

## Learning the Art of a Healthy Mind from Ryōkan Using Famous Stories

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### Abstract

The well-known Japanese monk, Ryōkan (1758–1831) achieved a timeless and unique self-realization, particularly in his search for truth in the world of poetry and calligraphy. On the other hand, many stories about the words and deeds of Ryōkan reflect unfavorably on him. In addition, much of Ryōkan’s behavior has been considered from a medical perspective. For example, the psychiatrist Iida (1987) argued for the strong possibility that Ryōkan had schizothymia in his psychopathology. However, he suggested that people can prevent or overcome the recurrence of a similar illness by learning about the life of someone like Ryōkan. Even though the hypothesis that Ryōkan had Asperger's syndrome (AS) has recently been suggested (Honma, 2012), the author indicated that Ryōkan’s psychopathology was similar to a mixture of schizotypal personality disorder and “developmental disorder,” which implies AS. And the author considered ways to learn about mental health from these characteristics. Although Doi (1985) often cited him, Ryōkan’s generous and agnostic freedom, such as “just walk on the ground,” was Ryōkan’s way. The author suggested that the “ground” of the clinical setting is important to clinical psychology.

**Keywords:** Ryōkan, developmental disorder, “ruri,” psychopathology, a way of mind

### 1. Introduction

#### 1.1. Problem and purpose

The well-known Japanese monk Ryōkan of the mid-Edo period (1758–1831) achieved a timeless and unique self-realization, especially in search of the truth in the world of poetry and calligraphy. Kanbara (1987) stated that, at that moment, the ideal of monastic lifestyle that Ryōkan had envisaged while in training was shattered, and it was only when he entered the life of a “beggar” in the world of rampant noisy busy empty places, that he progressed toward the real purpose of his life for achieving individual self-realization. Because Ryōkan is also said to have had schizothymia (Iida, 1987), he is believed to have hardly been immersed in the world with its rampant, noisy, busy emptiness. Therefore, for the sake of individual self-realization, it is said that Ryōkan felt he must playfully conduct his mind and body in the emptiness, or become close to human beings and the natural world with a warm outlook, thoroughly accepting the view of impermanence and equality with others (Kanbara, 1987). Perhaps it is Ryōkan’s human appeal in his many speeches and lectures that compel us to learn from his example.

#### 1.2. Criticism and rudeness as a monk

There are many stories about the words and deeds of Ryōkan that reflect unfavorably on him. Mizukami (2008) has criticized the inaction in Ryōkan’s life as a monk; a specific incident is described in detail in the 1974 novel “People of Saryū.”

Ryōkan became a priest without much motivation and did not take up a hoe and help farming families even in an age of frequent food crises due to droughts and floods as well as numerous uprisings. Neither did he show

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gratitude to the people who assisted him. There is a story from the days of “Shuza,” (the position of the leader of the Unsui (general designation of monks)) during the period of Ryōkan’s training era. In the apprenticeship system of a Zen temple there is a “Tenzo,” which is similar to a cooking engagement to cater for the Unsui. Even though his masterpriest abbot Senkei was in that position at that time, for Ryōkan, this position seemed to be no more than a cooking clerk. However, Mizukami’s (2008) view has changed, after discovering that the reason Ryōkan played with children was because they had been sold to the Joshu Kizaki inn and would probably not return home alive. However, apart from Mizukami, Ryōkan is seldom criticized.

### 1.3. Evaluation in medicine

Many behaviors of Ryōkan have been discussed from a medical perspective, and there is even a work termed “Ryōkan in medical care” (Japan Ryōkan Association, 1987). In this work, the psychiatrist Iida(1987) presented a simple question about Ryōkan from a psychiatric viewpoint and argued that there is a strong possibility that Ryōkan had schizothymia as part of his psychopathology. However, Iida(1987) also suggests that it is possible to learn therapy tips to help prevent and overcome the recurrence of a similar illness from the life of one such as Ryōkan. Although the hypothesis that Ryōkan had Asperger's syndrome (later referred to as AS) has also been discussed in recent years (Honma, 2012), even with this type of pathology, the author believes that it is possible to learn tips to continue overcoming similar diseases from his way of life and existence.

## 2. Method

In this study, (1) the author examines the remarkable psychopathology and features gleaned by the author from Ryōkan’s comical stories using a clinical psychological point of view, (2) subsequently, the author considers how one can learn hints about mental health from these features.

