

BUDDHIST PERSPECTIVE ON HEALTH AND HEALING

Understanding Buddhism

Buddhism is one of the Asian spiritual traditions. It is one of the most flexible religions which is dynamic to the changing times but maintains its core values. The religion had its birth holding the hands of Siddhartha Gautama, who is known as the historical Buddha, who was born in North India in the 5th century BCE. After the death of Gautama his teachings gradually made his followers to spread his teachings around the globe thereby leading to the rise of the new religion—Buddhism.

There are three main denominations in Buddhism---¹

- **Theravada Buddhism**--(practiced in Sri Lanka, Myanmar {Burma}, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam). Theravada Buddhism is also marked by the Mahayanists as “Heenayana” (The Lesser Vehicle).
- **Mahayana Buddhism**--- is practiced in China, Korea and Japan. It means the “Greater Vehicle”. One of the major objectives of Mahayana was to disclose or find the truth or of enlightenment. It is the second turning of the Wheel of Dharma.
- **Vajrayana Buddhism**---It is the most striking among the other sects of Buddhism and is considered as the third turning of the Wheel of Dharma. It is also called “Thanthrayana” (Tantric Buddhism) or “Manthrayana” (Esoteric Buddhism) because it engross in culturing the mind of the human beings by the means of binding psycho- physical energy through rituals, visualization, physical exercises and meditation.

Therefore, Buddhism has been one of the ancient religions with rich cultural heritage. Its followers are enriched with the knowledge of the Dharma. Buddha elucidated that all the problems and suffering of human beings crop up from the confounded and negative states of mind, and that all the contentment and good fate of the human beings begin from peaceful and positive state of mind.

Defining Buddhism

Buddhism provides a religious outlook which is based on the principles of humanity. It is the ancient civilization of China and India but it has left its deep imprint on places like Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Korea, Japan and the countries of the Himalayas. Buddhism was founded around 500BCE in Northern India by Siddhartha Gautama, who later came to be known as the ‘**Buddha**’ which means ‘Awakened One’. He had spent forty-five years of his life teaching the Way or Path to overcome suffering in all its forms. The teachings of Buddha came to be known as Dharma. Before the death of Buddha he made a group of followers who came to be known as “Sangha”. These three aspects – **the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha**²– are known

¹ Source: <http://www.thebuddhism.net/tag/sects/>

² Source:

http://www.chinabuddhismencyclopedia.com/en/index.php/A_Buddhist_Perspective_on_Health_and_Spirituality

to all Buddhists as the **'Three Refuges'** or the **'Three Jewels'**. The five basic guidelines in Buddhism are as follows---³

- To refrain from killing (especially human life)
 - To refrain from taking that which is not given
 - To refrain from misuse of the senses and sexual misconduct
 - To refrain from lying or using false or harmful speech
 - To refrain from taking intoxicating drink or drugs which cloud the mind
- "I teach suffering, its origin, cessation and path. That's all I teach", Buddha.*

The Four Noble Truths contain the essence of the Buddha's teachings---⁴

1. The truth of suffering (Dukkha)
2. The truth of the origin of suffering (Samudāya)
3. The truth of the cessation of suffering (Nirodha)
4. The truth of the path to the cessation of suffering (Magga)

Origin of Buddhist Tradition

The creator of Buddhism in this world is Buddha Shakyamuni. He was born as a prince in 624 BC in Lumbini, which was in northern India (now part of Nepal). 'Shakya' is the name of the royal family into which he was born, and 'Muni' means 'Able One'. He left his palace when he was 29 years old and he went in exile to a forest where he followed a spiritual life of meditation. After six years he accomplished enlightenment under the Bodhi Tree in Bodh Gaya, India.⁵ Buddha formulated the Eightfold path to Truth which includes the ways to have a relieve from all the sufferings of life—⁶



- The right understanding
- The right thought
- The right speech
- The right conduct

³ Source: <http://www.katinkahesslink.net/tibet/panchasila.html>

⁴ Source: <http://www.daily-sun.com/post/5958/The-Four-Noble-Truths>

⁵ Source: <http://www.aboutbuddhism.org/history-of-buddhism.htm/>

⁶ Source: <http://crossrivermeditation.com/the-eightfold-path-right-effort-right-mindfulness-right-meditation-on-the-concentration-factors-public/>

- The right livelihood
- The right effort
- The right mindfulness
- Meditation

Thus, following this path, Buddhism had its origin in the human society where millions of followers now adhere to its philosophy.

