



The Legend of Issun-boshi

ONCE upon a time there lived an old man and an old woman. The couple had no children, so they prayed to God. “Please God, let us have a child, no matter how small.”

And sure enough, a small child was born. It was a boy just about the size of the old man’s thumb. The couple promptly named him “Issun-boshi” (One-Inch Boy).

One day Issun-boshi said to the old man and old woman, “I would like to go to the capital and work. Please make preparations for my journey.”

So the old man made a sword out of a sewing needle that was just the right size for Issun-boshi. The old woman set a soup bowl afloat in the river as a boat for Issun-boshi

to ride in. Skillfully paddling his soup bowl boat with a chopstick, Issun-boshi set out for the capital.

Upon arriving at the capital, Issun-boshi visited the most splendid house in the city.

“Please open the gate,” he called out. “I have a request.”

The lord of the house opened the gate and looked around, but saw no one there.

“Who on earth is it? I don’t see anyone.”

“I’m at your feet.”

The lord finally discovered little Issun-boshi standing next to his shoes in the entranceway.

“Goodness, what a tiny child!”

“My name is Issun-boshi. Please let me work here.”

“You seem quite energetic and intelligent,” the lord said.

“All right, I’ll make you one of my retainers.”

Issun-boshi became the escort of the lord’s daughter, who was a princess.



One day Issun-boshi accompanied the princess on a visit to the temple. On the way there they came upon a big ogre, who sought to snatch the maiden away.

“Wicked ogre, you’d better not lay a finger on the princess!”

“How impertinent. I’ll eat you up!” the ogre said, and gulped Issun-boshi down.

“Ow, ouch!” the ogre began shouting, because Issun-boshi was stabbing inside the ogre’s belly with his needle sword.

“At this rate, I’ll die of pain,” the ogre moaned. “I give in. Let me go!”

The ogre spit Issun-boshi out and ran off toward the mountains at full speed.

“Thank you for saving me. You may be small, but you are very brave and strong,” the princess said.

“That ogre seems to have left something behind,” Issun-boshi said. “What’s this?”

“Why, that is the Magic Mallet (*Uchide no Kozuchi*). When you shake it, you get whatever you wish for. Issun-boshi, what do you wish for?”

“I want to grow up!”

When the princess shook the Magic Mallet, Issun-boshi grew and grew, and in the blink of an eye he had become a full-grown man.

Issun-boshi married the princess and became a fine samurai, just as he had hoped. 🍷

THE HOME OF THE ISSUN-BOSHI LEGEND

Sumiyoshi Taisha in the city of Osaka, Osaka Prefecture, is the shrine where the old man and the old woman prayed to be blessed with a child. It is known for hosting a festival every year from July 30 to August 1 called the Sumiyoshi Matsuri, which has become a summer tradition in Osaka. The popular shrine is also famous for its many visitors during *hatsumode*—the Japanese custom of visiting a shrine for the first time during the first three days of the New Year period (on 1st - 3rd of January)—attracting as many as 2.5 million people.

