



Design: Masako Ban

hito no fundoshi de sumō o toru!?

Doing sumō by wearing someone else's underwear!?



Pera Pera Penguin's

5-minute Japanese Class by Hitomi Hirayama

Vol. **31**

One of my colleagues succeeded in his latest project, so I told him, "Congratulations! You did an excellent job!" But some members who helped him do the project were watching me, and came to me, saying, "Keep your eyes on him, Mr. Pole! Because he is "hito no fundoshi de sumō o toru" hito desu yo. (Lit. Doing sumō by wearing someone else's fundoshi) I looked up the word fundoshi in a pocket-sized book featuring Japanese culture that I bought when I first came to Japan. It said that fundoshi was an old-style loincloth made of one sheet of fabric, and it was worn by men as underwear in the past. I couldn't believe that he was still wearing a fundoshi. I think sumo wrestlers wear mawashi, not fundoshi, correct? Ms. Hirayama, do all Japanese men still wear fundoshi even these days?"

■■■I don't think you can find anybody who actually wears fundoshi these days, but I'm not sure. If you talk to people in foreign countries and ask them about their impressions of Nihon, most of them would say something like, "geisha," "living in a house of wood and paper," or "people who always wear kimono," etc. Their impressions of Japan are still old fashioned and inaccurate. I think you might have thought that "hito no fundoshi de sumō o toru" meant, "Doing sumō by wearing someone else's underwear," and you must have been surprised! But it actually means, "Benefiting oneself at someone else's expense." fundoshi may give a bad impression to others, so it may be better to say, "tariki hongan" (benefiting oneself with the help of others)." Also, you should be careful when you use idioms, because some idioms might hurt the feelings of other people unwittingly.

Terminology in sumō

jo no kuchi : The ranks of sumō start from "jo no kuchi" and go all the way to yokozuna (grand champion). The way of sumō is a long way involving persistence and effort. "jo no kuchi" is the first rank, and also it means "It's only the beginning." Therefore, this expression is used to imply, "It is going to become harder and harder, and this is only the beginning." And its meaning is emphasized if you say "mada (yet)" or "honno (just)" before "jo no kuchi"—"jo no kuchi desu," "mada jo no kuchi desu" or "honno jo no kuchi desu."

e.g.,
Koizumi-san: Oh, my goodness! You have been drinking a lot!

うわあ〜 すごい 飲みますね。
uwaa sugoi nomi-masu ne

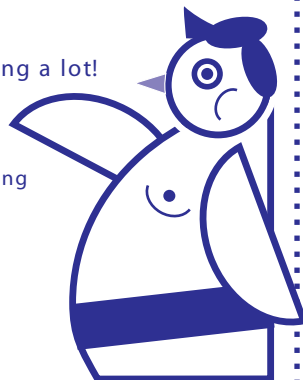
Pole-san: Oh, no, no! "honno jo no kuchi" desu
(implying: This is only the beginning; I'm going to drink more and more.)

いやいや 「honno jo no kuchi」 ですよ。
iya iya desu yo

e.g.,
Koizumi-san: Boy! This is very heavy traffic!

ひどい 渋滞 ですね。
hidoi jūtai desu ne

Pole-san: This is "jo no kuchi." We haven't passed the peak, yet.
まだまだ 「jo no kuchi」 ですよ。ピークはこれから ですね。
mada mada desu yo peak wa kore-kara desu ne



A) Using others to benefit oneself, rather than using one's own means

Wishing to finish his work by using other people, instead of making his own effort

Depending on others to realize one's goals:

(help from outside) (wish)
他 力 本 願
ta riki hon gan

B) To have the whole world against oneself

Surrounded by enemies

Hearing a song sung by the enemy on four sides:

(four sides) (song of "So" country)
四 面 楚 歌
shi men so ka

C) Trial and error

Striving toward success even though there are many trials and errors

Success through trial and errors:
(try, test) (carry out)(confuse)(error)
試 行 錯 誤
shi kō saku go

E) To be ever progressing

Making progress day by day. It also means rapid progress. Good examples are information technology (IT) and computers, etc.

Steady progress in days and months:
(day) (advance) (month) (step)
日 進 月 歩
nis shin gep po

G) Throw a sprat to catch a mackerel

Using a small investment as bait to gain a huge profit. "ebi tai" is the abbreviation of "ebi de tai o tsuru (to throw a shrimp to catch a sea bream)."

Sea bream out of shrimp:
(shrimp) (sea bream)
海 老 鯛
e bi tai

I) Great talents mature late.

Implying that a very accomplished person does not develop overnight, but he begins to use his talents later in life. If you say this idiom to people who have not yet made any success, it may be an encouraging thought for them, implying, "Cheer up, and soon you will become great and successful!"

Great talents mature late:
(great)(man of ability)(late hours)(make)
大 器 晩 成
tai ki ban sei

D) Impractical plans

Ideas or opinions that may sound good on paper, but are not practical.

Theory on desk:
(desk) (on) (of) (empty)(discuss)
机 上 の 空 論
ki jō no kū ron

F) Communication without words

Transferring thoughts (feelings) to someone else's mind without using words

Communication from heart to heart:
(by) (heart) (transmit)(heart)
以 心 伝 心
i shin den shin

H) They are both much alike / No big difference.

In ancient China, one soldier ran away in 50 steps while another soldier ran away in 100 steps when they were losing their battle. The soldier who took 50 steps said to the other that he was less cowardly because he ran a shorter distance away. But the whole idea was that both of them ran away. This idiom implies that there might be some differences between the two but they are very much alike. Note that the pronunciation of 50 is "go-ji," not "go-jū."

Fifty steps against 100 steps:

(fifty) (step) (hundred) (step)
五 十 步 百 步
go jip po hyap po

J) To be indecisive

Being hesitant or unable to make a decision

No decision, no conclusion:
(indecisive) (indecision)
優 柔 不 断
yū jū fu dan



4-character idioms

四 文 字 熟 語
よん も じ じゅく ご
yon mo ji juku go

1. Friend: (phone call from Mr. Pole) "Oh, hello, Mr. Pole! I was about to call you in a minute!"

Pole-san: Communication without words ですね。 desu ne

2. Friend's Mom: My son doesn't have a permanent job. He works as a part-timer even though he is already 45 years old.

Pole-san: Great talents mature late ですよ。 desu yo

3. German friend: My girlfriend's father loves German wine, so I bought some wine for him when I went back to Germany. And he was so happy that he took me to a sushi bar last week.

Pole-san: To throw a sprat to catch a mackerel ですね。 desu ne

4. friend: I overheard that two girls were talking about their weight. One said she weighs 82 kilograms, and the other said she weighs 80 kilograms, which she said means she is slimmer than her friend.

Pole-san: No big difference! ですね。 desu ne

5. friend: Two more new versions were released after I bought a computer last year. Now, my PC is outdated!

Pole-san: To be ever progressing ですね。 desu ne

6. friend: The politician did not keep the promises he made during his campaign, and now, has enemies on all sides.

Pole-san: To have a whole world against him ですね。 desu ne

7. friend: He always takes a lot of time to make decisions.

Pole-san: To be indecisive ですね。 desu ne

friend: I think Miss. Kojima's idea is excellent, but it might not work on actual settings.

Pole-san: Impractical plan ですね。 desu ne

9. friend: How is your new project coming along?

Pole-san: Every day, I'm trying new ways to figure out how things work out, but it seems nothing works.

Trails and errors ですね。 desu ne

Answers

1. F) 2. I) 3. G) 4. H) 5. E) 6. B) 7. J) 8. D) 9. C)

With cooperation from Yasuhiro Koga