Buddhist Spiritual Practices

Buddhist spirituality is associated with the end of suffering through the enlightened knowledge of reality. The holy life of the Buddhist followers ends in the kind of practices they perform and not in any belief or doctrines. It seeks for compassion and wisdom. The Buddhist followers are believed to follow the Noble Path laid down by Gautama Buddha. They mainly emphasize on morality and following the five vows of life. Buddhist practices like meditation are ways of altering the lives of human beings in order to extend the qualities of awareness, kindness, and wisdom. The following are the main types of Buddhist rituals which are believed to be practiced by their followers—

- Going for Refuge. This is probably the most significant ritual connecting people to the Dharma. This is the oldest and most common ritual throughout most Buddhist traditions.
- Offering homage or respect to the Buddha, to Buddhist teachers, teachings, or other important areas of Buddhist life.
- Making offerings or practicing *dana*.
- Confession of faults
- Precept ceremonies
- Calling on spiritual forces for support or protection
- Blessings, aspirations, and Brahmavihara “prayers.”
- Dedication of merit
- Rites of Passage such as weddings and funerals
- Initiations and ordinations⁷

Mind and body in Buddhism

All living beings are born with a mind and body in terms of Buddha. Buddhism does not believe in the existence of soul. Rather they believe that the mind manages human behavior. The body devoid of the mind is considered as a dead body. Buddha has exposed that the mind is not everlasting but it modifies each moment. One component of thought has two major elements-- the Citta or consciousness and Cetasika, the allied mental factors. This thought is explained in the Abhidhamma⁸. Most people are not conscious that the mind is more significant than the body and that the body is manipulated by the mind. The psychosomatic diseases are caused by

⁷ Source:--- <http://www.insightmeditationcenter.org/books-articles/articles/rituals-in-buddhism/>

⁸ It is the most important and special teaching of The Buddha.

an impure mind. Rupa or matter, according to Buddha, is shaped of four causes - kamma, citta, utu, and ahara. Kamma is the cetana or intentions of past thoughts. Citta are present thoughts. Utu is the climate (heat) and Ahara is the nutrient in the food one takes. Outside matter is only caused of utuja or heat. Human bodies have matter which is formed of all four causes, out of which, two are based on the mind i.e. kammaja and cittaja. This point to the meaning of controlling and developing the mind to have a hale and hearty body.⁹

Understanding Health in Buddhism

The meaning of health relates to the ways of supervising health including the ways to explore the causes of illness, the ways to be concerned for patients, or the ways to encourage health. Health is the state of wholly free from all anguish that is nibbana. Lord Buddha said in the Māgaṇḍiya Sutta that: “This is that health, this is that nibbāna” (M.I 511 in Horner, 1989: 190) or “Health is the highest gain, nibbāna the highest bliss; And of ways, the Eightfold leads to deathlessness, to security¹⁰.” (M.I 510 in ibid.: 189). Illness is the outcome of karma (law of cause and effect), therefore an unavoidable outcome of actions either in this life or in one’s previous life. Health is holistic in nature (i.e. it connects between mind and body); therefore, mental cures are important. Few Buddhists are of believe that a spiritually alert person will not become sick. If illness occurs in human body, then people are of believe that a cure can be gained by thinking positively or using medicinal herbs. Few presume that if they will expose their body to harsh natural conditions, they are less likely to fall sick because their immune system will be braced up.

Understanding Healing

‘He who tends to the sick tends to me’ – The Buddha¹¹

Healing is a trail of activities for the restitution of physical form from a troubled, diseased or damaged organism. Healing is many a time compared with the thought of in-depth, vivid and spirituality. Spiritual healing shows the path to the shield of health, highlights on meditation, specific movements of the body so that the health of the person is rescheduled to its normal state. The Buddha expected his followers to look after the sick. A caregiver should also be sympathetic, kind and should not be nauseated by saliva, phlegm, urine, stools or sores of the patient. He recommended the contemplation of the Seven Limbs of Enlightenment which are mindfulness; investigation of things (dhammas); striving; joy; serenity; meditative trance (samadhi); equanimity. Therefore, meditation on these factors was a process of overcoming inner poisons of envy, anger and illusion. Liberation is the outcome of healing according to Buddha. The Buddha said “Beings of the future may hear the names of the two Bodhisattvas” i.e. the King of Healing (Bhaisajya-rajā) and Supreme Healer (Bhaisajya-samudgate) by achieving the five prerequisites—

