

MEDICINES AND TREATMENTS IN ANCIENT INDIA AS REFLECTED IN BUDDHIST LITERATURE

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Abstract

Wellness and good health has always been desirable throughout the history of human civilization. All the ancient civilizations discovered and followed important methods of dietetic system, medication and treatments to preserve good health of their citizens. Similarly different healing approaches were adopted in ancient India where Buddhism had a significant contribution. Detailed information on various herbs, medicines and healing approaches are found in Buddhist literature, from which one can get a general idea about the medication and healing which has been a central part of Buddhism since the religion began almost 2,500 years ago. Most of the information about Buddhist medicines and healing ideas are available in *Mahāvagga* of the *Vinay Pitaka*. However this information is also available in other Pāli texts. In order to maintain the good health of the members of the Bouddha Sangha, Buddha used to prescribe remedies for various diseases, among which dietetic advice and meditation was most important thing. The present article sheds light mainly on these dietetic advices, meditation and various aspects of the application of various herbs in Buddhist medicine.

Key-words: Buddhism, Bouddha Sangha, Medicine, Vinay Pitaka, Mahāvagga, Dietetic advice, Bower Manuscript, Occult disease

Wellness and good health has always been desirable throughout the history of human civilization. All the ancient civilizations of the world used to discover and follow important methods of dietetic system, medication and healing approaches to preserve good health of their citizens. Similarly different approaches were adopted in ancient India also where Buddhism had a significant contribution.

Buddhism arose in the sixth century BCE in north-eastern India, where the indigenous culture and the Indo-Aryan Brahmanic tradition converged. Consequently, it was regarded as a rival heterodoxy. Besides, from the time of the Buddha, Buddhism attracted lay followers. As far as we can ascertain, Buddhists not only invented their system of medicine, they also followed the old system or old medical tradition. Buddha himself was guided by Jīvaka Komārabhacca, who had studied surgery and medicine at Taxilā and was in service at the court of King Bimbisāra. They practiced mainly Ayurveda. According to A. L. Basham, the science of medicine in India became known as Ayurveda.¹ Indian Buddhists accepted and practiced pathology, diagnostics, physiology and anatomy, prognosis, therapeutics, and pharmaceuticals. All were related to Ayurveda.

Buddhist physicians sought to restore the primal state of health by means of a regimen of preliminary purgatives, enemas and emetics followed by a light and wholesome restorative sãttvic diet. With the rise of Mahayãna medical study (chikitsa-vidyã) became one of the five disciplines basic to understanding Buddhism itself. This encouraged the proliferation of priest-physicians who aspired to follow the path of the compassionate bodhisattvas. Many Mahãyãna monasteries and nunneries in East Asia operated clinics and dispensed medicine for the sick later on.²

It was a common belief in the Buddhism that Buddha was the guide to make everybody free from infirmity, disease and death. Healing has been a central part of Buddhism since the religion began almost 2,500 years ago. In Buddhism, medicine is a living tradition that focuses on plants and minerals which has healing properties. It also includes physical and mental practices like yoga and meditation that have some proven health benefits. The *Mahãvagga* section of the Pãli *Vinaya Piṭakahas* mentioned instances where the Buddha acted as a physician, prescribing treatments and medicines to sick monks. Yijing, formerly romanised as I-ching or I-tsing, cited a sutta on medicine that was said by the Buddha himself.³ Most of the information about Buddhist medicines and healing ideas are available in *Mahãvagga* of the *Vinaya Pitaka*. However this information is also available in other Pãli texts. Buddha is called herbalist (Vaishajyaguru) in Buddhist literature. In order to maintain the good health of the members of the Bouddha Sangha, Buddha used to prescribe remedies for various diseases, among which dietetic advice was most important thing.

Diet basically refers to the consumption of nutritious food and drink in the right amount at the right time. Diet is capable to increase physical strength and memory. Diet can be divided into two categories—food and drink. Now let's see what kind of diet is known from *Mahãvagga*. In *Mahãvagga's Vhesaja khandaka*, food grains, seeds, fruits, roots, flowers, pulp, dairy food products, meat etc. are categorized as food and in the case of beverages fruit, flower and pulp extracts, milk, various milk drinks, mixtures and stimulant drinks etc. categorized as drinks.

