
Buddhism, Medicine, and Health

I. Introduction

Since the origin of the world, birth, aging, illness, and death have been unavoidable. Prince Siddhartha learned of this truth when he ventured beyond his palace and visited the poor area of town. There, amidst beggars, sick people, and frail elders, he saw the reality of life. Immediately, a desire arose in his heart to relieve the pain and suffering of these people. Thus, he renounced his life of luxury and became a monk, hoping that through meditation and cultivation he could find solutions for poor and ailing people.

From the beginning, the Buddha (formerly Prince Siddhartha) realized that just as one can suffer from physical diseases, one could also suffer from an unhealthy mindset. To cure diseases of both the body and mind, the Buddha devoted his entire life to passing down the knowledge of the *Tripitaka*. While the Buddha sought to cure both physical and mental illness, greater emphasis was placed upon the mind. He used knowledge of the Dharma to heal illnesses that arise from the three poisons: greed, anger, and ignorance. The Buddha's medicine treats diseases originating in the patients' minds, curing them of these poisons. Psychologists also treat illnesses by working with their patient's mental state, but their treatment differs from the Buddhist practice of treating the mind. According to Buddhism, the pure and wondrous Dharma is the perfect medication for an ailing mind, as well as a sick body.

Keeping both the mind and body healthy is important, for the body is the vehicle that we use to practice the Dharma. Like all things, the mind and the body are interdependent; the health of the mind influences the health of the body and the health of the

body influences the health of the mind. Using the healthy body as a tool, we can cultivate a compassionate heart and a clear mind. With a cultivated mind, we are able to examine ourselves, clearly see the nature of our problems, and work to resolve them. We will then approach the path to true health.

II. Buddhism and Medical Science

In the sutras, we can find analogies that describe the Buddha as a doctor, knowledge of the Dharma as medicine, monastics as nursing staff, and all lay-people as patients. According to this medical analogy, Buddhism is considered a medication with broad applications—a medication that can cure ailments in all aspects of life. In general, Western medicine functions within a much smaller framework, with a few exceptions. Typically, Western medicine approaches illness through diagnosis and treatment of physical symptoms. This approach tends to reduce suffering temporarily and to remove the symptoms for a period of time; however, the lack of symptoms does not mean that the root cause has been identified and removed. Therefore, the disease has not neces-

sarily been completely eliminated. Buddhism offers patients not only symptomatic relief, but also spiritual guidance to ensure long lasting, overall health.

While Western researchers have conducted numerous studies on pathology, pharmacology, immunology, and anatomy, enabling them to develop more sophisticated medical techniques, scientists still doubt that religion can help to explain the cause of a disease. However, without investigating the role of religion in disease, scientists remain quite distant from its definition, causes, and treatments, as understood from a religious perspective. According to Buddhism, it is not enough to approach medicine in a manner that simply eradicates symptoms; the spiritual aspects of disease and its mind based causes and remedies must be the primary consideration.

Only recently have science and religion started to communicate and blend in a manner that is beginning to narrow the gap between a scientific approach to disease and one rooted in religion. The U.S. government coordinated international conferences on “The Relationship Between Religion and Health” are examples of such communication. Harvard Medical

School offered a class entitled “The Essence of Medicine.” Religion is gradually influencing the biological, psychological, and social aspects of medicine in Western society. Buddhism has played a significant role in uniting spirituality and medicine in the West.

In the East, religion has had an impact on the field of health and medicine for a much longer time. Eastern medical practitioners never doubted the role of religion in disease; the two have been integrated for thousands of years. Out of thousands of documents in the Tripitaka, a significant number contain records about Buddhist medicine. When this canon of discourses and sutras was brought to China, the most salient aspects of Indian Buddhism blended with the most highly regarded aspects of Chinese medicine. With modifications and improvements contributed by numerous Buddhist masters over the years, the Chinese Buddhist medical system has evolved into the present system. The following pages elaborate further on the Buddhist understanding of illness and disease and the Buddhist approach to medicine and healing.

III. Buddha as the Great Doctor

When the Buddha was young, he learned the science of medicine.¹ He became very knowledgeable about the nature and cure of diseases. According to the sutras, a famous physician named Jivaka further advanced his medical practice and mastered additional skills by learning from the Buddha and following his instructions. Jivaka performed several remarkable surgical procedures, earning a respectable reputation in the medical field. One of his well-known operations involved the repair of an obstructed colon. Jivaka performed this surgery using a sequence of techniques similar to contemporary practices: administering anesthesia, opening the abdominal region, repairing the colon, and finally, closing the incision with stitches. Though a trained physician, Jivaka became even more competent in his mastery of medicine under the Buddha's spiritual and medical guidance.