In this work, the author regards these stories as episodes that symbolize Ryōkan’s core identity and his nature. Even though the presentation may seem selective, there are multiple stories of a similar nature that represent Ryōkan’s key features.

### 2.1. Introduction of Ryōkan Upbringing

Ryōkan (1758-1831) was born as the oldest son among seven siblings to the nanushi (headman) Tachibanaya Yamamoto in Izumozaki, Niigata Prefecture (Matsumoto, 2008; Nakano, 2010). The childhood name of Ryōkan was Eizō, and he was also said to be naive, foolish, a “lantern in the daytime,” and useless. However, he liked studying works such as the Analects of Confucius as a child. He has renamed Fumitaka after the ceremony of attaining manhood at the age of 15. He was renamed Ryōkan “the great fool,” at the age of 22, when Buddhist (Zen) master, Kokusen, a monk at Entsūji Temple in Okayama Prefecture visited Koshōji of Izumozaki and gave him this nickname. Finally, Ryōkan became a Zen monk (Unsui) and accompanied Kokusen into the country for training (Matsumoto, 2008).

In a Zen temple, labor is emphasized. Additionally, he went during a 12-year period without any acquaintances, and this has been likened to the “ultimate solitude.” After training, Ryōkan was awarded the inka no ge (a kind of graduation certificate) when he was 33-years-old, and this written content taught him that, “the road to practice, which appears poorly maintained, is in fact big and broad and this is a good thing, a wonderful thing.” While Ryōkan had obtained qualification as the chief priest by receiving the application of inka no ge, after the death of Kokusen, Ryōkan had gone out seeking countries training when he was 34 years old without being part of a particular temple (Kato, 2008). Buddha's heart is known as mercy. According to Matsumoto, Ryōkan considered it easier to practice the cultivation of Buddha’s compassion without being attached to a temple, so he became a beggar monk (Matsumoto, 2008).

In such circumstances, there is a strong image of Ryōkan as a mere beggar monk devoted to walking on the ground (Doi, 1987). However, Doi (1985, 1995) valued Ryōkan and often cited him. In addition, Saito (1987) says that the monk’s way of life that rejects the real world, as well as establishing oneself as a high-ranking monk in an agricultural society is characteristic of Ryōkan. This is also said to be the essence of Ryōkan.

### 2.2. Stories of Ryōkan

An overview of the upbringing of Ryōkan and its features is described earlier, but I would like to consider stories about Ryōkan.

**(1) Visitors:** The monk Ugan born in Sanjo, 20 years his senior, was invited to Ryōkan's hermitage in Gogōan. Although Ryōkan had been down the mountain to obtain wine, admiring the moon on the way home, he continued to drink wine, forgetting that his visitors were coming, and then he spent the night as he was. From this episode, the characteristics of Ryōkan such as "indifference, immediate forgetfulness, inability to keep his promises," can be seen. I also think that the tendency of his mind to move immediately to other things while in the middle of something represents "impulsivity" as a sign of developmental disorder.

**(2) Buried alive:** This is a story about when Ryōkan has visited his aunt at Bunsui. Ryōkan went up to the next forest because Belly had been combed; he entered the house of one of the farmers and began eating rice without permission. At that time, the landlord came back. The landlord tied Ryōkan up and tried to bury him alive. Then, the village headman, who knew Ryōkan, was passing by and helped him. According to this story, Ryōkan cannot tell right from wrong when judging his own behavior. In other words, it is not even in the offense, but he could not understand whether or not his own actions provoked people. On the other hand, from Ryōkan's statement, "I must be bad because these things happen to me," we know that he judged right and wrong based on his own experiences. In other words, we can imagine that Ryōkan did not fully understand whether his behavior would provoke people.

**(3) Mash pickled leftovers:** Ryōkan stored the fruit of soy sauce in a pot and placed leftovers in it. He also ate in the summer, and people who came to visit advised him not to eat in this manner. Ryōkan jokingly replied "If you put the maggots in a bowl, they escape naturally, so I don't mind eating, even if there are maggots in the pot." (This episode shows that Ryōkan was not good at organizing and cleaning up.)

