

**A NEW CENTURY OF HEALTH**  
**Buddhism and the Art of Medicine**  
**Skin Disorders [25]**

*Participants include SGI President Ikeda and dermatologists Chiaki Nishiyama and Kimiko Sato, both Soka Gakkai doctors division vice chiefs.*

**Ikeda:** Dr. Sato, Dr. Nishiyama, why did you choose the field of dermatology?

**Sato:** I came down with nephritis while I was a medical student. I was so sick that I was told I couldn't withstand the demands of being a doctor. I tried to think of a specialization that didn't require great physical stamina, and that was how I chose dermatology.

**Nishiyama:** When I was a medical student, I broke out in a rash from a chemical called *formalin* used in anatomy class. My father was a doctor, too, but unfortunately not a dermatologist! I must have been in pain for about a year and a half. Then I went to a dermatologist, and I was cured in just two weeks. That's when I decided that I wanted to become a dermatologist.

**Ikeda:** Once when I was a child, I had a large boil under my chin. It swelled tremendously and was beginning to affect the bone. I tried various medicines, but nothing worked. There were no dermatologists nearby. Finally, I had to go to a regional hospital and have it incised, but it took a very long time to heal. It hurt, it was swollen, and I didn't want to go to school, where everyone would notice it.

In the old days, children often suffered from boils, but we don't see that so frequently anymore.

**Nishiyama:** Nutrition has improved, for one thing, and we have many new drugs. Today there is a dramatic decrease in such skin disorders.

**Ikeda:** I've heard it said the body's largest organ is not the lungs or the liver but, in fact, the skin!

**Sato:** Yes, that's true. An average adult has approximately 17 square feet of skin. And while the average adult heart weighs about 10 ounces and the liver about 3 pounds, 3 ounces, the skin weighs as much as 8 pounds, 12 ounces.

**Ikeda:** We talk about someone being thick-skinned, meaning insensitive, but is there actually a difference in skin thickness from individual to individual?

**Nishiyama:** Medically speaking, there is no relationship between the thickness of a person's skin and his or her character! A thick-skinned person and a thin-skinned person alike have skin about 1 millimeter thick on the face, while on the rest of the body, it averages about 2 millimeters.

**Ikeda:** What are the functions of the skin?

**Sato:** Protection, secretion and excretion, heat regulation and sensation.

**Ikeda:** My, that's a hardworking 2 millimeters!

**Sato:** It is indeed. The skin's first function is to protect the body. It acts like a cushion that absorbs force when we bump into, scrape against or are impacted by an object. Though the skin may be damaged in the process, it can repair itself.

**Nishiyama:** The skin also blocks out bacteria, ultraviolet rays and chemicals such as soap. It's a protective barrier.

**Ikeda:** When you say secretion and excretion, are you referring to perspiration?

**Sato:** Yes. Perspiration contains not only water and salt but waste products. On average, we perspire about 3 pints a day — about the same as the average amount of waste products we urinate each day.

**Nishiyama:** The skin also eliminates toxic materials from the body, in addition to perspiration. In 1968, there was a food-poisoning incident in which rice-bran oil was contaminated with a toxic substance<sup>1</sup> [the Kanemi oil-poisoning incident in Japan]. All the victims, regardless of age, broke out in pimple-like pustules. An examination of the pustules by dermatologists at a local university hospital revealed that the body was excreting the toxin from the pores, which caused the pustules to form.

**Ikeda:** Yes, that was a famous incident. It worried us all a great deal at the time. Perspiration is also a way of lowering the body temperature, isn't it?

**Sato:** Yes, it is. A perspiring person may appear to be hot, but actually the opposite is true. When we perspire, the evaporation of the perspiration from our skin's surface cools us, lowering the body temperature. This is how the skin helps regulate body temperature. When it is cold, the blood vessels in our skin contract to allow only a small amount of blood through them, promoting conservation of body heat. When it is hot, the blood vessels expand to permit blood to flow freely, facilitating evaporation of perspiration.

**Ikeda:** All these things take place without our being aware of them — how wondrous are the workings inherent in life!

**Sato:** Another function of the skin is to sense pain, heat, cold and other phenomena.

**Ikeda:** Apparently, the human race has suffered from skin diseases since ancient times. Egyptian papyruses record skin cancer, eczema, carbuncles and other disorders. About how many different kinds of skin disease are there?

