

## THE DAUNTING CHALLENGE OF ILLNESS

**Health means constant challenge. Constant creativity. A prolific life always moving forward, opening up fresh new vistas—that is a life of true health. An unbeatable spirit is what supplies the power to keep pressing ahead.**

I HAVE heard many moving experiences over the years about the heart-rending struggles people, young and old, have had with illness. Each time I am reminded of how we tend to take good health for granted. I am no exception. Just this past holiday season I found myself drifting into the tenacious grip of an ever-worsening cold—the insidious kind of cold that saps the strength right out of your life. It was a holiday season I was really looking forward to. My sons and daughter would all be home for the first time in years. Anticipating this time together, my wife and I had planned a short family trip. But by the time Christmas arrived, I was too sick to even leave the house. It would be the first time I stayed home during a holiday season in more than seven years.

The good news was that we were able to interact as a family again for a few days. We talked like we hadn't in years. I heard the plans my kids are making for their lives. We laughed, we ate, we did gongyo together. In fact, it occurred to me later that we were able to start the year practicing one of the three points for 1998—the strengthening of family ties. The bad news is that I gave my cold to my wife and daughter.

On New Year's Day, I was able to attend the gongyo meeting at the Ikeda Auditorium. But there was a literal chasm between where my spirit was and where my body wanted to be. As I struggled to overcome what was really a minor illness, I thought of the many times I have encouraged others never to be defeated. At the same time, I thought of those suffering from more serious, life-threatening diseases—cancer, asthma, heart disease, AIDS, drug addiction, and so on. What must their lives be like? I had a simple cold and found it difficult to do gongyo to my satisfaction. What a daunting challenge the obstacle of illness can be.

I recall SGI President Ikeda's comments on the subject, when he said: "Health is a universal desire of human beings. No matter how wealthy or powerful one is, health, after all, is the most precious thing" (May 17, 1996, *World Tribune*, p. 9).

He then gave the example of a man who had worked his way up from pennilessness in his youth to eventually become one of the wealthiest people in the world. The man fell ill and confessed that he would give all his riches to be young and healthy once more. He said he wouldn't even mind being poor again, as long as he had the health and the strength to work. I think we can all appreciate that.

BUDDHISM," President Ikeda said, "recognizes illness as one of the most basic sufferings that human beings experience—as we can see from its inclusion in the four sufferings of birth, old age, sickness and death. In seeking to free people from this suffering, both Buddhism and medicine share a common goal. What is the secret to living fully and vigorously day after day?" (Ibid.)

Title: The Daunting Challenge of Illness

Subject: Living Buddhism 02/98 v.2 n.2 p.4 LB9802p04

Author: Fred M. Zaitso

Keywords: Challenge Commentary Daunting Guidance Health Illness Publisher

President Ikeda got to the heart of the matter when he shared an anecdote about his friend the late Dr. Norman Cousins. He said:

Dr. Cousins lived a life of continual challenge and eternal youth. His research into the oneness of mind and body was not simply theoretical, either. He himself achieved miraculous recoveries from collagen illness—a life-threatening connective tissue disease—with which he was diagnosed at 50, and a major heart attack at 65, going on to live until the age of 75. In those years, he produced an enormous amount of work of great and lasting value. The question is, what so strengthened his life force? I can't help but conclude that it was his love for people and a strong sense of responsibility. Both of those are based on a great faith in humanity. Dr. Cousins summed up his beliefs in the single word, *hope*.

"Hope," he said, was his secret weapon. In our dialogue, he remarked: "Death is not the greatest tragedy that befalls us in life. What is far more tragic is for an important part of oneself to die while one is still alive. There is no more terrifying tragedy than this. What is important is to accomplish something in this life."

Health is not simply a matter of absence of illness. Health means constant challenge. Constant creativity. A prolific life always moving forward, opening up fresh new vistas—that is a life of true health. An unbeatable spirit is what supplies the power to keep pressing ahead. (Ibid.)

All I had was a cold, which is over now, and of course I'm feeling as if nothing had ever happened. I want to chant more. And do more activities. But it is so easy to give up when we are sick. Some people I know go so far as to say they don't want to continue living. As Buddhists, we must never allow our friends and family to give up hope. To live is to continue until the last moment. Nichiren Daishonin says in his letter "On Prolonging Life": "If you are unwilling to take proper care of yourself, it will be very difficult to cure your illness. One day of life is more valuable than all the treasures of the universe, so first you must muster sincere faith" (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 231).

He means for us to live life to the fullest. That is the source of joy, the joy we want to share with others. That is what I want to remember as I chant for all the dear members of the SGI-USA to overcome every illness and suffering and live a life filled with joy and hope.

Fred M. Zaitso  
SGI-USA General Director