

MACHIKO NAKAYAMA

ORIGINS  
OF  
IKEBANA PHILOSOPHY



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*THE ASIAN CENTRE*

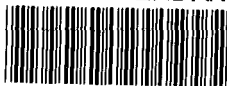
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# ORIGINS OF IKEBANA PHILOSOPHY

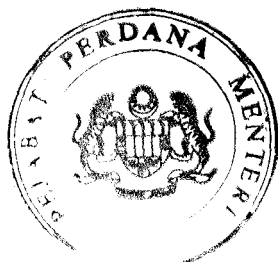
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*THE ASIAN CENTRE*

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# Preface

## Why are Cut Flowers Used in *Ikebana*?

*Ikebana* is written 生け花 meaning 'Living Flower.' *Ikebana* is the art of flower arrangement using fresh flowers, leaves and branches which are put into containers filled with water.

Why are cut flowers used in *Ikebana*? It is said that *Ikebana* started off as an offering to the Shinto gods and to the Buddha in Japan. According to a Buddhist tradition, there was once a storm which had damaged all the trees. Then along came a monk who revived the trees by planting a sprig collected after the storm. It seems a contradiction that while Buddhism itself places so much emphasis on life, *Ikebana* offers cut flowers to the Buddha. This book attempts to trace the historical and philosophical background of *Ikebana*.

Tradition has it that all present Japanese traditional cultural practices such as *Ikebana*, the *Cha-no-yu* or tea ceremony, and the *Noh*, a medieval lyric drama,

were formed in the Muromachi period (1338 - 1573). The many mysteries surrounding this period make it difficult to trace the original philosophical background of *Ikebana* in particular. It is known, however, that the traditional tea ceremony, including its philosophy, was introduced to the world in *The Book of Tea* by Kakuzo Okakura (1862 -1913) and that the ideology of Zen was documented in the complete works of Daisetz T. Suzuki (1870-1966). Regretfully there are few books regarding the history and philosophy of *Ikebana*, although over one million people practise *Ikebana* in various parts of the world, and their numbers are increasing. For those interested in Japanese traditional culture the foundation of this volume lies in the present author's thesis entitled *Rikka and Shichishi-to* (*Rikka to Shichishi-to* 立花と七支刀, 1991-95).<sup>1</sup>

As indicated in the above book, *Tatehana*, the Seven Branched Standing Flower form, is the archetype of *Ikebana*. *Tatehana* is its proper name but this form is also commonly known as *Nanatsu-eda* or *Nanaeda*, Seven Branches. In any attempt to examine the origins

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1. In the title *Rikka to Shichishi-to*, *Rikka* can be read as *Tatehana*, because the characters 立花 can be pronounced both as *Tatehana* and *Rikka*.

of *Ikebana* philosophy, it is impossible to ignore *Tatehana*. Hence this archetypal form was delved into in great detail. This proved no easy task for many important historical materials containing references to *Tatehana* were destroyed in a tragic fire in Kyoto during the period of the Onin civil wars (1467-1477). Hence there are no available illustrations showing the form of the *Tatehana*. However in one of the ancient copies of *Kadensho*, books on the theory and technique of flower arrangement, it is possible to find a prototype of the *Tatehana* form called *Nanaeda* which was offered to the Shinto gods and to the Buddha. One example of this prototype of *Tatehana* can be seen in the *Nanaeda* figure named *Busshin-no-hana* (Fig. 1) which comes from another version of *Kadensho*, known as *Kagenhiden-no-daiji*.

In the course of this research, it was discovered that a relationship exists between the two figures: the *Nanaeda* figure and *Shichishi-to* (Seven Branched Sword Fig. 2). In the Japanese language an ideogram and a phonogram are pronounced differently. We may read the character 七 as both *Nana* and *Shichi* which means 'seven.' By comparing the shape of the *Nanaeda* figure (Fig. 1), *Tatehana* with the shape of *Shichishi-to* (Fig. 2), it became apparent that both the *Nanaeda*

figure and *Shichishi-to* had the same division of branches pointing in identical directions. Intuitively, the present writer noticed the similarities. Despite the lack of documentation on *Tatehana* or *Nanaeda*, the similarities between the two forms are obvious.

