

Buddhism and the Art of Medicine Drugs and Medicines — Part 2 [27]

Participants in this installment include SGI President Ikeda, Soka Gakkai Doctors Division Vice Chief Yoshio Kanaya and pharmacists Hitomi Kodama and Yuriko Kato. Part 1 appears in the Sept. 12 World Tribune.

Ikeda: They say that medicine is a double-edged sword: It can be beneficial or harmful, depending on how it is used.

Kanaya: Yes. Side effects are a good example. Even drugs that are very effective can cause strong side effects in some patients.

Ikeda: I guess it's a case of "One man's meat is another man's poison."

Kodama: Yes. Any drug is basically a foreign substance, as far as the body is concerned, and, in that sense, slightly noxious. If the drug isn't taken in the prescribed method or is taken in combination with some incompatible substance, it can become highly toxic to the body.

Ikeda: I've heard that a number of poisonous substances are used in certain drugs.

Kato: Yes, an extremely small dosage of poison is sometimes used for treating certain conditions. The amount has to be controlled with extreme care, because even the smallest overdose can prove fatal.

Kodama: A good example is aconite, a substance derived from the monkshood plant [in the buttercup family]. It has been used as poison and also as a pain reliever since ancient times and is still used in Chinese medicine.

Common Side Effects

Ikeda: What are some examples of common side effects?

Kodama: Stomach pain, constipation, diarrhea, drowsiness and loss of concentration.

Ikeda: Most doctors advise pregnant women to avoid even cold medicines. Is this because of possible side effects?

Kato: Yes. Side effects are a concern.

In addition, medication can harm the fetus. Special care to avoid all drugs should be taken, particularly during the first trimester of pregnancy.

Kanaya: Those who suffer from allergies or have liver or kidney problems are likely to be susceptible to side effects. Allergic reactions to drugs include hives, nausea and loss of appetite. In severe cases — though rare — the patient may lose consciousness.

Ikeda: How can side effects be avoided?

Kodama: First, let the doctor or pharmacist know if you are pregnant or suffer from allergies, as well as what other medications you are taking. After that, it is important to know about the medicine you will be taking and follow the directions concerning dosage.

Kato: Yes, it is important to be informed about your medication. Unless you fully understand what it is and how it works, you may forget to take it or stop taking it, which could result in your illness getting worse.

Kanaya: Whenever you receive a prescription, make certain to ask the doctor or pharmacist the name of the medicine, its effects, when it should be taken, what side effects to watch for and how you can prevent them.

Ikeda: Drugs have such difficult names, don't they? Those long, scientific names somehow make them sound so effective! Seriously, though, precisely because their names are not very revealing to the layperson, we must always be certain to receive a clear explanation of the drugs we take.

Kanaya: In April, a new pharmacy law took effect in Japan. One of its provisions is that pharmacists must inform patients how to properly use the drugs they receive. I think that in some cases in the past, hospital pharmacists have been too busy to give patients clear, full explanations about prescription drugs.

Ikeda: The attitude with which pharmacists address patients is important, too. Some pharmacists, I have heard, are bureaucratic or speak condescendingly to patients. When they are, the explanation, no matter how thorough it may be, isn't communicated properly to the patient. I hope all pharmacists will put themselves in the patient's shoes when they explain prescription drugs, doing so courteously and considerately.

Of course, patients mustn't receive information passively, either. They need to actively protect their health.

As we said before, drugs can be highly toxic. There's no need to be overly nervous, but if you have questions about a certain medication, voice them unhesitatingly — make sure you understand and are completely satisfied with the explanation you get before using a medication.

Kato: Yes indeed. It is crucial to communicate with your doctor and your pharmacist.

Ikeda: Those who must advise or guide other people — not only in medicine and health services, but in every field — have a duty to explain themselves fully. And people have the right to be fully convinced before following that advice. To date, there has been all too little of this in Japanese culture, and I hope we will see a major change in this in the future.

This need for proper understanding and information is just as important when using over-the-counter remedies, right?

Kato: Yes. Again, the best thing to do is ask your pharmacist for a full explanation of the medicine. In addition, read the directions and description of the medicine. Many people just throw those away, but it's always a good idea to keep them as long as you have any of the medicine.