**Sato:** More than 900 types are recognized.

**Ikeda:** What kinds of skin diseases are on the increase lately?

**Sato:** Allergies, atopic eczema and other diseases related to the immune system.

**Ikeda:** We have already discussed atopic eczema in this series [see Sept. 27, 1996, *World Tribune*]. That particular installment drew a great response from our [*Seikyo*

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*Shimbun*] readers. What other skin diseases are prevalent?

**Nishiyama:** Most frequently encountered are eczema-type disorders, such as contact dermatitis, especially hand dermatitis, and various kinds of rashes. They account for nearly a third of all skin diseases.

**Sato:** Rashes are generally caused by contact with some irritant. Common irritants are metal jewelry such as necklaces or watch bands, or plants such as poison sumac, ginkgo and primrose, as well as certain industrial chemicals. Skin that comes into contact with the irritant turns red and swells up, becoming extremely itchy at the same time. In some cases, a single contact causes no reaction, but repeated contact can produce a rash. Perspiration can also worsen the symptoms.

**Ikeda:** What precisely causes eczema on the hands?

**Nishiyama:** Eczema on the hands occurs most frequently among people who regularly handle soaps, detergents and other chemical solvents in their work. The skin of the palm and fingers becomes rough, and sometimes the fingerprints even disappear. In some cases, the back of the hand and the area around the fingernails becomes red and extremely itchy.

**Ikeda:** How is eczema different from hives?

**Sato:** In both cases, the skin is itchy and red, but in the case of hives the symptoms disappear in just a few hours. Middle-aged and elderly people often suffer from pruritus, which is characterized by an itchiness all over the body, but it is not accompanied by any rash.

**Nishiyama:** Some skin diseases are caused by viruses. Shingles [herpes zoster] is a good example. It usually occurs in people who have had chicken pox as children. The virus remains dormant in their bodies, and when they reach middle age or older and their resistance naturally lowers, the virus becomes active again, causing a rash to break out. A characteristic feature of shingles is that it is accompanied by intense neuralgic pain.

**Sato:** Most warts on the hands and feet are also caused by viruses. Warts in elderly people, however, are often part of the natural aging process.

**Ikeda:** Scabies is another common skin disease, isn't it?

**Sato:** Scabies is caused by a parasitic insect, the scabies mite [*Sarcoptes scabiei*].

**Ikeda:** Napoleon suffered badly from scabies, which he caught from his soldiers. There is a well-known episode about him and this disorder. Scabies, also called the itch, was rampant in Europe at the time, but its cause was unknown. Many doctors, when confronted with a disease that they could find no cause for, simply blamed it on scabies. One day, Napoleon caught a cold while on the battlefield. His symptoms were atypical, so the military doctor, puzzled, adopted the common excuse and told Napoleon that his internal organs had been attacked by scabies.

What the doctor didn't realize was that Napoleon actually did suffer from scabies. Napoleon evidently saw through the doctor's temporizing. He smiled cynically and said,

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“You are indeed a great doctor, since without knowing that I actually suffer from scabies, you diagnosed my trouble with such great dispatch!”

**Nishiyama:** The great doctor was great at “doctoring,” it seems!

**Ikeda:** In any situation, knowledge and correct information are very important. Without them, we can be easily led astray. How much more important this is in matters of health, which can mean the difference between life and death.

We have said this on many occasions during this series, but truly it is important to take charge of one’s health, not to leave it up to others. We must become doctor, nurse and patient all rolled into one and work wisely to protect our health. To do that, we need to be informed properly about health issues and to make certain we always receive a thorough explanation from our doctors. What can we do to keep our skin healthy?

**Sato:** The basics are the same in preventing every disease: to have a balanced diet and keep a balanced and healthy lifestyle.

**Ikeda:** What practical steps can we take to care for our skin?

**Sato:** Regular cleansing is most important. It’s a good idea to get into the habit of washing your hands and face when you come home at the end of the day.

**Nishiyama:** And not just with water but with soap. Some say that soap is drying and harsh on the skin, but if you rinse it away thoroughly, it rarely causes problems.

**Ikeda:** I’ve heard, however, that elderly people should go easy on using soap.

**Nishiyama:** Yes, that’s right. Actually, our skin begins to age from around our early 30s, so this advice doesn’t necessarily apply just to senior citizens.

