

Buddhism and the Art of Medicine Drugs and Medicines — Part 1[26]

President Ikeda discusses with pharmacists making informed choices on drugs and medicines. They clarify that drugs should only assist the human body in healing itself, not replace the body's natural healing functions.

Participants in this installment: SGI President Ikeda, Soka Gakkai Doctors Division Vice Chief Yoshio Kanaya and pharmacists Hitomi Kodama and Yuriko Kato. They discuss the state of Japanese drugs and medicines.

Ikeda: There is such a surge in interest in drugs and medicines that the current health boom in Japan might well be described as a medicine boom. In fact, there are many new drugs on the market, but many of us lack proper information about them.

I think that is a fair description of the present situation. With that in mind, we have invited three experts in this area to contribute to today's session.

Kanaya, Kodama and Kato: Hello.

Ikeda: I remember once when we visited the Chinese city of Guilin, while we were all waiting for our boat, two girls selling medicine approached us. I asked them, jokingly, "Do you have any medicine to make me smarter?" And they answered without a pause, "We just sold out!" I was delighted with their fine sense of humor, their quick wit — just what one would expect from a country like China, with its culture and history.

Kanaya: If you asked that question in Japan, the peddler would probably just answer coldly, "There's no such thing!"

Ikeda: What exactly is medicine?

Kanaya: In China, they say that anything can be medicine.

Kato: In Japan, according to the Drugs, Cosmetics and Medical Instruments Act, a medicine is anything that is used to treat, diagnose or prevent illness in humans or animals.

Kodama: Among all available drugs and medicines, those that receive the approval of the Ministry of Health and Welfare are classified as pharmaceuticals.

Kanaya: The basic function of drugs and medicines is to assist the body's powers of healing. A medicine is any substance that acts as an agent in stimulating the body's natural healing powers.

Ikeda: Yes, that seems like a good definition. The second Soka Gakkai president, Josei Toda, used to say that the human body is one big pharmaceutical factory. Medical science and drugs, he said, should only be used to assist and enhance the body's ability to heal itself.

Kodama: I think that is a very important point. Instead of becoming too dependent upon medication, it's important to try to achieve and preserve a physical condition in which, if

possible, one can get well without resorting to drugs.

Ikeda: What are the differences between prescription drugs and over-the-counter remedies in Japan?

Kodama: Prescription drugs, of course, require a doctor's prescription, while over-the-counter drugs don't.

Ikeda: When we visit our doctor with a cold, he or she often prescribes several different drugs. But when we go to a pharmacy, the pharmacist will usually recommend only one kind of cold medicine. Why?

Kato: Most prescription drugs are designed for a single purpose. If you have a fever, a cough and a runny nose, the doctor will prescribe one drug for each symptom.

Kodama: On the other hand, over-the-counter cold medicines are designed to treat a wide variety of symptoms, so they often contain several drugs.

Kanaya: To compare drugs to food, we might say that over-the-counter drugs are a sort of prepackaged meal, the same for all, while prescription drugs are like a home-cooked meal of fresh ingredients, such as vegetables, meat and fruit, prepared just for the patient.

Ikeda: I see. The doctor writes a prescription that meets the specific needs of the patient.

Kato: Yes, though, of course, the actual preparation of the prescription is done by the pharmacist.

Kodama: The best thing about prescription drugs is that they are prescribed expressly to meet the needs of each patient. For example, one patient may have a cold, but no fever, while another has a fever. With prescription drugs, the doctor can prescribe according to the particular symptoms.

Kanaya: The doctor can also, respond to the patient's requests, such as for a drug that won't cause drowsiness. Such a choice sometimes isn't possible with over-the-counter drugs. When you buy a commercial cold medication, you're getting a drug that is designed to relieve a fever even if you don't have one, and all sorts of things you may not need.

Ikeda: What is the best way to use these two sources of medication?

Kodama: Over-the-counter remedies are useful in an emergency. For example, when you're traveling, or when your symptoms suddenly worsen, and you can't get to a doctor.

Kanaya: Even then, it's wise not to choose a medicine on your own. Tell the pharmacist your symptoms, and he or she will recommend the best medicine. And let your pharmacist know about any medications you may already be taking for chronic illness.

Kato: When your symptoms are different than usual or they persist longer than usual, you should definitely visit your doctor and get a prescription. In that case, you should also tell your doctor which, if any, over-the-counter remedies you have been taking.

Ikeda: Some people take over-the-counter medications and prescription medicines at the same time, don't they?

Kanaya: Yes, they do. And others take several types of over-the-counter medicines at the same time. It is important not to decide on your own what medicines you should take. Always seek the advice of a pharmacist or doctor.

Ikeda: Nichiren Daishonin said: "When giving medicine to a sick person, one should know what kind of medicine was administered before. Otherwise, different kinds of medicine may conflict and work against one another, killing the patient" (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 6, pp. 28–29). The Daishonin was using medicines as a metaphor for knowing what philosophies or religions are already current before spreading the True Law.

Kanaya: Nichiren Daishonin was aware of the medical science of his time.

Ikeda: From the time of Shakyamuni, Buddhism has shown a strong interest in healing the sufferings of both mind and body, and many Buddhists have studied and written on medicine. I won't go into the details, but I think we can say that the art of pharmacy is the product of humanity's long struggle with illness. The history of medicinal remedies is as old as the history of our species. The oldest records of medicines are found on clay tablets from Mesopotamia, dating as far back as 2700 B.C.E.

