

The Common Cold and its Benefits

or:

the Internal Physician and her Associates

To suggest, as the main title of this article does that colds may have benefits seems at first glance to be the very essence of paradox. It baldly though implicitly states something that most people would find counter-intuitive to say the least and most likely complete nonsense.

The sense of the statement is so utterly foreign to the experiences of most people that the words could easily give rise to immediate ridicule if not scorn and contempt. What benefit could possibly lie in being laid off work, running a fever, unable to eat properly, incapable of the least muscular or mental effort and generally feeling like the end of the world has arrived unannounced?

That was approximately my own reaction when I encountered a similar formulation - "Colds and their Benefits" - in Japan in the late 80's. It was the title of a book by a certain Noguchi Haruchika, one of the very first I came across in which a serious attempt was made to address the essential and underlying mechanisms of health in an easily comprehensible way and using simple, practical examples.

Let us briefly get acquainted with our chief protagonist. Haruchika Noguchi (right) was born in 1911 on the outskirts of Tokyo and displayed powerful healing abilities at a very young age. The story goes that he was so gifted that already as a teenager people came from far and wide to receive healing from him. It was said that when he walked in the streets he had to keep his arms crossed, otherwise they would reach out and spontaneously connect with every passer-by to heal them.



He was encouraged to cultivate his unique abilities in peace and did so to the extent that a body of knowledge and a group of practitioners gradually accumulated around him. The body of knowledge became known as seitai (literally: correct-body) and developed to include two main practices.

The first is yuki – a simple and uncluttered laying on of hands with emphasis on clarity of posture and breath. The second is katsugen-undo. The simplest translation of katsugen-undo is spontaneous movement. The fundamental idea is to create conditions whereby the body can, through its own spontaneous choices, cause movement that will completely mobilize all body parts, including those tense and forgotten parts which are normally inaccessible and even areas which cannot be activated voluntarily.

It has subsequently been popularised by the late and great Kishi sensei within shiatsu circles.

Seitai practitioners regard katsugen as somewhat of an anti-exercise method, based on the idea that "human beings are so constituted as to be able to live in health without much struggle so long as they express, to the fullest extent, living as it is". In other words, the human body is so created that it has the potential to maintain perfect health through the spontaneous exercise of its natural function – so long as it is left in peace to do so.

The corollary to these ideas is that forcing the body to do pre-determined and repeated exercise forms, rather than releasing the body back into its full and natural range of functions, instead creates new patterns of tension.

After forty years of practise and healing with groups and individuals, Noguchi described the thinking behind katsugen-undo as follows: "Yawning, sneezing and coughing are manifestations of an activity which lies in the hindbrain and the spinal cord - the extrapyramidal motor system - the origin of the body's reflex actions."

To gain access to this primitive but essential part of the nervous system Noguchi gave the following simple guidelines: "let your head fall forward, relax your whole body, think of nothing in particular and your body will naturally begin to move about of its own accord. When the movement begins, let it continue as it is. If you do this, those parts of the body that have something wrong with them and those parts where strength is incessantly summoned up and which are consequently tense and insensitive will be revived; this kind of natural movement occurs and we call it katsugen-undo: movement that renews life at its root".

His thoughts on the common cold were no less direct and no-nonsensical but since his findings were so contrary to the tendencies he observed in modern medicine and training practices, he used the device of paradox to make his point crystal clear, thus: colds and their benefits!

His fundamental thinking was that the body and mind were perfectly designed and contained within them all of the necessary instincts, reflexes and impulses to maintain perfect health. The problem as he saw it was that people made themselves insensitive and thus lost contact with these natural tendencies. Thus spontaneous movement was his basic prescription for health and the common cold would do the rest.

How, we might ask?

He reasoned that when the body registers a certain level of tension, it takes control of the situation, puts the mind out of the picture and creates conditions in which it can resolve tension, rebalance and regulate. In relatively healthy people this takes the form of a common cold. Think about it. What happens when you get a cold? You have to stay at home. You rest. You sleep. You drink plenty of warm fluids and hopefully easy to digest soups. Basta! You do nothing.

The common cold is forcing you into an attitude of wu wei. You become in a sense a slave to the requirements of your body and are powerless to do anything about it. Involuntarily you enter a deep state of consciousness where many things are possible

beneath the surface, things which our daily routines tend to fend off and neutralize. We go on a retreat!

This is the genius of the common cold and the very special clarity of insight that Noguchi brought to the world. His idea was that if we could just refrain from interfering with medicines and antibiotics then the body would take care of business and we would come out the other side healthier, fitter, lighter and clearer than when we went in. Sounds great, doesn't it?

Consider this also: colds have very distinct phases, don't they? In my own case, it is invariably the throat that warns me and then the inexorable phases follow from there: sneezing, running nose, blocked nose, coughing and phlegm expulsion. Energy-wise the first day starts the dip downwards and by the time the coughing has started I am on the way up again and can start acting more or less as normal again.

Sometimes I get a few muscular or jointy aches and pains and this is where it gets really interesting - nearly always in the same places: upper back and sacrum. Recognise that? No? That's because the cold is my cold and not your cold. My body has its own itinerary of places to go and people to meet because I have my own special and unique health issues - yours are different and that is why your colds are different from mine. Perhaps you get fever or the order of the phases is different. Maybe you are actually flat on your back for a day or three - that never happens to me. Perhaps you get headaches, sinus problems, shoulder pain or diarrhoea. You get the picture? The cold is like your very own personal, internal physician and you cannot lie to the internal physician. She knows!