**Sato:** In healthy skin, the outer layers of the epidermis, rich in lipids, help protect against the evaporation of fluid from within and keep the skin moist and supple. As the skin ages, however, oil secretion decreases and the skin dries out easily. The overuse of soaps and vigorous rubbing only further deplete the skin’s natural oils and exacerbate the dryness.

**Ikeda:** I know many elderly people enjoy taking baths daily. Perhaps they would be wise to take note of this point.

**Nishiyama:** Yes, hot water in particular strips the skin of its natural oils. It is better if the elderly bathe in tepid, not hot, water, and stay in the bath only for a short time.

**Ikeda:** By the way, do you have any advice for those who suffer from eczema on the hands, an affliction we spoke about a little earlier.

**Nishiyama:** Yes. It’s a good idea to wear rubber gloves when using detergents or chemical solvents. It’s even more effective when you wear thin cotton gloves underneath the rubber gloves, since many people are prone to rashes from latex.

**Ikeda:** Ultraviolet sunlight is also harmful to our skin, isn’t it?

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**Sato:** Yes. It accelerates the skin's aging process. Overexposure to the damaging rays of the sun can cause not only wrinkles and freckles but make our skin more susceptible to warts and skin cancer.

**Ikeda:** How can we protect ourselves against ultraviolet rays?

**Sato:** Basically, by avoiding long exposure to direct sunlight. It's a good idea to wear a hat or use a parasol when the sun is at its strongest. And I also recommend applying sunscreen or wearing a long-sleeved shirt or jacket when spending any length of time outdoors, to protect oneself against UV radiation.

**Ikeda:** Sunbathing once had a reputation as healthful.

**Nishiyama:** Moderate exposure to the sun can indeed be beneficial, having a germicidal effect. But overexposure only damages the skin. When swimming in an outdoor pool or at the beach, about 30 minutes in the sun is the maximum safe exposure.

**Ikeda:** In Japan, we often say that people from regions noted for pure water have beautiful skin.

**Sato:** Yes, hence the reputation of the great beauties of Akita and Kyoto. These regions are also famous for their excellent sake, the core ingredient of which is said to be pure, good-quality water. The best water for sake is that which promotes healthy metabolic function; that is thought to be the reason that such water promotes good skin as well.

**Ikeda:** I see. Does stress have any effect on our skin?

**Sato:** Yes. It doesn't have the same effect on everyone, but it is true that of two people with the same basic skin type, the person subjected to significant stress is more likely to have skin problems. I think we can say, as a result, that a balanced, anxiety-free lifestyle is beneficial to the good health of our skin.

**Ikeda:** When you have a skin problem, should you go to a dermatologist or an internist first?

**Nishiyama:** In general terms, we can divide skin disorders into two types: those caused by external irritants and those caused by internal problems. I think the best procedure is to have a dermatologist look at the problem first. He or she will then refer you to another department if that's what's called for.

**Ikeda:** Our skin is not only an exterior covering but also a mirror that reflects our inner health. Can a person's overall health be evaluated by looking at his or her skin?

**Sato:** Well, some people wear so much makeup nowadays that they can masterfully camouflage a less than healthy complexion! But seriously, the condition of our skin is a barometer of our general health. It's a very good idea to look closely at our skin every day.

**Ikeda:** I think many of us tend not to pay too much attention to skin problems, thinking

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they'll just go away on their own. But really — without being neurotic about it of course — we should keep a close watch on our skin, shouldn't we?

Shariputra, as you may know, was a famous disciple of Shakyamuni, hailed as foremost in wisdom. In a general sense, Shariputra represents all who correctly practice Buddhism.<sup>2</sup> The three Chinese characters of Shariputra's name in Japanese, Sharihotsu, have been interpreted respectively to mean skin (*sha*), flesh (*ri*) and bone (*hotsu*), thus representing life in its entirety.

The transformation of our lives that we achieve through Buddhist practice affects our bodies and our minds. Our bodies and minds are transformed right to their very essence. The life force of the Mystic Law pervades and vitalizes our flesh, bones and skin.

I hope all our readers will spend each day cheerfully and vibrantly, brimming with the dynamic energy of the rising sun, their faces radiant with good health. Pursuing the wise path of faith equals daily life is surely the greatest proof of being foremost in wisdom.

**WT**

1. Polychlorinated biphenals (PCBs).
2. In the "Record of the Orally Transmitted Teachings" (Ongi Kuden), Nichiren Daishonin says, "Now Nichiren and his followers who chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo are all Shariputras" (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 722).

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