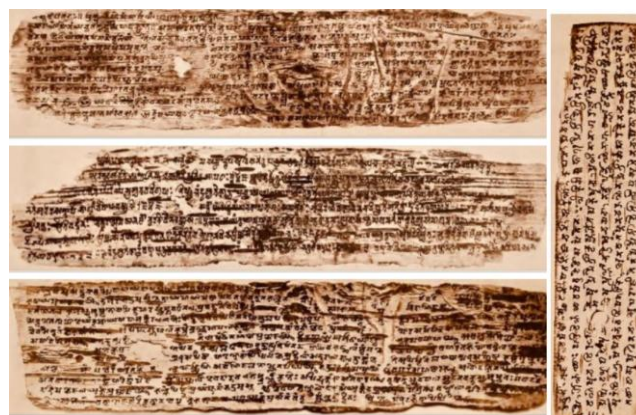
Now the question is why the above products were included in Buddhist medication or healing process? It is probably because of the disease-preventing properties of herbs like neem, tulsi, etc., Buddha always prescribed them to be used whenever necessary.⁴ Shãli and Brihi were the staple food at that time.⁵ Mung bean, lentil etc. are also mentioned in the *Mahavagga*.⁶ Ghee, nani, oil, honey and jaggery were used as medicines.⁷ But in other places these were observed to be consumed without disease. Pies were said to be the best food which bestows life, colour, happiness, strength, memory and eliminates thirst, hunger, rheumatism, bile and purifies the body and increases digestion.⁸ On the other side, it is particularly necessary to mention the prohibited list in connection with non-vegetarianism. Buddha considered the meat of animals other than elephant, horse, snake, dog, monkey, fox, wolf, bear, hyena etc. to be edible. Human flesh was completely prohibited in Buddhist medicine.

It has already been mentioned that honey, jaggery and pãesãnna were served as important confectionary foods. Pipul, haritakã, pepper, ginger, root etc. were edible for their medicinal properties. Use of

turmeric, neem, āmlaki etc. were used for adding flavour to food.⁹ Different types of salt were known in this food list such as sea salt, black salt, rock salt, red salt, common salt etc.¹⁰ Consuming Telpakam i.e. oil mixture with Majjhjhapakhitam relieves stomach ache. Cow urine was noted as a special drink in Buddhist literature. According to *Majjhim Nikāya*, cow's urine had the ability to cure diseases like anemia.¹¹

While staying in the Jetavana monastery of Anathapindaka, Buddha prescribed to the monks fell ill during summer to consume ghee to avoid summer heat. But his suggestion was not fruitful. However the stature of Jivaka and the record of healing and surgeries of rare diseases are the proof of developed Buddhist medicine. Buddha always wanted the members of his Sangha to lead healthy lives. But in human life illness is a very common occurrence. Buddha himself forbade the entry of leprosy, tuberculosis, and epileptics into the Sangha. Buddhism also used medicine to increase its popularity.

In the context of Buddhist medicine, it is necessary to mention the *Bower Manuscript*. This is the late 5th Century or early 6th Century Sanskrit text includes an ancient Indian medical treaties (33 leaves) and several other treaties (23 leaves). It was found in Kucha near silk route in China.¹² First of all, its importance lies in the fact that it is the only manuscript on Buddhist medicine that has been found in its original state and in its entirety. This manuscript focuses on various aspects of medicine. The first chapter of this manuscript discusses the general and medicinal properties of garlic, its uses and merits, different terms and different terms of garlic with meat.¹³ However, in Buddhism, the meat of various animals was also mentioned as food, which never fit with the ideal of non-violence. We see Jīvaka, the most famous Buddhist physician in the history of ancient India, cured fistula of Magadha king Bimbisar by the ointment. According to Buddha, treatment of vaginal/Occult disease was forbidden because it was a secret place. But here we see Jīvaka putting the physician's duty to cure disease and prioritized the patient's needs than religious injunctions.¹⁴ During early days of Buddhism Jīvaka cured a woman of a severe headachewith a handful of ghee mixed with medicine. He cut and opened the skin on the head of a merchant who suffered from a head disease. He cut and opened a man's stomach in order to correct a twisted bowel and he cured a neighbouring king suffering from jaundice.¹⁵



Bower Manuscript of Kucha, Source: Wikipedia

Medicine and food are inextricably linked. Treatment is never successful unless accompanied by a proper diet. Food acts as a supplement to medicine. Hence, in terms of diet, Buddhism emphasizes fruits, roots, and leaves, as well as dairy foods and non-vegetarians. Although for the most part in the later times, institutions in the Theravāda tradition depend heavily on professional physicians. In institutions of the Mahāyāna tradition, lay physicians, chiropractors and others assist priest-physicians of the esoteric tradition are generally staffed by priest-physicians. And most Buddhists have no hesitations about seeking medical advice from non-Buddhist physicians.

We all know that meditation is beneficial to our body and our mind. If it has been firmly established, our mind becomes calm. The physical benefit of meditation can boost our immune system; normalize the pulse and blood pressure. The psychological benefits come from a slowing down of the brain waves which makes us feel relaxed and can relieve muscular aches, pains and headaches. Buddhists followed everyday meditation to maintain their good health. According to Buddha meditation can treat diseases of the body and the mind. Buddhadasa Bhikku was, one of the famous Bhikkus of modern times who strove for a simple pristine practice in attempt to emulate Goutama Buddha's core teaching. He demonstrated the importance of breath control which is mindfulness of breathing; the more we can regulate our breathing the more able we become to fight disease. As he stated: "We have to realize that our breathing affects our nervous system, our thoughts, our awareness and the different mechanisms within our bodies. The liver, the kidneys, the intestines and the stomach are all related to our breathing." Today the practices of meditation are worldwide firmly accepted.

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