taiwanese-style reflexology. And since the time he first introduced his technique in his adopted country, the Taiwanese government has slowly come to accept reflexology as a viable health-care method. Fr. Josef estimates that 20 percent of Taiwan's population receives reflexology sessions regularly.

His technique

Fr. Josef does not hide the fact that he is completely self-taught, since no teachers were available to him. Although he is very knowledgeable about the body and the reflex points, with characteristic humility he says, "Honestly, I could not pass one [reflexology] exam." He claims that his only guiding principle was to get results as quickly as possible for the sake of the client's health, and that he learned by reading books on reflexology and medical texts, and through trial and error.

It seems, though, that aiming for a swift recovery has also saddled the Rwo Shur method with a deserved reputation for being painful. Then again, there is no denying that its practitioners have succeeded remarkably with scores of "hopeless" cases.

Fr. Josef tells the story of one of his very first clients, 73-year-old Mr. Chen, who suffered from severe back pain due to an accident. Mr. Chen had visited seven physicians, with no relief; used up all his money; and finally decided to tell his priest—Fr. Josef—that it was time to go to heaven.

"Not yet," Fr. Josef told the man. "I will see you at 4 p.m. tomorrow." Fr. Josef showed up the next day. At some point, Mr. Chen began crying from the pain of the session. The second and third sessions were equally painful. When Fr. Josef returned a fourth time, Mr. Chen had hidden himself to avoid the treatment, but neighbors told on him. Fr. Josef treated him once more, although he himself had lost hope. That night, around 10 p.m., Fr. Josef received a joyful call from the man's family, saying, "It works! Come back tomorrow!" Within two weeks, the man who had been ready to die was fully recovered. By working on very tough cases like this from the outset, Fr. Josef gradually developed his technique.

Today, he admits that perhaps in the early years he was too aggressive, and he now counsels students to pay attention to the client's pain tolerance. However, he maintains that deeper pressure works faster, and that if the patient has a "shell" over a certain reflex, there is nothing to do but break that shell, which will be painful.

Of the pain involved with the technique, physician Eugene Cheng, M.D., says, "Though the Rwo Shur Method, in the early days, was painful, Fr. Josef's affection, sincerity and modest deeds gained the trust of his [clients], and many people loved him because of the cures he effected. He was never arrogant, and kept studying with his students for new knowledge, creating better treatments, and seeking for ways to reduce the clients' pain."

In the beginning, Fr. Josef used only his hands, and especially his thumb. He was in such demand and working so hard that finally a helper observed, "Try using a stick, or you will kill yourself." It took him about six months to incorporate the four-inch long wooden tool into his work. He finds it especially useful on tough feet, and he believes the stick can go deep into a reflex without creating so much pain. His technique has also evolved to use fingers with thumb, like pincers; the thumb knuckle; and forefinger joint.

The reflex points addressed in Fr. Josef's method are similar to those used in Western-style reflexology. A few differences include working the diaphragm on the top of the foot, around the base of the metatarsal bones; a new reflex called the balance organ in the hollow between the fourth and fifth metatarsal heads on the top of the foot; and a larger solar plexus reflex, encompassing the kidney, adrenal gland and gall bladder points.

Across Asia

Fr. Josef has distanced himself from the Rwo Shur Institute in recent years because, he says, he believes that as the organization grew larger, money became more important to many practitioners than did helping people.

However, he says that the institute did a marvelous job spreading Taiwanese-style reflexology throughout Asia. Under its auspices, Fr. Josef offered many courses in Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong, South Korea and Japan.

On mainland China, there has been an especially strong response to reflexology. While China has had a tradition of foot massage and uses points in the feet for acupuncture, the theory and practice of reflexology seem to have been largely either lost or unknown. Fr. Josef and his students were the catalysts in introducing reflexology to modern Chinese.

