

## **PERSPECTIVE: Health Comes From a Sense of Belonging**

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My dream is to be the healthiest woman in the universe. Even for one of the biggest dreamers ever to live, this one rates. But perhaps it's one that isn't too far to reach.

I decided to become absolutely healthy about five years ago, seven years after I became a practitioner of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism. What finally prompted me was the dismal realization that my family's health history isn't very pretty. My mother, like her mother, became diabetic in her 40s. Because of her weakened constitution, her kidneys gave out just after her 60th year. Two years later, frail from the constant dialysis and her lifelong struggle with respiratory problems, she succumbed to pneumonia and died.

Both my father and grandfather battled heart disease. The fifth heart attack ended my father's fight, which started when he was 54 and lasted 15 years.

My parents were constantly in and out of hospitals the last five years of their lives, and I saw firsthand what a horror illness can be. At that point, I vowed that I would do everything in my power to see that I lived a healthy life.

While reading an article in the September 1996 issue of *Health*, I discovered that the healthiest women in the world reside in Okinawa, Japan. The average life span is 84 years and the average state of health is remarkably good. They claim this longevity of wellness has more to do with how they live than who they are.

The article relates the findings of Kazuhiko Taira, a gerontologist (one who studies aging and the problems of the aged) and epidemiologist (one who is schooled in the incidence, prevalence and cause of disease in large populations), as he meets with and examines various seniors living on the island.

The first thing mentioned by these people as a contributing factor to long life is diet. Theirs is strikingly different from the rest of Japan. Okinawans eat "three times more meat (mostly fish), 50 percent more tofu, and 40 percent less salt."

Taira then quotes a saying in Okinawa: "Food is medicine, but that is only part of the answer." This is where the article started to get very interesting to me. Taira goes on to say that "The second and maybe more important secret to a long and healthy life in Okinawa is what we call *yuimaru*."

As I read on, I discovered that *yuimaru* is, as one of the natives defines it, "that sense of belonging, of being necessary." This concept started on the farm, with the realization that no one who is too lazy or too independent will survive the rigors of farm life. It takes everyone in the village coming together and understanding their interdependency to ensure the success of all involved.

Taira then talks about studies both in the United States and Japan that have proven the emotional stability of elderly people who share strong ties with friends, family or at least one other person. He also says that isolation from others makes it "easier to withdraw from social activity, to stop going to the community center, to stop seeing friends — and to stop getting exercise. Socializing is good for the body as well as the soul."

Well, I thought, how about that? Of course, I immediately began to think of the SGI and its unprecedented efforts to instill this very idea (of *yuimaru*) into the hearts of its members. We are starting to understand the importance of involvement, both socially and individually, in our communities. Our organization promotes interaction and steady dialogue as a means to our human revolution and the peace and security of all who share the planet.

I feel SGI President Ikeda sums up the usefulness of our movement to all of humanity in

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his poem to the members of Los Angeles, “The Sun of *Jiyu* Over a New Land”:

*This profound understanding  
of coexistence, of symbiosis —  
here is the source of resolution for  
the most pressing and fundamental issues  
that confront humankind  
in the chaotic last years of this century.*

Our lesson is a global one: Cities and towns need us and we need them. Working closely together can only speed up the quest for much-needed answers to the problems of our world. And not only that, we can become pretty darn healthy in the process.

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