

# HEALING IN RELATION TO BUDDHISM AND ITS PHILOSOPHY

By Ven. Dr. Medagana Vajiranana

*There is a distinct relationship between medicine (healing) and Buddhism and its philosophy. Both are 'of the highest expressions of man's compassion towards living creatures' and both 'make the most noble contribution to their well-being'. So says the 'Ven. Dr. Medagana Vajiranana in his speech at the opening of the 7th Congress of Acupuncture in Colombo, Sri Lanka on 19th October, 1981.*

*Compassion and The Four Noble Truths about Suffering form the very foundation of Buddhism. It was out of compassion for the suffering of his fellowmen that Prince Siddhattha left his family and home over 2500 years ago to seek a cure for the ills of the world. Compassion and suffering – 'all the ills that mortal flesh is heir to' and all the ills of the mind – are the very basis of medicine. The doctor's primary concern is to put an end to the suffering of his patients; this is also compassion.*

*A large number of bodily or physical ailments are attributed to the sick mind. The psychologist or the psychiatrist has to find out the root cause before administering mental therapy to his patient. Buddhism too employs mental therapy to effect cures or relieve pains. For example, a woman in labour can be relieved of pain by listening to the chanting of Pirit verses or discourses. The chanted discourses possess not only philosophic value but direct psychological effect as well. Again, Buddhist meditation is mental balm; it calms the emotions and eases the tensions and thus has great healing power. Meditation is, as the Ven. Vajiranana puts it, 'a universal method of healing, transcending all boundaries of race, creed and nationality'.*

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Let me express my sense of gratitude to Prof. Anton Jayasuriya, and those responsible, for the honour of inviting me to speak to this highly distinguished gathering, the World Congress of Acupuncture sponsored by the World Health Organisation, the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Indigenous Medicine and Acupuncture, Sri Lanka.

Medicine, I believe, is one of the highest expressions of man's compassion towards living creatures and makes the most noble contribution to their well-being. So, also, is the Philosophy and Religion of the Buddha, and I would like to say something on the relation between your respected profession and the teaching and civilization of Buddhism, which has healed the ailing mind and body throughout its history and will continue to do so in the future.

In a well-known sermon in which the Buddha set out what we call the Four Noble Truths, He said that His main concern was the problem of human suffering and how it could be eliminated. To convey the concept of suffering, the Buddha used the Pali term "Dukkha". His whole effort was directed towards finding a way out of dukkha. It is very difficult to find a single English word which conveys the meaning of dukkha, but it has been variously translated as suffering, pain, sickness, unsatisfactoriness, imperfection, insubstantiality and so on. Not only does it include, as Shakespeare said, "all the ills that mortal flesh is heir to", but also all the ills that afflict the mind.

If Buddhism is summed up as "cease to do evil, learn to do good and purify the mind", then it is this last instruction with which we are concerned here. The whole system of Buddhist mental training can be seen as a progressive system of mental hygiene. The first two injunctions, namely, "cease to do evil, learn to do good", are concerned mainly with our relationship to other people and are strictly moralistic in character, but in being asked to purify the mind we are told to seek out the very foundation of human life itself and examine it. Out of this arises compassion, and compassion is the Heart of Buddhism. It was out of compassion for the suffering of his fellow men that Prince Siddhattha who was to become the Buddha left home, family, riches and comfort to seek a cure for the ills of the world. "Birth is suffering, old age is suffering, disease is suffering, death is suffering", this is what the Buddha taught His disciples. This was His diagnosis; that all life is suffering, is subject to suffering. But His diagnosis was not merely a passive observation. He went further and saw that the causes of suffering were ignorance and craving. Ignorance of man's true nature and the craving for sensuality, possessions and immortality are expressed in the second Noble Truth expounded by the Buddha. His prognosis of man's condition is good, and in the Third of these Noble Truths He explains how the root causes of suffering i.e. ignorance and craving, come to be and also how they pass away. He shows how the condition can be eradicated permanently, once and for all. The course of treatment prescribed for the ills of life is known as the Noble Eight-Fold Path. Should the patient follow this course of treatment he will not only eradicate the cause of his suffering, but will, in the process, prove from his own experience the efficacy of the prescription.

The Buddha said, “Monks, there are two kinds of disease. What are they? Bodily disease and mental disease.” Although the Buddha appears here to make a distinction between mind and body and the health of each, He stresses that their interaction is a most important factor. Two thousand five hundred years ago the Buddha was teaching His disciples to discipline their minds in order to help to overcome the effects of physical illness. He was very much aware of the closeness of the relationship between mind and body in the psycho-somatic complex. In His analysis of human beings He makes clear the nature of each and the dependence each has upon the other.

To be realistic is a most desirable quality in a doctor, and in a philosopher too, realism is of the utmost importance. Only through objective examination and comprehension of the world, of man and of his sufferings can we hope to reach a point where we are collected within ourselves and so truly effective in helping others.

The application of realism to life does not mean that in Buddhism one is advised to take a pessimistic outlook. On the contrary, the well-known Buddhist Theory called Dependent Origination teaches, to put it in simple terms, that events occur because they are caused. If one wants to avoid undesirable events one must remove the relevant causes. This is the teaching of the Buddha and the meaning of His message. It is perhaps as a result of this that some Western psychiatrists and psychologists have such an interest in the psychology of Buddhism.