Kodama: In Shakyamuni's India, many substances were used as medicines, including such plant materials as poppies, oleander, turmeric and sandalwood; animal substances such as the musk of musk deer; and minerals such as mercury. With the exception of mercury, which is highly toxic, all those substances are still in use today as medicines.

Kato: Drugs derived from living plants and animals are called natural drugs. Many modern pharmaceuticals have been produced from analyzing just why such natural drugs are effective.

Ikeda: The wisdom of the ancients is impressive indeed. Though thousands of years have passed, it still benefits us today.

Kanaya: Yes. But there have also been some strange medicines. For example, in ancient Mesopotamia, horse manure was regarded as a remedy. I have no idea if it was effective, but it was used for a long time.

Ikeda: Japanese drugstores carry a wide variety of vitamin and health drinks. Are these classified as medicines?

Kanaya: Some are, and in that case they must be properly labeled. But the rest are really just categorized as soft drinks or health foods.

Ikeda: Are they effective even though they are not medicines?

Kato: They are of no direct help in treating any illness, but they can be used as nutritional supplements after an illness or when one has no appetite.

Kodama: When we are healthy and have an appetite, we get all the vitamins we need from our food, and such drinks are of little use. Any excess of vitamins ingested is just excreted through urine and feces.

Kanaya: Vitamins are very important, of course, but many of them, such as vitamins B and C, cannot be stored very long by the body. Daily servings of fruits and vegetables are the best and most balanced way to get enough vitamins.

Kato: Nutritional supplements can be effective when one hasn't had enough sleep or is suffering from fatigue. Of course, the best thing to do when you are tired is to rest.

Ikeda: But people today are so busy they often can't rest even when they want to. That's when they are likely to turn to health drinks, because they're so handy. But if we drink such supplements to keep going and then get sick from exhaustion or overwork, the drinks will have had just the opposite effect of what was intended.

For the elderly, in particular, rest is important. I hope they will make special efforts to get the rest they need.

The vitamin drinks sold in Japan are based mostly on Western medicine, while the nutritional supplements are based on Chinese medicine. What is the difference between these two medical traditions?

Kanaya: Western medicine focuses on disease and is designed to treat specific symptoms in specific organs, such as illnesses of the stomach, the eye or the ear. Chinese medicine, on the other hand, focuses on the individual holistically and treats the entire body rather than specific organs or symptoms, aiming to balance the body's inner harmony and working for a general improvement of the patient's condition.

Ikeda: It's the difference between looking at the part and looking at the whole, then.

Kodama: Yes. For example, in Western medicine there is a specific drug for a specific symptom. Whoever the patient is, pain is treated with analgesics and hives is treated with antihistamines.

But that's not the case in Chinese medicine. The same medicine may be prescribed for both joint pain and hives. Or different medicines might be prescribed for different patients, even though they have the same symptoms.

Kato: That's why it's so difficult to answer when someone asks what a particular Chinese medicine is for.

Ikeda: Are there any other differences?

Kanaya: The drugs themselves are different. Most drugs used in Western medicine consist of a single substance, but the drugs used in Chinese medicine are a combination of many different natural drugs. Of course, each natural drug contains many different substances, so a single Chinese medicine can contain hundreds of substances.

Ikeda: When I was a child, we were given a medicine called Bear's Gallbladder for an upset stomach, and it was quite effective. Is that a Chinese medicine?

Kodama: Bear gallbladder is an ingredient used in the preparations of many Chinese medicines.

Ikeda: Do the drugs of both Western and Chinese medicine have side effects?

Kato: Yes, they do. Western drugs affect not only the organ they are aimed at, but other organs as well. And when Chinese medicines don't suit a person's constitution, they can have many side effects.

Ikeda: It seems that both types of medicines have their strong points. What's the best way to decide which kind of medicine to turn to?

Kanaya: Sudden or acute illnesses and infectious diseases respond best to Western medicine. On the other hand, when one doesn't really feel sick, but is still not in good condition, or when the cause of the illness cannot be identified, or in the case of some chronic disorder, Chinese medicine is often effective.

Kodama: For example, antihypertensive drugs can effectively lower blood pressure. But when headaches, insomnia or numbness persist even after one's blood pressure drops, Chinese medicine can be very useful in relieving those symptoms.

Ikeda: Does that mean that we can use them together?

Kato: Yes, it does. In particular, those suffering from chronic illnesses and being treated with Western drugs can often use Chinese medicine to help eliminate any adverse side effects caused by those drugs. And Chinese medicine can be used to improve general physical condition so the dosage of Western drugs can be reduced.

Kanaya: It is important to remember, however, that a preparation of Chinese medicine needs to be tailored for the unique needs of each patient, so we should consult a specialist.

Ikeda: There are many drugs, but all of them should only be used under the advice of a trusted specialist who can make the most effective use of them. Earlier I mentioned that Mr. Toda described the human body as one great pharmaceutical factory. The human body has a natural ability to heal itself. In Buddhism, this power is often described metaphorically as the function of Bodhisattva Medicine King. When we bring our lives in rhythm with the Mystic Law, the function of Bodhisattva Medicine King is strengthened and energized. And when that happens, drugs no doubt work better, too.

Kodama: I have seen many examples of that truth in other people and have experienced it in my life as well.

Ikeda: In our next installment, let's discuss the proper methods of taking medicines.

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