**(4) Bamboo shoots:** This is a story from the Gogōan hermitage before and after the 14th year of Bunka (1817). When bamboo shoots appeared under the floor, Ryōkan stripped the floorboards and allowed the bamboo shoots to extend freely. Even if bamboo shoots had broken through the roof, Ryōkan would sit comfortably under them. (It could be considered that Ryōkan was slovenly, but to Ryōkan, this was like parental love for what can grow. Furthermore, it might seem that he developed his own rules that were similar to feelings for children.)

**(5) Ikkann:** This was an event at the auction of a horse at a shrine. The children had seen Ryōkan recoiling in surprise when he heard "ikkann" (cheers of enthusiasm). From then on, when children saw Ryōkan begging, they called out "Mr. Ryōkan, ikkann." Ryōkan diverted back to please the children. After deflecting back many times, Ryōkan finally fell down backward.

**(6) Hide-and-seek:** When Ryōkan was hiding in the barn playing hide-and-seek with the children, the children could not find him, and in the dusk everyone had returned home. Next morning, in the dim light, when the neighbors came to gather straw and saw Ryōkan coming out, they started saying, "isn't that Ryōkan sama?"; Ryōkan said, "Be quiet. I will be found." Here, I want to examine characteristics of Ryōkan's childhood that are thought to be related to these episodes. First, considering that Ryōkan was the eldest son of a nanushi (headman), he was probably accompanied by the attendant wherever he went and did not play with friends of the same age; this would have been a source of continuous disappointment for him. Here, the author considered the internal impact of the episode during Ryōkan's childhood. At first, when playing "Hide-and-Seek," Ryōkan remained hidden until morning. In "ikkann" he continued until he fell down backward. According to Sakurai (2006), such an attitude displayed by Ryōkan is said to be a result of the idea of not letting children feel disappointed and lonely. The author imagines that this was also derived from Ryōkan's unwillingness to abandon the hope of playing with friends during his own childhood. Ryōkan's mother was said to have died during his training at Entsūji, and his father committed suicide during his country training (Kato, 2008). Hence, the author imagines that Ryōkan also experienced some sort of disappointment regarding play during his childhood. In other words, the author thinks that episodes with children could have been a result of his own experience, and he might have developed a rule of his own that involved not disappointing children.

In addition, at that time, the children of Niigata were sold as labor to the Ota Kizaki inn, which is currently in Gunma Prefecture. Children would disappear, and most of the children who played together today would no longer be able to meet again tomorrow. Ryōkan may have thought that he would not be able to meet with such children again, and he had only one chance to play with them (Mizukami, 1997; Sakurai, 2006). In relation to this, Ryōkan was eager to inculcate the importance of character in children. However, for similar reasons involved in his playing with children, the author thinks he thought it of little use for them to be able to write characters once they were sold.

**(7) Lack of talent as a headman:** Ryōkan, the eldest son of a nanushi (headman), was born in an elite position. However, Ryōkan willingly abandoned his position. There seem to have been several reasons for this, but according to Kambara (1987), one of the main reasons was that Tachibanaya father's parents' household had suffered financially. Hence, it was a great setback for Ryōkan that he did not have the power to support his parents' home. However, there are even humorous features of Ryōkan in this regard. For example, according to Tanikawa (1998), Ryōkan was said to be useless from childhood because he was quiet, honest, and said to be a lantern in the daytime. In addition, he had low levels of management ability, forgot errands easily, and was striking for his low levels of attention and concentration, and a tendency to leave things behind. Furthermore, he was also said to have been clumsy and weak in exercise, and so, it was thought that he had no talent as a headman. Moreover, there is also a related legend. An important role for nanushi was to witness the execution of criminals. Ryōkan also probably witnessed these during his childhood because of his standing as the heir of the nanushi. However, according to Tanikawa (1998), Ryōkan found these to be very unbearable. In these circumstances, Ryōkan was ordained as a priest at the age of 18. Incidentally, he traveled to training accompanied by his master after Kokusen from a former execution ground, which is currently referred to as "the hill of journey." In other words, the author imagines he might have set out on his journey after attending such executions.