When Fr. Josef attended the China Reflexology Association's conference in 1996, he was amazed to hear the Chinese health minister publicly announce his support of reflexology. Explaining that health insurance is not yet available to every- one, physician Qian Xin-Shan said that physicians and reflexologists have a duty to teach natural health methods so that people can help themselves.

Today, reflexologists in China practice alongside physicians in Chinese hospitals, and they are very active in case-study documentation and research. In only a decade, membership in the China Reflexology Association has grown to almost 10,000.

Beyond Asia

The work of this authentic, humble and charming priest is becoming known to more people. In 1998 he introduced reflexology to another part of the world: South America. In Santa Cruz, Bolivia, he taught laypeople, physicians and nurses his technique.

Fr. Josef has been a keynote speaker for International Council of Reflexologists' conference. In 1991 he was presented with the council's Special Recognition Award for his successful efforts in popularizing reflexology in China; in 1999 he received the council's International Humanitarian Award for helping spread reflexology throughout Asia. He has also addressed the Reflexology Association of America.

"Through his humility and compassionate love, he has brought help to thousands and thousands of people who cannot afford Western health care," says Christine Issel, a founding member and first president of the International Council of Reflexologists. "If I were to make a list of those who have had the greatest influence on the growth and development of reflexology, his name would be right under Eunice Ingham's [Ingham developed and popularized the Western method of reflexology]. What Eunice did in America, he has done in Asia and around the world.

"As far as I'm concerned, he is the most influential reflexologist alive today," Issel continues. "He exemplifies what reflexologists aspire to attain both in helping humanity and in their own personal growth."

The result of exposure in the United States is a nonprofit organization called The Father Josef Method of Reflexology, which sponsors workshops where reflexologists receive instruction from Fr. Josef.

Not surprisingly, Fr. Josef has fans in both the East and West.

"Fr. Josef acts as a bridge between the East and West," says Geraldine Tay, a translator of Fr. Josef's book on the Rwo Shur Health Method and a reflex- ologist in Singapore and Malaysia. "He is a European who speaks Mandarin and Chinese dialects, working in the East. His understanding of the people of Europe and Asia makes communication between the two easier. Furthermore, people accept him and his reflexology because he is a priest who preaches love, a very important factor to make foot reflexology work. [He] will not practice reflexology for monetary gain or fame, but for the love of mankind."

Mitsuru Orita, a reflexologist in Tokyo, Japan, trained in the Rwo Shur Method. "Fr. Josef is for me a big, brilliant star in the sky," he says. "I met him for the first time 13 years ago, and since then, he hasn't changed. He continues to have passion and vigor to promote reflexology to the world. I continue to follow his path."

Bill Flocco, founder and director of the American Academy of Reflexology in Burbank, California, adds, "Because of Fr. Josef's introducing foot reflexology to Taiwan and China, millions of people's lives throughout the Orient have been improved-through better health, less illness, greater well-being. [Fr.] Josef has done more than any man in recent history to touch the lives, souls and well-being of such a massive number of people throughout the countries of the Orient."

Connecticut reflexologist Irina Breslav says she was fortunate to be chosen from the audience at the Seventh International Reflexology Conference in Hawaii in 1999, as the person Fr. Josef would demonstrate his technique on. "

One month later, with his permission, I was in Taiwan working beside him in his remote village of Chang Pin, learning and applying his unique method of reflexology," she says. "Since returning to the U.S., I have been employing a blend of his method and the classic Ingham approach, which has doubled my practice and generated enthusiastic healing stories from my clients."

Despite the worldwide acclaim, Fr. Josef continues quietly on his healing mission. And although he has continued his parish ministry in Taiwan successfully all these years, he maintains that reflexology became his mission through a special calling.

"There are all kinds of healing methods in nature," he says, "but the most wonderful one, the Lord of the Universe has put into everyone's feet."

Kathryn Treece is a certified massage therapist who often incorporates reflexology into her work. Living in Tokyo, Japan, she is also a writer and teacher

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