⁹ Source: http://www.maithri.com/links/articles/mindbody_1.htm

¹⁰ Source: <http://obo.genaud.net/dhamma-vinaya/pts/mn/mn.075.horn.pts.htm>

¹¹ Source: <http://seanrobsville.blogspot.in/2013/01/he-who-tends-to-sick-tends-to-me-buddha.html>

1. One should shower loving kindness on the others.
2. One should abstain from following unwholesome deeds in life
3. One should have peace and calmness in life
4. One should listen to the texts of Mahayana and Theravada
5. One should believe and have faith on the eternity of Buddha and one must always abide by the truth.

Buddhist Healing Practices

Gautama Buddha discovered that enlightenment could come only when there was a healthy mind in a healthy body. Spiritual development can only come when one avoids hedonism, devotion to pleasure or asceticism, mortification of the body. ¹²Healing in Buddhism involves surrendering oneself and liberating his mind so that they can work for the good of the people. Welfare of others is the key to one's own healthiness. Karma is the architect of all happiness and misery. Buddhism affirms that for long-lasting healing to take place, it is essential to heal not only the existing disease with proper medications and other methods of treatment, but also the root of the disease, which initiates from the mind. This brings in the concept of "ultimate healing". This promotes the notion of ridding all the negative thoughts away from the mind of the individuals, as a healthy mind is the secret to one's healthy body. One must not be selfish in nature, it is only then that he/she can heal faster in life. Kind words and acts are helpful in bringing in expectations and console to a vulnerable patient. Metta and Karuna are inspirational sentiments (brahamavihara). Narration of the enlightenment aspects (Bojjhanga) is functional in healing physical disorders. The ten perceptions put forward by Buddha on healing are based on the impermanence, egolessness, pollution of the body, evil consequences (of bodily survival), abolition (of sensual pleasures), aloofness, cessation, disillusionment with the entire world, and impermanence of all things and mindfulness of breathing. It is thus by these ways that Buddha has proclaimed the different spiritual healing practices to his followers.

Healing and Psychotherapy

Well-known and celebrated psychologists like William James, Carl Jung, and Eric Fromm viewed that much of the importance in Buddhist philosophy is in its constructive impact on mental health. Contemporary health practitioners have gathered facts which maintain the fact that Buddhism possesses the secret to the healing of the mind of the individuals. Mental health can be looked after properly by following the principles laid down in Buddhism. Psychotherapy is defined as a treatment of emotional, behavioral, character disorders based chiefly upon "verbal or nonverbal communication"¹³. Buddhism is a course of mind schooling. Buddhist psychotherapy is founded on the Buddhist model of the cause of mental suffering (i.e. the noble

¹² Source: <http://shindharmanet.com/healing/>

¹³ Source: <http://www.buddhistchannel.tv/index.php?id=7,11747,0,0,1,0#.Vf7SXX301ac>

fourfold truths) and the conceptions of attachment, eternalness and adhering to the fact of self as the forces of mental suffering. It deals with self-knowledge, judgment, outlook and measures to reduce the psychological suffering. The Buddhist philosophy talks about the human mind and its pathological and non-pathological sections. In Abhidhamma (which is the higher teaching of the Buddha) analyses the human mental progression. In Abhidhamma man is portrayed as a psycho-physical being consisting of both mind and matter. The Buddhist Jathaka story book deals with the DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) which is based on mental illnesses. Buddhist psychotherapy is based on the Buddhist replica of the cause of mental affliction. It has a constructive impact on mental health and it can be used to take care of a wide variety of mental illnesses of human beings.