**(8) Familiar with calligraphy:** Even though it is said that people begged Ryōkan to read Buddhist scriptures, he excelled in handwriting enough that even if Ryōkan did things that made people angry, as in the stories, there were also incidents where people asked, "write a letter instead for me," indicating that he had the ability to soften people's attitudes. People began to save anything as important if it was written by Ryōkan, yearning to share the virtue of his virtuous life after his homecoming. Ryōkan's reputation for his poems also gradually developed among the people, until many people attempted to bring him to their house and write a poem when they saw Ryōkan begging for alms (Matsumoto, 2008). In this way, Ryōkan was protected by the people because of his excellent writing. Moreover, many of his works were of brilliant quality, perhaps because of the characteristic of AS (Art Yearbook Editorial Department, 2015). Karaki (1989) discussed the features of Ryōkan's works of art. Tachikawa (1987) argued about Ryōkan's calligraphy, and discussed the features of his presentation act that it exposed the visual shape image. In other words, Ryōkan was predominantly focused on visual figures rather than the characters even in his writing, which are also believed as being a characteristic of AS.

**(9) Impulsivity:** When his friend Hosai visited Gogōan, Ryōkan was in Zen meditation. An hour passed with no answer to his voice. Finally, Ryōkan invited Hosai in, but one hour passed silently. Hosai could not endure it, and then said to him, "Ryōkan seems pretentious." Ryōkan composed the verse, "A mouth hung open/Exposing the guts inside;/A chocolate vine." (which means, if one opens one's mouth merely to upset others, it is better not to open one's mouth at all). "It might be better for me not to open my mouth and say anything, if I provoke many people by opening my mouth and saying something. There is 'nothing of attention.' (Literally: Words would come out with a mouth).

**(10) Amplification of experience:** According to the story termed "turbot," for example, when Ryōkan was pointed out by a sinister look from his father and was scolded with the words "you become turbot," he was afraid of being alone forever. Such experiences could happen to anyone, but the author thinks of his strength of commitment as well as his experienced feelings that were amplified compared to other people's experiences.

### 3. Discussion

**3.1. Psychopathology of Ryōkan:** Iida (1987) discussed from a psychiatric point of view of how Ryōkan could maintain mental and physical health during the ultimate solitude of his training. For this, Iida (1987) discussed a temperament that can withstand the harsh physical environment; further, it was also revealed that a lonely interpersonal environment is necessary because there is no means to self-support, and there is no choice but to depend on the goodwill of the people on surrounding area in life, then he must be allowed his presence, and must be a person with a human appeal of feeling worth to be asylumed, by the people around. Based on this, Iida argued that Ryōkan probably had the condition of schizothymia. However, the psychiatrist Sakurai (2006) disputed this, saying that "solo play" for Ryōkan was not merely a superficial desire to spend time alone and hating relationship with others but was meaningful as a condition for obtaining spiritual richness.

In addition, Sakurai (2006) argued that Ryōkan was familiar to people such as the villagers and the village

headman and nun Teishin, had the mind of a parent, and readily felt for the misfortune of others. Hence, his behavior did not mean that he loved to be alone, and he was not an unapproachable person. The author agrees; hence, I raise some points as evidence.

### **(1) Surprising Brightness (Tanikawa, 1998):**

(i) According to Eiju Kera, who was famous in his book called “Kiwa” (Ryōkan’s Strange story), when Ryōkan came to stay, the house was at peace, and filled with a good atmosphere called “waki.”

(ii) Anecdote of the tea ceremony: Ryōkan did not show off the knowledge of tasteful, drank a strong tea and threw it up, then he turned it around next. About this, Tanikawa infers that he had thought that the tea ceremony was intended to relax the guest, so when he obsessed about etiquette and chrysanthemums, this would have meant putting the cart before the horse.

(iii) Playing Go (Japanese game): When Ryōkan visited the house of Tomitori (syōya, a great headman in Jizōdō), they had an intimate companionship.

(iv) Drinker and inveterate smoker: A drunk person smelling of garlic cannot be allowed in the precincts of the Temple. But, when Ryōkan visited farmers, he was recommended doburoku (Japanese liquor), and he discoursed with a laugh. In this way, Ryōkan went among the people of the village without discrimination, and he was welcomed.

(v) Bon dance in drag: In the Kanbara region in Niigata, there is a custom of the all-night Bon dance, and Ryōkan also participated in it. Wearing a towel like a woman from the head, Ryōkan was dancing as a transvestite with a borrowed women’s plumes kimono. When the villagers called out to Ryōkan, “Good-looking, whose daughter are you?” Ryōkan ran away while dancing pointing down in embarrassment, so as not to be exposed as a man by replying using his own tone. The villagers invited Ryōkan to the circle of dancing, and they loved this humor that was filled with childish familiarity.