¹ Medicine is one of the five sciences whose study is mandatory for monastics. The other four are language, arts and mathematics, logic, and the philosophy of Buddhism.

In addition to records about the Buddha and Jivaka, numerous sutras such as: *Sutra on the Buddha's Diagnoses [Fo Yi Jing]*, *Sutra on the Buddha as a Great Doctor [Yi Yu Jing]*, *Sutra on Relieving Piles [Liao Bing Zhi Jing]*, *Sutra on Healing Mental and Physical illness Resulting from Improper Meditation [Zhi Chanbing Miyao Jing]*, *Sutra on Healing Dental Diseases [Chi Jing]*, *Sutra on Dharani for Healing All Diseases [Chu Yigie Jibing Tuoluoni Jing]*, *Sutra on Dharani for Healing Seasonal Diseases [Zhou Shigi Bing Jing]*, *Sutra on Golden Light [Suvarnaprabhasottama-sūtra]*, *Five Part Vinaya [Mahisasaka Vinaya]*, *Four Part Vinaya [Dharmagupta Vinaya]*, *Ten Recitations Vinaya [Sarvastivadin Vinaya]*, and *Great Compilation on Monastic Rules [Mahasanghavinaya]*, contain many other references to the Buddha's knowledge about medicine. The Buddha truly deserves to be regarded as the grand patriarch of Buddhist medicine. He was capable of curing diseases not only of the body but also of the mind, the latter of which were his specialty. Today, when a patient seeks a physician's care for a physical ailment, the physician typically only pays attention to the painful symptoms in the body, ignoring both the

causes of the physical ailment and the suffering in the mind. By not investigating and discovering the true roots of the disease, the physician only accomplishes a fraction of real healing. They do very little to heal the patients' unhappiness, for they do not recognize and understand the true cause of the human life cycle of birth, aging, illness, and death. They do not take into account that karma and mental constructs are associated with the origins of illness.

The Buddha's realization of what induces the perpetual cycle of rebirth and the stages of aging, illness, and death enabled him to guide others to live with ultimate physical and mental health. The Buddha eliminated disease by going to the heart of the cause and drawing upon his knowledge for the proper remedy. In the *Gradual Discourses of the Buddha [Ekottarikagama Sutra]*, the Buddha explained that an imbalance in qi,² an overabundance of phlegm, and an increase or decrease in the body's temperature could be treated with clarified butter, honey, and oil based food respectively.

² According to Chinese medicine, qi is the energy or life force that circulates throughout the body; this vital power is believed to flow throughout the entire universe.

Regarding mental health, greed, anger, and ignorance are understood as the three gravest psychological diseases. The Buddha taught that greed could be cured by the contemplation of impurity, anger by the contemplation and practice of kindness, and ignorance by the contemplation of the true nature of all things and the cultivation of wisdom. These are the medications that the Buddha encouraged everyone to use in order to heal the diseases of both body and mind.

In the *Sutra on the Buddha's Diagnoses*, the Buddha explained that a doctor should progress through four steps when helping a patient. Doctors must: 1) discover the origin of the illness, 2) achieve a thorough understanding of the illness, 3) prescribe the appropriate medication to cure the illness, and 4) completely cure the illness in a manner that prevents it from reoccurring. In addition to mastering these four criteria, a good doctor should always act with a generous heart when treating patients, considering them as his or her dearest friends.

The Buddha also identified five important practices for caretakers—nurses, family members, friends, and others—to be aware of as they care for patients.

He encouraged caretakers to: 1) insure that the patients are tended to by good-hearted and skillful doctors, 2) wake up earlier and go to bed later than patients and always remain alert to the patients' needs, 3) speak to the patients in a kind and compassionate voice when they are feeling depressed or uneasy, 4) nourish the patients with the proper food in the correct amounts and intervals according to the nature of the ailment and according to the doctor's instructions, and 5) talk with skill and ease about the Dharma with patients, instructing them in proper healthcare for the body and mind.

