



## OIDEYASU!

# MIND AND BODY IN HARMONY THROUGH KANPŌ

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*Hawai'i Herald Columnist*

When I first came to Kyōto, I experienced a variety of stresses from my new surroundings. The summer was hot and gruesome. Then, before I knew it, a chilly autumn was upon us. I felt an unexplainable fatigue that can only be described in Japanese as *yaru ki ga nai*, or simply lethargic. I had no energy and no appetite. I had periodic heartburn and my hands and feet were cold. I had a stiff neck and shoulders and a dull lower back pain. I just felt . . . out of balance.

One afternoon while walking through a shopping arcade, I saw a sign — “Sakamoto Kanpō, Herbal Medicine.” Curious, I stood outside the small shop and peered through the window at a display of various dried herbs. There were no customers in the shop, so I gathered up my courage and walked in. Immediately, I could smell the deep, earthy aroma of herbs.

I was greeted by Kikuoka Nobuko-san. After spending an hour or so describing my symptoms, she sent me home with several bags of herbs to brew and drink throughout the day. The light tea I brewed over a low fire for 45 minutes emitted an aroma of cinnamon and ginger that gave me a sense of contentment, and I found myself looking forward to my cup of tea. After about a month of drinking the brew, I felt a sense of calm and steadiness.

Kikuoka-san, who is 66, was born May 1, 1947, in Igashi City in Mie Prefecture. She came to Kyōto more than twenty years ago as a young divorcee and mother. She raised her young daughter as a single parent and has been an herbal specialist at the Sakamoto Kanpō shop for the last 23 years.

Kikuoka-san said she never imagined she would become an herbal specialist. Like most women her age in Japan, she married and had a family at a young age. Call it fate, but when she had to suddenly find a job after her divorce, Sakamoto Kanpō was willing to train her.

Kikuoka-san started at the bottom of the ladder. She cleaned, took inventory and restocked the herbs. In the process, she learned their names and functions. As an apprentice, she watched, listened and learned from the shop owner and the senior herbalists about the many different kinds of herbs and their possible combinations and uses.

The shop's owner, Hiroaki Sakamoto, is a third-generation *kanpō* herbal specialist. He joined our conversation, explaining that his grandfather was involved with *kanpō* from the Taisho Period (1912-1926). One of his first products was called Mamushi,

a heal-all ointment made from snake oil that was especially effective for rashes, cuts and fungal infections. After World War II, Sakamoto Kanpō, the business, began specializing in *senji*, or dried herbs, that are simmered, along with bottled herbal health drinks and liquid essence, capsules, tablets and powder that heal and energize the body.

According to Sakamoto-san, *kanpō* became well known in the Edo Period, when it was introduced to Japan from China through Korea as a healing method for the royalty. “Among commoners, there was a local tradition of folk medicine, for example, *yomogi* (mugwort) or *dokudani* (fishwort). This herbal knowledge was passed down ‘*obaachan guchi-gotae*.’ This orally transmitted wisdom became a part of the culture, a *fukushin*, a kind of confidant or a trusted friend.”

Sakamoto-san explained further, “In *kanpō*, one can deal with things that cannot be seen in Western medicine. In Western medicine, such things as antibiotics are used to treat the specific bacteria. But with *kanpō*, the body heals itself from *kokoro* to *karada*, mind to body, as one set, and not as something separate. Also, the key words in *kanpō* are *baransu wo toru*, maintain balance. You don't need too much plus, nor minus. It has to be in balance.”

Kikuoka-san and Sakamoto-san believe they help keep people healthy with *kanpō*. “For those people who were not feeling well, when they tell me that they have improved, it makes me feel good,” Kikuoka-san said, smiling. She continued, “The hardest thing about this work is that not all customers are the same. It requires a lot of listening. We also adjust the combination to suit the customers. Finding that right combination is a challenge, so we listen very carefully to their symptoms.”

Customers come to Sakamoto Kanpō with all sorts of ailments. “Many women come for menstrual problems or for cold hands and feet and chill in the body. Some come for dermatological problems, insomnia, fertility, menopause, back problems and so on. For men, they come because they want to be more energetic, or they suffer from diabetes or have prostate problems. There are also serious situations such as cancer. We try to help them have an easier time dealing with chemotherapy and other drugs. We try to boost their immune system and help lessen the side effects, such as nausea, fatigue and lack of appetite.”

