

A Needle in the Head is Worth Two in the Back: A Journey into Japanese Traditional Medicine

Jana van der Veer

“No needles,” I say to the receptionist in Japanese. “This is not an acupuncture appointment.” I’d specified this when I made the appointment as well. I was referred to the clinic, which specialized in Japanese traditional medicine, by my writing group leader, Colleen. Her husband is a doctor, or *sensei*, here.

The receptionist gives me a strange look and asks me to step behind the curtain to the left. I put my clothes into a small locker and change into a white cotton Johnny with tiny blue flowers.

I have no idea what to expect. I have come here out of desperation. Over the last four months, I’ve been in and out of doctors’ offices and hospitals, being treated with a rainbow collection of pills and powders and diagnostic tests that have found nothing conclusive. What started off as some sort of intestinal glitch brought on by tainted food or water from a trip to Indonesia has left me feeling permanently depressed, weak and exhausted – and my entire digestive system is now out of whack. I have to plan what foods I eat and in what combination to avoid nasty consequences. I always, no matter where I’m going, need to know where a bathroom can be found.

I’ve been fortunate; up to this point in my life, I’ve never had an illness that a brief run of antibiotics couldn’t fix. But now, added to the difficulty of navigating a foreign health care system in a language in which I’m only moderately fluent is the deep-seated feeling of panic at my utter inability to improve my condition.

My immune system is so depleted, in fact, that I recently came down with a case of shingles, commonly called “adult chicken pox.” The chicken pox I remember from

childhood, however, consisted of itchy spots made bearable by Mom, chicken soup, and Sesame Street. That illness bears no relation to the blistery rash that felt like broken glass embedded in my skin and a bone-deep achiness as though I'd pulled every muscle in my right side.

Colleen convinced me to come here only after much resistance on my part. "Don't they do acupuncture? I really hate needles. I mean, *really* hate. I used to kick the doctor when he came to give me my shots."

"They do acupuncture there, but they don't have to. They can do other things, too, like shiatsu and moxibustion." Seeing the expression on my face, Colleen handed me her husband's card. "Look, please, just go. You need to go. It's the only thing that will help you at this point. What do you want, more pills?"

So now I'm here, and my hands are sweating, and I'm fidgeting in my seat, unlike the Japanese patients, who sit impassively waiting their turn. *What am I doing here? This is a mistake. Maybe I should just get up and go.*

Before I can bolt, a young woman in a loose blue cotton jacket and pants calls my name from the doorway to the inner sanctum. She smiles encouragingly as I walk slowly toward her, with the same feeling in the pit of my stomach that I get at the dentist when I know that drills will be involved.

"No needles," I tell her.

She just smiles and leads me to a low table-like bed in a curtained-off area. "Lie down on your back, please. The doctor will be with you shortly."

I lie down, and only then does it occur to me that I never specified the name of the doctor I wanted to see. Colleen called me that morning, though, with cheery encouraging words about the treatment, and saying she would tell her husband I would be there today. I focus

on that, and on taking deep breaths to calm my pounding heart. *This is ridiculous. It's not a torture session, for heaven's sake. He even speaks English, so you can tell him exactly what you've been going through.*

A small, neat man with graying hair and beard steps through the curtain. Light glints off his round glasses so I can't see his eyes. His hand is loosely cupped at his side.

He approaches the bed and raises his hand. Before I can blink –

There's a needle in my head.

It's stuck just below the hairline, slipped in so quickly I didn't even feel it. But still –

There's a needle in my head!

I break out in a clammy sweat. It's all I can do not to jump off the bed and run out the door. “Er – “ I say.

“Be quiet,” the *sensei* says. “Stay still.”

“But –“

The nurse in the blue uniform comes up on the other side of the bed. “Let the *sensei* examine you. He is a very great doctor. It is rare for the head of the clinic to see a new patient himself.”

He's not even the right doctor! This isn't Colleen's husband. He's not the head of the clinic.

The *sensei's* eyes are closed as he moves his outstretched hands slowly down my body, not touching it, but hovering a few inches above it, from the top of my head, along my arms and torso, and down my legs to my feet.

“He is feeling where you are sick,” the nurse says.

“Well, I can tell you what happened...” I’ve never met a doctor who didn’t want you to tell him your symptoms.

“Be quiet,” the *sensei* says. After a few moments, he opens his eyes and looks at me critically. His hands have come to rest over my lower right abdomen. “Your main problem is here.”

“Yes, that’s right!” I am surprised. This is what I’ve been trying to tell all the doctors I’ve seen so far, but they’ve all said that it was impossible, that it was higher up, or that it was stomach trouble, or just a virus that wouldn’t go away. But that is the exact spot where the pain originated and has been bothering me for weeks.

The *sensei* moves his hand up my right side. “You have illness here.”

“Yes.” My shingles, gone now except for a few red spots, invisible under the Johnny.

He looks at me, cockling his head. “You should stop carrying your bag over your left shoulder all the time.”

“Er – okay.”

“Tell me how this happened.”

I start to tell him, but I am distracted by the fact that *there is a needle in my head*. It doesn’t hurt, but I can feel it jumping under the skin as I talk. I start to wonder how many

other needles will be jabbed into me without my consent – I mean, hadn't I been clear about the no-needles thing?

“Your Japanese isn't very good.” The *sensei* interrupts my thoughts. “How long have you been in Japan?”

“About a year.”