The Buddhist approach to medicine is entirely complementary to this psychology and the attempts of the physician to heal the body are not taken as contrary to Buddhism; in fact Buddhism welcomes it because it results in the reduction of suffering in the world, which Buddhism is primarily concerned with. When the Buddha was examining the psychological structure of man He did not examine only the manifestations of mental activity. He also saw the body as an integral part of the whole man. Once an old, decrepit man named Nakulapita came to see the Buddha and asked Him for some solace in his old age. The Buddha replied by agreeing with Nakulapita that his physical state was very poor and yes, he was getting very old and decrepit. But He tells Nakulapita to train his mind in the following way: “May my mind not be ill, though my body is ill.”

This is as far as the theory of Buddhism goes. Now let us take some examples where the Buddha exemplified His teachings in practice. There was a monk called Tissa who was suffering from severe skin disease. Naturally there was no one willing to nurse him and as a result he was thoroughly neglected. The Buddha came to know about this and at once with the assistance of a disciple

attended to the suffering Tissa and preached him a sermon, but the monk died. After this pathetic incident He convened an assembly of the monks and declared the following memorable words – “He who tends the sick respects me”.

At the popular level in Sri Lanka one part of the Buddha’s teaching has been cultivated with great enthusiasm by the Sinhala people. This is the chanting of Pirith. Angulimāla, who was a reformed murderer, became a monk. One day he came upon a woman in labour and was so moved by compassion for her that he asked the Buddha’s advice. The Buddha told him to recite some Pirith verses for the woman to hear. When he did so, the woman immediately and painlessly delivered her child. Since then this verse has always been chanted at the bed of women in labour.

Pirith, originally Paritta, means discourses for protection, and is certainly a part of the teaching of the Buddha Himself. Most chanted discourses are not only of philosophic value but have a direct psychological effect as well.

The Pirith chanting is meant to purify the mental state of the listeners specially of those who are suffering from physical ailments. This practice is based on the assumption that purifying the mind can result in the recovery of the patient. This fact has been borne out by scientific evidence. Recent research in psychology has thrown much light on the importance of mental health and stability for the happiness and well-being of the individual, and this the Buddha saw clearly.

During the last fifty years medical scientists have obtained sufficient proof that a large number of diseases are caused by disturbed mental states. So psychological improvement of the patient is now recognized as an essential part of the cure of physical disease.

Here Buddhist meditation which acts directly on the mind has a significant role to play in improving the mind. Meditation is of two kinds, Calming (samatha) and Insight (vipassanā). The Samatha meditation calms the emotions, worries, tensions and all that upsets the balance of the mind. The Insight meditation gives one the ability to see things with objectivity as they really are.

To a considerable extent Buddhist meditation can be regarded as mental therapy. And, for those who practise it, it is indeed a most valuable therapy. But I would like to say that it is very much more than this, because, as the Buddha showed by His own example, it is the means to ultimate wisdom.

I am happy to see the growing interest in meditation throughout the world, since it is a universal method of healing, transcending all boundaries of race, creed and nationality.

Following the Buddha's teaching, devout Buddhist rulers actively promoted healing activities – as a part of their Buddhist practice – by building hospitals and establishing free dispensaries. The well-known Indian Buddhist Emperor Asoka of the 3rd century B.C. carved the following edict on a rock (Girnar text II) “Everywhere in the dominions of King Priyadarsi, Beloved (i.e. Asoka himself) of Gods, and likewise in the bordering territories ... has arranged for two kinds of medical treatment viz. medical treatment for men and medical treatment for animals. And wherever there were no medical herbs beneficial to men and beneficial to animals, they were caused to be imported and planted. On roads, wells have been caused to be dug and trees have been caused to be planted for the enjoyment of animals and men”. This is the first record of the establishment of the government hospitals not only for human beings but also for animals.

Here, I might point out, in passing, that the Buddha's compassion generated a concern for the environment, and that Emperor Asoka's edict about planting trees might well be followed here in the Third World and, if I may say so, in the rest of the world as well. For what can be more important to the physical and mental well-being of mankind than a healthy, productive and pleasant environment?

This example was faithfully followed by the Kings in Sri Lanka after the introduction of Buddhism. King Gamini provided free food and medicine to the sick as prescribed by the physicians. Ven. Welivita Saranankara Sangha, Raja of Sri Lanka, is reported to have composed a book on medicine which is known as Bhesajja Manjūsa.

Before concluding my brief remarks I may mention another important matter. The rules – the Vinaya – formulated by the Buddha for monks and nuns strictly regulated their lives and left no room for deviation. Even so provision was made for the clergy to practise medicine on compassionate grounds though not as professionals. This shows how the Buddhist concept of compassion has been given pride of place, even over basic monastic discipline.

Thus the well-known Buddhist statement “Health is the highest gain” (ārogya paramā lābhā) stands established both by theory and practice. The teacher who pronounced this is held to be a peerless physician throughout the Buddhist world, and following this tradition some have called him “the Master Physician

– Bhaisajya Guru and here in Sri Lanka he is honoured as honourable physician” ...bava dukata vedānan.