Kikuoka-san believes the human body adjusts itself through the seasons. “In spring, the *ki* energy rises upwards and, therefore, there are symptoms that affect the upper torso such as weaknesses to hay fever and allergies. To please the liver may be good. During summer, one needs to take care of the mid-torso, for example, the stomach and the intestines. During autumn, the lung needs special attention against colds. In winter, the kidneys may need warming.”

“The medicine doesn't change with every season, but one can keep this in mind to be healthy. A good, balanced meal and eating foods that are good for these organs also keeps one healthy.”

“*Kanpō* is a very individual thing,” she said. “Everyone is different, so the medicine can never be the same. It is not ready-made, but order-made. I personally love *kanpō* because although the result is not immediate, it helps the weak become



**Nobuko Kikuoka:** “The hardest thing about this work is that not all customers are the same. It requires a lot of listening. We also adjust the combination to suit the customers. Finding that right combination is a challenge, so we listen very carefully to their symptoms.” (Photo by Jackie J. Kim)

stronger,” Kikuoka-san said.

“In the beginning, I really wondered if I could continue with this work. The hardest part was wondering if the combination that I made was right for the customer. For myself, I can know right away if it helps me or not, but it is for another person. So I ask my customers to call me and let me know how they feel.”

I knew that to be true because I received some of Kikuoka-san's comforting counsel over the phone.

“This way I can rearrange the combination and sometimes change the ingredients. Everyone is different and their symptoms must be dealt with caution. There are some customers who have continued with me for almost twenty years. There is a co-worker who has been here for over forty years. She has customers who have been with her for over thirty years. The wonderful thing about having customers for so long is that you get to know their family, their children and grandchildren. Then they also tell their friends because there is trust. I try my very best not to lose this trust. I also receive a lot of power from the customers. When customers tell me, ‘Thank you, I feel better,’ or ‘The problem that I had is gone’ — this is the best.”

I picked up my batch of herbs, including angelica root, cinnamon, peony, licorice, anise, oyster shells and a few other ingredients that strengthen and balance the *kokoro*, mind, heart and spirit and looked forward to making a fresh brew.

I have come to realize that Kikuoka-san and her colleagues are not only herbal specialists, but counselors as well. They not only patiently listen to their customers' symptoms, but to things going on in their lives. Indeed, the herbs are healing, but having an empathetic ear to share the complexities of life also seems to work wonders. ■■

Jackie J. Kim lives in Kyōto with her husband. Kim is the author of “Hidden Treasures: Lives of First-Generation Korean Women in Japan.” While living in Japan as a JET teacher and later as a graduate student, she interviewed elderly Korean women who had immigrated to Japan. Those interviews led to the publication of “Hidden Treasures.” If you're wondering about Kim's department head title, she explained that “Oideyasu!” means “Welcome!” in Kyōto-ben or dialect. You can share your comments with Kim by emailing her at [jackiejkim@hotmail.com](mailto:jackiejkim@hotmail.com).

## FEEDBACK

Contributing writer Jackie J. Kim received the following note by email from Alan Okinaka from Hilo following her piece on haiku writer Funakoshi Waka in the June 7, 2013, edition of the Herald.

Aloha Jackie,

Mahalo for a great article in *The Hawai'i Herald* on Funakoshi-san and haiku. I am not yet an accomplished haiku writer, but I enjoy writing them when the moment strikes. I just started “recording” each day with a haiku poem, just like the ancients did.

I found it interesting that the 5-7-5 syllables are held for both Japanese and English, which means translating a poem from Japanese to English will not necessarily mean the English will have the same 5-7-5 structure, and vice versa. It must be the rhythm that is important.

Visited Japan a bit over a year ago and it was a wonderful visit. Hiroshima, Higashi-Hiroshima, Iwakuni and Kumamoto made up our itinerary. I have an aunt and uncle in Iwakuni and it was good to see them again after 22 years since my last visit. We have all grown!

Alan Okinaka  
Hilo, Hawaii