

“A Handful of Salt” Theory

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My younger son goes to a Buddhist high school. The school has a temple service every Friday, during which the high school teachers take turns giving a short speech. Last Friday, one teacher said during his speech, “I wonder why a person who ate junk food and never exercised lived to be 90, while another person who exercised every day and ate a healthy diet died at 40.” Unfortunately, my son couldn’t remember the rest of the teacher’s speech. I want to learn the conclusion when I have the chance.

Meanwhile, I found a similar story in a past issue of the Gedatsu seasonal magazine. It was about a Buddhist teaching called “A Handful of Salt.”

According to the teaching, one day, the Buddha asked his students, “Some people commit bad deeds and go to hell after death. Others do the same thing but don’t go to hell. Why is that?” None of the students were able to answer the questions.

The Buddha gave them a hint: “Imagine someone putting a handful of salt into a small cup of water. What would happen? Would the water become too salty to drink?”

“Yes, since it’s only a small cup of water, it would become too salty to drink,” one student answered.

The Buddha said, “Exactly. Now imagine someone putting a handful of salt into the Ganges River.”

“No,” answered another student. “Since it’s a huge mass of water, it wouldn’t become too salty to drink.”

One student spoke up, “I understand now, master. I think it depends on ‘the size of the space’ in our mind to hold something negative. A person who does many good things is like the Ganges River. Doing something slightly bad wouldn’t make the water salty. However, a person who rarely does good things is like a small cup of water. A handful of salt would make the water too salty to drink.”

The Buddha was satisfied with the answer.

It is important for us to do good things and enlarge the space in our mind. The Buddha did not say, “Don’t do bad things.” Instead, he said “Do many good things.”

In Western medical treatment, disease is like an enemy. The basic concept is: we need to fight the disease.

On the other hand, in Buddhist teachings, instead of fighting disease, they think about accepting and coexisting with it.

For example, imagine you have cancer. In Western medical treatment, the concept is to fight against cancer completely. The problem is, the more they kill cancer cells, the more they kill normal cells, as well, and end up having side effects, such as hair loss or fatigue. That is inevitable as long as they keep fighting against cancer.

In the Buddhist approach, they accept cancer and they teach how to coexist with cancer.

In Buddhism, there are four sufferings: suffering of birth and living, suffering of aging, suffering of

sickness and suffering of death. The definition of “suffering” is the thing beyond our control. We suffer because we try to control what we cannot control.

Buddhism and Gedatsu teachings tell us to let go of the things we cannot control. In other words, “give up” or “surrender.” “Give up” might sound negative, but *akirame*, the Japanese translation for “give up” also means “reveal the truth.”

Basically, becoming sick and aging are not controllable, so Buddhist teaching tells us to accept them and think about coexisting with disease and aging peacefully.

That is the excerpt from the magazine’s article. I thought the person who ate junk but lived to 90 might have done many good things in his life.

Our founder, Gedatsu Kongo said, “When you become sick, accept the sickness and be patient. Apologize to God because your sickness is a loss for your family and society.”

Let’s do more good things and enlarge the size of the space in our minds.