Additionally, there are poems conveying a “gregariousness” particular to him as well, such as “To live in this world / Surrounded by so many / Seemed dreary to me / But to live all by myself / Proved much too lonely as well.” and “If ever you’re asked / What is bitter in this world / You must answer thus; / A heart that hates one’s fellows and rejects their company.” From these features, like Sakurai (2006), the author also does not see the characteristics of “schizothymia,” such as “tendency to hole up in their own world and soak in solitude” (that is, “I am not escaping from the world; / But what I like best is / To enjoy myself alone / Without mingling in the crowd.”), that is the cornerstone of the diagnosis of “schizothymia.”

**(2) Pathology of “Folly”:** In addition, in terms of Ryōkan’s behavior seen in the above story, according to discoveries from clinical psychology, the author’s specialty, I see the characteristics of developmental disorders, similar to Honma’s view. Moreover, as will be described later, the manner in which his ascetic practices took him on a wandering journey through various lands also suggests the coexistence of schizotypal personality disorder. Furthermore, no matter what type of psychopathology this was, it could be represented as “folly” if we focused on the common features of the above anecdotes in everyday language. These are the qualities of Ryōkan that Buddhist master Kokusen saw through.

### **3.2. “Ruri” and the Mental World of Ryōkan:**

Having argued for the coexistence of schizotypal personality disorder in the psychopathology of Ryōkan, I will explain the rationale for this hypothesis.

Jaspers examined the significance of biographical discussion of a specific person in terms of “grasping the psychopathologically interesting aspects of spiritual life and this being a living record clarifying the significance of various phenomena and processes of spiritual life as the cause of such human creativity” (Jaspers, 1913; Uchimura, 1956). Here, the author discusses the mental world of Ryōkan that seemed to provide some background to the wandering country training and “emptiness” from the view of “Ruri” (Sasaki, 1985) and “amae” (Doi). Furthermore, the author clarifies the relationships between “Ruri” and Ryōkan’s unique self-realization.

#### **(1) “Emptiness” of Ryōkan:**

(i) **Motivation of the priest and “emptiness” (Tanigawa, 1998):** (a) Father Inan accused his alumnus Tomitori Chobe in the magistrate’s office. Eizō had fled from his father at the age of 18. (b) Ryōkan was given the daughter to wed from the Sekine household, but they were divorced in half a year. Ryōkan had become a priest after he had known the emptiness of these disappointing experiences.

**(ii) Motivation of country training and “emptiness”:** (a) Ryōkan received the inka no ge (a kind of graduation certificate) as a 33-year-old, but the following year, master Kokusen died. Ryōkan was also said to have been expelled as he was not compatible with the successor priest of the temple, Gentōsokutyū. (b) Ryōkan knew the importance of each sect in the religious sectionalism, and secular capabilities such as financial skills, political power, and temple management in each sectionalism. He was apparently considered to be frustrated by the gap between his ideals and reality about monastic lifestyle.

**(2) Ruri:** Sasaki (1985) defined the mental system as “ruri” that “the mental system of patients with no room for real examination continues wandering in search of something that will heal themselves of unsatisfied feelings in the midst of a world that does not fit into their desired image.” In addition, he argued that “ruri of spirit” produces the narcissism defense; furthermore, he says it is related to the lack of relationships that form the basis of the self-awareness that integrates oneself with others. Sasaki (1985) says that this behavioral style of those who have lost “fused relationships” by collapsing these mental defenses and who also could not develop an independent self-consciousness is said to be “Ruri as the action (Wandering).”

Ryōkan is thought to have undertaken a journey following the “collapse of the fused relationship” caused “by loss of parents and benefactor,” and the point that “he rejects even the monk’s way of life also the real world, as well as establishing oneself as a high-ranking monk in the agricultural society” is also very similar to “Ruri.” Ryōkan was simply wandering (“Ruri”) as a priest, during country training, even in residence after homecoming. In addition, Sasaki (1985) pointed out that the failure of the narcissism defense is also seen in “absenteeism persons” and captures the appearance as “Ruri.” He argues that this aspect is similar to the “schizotypal personality disorder.” Based on these considerations, the author thinks that the psychopathology of Ryōkan was closer to the coexistence of schizotypal personality disorder and “developmental disorder” that the author has indicated in this paper, rather than “schizoid personality” as “schizothymia” claimed by Iida (1987).