As a result of this find we will attempt in Part 1 of this book to clarify the origins of *Ikebana* by discussing firstly the fundamental features of the *Shichishi-to*, its political significance and the belief system surrounding it.

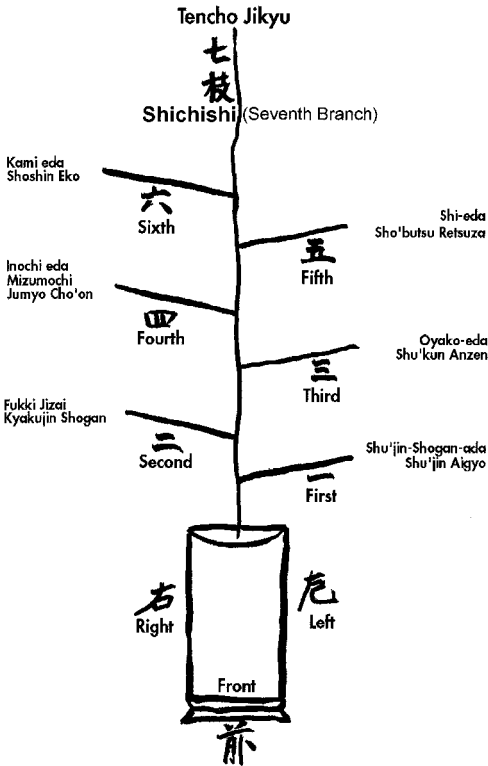
Following that, we will discuss in detail the history as well as the form of *Tatehana*. We will also explain the political significance and the belief system surrounding *Tatehana* as well as the similarity of these ideas to those attributed to *Shichishi-to*.<sup>2</sup>

Thirdly, we will examine the placement of the *Tatehana* in the *shoin* (study and guest room) of a noble man's residence and how this placement can help us

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## 2. 七支刀 (Seven Branched Sword)

A sword from Korea which found its way to Japan from Kudara, one of the old Korean kingdoms, 4th -7th century A.D. This sword, now a national treasure, was symbolic of ancient sovereignty, a topic which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 1.



1. *Busshin-no-hana* (Seven Branched Standing Flower for the Buddha and the Shinto gods). Structured figure of *Tatehana* form also known as *Nanatsu-eda* or *Nanaeda*. It should be noted left and right are in reverse order (Explained in Chapter 3). Sources: *Kagenhiden-no-daiji* handed down in 1487.



2. *Shichishi-to* (Seven Branched Sword). The sword, a national treasure of Japan, originally from Kudara (an ancient kingdom in the Korean peninsula).

better understand the significance of *Tatehana* in Japanese tradition.

In the final section of Part 1, we will discuss the transformation of the archetypal *Tatehana* 立花 of the Muromachi period into *Rikka* 立華, the Seven Branched Standing Flower form of the Edo period (1600-1867) and the possible reasons for this transformation. In this particular section we see how the Seven Branched form played an important role in politics and religion in the Muromachi period, the Azuchi-Momoyama period (1573-1600) as well as during the Edo period.

Part 2 will focus on the significance of *Nana* or *Shichi* 七.<sup>3</sup>, the concept of 'seven' that is found in the Japanese traditions of *Cha-no-yu* or the tea ceremony, *Ikebana*, and especially in the *Noh*, a medieval lyric theatre. We will also go back into traditional Japanese culture to examine some examples of the belief in the number seven in its philosophy and religion, as well as in its folklore.

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### 3. *Nana* or *Shichi* 七 (seven)

We can call the character 七 as both *Nana* and *Shichi*, because in the Japanese language an ideogram and a phonogram are pronounced differently.