Meditation and Healing

Meditation is a coordinated mind-body performance and deliberate effort that helps in converting the mind. In Buddhism meditation is observed as one of the processes of the Eight-Fold Path. The theory of mindfulness is based on Vipassana meditation technique. Mindfulness is explained as a practice of knowledge to put concentration on moment-by-moment understanding with an approach of inquisitiveness, openness, and acceptance. Vipassana meditation calls to mind a state of increased perceptual lucidity and decreased programmed reaction. Methha Meditation or Loving-kindness Meditation is largely used by many admirers. It increases the feelings of kindness and empathy for self and others. Anapanasati meditation or 'mindfulness of breathing' is a meditation developed by the Buddha in the Maha-Satipatthana Sutta which is the Great Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness. Mindful breathing increases oxygen intake and has stress reducing impact¹⁴. These processes in turn make the human beings to heal faster and lead a healthy lifestyle.

Prayer and Healing in Buddhism

*“Just as the soft rains fill the streams,
Pour into the rivers, and join together in the oceans,
So may the power of every moment of your goodness
Flow forth to awaken and heal all beings—
Those here now, those gone before, those yet to come.”*
----Lord Buddha¹⁵

Prayer, or chanting in Buddhism, is generally in Pali and is proposed to pay reverence to the Triple Gems--the Buddha (the Enlightened One), the Dhamma (the Teaching), the Sangha (the Order)--and to remind the individuals of the noble qualities of Buddha and his instructions. It

¹⁴ Source: <http://www.lankaweb.com/news/items/2014/01/10/buddhist-psychotherapy/>

¹⁵ Source: <http://www.beliefnet.com/Prayers/Buddhism/Illness/Traditional-Blessing-And-Healing-Chant.aspx?q=Rains>

tries to secure blessings and safeguard of oneself. One of the widely known prayers for its healing effect is *bojjhanga paritta*. Paritta implies "protection" and *bojjhanga* refers to the seven factors of enlightenment (*bodhinana*). It is chanted to ward off illness and to promote healing among individuals. It is a tradition among the Theravada community to chant prayers for the welfare of the sick. Spinning the written form of the mantra around in a Mani wheel (prayer wheel) is also believed to give the individuals healing in all aspects of one's life.¹⁶ It is believed that the truth of the Dhamma and the Buddha's boundless compassion embodied in the verses chanted have great power to promote healing.

The concept of Giving and Healing

Dana or giving is another way of healing of the individuals. It involves the giving of material gifts (*amisadana*) to individual monks or to the poor and the down-trodden; the giving of spiritual gifts (*dhammadana*) to those who are in need of it. It also involves the sharing of time, power, wisdom, and experience for the benefit as well as welfare of others. People who practice dana is seen by the practitioners to heal faster. Voluntary offerings and doing good for the people enhances one's soul and spirit and brings in positive impact in the minds of the individuals which thereby helps the individuals to heal from their ailments. Even if *dana* alone cannot restore to health the deadly disease, it can heal the mind by eroding away all the negative thoughts. As the mind can manipulate the body, physical health recovers when the mind is sound. This happens when *dana* is given in true compassion, consideration and devoid of any self-interest. Therefore, such altruistic feelings in one lead one to reach *nibbana* which is the ultimate goal of Buddhism.

Healing in Tripitaka

Tripitaka is a Pali word meaning three baskets. It contains the three baskets of teachings--- a Sūtra Piṭaka, a Vinaya Piṭaka and an Abhidharma Piṭaka. To cure any kind of diseases of both the body as well as the mind, the Buddha devoted his complete life to passing down the information of the Tripitaka. He emphasized in the holy book that one must start the treatment of any disease in the human beings by studying the minds of the individuals. If the mind can be healed of its wound then a person can have a quick recuperation in his health condition.

Conclusion

The Buddhist religion is one of the contemporary Eastern religions in comparison to the other religion of the world. Keeping both the mind and body healthy is important, for the body is the vehicle that we use to practice the Dharma. The mind and the body are two inter-dependant parts of the human body which must have proper coordination with each other. The health of the body is influenced by the health of the mind. Buddhism is measured as a medication with an extensive overview. It is Buddha who is considered as the great doctor as well the healing giver. He proclaimed that greed, anger, lust, selfishness and so on must be abandoned by all

¹⁶ Source: <http://www.dharma-haven.org/tibetan/meaning-of-om-mani-padme-hung.htm>

individuals instead they must serve the common people who are in distress. Thus, Buddhism has played a significant role in uniting spirituality and medicine in not only in the East but also in the West.

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