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Ikeda: Although it may be less true now, in the past there were many suspicious medicines being peddled. There were also many unscrupulous, greedy doctors, who earned large profits selling different quack medicines. In Japan, this practice has been referred to as “ninefold medicine,” meaning to profiteer by selling medicine for many times what its ingredients are originally worth. There is an Edo-period (1600–1868) novel by an anonymous author titled *Ninefold Medicine*, by the way.

Kodama: What kind of novel?

Ikeda: It’s the story of a poor, conniving monk, who was trying to come up with a money-making scheme. He recalled that once, long before, when a fishbone had gotten stuck in his throat, he had dislodged it with a dose of flour and red dirt. So he struck upon the idea of that as “medicine,” selling it as a cure for dislodging fishbones stuck in the throat. This “wonder” remedy was a big hit. The monk soon gained fame as a “doctor” and made a fortune.

Kato: Now that’s a good example of the old saying “A priest always makes money on you — coming and going.”

Kanaya: The fact that such a story was written during the Edo period shows that even then people thought priests venal and dishonest.

Ikeda: Is there any ninefold medicine still on sale today?

Kanaya: Not among official pharmaceuticals — nor, indeed, should there be!

Between 10 and 15 years are usually required to develop a new drug. Not only is a new drug tested rigorously for its effectiveness, safety and side effects, but strict quality-control measures are enforced in its manufacture after it is approved.

When we consider all the work that goes into producing a safe, effective drug, I think drug prices are reasonable.

Kodama: But I must say that many folk remedies and so-called health foods are expensive.

Following Instructions Carefully

Ikeda: As we briefly touched on earlier, it’s important to follow the dosage instructions, isn’t it?

Kanaya: Yes. Depending upon the disease being treated, taking too much or forgetting a dose can be dangerous.

Ikeda: Why are different drugs supposed to be taken at different times, like before a meal, after a meal or between meals?

Kato: These times are based on when ingesting the drug is safest and most effective. For example, drugs that may upset the stomach are taken after a meal. If a drug’s effectiveness is reduced or absorption impaired by stomach acids, it is usually taken before meals.

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Kanaya: As a rule, after meals means within 30 minutes from eating, and before meals means 30 minutes before eating.

Kodama: Drugs that help the stomach when it's empty, or are particularly difficult to absorb, should be taken between meals.

Ikeda: Between meals means when the stomach's empty, then?

Kodama: Yes. It's best to think of between meals as about two hours from the last meal.

Ikeda: When taking a drug prescribed for after meals, is it absolutely necessary to eat first?

Kato: You don't have to eat a lot, but to protect the stomach it's best to eat a little something — a cup of thick soup, a cookie or a cracker will do.

Ikeda: Many people take their medicine with tea or juice.

Kato: Yes, but the safest way is to take it with lukewarm or cold water. The caffeine and tannin in tea and coffee can undermine the effect of many drugs.

Kodama: And juice and milk should both be avoided — especially when taking antibiotics. Milk reduces the effectiveness of antibiotics, and the acidity of orange juice and soft drinks may boost their effect.

Ikeda: What effect does alcohol have on drugs?

Kato: With any medication, alcohol is best avoided. Alcohol can strengthen or weaken the effect tremendously, depending on the drug, and may also cause adverse side effects.

Kodama: Those taking drugs for diabetes and high blood pressure must be especially careful, because alcohol can cause sudden drops in blood sugar and blood pressure.

Ikeda: What about the special needs of children and the elderly?

Kanaya: The dosages for over-the-counter drugs are often too strong for the elderly, who should get any drugs they need from a clinic, if possible. If they do use nonprescription remedies, however, it's probably a good idea to start with a half-dosage. For children, the directions on the package should be followed strictly.

Ikeda: Where should medicines be stored?

Kato: What's best is a cool, dry place, away from direct sunlight.

Kodama: The refrigerator is also good, except that children may mistake pills for candy and eat them. To prevent this, you can put the medication in a child-proof container.

Kanaya: When you have prescription drugs left over, don't keep them — throw them

away. Prescription drugs are always for a specific person with specific symptoms. Never give them to anyone else.

When you no longer need the drugs, throw any remainder away. And, of course, never accept medicine prescribed for someone else — even if you seem to have the same symptoms.

Kodama: Nonprescription drugs have an expiration date stamped on the package. Never use drugs after that date. And if the drugs are discolored or show any other change, throw them away — even if the date has not yet expired.