He frowns. “Your Japanese should be better than this by now.”

I am too shocked to protest. I've never in my life met a rude Japanese person. I realize my Japanese is far from perfect, but I know it's better than many foreigners', and usually any effort to speak the language is greeted with a smile and a *Nihongo ga jozu desu, ne!* (“Your Japanese is very good, isn't it!”). I want to snap that I don't usually have to remember proper Japanese *while a needle is sticking out of my head*, but something tells me that won't go over well.

He says something to the nurse that I can't understand, and she makes some notes on a clipboard. He turns and takes the needle out of my head, and again it's so quick that I can't even feel it. He leaves without a good-bye. All I can feel is intense relief.

“Can I go now?” I ask the nurse.

“No, wait a few minutes, please.” She swishes out and shuts the curtain behind her.

More than a few minutes pass; I start to get impatient. I'm about to get up and go anyway, when another man comes in. He is dressed in a blue cotton jacket and trousers like the nurse. His black hair is a little long and ragged, like he needs a cut. He pulls up a low stool to the end of the bed and smiles a quiet, gentle smile.

“Hello, my name is Kadoya,” He says in English. “How are you?”

I prop myself up on my elbows and glare at him. “I’ve been better.”

He nods, still smiling. “That is why you are here. We will do your treatment now.”

“No needles,” I say firmly.

“Okay.”

I flop back down, still wary but willing to try. I am tired of being sick and exhausted all the time. I’ve always been ridiculously healthy, and the past four months have been deeply unsettling. I feel like my body has suddenly become my enemy, and I am at its mercy.

“We will try some *shiatsu*. Do you know what that is?”

“Not really. A kind of massage, right?”

He smiles. “A little bit like that. Turn over, please.”

That doesn’t sound too bad. Kadoya-*sensei*’s hands are strong but gentle as they apply pressure to various points of my legs and lower back. He explains what he is doing, something about “triangular relationship theory” and how different pressure points are connected to various organs in the body, but as the tension slowly drains from my body, I find it hard to follow.

It’s not totally relaxing, though. Sometimes he presses so hard that I wince. I’m sure I’ll have bruises everywhere. “Too much?” he asks.

“Just a little.” I don’t want to be a total wimp.

It's not until I'm back on the street, a little dazed, with instructions to rest, eat healthy food, and drink lots of water, that I realize Kadoya-*sensei* isn't Colleen's husband, either. Their last name is Watanabe. That's okay, though. I liked Kadoya-*sensei*. I liked his calm manner, and the fact that he actually listened to me and didn't use needles. More importantly, I feel better than I have in months.

Thus begins my odyssey into the world of traditional Japanese medicine. I meet with Kadoya-*sensei* weekly. He does *shiatsu* and cupping (putting heated round tea-cups upside down on my back to withdraw toxins) and moxibustion (burning special herbs on my skin – not as painful as it sounds). After a few weeks, he says casually that the treatment would be much more effective with acupuncture. Will I allow him to try it? If I don't like it, he will take the needles out. He shows me the needles – they are, indeed, about as thin as a hair – and I agree to try it.

I never learn to like it, and in fact break out in a sweat each time he starts the treatment, but I learn to tolerate it. He is very gentle, twisting the needles in slowly and then removing them, so I don't have to lie for long periods with needles sticking out of me, a thought that gives me the willies. The needles go into my back, so I don't even see them. Usually, I don't feel a thing, except an occasional sharp twinge that Kadoya-*sensei* assures me indicates a breakthrough. I feel relaxed and sleepy after the sessions, and my health improves. It will take time to fully recover, Kadoya-*sensei* says.

Colleen is at first indignant when I tell her I am seeing another doctor, not her husband, but I tell her it was a mix-up, and it would make waves to ask to see a different doctor now. She has lived in Japan long enough to know this is the truth, and that making waves, or causing Kadoya-*sensei* any loss of face, would reflect badly on her husband as well as me.

I eventually do see her husband, Watanabe-*sensei*, when Kadoya-*sensei* goes on vacation, and I am profoundly glad for the twist of fate that brought me to Kadoya-*sensei* instead. I find Watanabe-*sensei's* manner jarring, from his hearty jocular to the way he quickly

jerks the needles in and out of my back. I'm sure he's a good doctor, and I know from conversations overheard at the clinic that he is popular with the patients, but by the time *Kadoya-sensei* returns I vow that next time I will take a vacation from treatments rather than see anyone else.

Kadoya-sensei and I eventually become friends, and even after my treatment is completed, I continue to see him. He teaches me many things, from where the pressure points are in various areas of the body, to meditation and yoga. I'm twenty-four years old, and this is the first time I've heard about the mind-body connection in terms of health and healing. Over the next year, I undergo a radical change in my attitudes toward my body and my illness.

I no longer feel like my body is my sneaky enemy, ready to attack me with mysterious and incurable symptoms at any moment. I begin to feel grateful to my illness, for providing the impetus to discover a whole other way of being, and for giving me the opportunity to learn so many new things.

By the time I leave Japan and *Kadoya-sensei* behind, it's hard for me to remember that there was a time when I thought antibiotics were the answer to everything, or that I was terrified of acupuncture, or that I believed my mind and body were completely separate entities at war with each other. I am astonished and humbled by the gift I have received, nothing less than the gift of reclaiming my physical and mental health, and the tools to consciously improve both over a lifetime.