So the enormous plus side of all this is that if you allow the cold to do its work, you will get a servicing like no other. You will emerge healthier and closer to your own optimal balance. Your eyes will be clearer, your ideas will be clearer and your body will feel lighter and more energized. If on the other hand, you resist the cold and try to steam roller through it, then the body's self-healing mechanism takes a blow and if you do this enough times it will start to become de-sensitized and cease functioning optimally. Do it regularly and you are looking at far more serious interventions from the internal physician. Say, stroke, heart problems, autoimmune conditions; that kind of thing. The cold is sounding pretty good now, isn't it?

There is another interesting aspect to this whole subject and it has to do with an old saying that I've heard here and there through the years and initially failed to understand: you can't have two diseases at the same time. Utter nonsense, you might say. What about all the patients who turn up like archaeological digs with layer upon layer of pathology, strata on strata of deformed energy become matter, onion ring within onion ring, Russian doll inside Russian doll? Yes, all of that is true and the saddest part is that as these layers of trauma and hurt really start to pile up, the organism gets increasingly cut off from the spark of life at the core.

And yet there is a strange and paradoxical truth within the saying - however nonsensical it may sound at first. What I have noticed is that patients who are seriously ill and have been for a long time do not get colds. In fact I have made it a habit to ask chronically sick people when they last had a cold. Invariably the answer is something

like this: "Oh, I can't remember. It must have been years ago". Is this then a sign of health? Negative. It is a sign that the body is so switched off that it is beyond range of the simple mechanisms set in motion by a common cold.

Turn that around however, and we have cause for the most paradoxical of celebrations when a chronic condition yields to the extent that a patient actually manages to contract a cold. This happened a few years ago in my practice with a person who had not had a cold for over ten years. Although it caused her to be laid flat out on her back for nearly three weeks with a 39-degree fever, she was able to ride out the storm and was as happy as a lark afterwards. And guess what? It happened over the Christmas and New Year period when she already had almost two weeks worth of leave awaiting her... Can you see where I'm going with this?

How often do you hear someone say: "Typical! It's been a hectic term, we've worked like slaves and as soon as I finally get some time off and go on the holiday of a lifetime I get laid up and have to stay in bed for the entire first week". Or how about this one: "It's just not fair! I've been studying for those exams like my life depended on it. I was really good - day and night over the books. And then when the final paper was done: wham! Down I go and have to lie in bed for two weeks".

What is going on here? Well, it's pretty obvious, isn't it? As the body accumulates tension, a debt builds up. This debt is kept precisely, judiciously and to the third decimal point by the inner accountant, close ally of the internal physician. The internal accountant then hands the bill over to the physician when a gap finally comes up in the schedule - they are only being fair, you see. When the gap finally arrives, the physician dons his heaviest working clothes, rolls up his sleeves and wades in with his calling cry: you, my friend, are mine! Shut up, lie down and take your medicine.

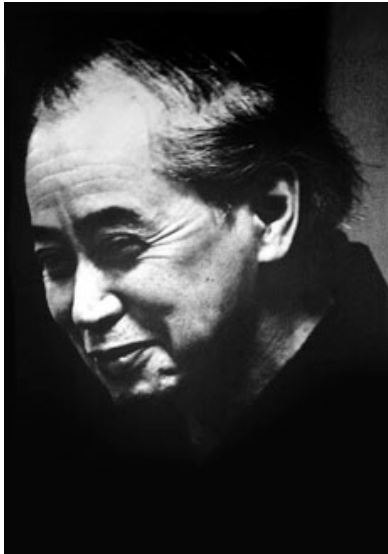
Of course, no one wants to get a cold. I always do what I can with my Chinese herbs to ward them off - they say that if you can get in there quickly enough you can do the job the cold was setting out to do and avoid the symptoms. However. That only works sometimes. Other times, the physician has decided - you're going down! That is then that. The cold is on its way through and the only thing to do is to accept it and furthermore - help it. Assist it: hot drinks, honey, lemon, ginger, soup, rest and sleep - the whole drill.

So next time you catch a cold during a break when the going has been tough for a while, send a prayer of gratitude to the internal accountant and his friend the physician. Thank them for doing their work - the work that you neglected to do consciously with mindfulness, kindness and care - all the breaks you worked through, the late nights you never compensated for, the holidays cut short or diluted by work and worry. Without guilt or shame remind yourself of all the times you submitted to stress and forgot to compensate with rest and relaxation.

Thank your lucky stars for the wisdom of the body and as reverently as possible follow the phases of your cold. Revisit your areas of weakness, trauma and neglect and contribute actively to the healing work going on there - completely free of charge and with no strings attached. All you really have to do is consciously acknowledge the

mistakes and compromises made and take the time to allow the accrued consequences to heal from within as the cold travels through your system.

Thank them, above all, for keeping you within range of the common cold because that is the body's sweet medicine. The harsh medicine you do not want to try.



It is worth noting that Noguchi himself claimed that he was in such close touch with his body's needs that his colds gradually became the work of one or two hours - at most an afternoon or evening. He even referred to the "one sneeze cold" - somewhat akin to one-breath Zen perhaps?

The point here is that once we are closely in tune with our bodies, we can open the ventilation valves at any time and fairly painlessly disperse whatever tension has been building up.

Have you ever noticed how people sometimes ask you if you have a cold when you weren't aware of suffering from one at that moment? Maybe you were having a two-hour cold. Have you ever felt tired, off colour and drowsy of an evening and then pretty much right as rain after an early night and a long, deep sleep? Remember those days when you sneeze about six or seven times within a half hour and then promptly forget all about it? Let's call it the "seven sneeze cold" then.

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