

Pat Winter, New York Drug-free After All These Years

Health issues have been a reoccurring theme, so to speak, in my prayers for much of the past 21 years. I once thought of myself as a bona fide, card-carrying hypochondriac. But I can look back now and realize that I never understood the reality of my health situation. I worried about relatively minor problems, believing I was above the real problems I had.

For 18 of those 21 years, you see, I was addicted to prescription drugs (tranquilizers, sleeping pills and the occasional pain killer); I smoked up to three packs of cigarettes a day; I was 70 pounds overweight; and I had a bad knee and constant anxiety attacks. I never slept at night without drugging myself into a stupor. I never did anything without a cigarette, and although I tried diets and weight-loss programs, the results were always temporary. I should add that I had many bouts of depression and an almost manic-like temper.

I can't believe I survived with all of that, but I did, and by all accounts escaped serious health problems. I realize now that if I hadn't been practicing this Buddhism as strongly as I was — chanting daimoku, doing gongyo and taking an active role in Buddhist activities — I would never have made it!

Five years ago menopause started. Again, despite my addictions and bad habits, there were relatively few problems. I had the occasional hot flash, but I virtually breezed through a phase that most women dread.

Or so I thought.

The second summer into menopause I became inconsolably depressed. I chalked it up to hormones, but it was really bad. In addition to being so depressed that I cried all the time, I became increasingly paranoid. I was so anxious and nonfunctional that finally I decided to see a therapist.

That's when my daughter suggested that maybe, just maybe, all the pills I was taking were causing these problems. That was ridiculous, I thought. I laughed the idea off. After all, I had taken drugs for 30 years and had never had a problem. I had even, eight months earlier, used nicotine patches and some heartfelt daimoku to end my 35 years of smoking. I never thought I'd be able to quit, but I did. On top of that, I started going to a gym because I was afraid of gaining even more weight.

Still, I was worried, and I chanted for help, although I didn't know what that meant.

One of the things that first attracted me to this Buddhism was the concept and realization that we can change anything. SGI President Ikeda says that "faith is to fear nothing," and that includes change. Through my practice, I learned, sometimes painfully, that change is up to me and me alone. There is always support from the organization, but it is up to me to sit in front of the Gohonzon and, from the depths of my life, determine to make this change and chant for the strength to persevere.

I went to a psychologist and told him that although I was sure my daughter was wrong, she was concerned about the pills I was habitually taking. I gave him as much of a history as I could, and he consulted a psychopharmacologist — a psychiatrist who deals with drugs.

The word came back that my symptoms most certainly were drug-related, and I needed to see the psychiatrist.

Now I was in pretty deep — I was going to the psychopharmacologist, but I had no intention of quitting pills. They were my friends. They deadened me to the world. No way could I sleep without a handful of prescription sleeping pills and tranquilizers — and more

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if I needed them! I took eight to 10 pills every night.

After a long consultation with the doctor, in which I gave him my whole drug history — starting with amphetamines and diuretics for weight control when I was 11, he told me I was lucky to be alive. It was miraculous, he said, that I had gone on so long. I was a full-fledged junkie — only my drugs were prescribed by doctors and filled at a variety of drugstores (I had really learned to work the system), and I had a job and a family and lived in mainstream society.

But the truth, I was learning, was that I was a drug addict as much as anyone on the street who snorted cocaine or shot heroin.

The doctor said I could come off of these drugs — no, he said I HAD TO, my life depended on it — but it would take a long time and would not be easy. Although I didn't want to do it, something inside of me, my Buddha wisdom, said *yes* — and so we started.

The process was slow and more painful than anything I had ever experienced. I chanted so hard to get through it. I was an outpatient and going to work and doing all my activities, but my hands shook, my mind raced, my head felt like cotton, I had the hardest time focusing, my heart pounded and I was scared to death. So many times I was up all night, trying to chant, read, sleep and just become comfortable with myself.

It was hell. For nearly two years.

But I stuck to the program, cutting back pills each week, seeing the doctor once or twice a week, and chanting like my life depended on it. I guess it did. After eight weeks I had cut out all the abusive and addicting substances I had been taking for all those years. I was on, and still am on, a non-addictive drug that I will finish with this year — but the poison was finally out of my system.

In 1996, my determination was to be healthy: mentally, physically and spiritually. I wasn't completely sure what that meant, but I jumped into the year 100 percent with this determination.

Fabulous things happened. I found the right doctor, who discovered that I had been overdosing on thyroid medication for many years, leading to the anxiety attacks that made me dizzy and shaky. I have been slowly cutting down on the medication and those attacks are gone!

I lost 65 pounds by totally changing the way I eat and exercising four to five times a week. I have taken three health and fitness vacations with my daughter.

My knee is well! I found the right kind of treatment (nonsurgical and definitely without drugs!) and besides the usual stiffness in a 56-year-old knee, I have a full range of motion.

Thanks to the Gohonzon, to this practice, to my leaders who have helped and encouraged me so much throughout the years, who have taught me how to make a determination and then win, and to SGI President Ikeda, without whom none of this would have been possible, I am healthier and happier than I have ever been in my life.

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