**(3) Additional psychological features:** (1) Although Ryōkan is not usually associated with “anger” (Shibuya, 2010), he expresses it fiercely against the monk in “sougya.” He denies the all same trade, because “a person who is referred to as a priest today, there is no enlightenment also without piled training, just unnecessarily spending the alms of the parishioner, and not trying to look back to Buddha’s Commandment.” This is equivalent to projection of the bad self that he cannot accept into his identity, that is, a form of ego splitting. Ryōkan hates “calligraphy of calligrapher,” “poems of poem composer.” The author thinks this reason is that he did not learn either calligraphy or Buddhism in china. This is equivalent to projection of the bad self to something external, that is, ego splitting. (2) Ryōkan has totally denied being in the same profession, and also discounted Senkei’s senior rating in Entsuji as “just a cooking engagement.” However, in the same profession, Kokusen and Soryū are idealized. This represents subject splitting. (3) Ryōkan was not seeking the way of a stable priest, he chose to train as a mendicant monk. This is a characteristic of Ryōkan that many people regarded as a “true investigator,” however, this can also be interpreted as just like continuing to wander while always in search of something. This represents a lack of a sense of stability and a stable sense of self, features of borderline personality disorder (schizotypal).

## 4. Summary

### 4.1. Training of Ryōkan and his mind:

Training of Ryōkan and amae: Ryōkan gives a strong impression of a “recluse discarding the world,” but he lived by begging from people (relying on them) for food and shelter. Although Sakurai (2006) discusses that this feature of Ryōkan occurred after leaving the Entsuji Temple, to the author this seems to be a result of “begging for food” and “training of beggar” with alms. Then Ryōkan is considered to have been able to “be friendly by the people” and to “fawn on the people” even though he was not good at that until then. The author believes that this is related to Ryōkan, who was initially called as “useless as a lantern in the daytime,” gaining the ability to withstand loneliness and ambiguity, polishing his former “absentmindedness” into “not getting caught up in things and becoming free.” As described above, the author indicated the possibility that schizotypal personality disorder was comorbid in the psychopathology of Ryōkan based on his country training being just like “Ruri wandering,” which are also considered instead of Ryōkan’s

pathology (Kaga, 1971) or from his “emptiness.” Additionally, living a holy life means that one has no choice but to endure “loneliness and ambiguity,” causing the same effects as those of psychoanalytic therapy, and was thought to have contributed to his unique self-realization.

#### 4.2. Learning a Healthy Way of Mind from Ryōkan:

Iida (1987) argued that it is important to lead people with mental illness to discover a life style that is socially effective while taking advantage of their distinct qualities. In modern times, “taking advantage of humanness” is important to support the failure on their life.” This is also true in a developmental disorder that has features of psychopathology similar to “folly,” and it is even more true in any psychopathology.

#### 4.3. Finally:

The author can identify features such as “being alive and supporting the humanity of people” as being Ryōkan’s way. In response to such existence and the teaching of Kokusen like “It is good to practice the road looks like foolish is large and wide”, the freedom like “It's a broad thing if you walk in the middle even in a small way” (Matsumoto, 2008) “Just walk on the ground” (Doi, 1987; Mizukami, 1997; Nakano, 2010), even while having an excellent charm, is the way of Ryōkan. Though the author wonders whether Ryōkan’s way is good for the health of the mind, the author considers Ryōkan’s way of life to be a model of a healthy way of mind and considers learning tips to help us prevent or avoid the recurrence of mental illness. In addition, though Doi says he likes Ryōkan and often cites him (Doi, 1985; 1987; 1991;1995), I imagine the reason is that Doi was strongly recognized as a clinician in his own right, and he has always taken care of the “ground” of clinical setting. The author thinks the “ground” of clinical setting is important in clinical psychology; similarly, I consider Ryōkan’s way just like “only walk on the ground” can be a model of the way of clinical psychology.

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**Appendix :** This paper improves on the oral presentation of the 34th Annual Convention of the Japanese Clinical Psychological Association.