Ikeda: This advice to discard old prescriptions once they are no longer needed seems related to the idea that we shouldn't become overly dependent on medication. A strong will to defeat one's sickness is important. On the other hand, it's a mistake to stop taking a prescription that you need, isn't it?

Kato: It certainly is. It's dangerous to arbitrarily stop taking a prescription, to decrease the dosage, or to pick and choose from among your doctor's prescriptions. Sometimes people take several varieties of drugs at once to reduce side effects.

Ikeda: The wrong combination of drugs can also intensify side effects, can't it?

Kodama: Yes. But most lay people don't know what drugs shouldn't be taken together. So I can't stress enough how important it is to let your doctor or pharmacist know about all diseases and health problems you are being treated for and the medication you are taking. The same holds true when buying over-the-counter remedies at the drugstore.

Kato: It's a good idea to jot down the names of the medicines you are taking.

Kanaya: I especially recommend keeping a medication notebook for those with chronic illnesses, such as diabetes and high blood pressure, or for the elderly who have been on a drug regimen for a long time.

Ikeda: A medication notebook?

Kodama: Yes. Any ordinary notebook will do. Just record the drug, the disease or condition, the date you received the drug, and the name of the hospital, clinic or pharmacy where you got it. You should also jot down comments, particularly when a drug has caused a bad or allergic reaction. The record should include both prescription and nonprescription drugs.

Ikeda: So it's sort of a personal history of all the medication you've taken.

Kanaya: Yes, it is. In fact, we call it a medication history.

Ikeda: In any case, wherever you may be given medication — of any kind — acquainting the doctor with detailed information on your medication history is important.

Kato: Yes. For example, the fever-reducing drug you receive from an internist and the pain killer you receive from a dentist may have the same effect, even though they may have different names. If you take both at the same time, you are taking double what you need.

Ikeda: I also understand that while a medicine might work for one person, it might not work for another, right?

Kato: This is most common with nonprescription drugs. A large person, for example, may not be affected by the standard dose. The severity of the person's symptoms and his or her general condition can also play a role in the drug's effectiveness.

Kanaya: There's also the so-called placebo effect to consider — a placebo is a dummy medicine. For example, if you give a patient a little bit of flour and tell him or her that it is an effective drug, it may actually have a beneficial effect. This is the placebo effect.

Kodama: But if the patient doesn't understand the drug and feels anxious about its effects, he or she may claim that symptoms persist even when the drug is working.

Ikeda: It's important to know the drugs you are taking. Dr. Norman Cousins (1912–90), known as “the conscience of America,” was also known for his research on the placebo effect.

Second Soka Gakkai president Josei Toda, as I've mentioned before, used to say that the human body is a great pharmaceutical factory. And Dr. Cousins said it's the best drugstore there is. Both were referring to the power of the body to heal itself.

Dr. Cousins held that peace of mind, hope and the desire to live stimulate the body's recuperative powers to the greatest degree. They also increase medicines' effectiveness. The word *placebo* derives, I believe, from the Latin word meaning to please. In that sense, we can say that encouragement, which pleases and gladdens a sick person, is an all-purpose medicine.

Warm encouragement and support provide assurance and strength, hope and self-confidence. And peace of mind and hope stimulate a patient's life force. Dr. Cousins was emphatic that the mind and body are one. And he sought to demonstrate this scientifically. His belief accords with Buddhist teachings.

For example, though a patient may be afflicted with a disease, if his or her mind is strong it can exert a positive influence on his or her physical condition. The strength and soundness of our attitude, of our inner determination to be well, are important. They comprise the secret to the lasting health of our life force.

No one can escape the sufferings of birth, old age, sickness and death. We all fall ill. We all have times when we're not up to form.

When we become ill, the important things are strong prayer and wisdom aimed at overcoming that sickness. We should strengthen our life force by chanting dynamic, resonant daimoku, while seeking qualified medical expertise and sound treatment.

We shouldn't fall into the trap of thinking that just by praying everything will be all right. The full power of prayer is only manifested when accompanied by action. Buddhism is a teaching of reason.

Health is a daily effort — it's a combination of strong prayer and careful, practical action. I hope you will all live long, healthy lives. This is my deepest wish.

Please live your lives to the fullest. Doing so is a great challenge. Live long lives. No matter what happens, live vigorously — right to the end — so that you can look back over your life and say, “What a wonderful life I have had!” That is the true meaning of a healthy life.

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(This concludes the first series of “Buddhism and the Art of Medicine.”)