Lastly, the Buddha offered advice to patients in order to help them heal quickly and thoroughly. He recommended that patients: 1) be cautious and selective about the food they eat, 2) consume food at the proper intervals, 3) stay in touch with their doctors and nurses and always act kindly and graciously toward them, 4) keep an optimistic or hopeful outlook, and 5) be kind and considerate of those who care for you. The Buddha believed that a cooperative effort from the doctors, caretakers, and patients yielded the best results from treatment. The Buddha was not just

an average doctor; he was an exceptional doctor who had vision and insight.

IV. Medical Theories in Buddhism

According to Chinese medicine, diseases are caused by seven internal and six external elements. The internal elements are extreme levels of happiness, anger, anxiety, a brooding mind, sadness, fear, and shock. The external elements are coldness, summer heat, dryness, heat, dampness, and wind. The seven internal elements, also referred to as emotions, are believed to cause illness because they directly impair the healthy functioning of our five main organs (i.e., the heart, liver, lungs, spleen, and kidneys). Extreme levels of either happiness or fear damage the heart, anger harms the liver, anxiety harms the lungs, a brooding mind affects the spleen, and shock hurts the kidneys. According to Chinese medicine, a healthy and balanced emotional life is essential in maintaining one's physical health.

Various Buddhist sutras describe the causes of disease in a similar manner. For example, the *Sutra on the Buddha's Diagnoses* mentions that there are ten causes and conditions of sickness. These causes

are: 1) sitting for too long a period without moving, 2) eating too much, 3) sadness, 4) fatigue, 5) excessive sexual desire, 6) anger, 7) postponing excrement, 8) postponing urination, 9) holding one's breath, and 10) suppressing gas. Approaching the causes of disease from a slightly different angle, the *Great Techniques of Stopping Delusion and Seeing Truth [Mohe Zhiguan]* points out six causes for disease. They are described as: 1) an imbalance in the four elements (earth, water, fire, and wind), 2) irregular dietary habits, 3) incorrect meditation methods, 4) disturbances by spirits, 5) demon possession, and 6) the force of bad karma. Illness that originates from most of these origins can be cured if people improve their diet, become more aware of their bodies' natural processes, and get plenty of rest. However, the last three causes are related to karma, and the cure lies in improving one's character and purifying one's mind. A person afflicted for the last three reasons needs to spend time in spiritual practice, repentance, and doing good deeds. Only then will the illness begin to go away.

The Treatise on the Perfection of Great Wisdom [Mahaprajnaparamita Sastra] states that illness is

caused either by internal or external causes and conditions. Still, the *Path of Purification* [*Visuddhimagga*] mentions additional causes of disease, but they are too numerous to list here. All of the theories on the various causes of illness can be grouped into two main categories: 1) imbalance in the four elements and 2) presence of the three poisons of greed, anger, and ignorance. The following is a detailed discussion of these two classifications.

1. Imbalance in the Four Elements

According to Buddhism, the body is composed of four impermanent elements—earth, water, fire, and wind. Only consciousness is reborn in one of the six realms of existence. This theory is the foundation of Indian Buddhist medical science. Chinese medicine believes the body to be comprised of a unique system of subsidiary channels that transmits vital energy (qi), blood, nutrients, and other substances through the five organs and six internal regions in one's body. When this intricate circulation system is flowing properly, the four elements stay in balance, the major organs can perform their essential functions, and the body remains healthy.

The *Condensed Techniques of Stopping Delusion and Seeing Truth [Xiao Zhiguan]* states that each of the four elements is able to cause 101 diseases, with a total of 404 diseases possible. Each element is connected to certain types of disease. For instance, the earth element is related to diseases that make the body become heavy, stiff, and painful, such as arthritis; the water element afflicts the body with diarrhea, stomachaches, and difficult digestion; the fire element causes fever, constipation, and problems urinating; lastly, the wind element is related to breathing difficulties and vomiting. The third volume of the *Record of Buddhist Schools in India and Southern Asia [Nanhai Jigui Neifa Zhuan]* states that, “If diseases are related to the four elements, they are usually caused by overeating or overexertion.” An imbalance in the four elements and the resulting illnesses can also occur due to a diet that is not in tune with the four seasons. When the seasons change and temperatures vary from cool to cold to warm to hot, it is important to adjust dietary intake in a manner that enables the body to function at its best.

In the *Sutra of Golden Light*, a young man asked his father, who was a doctor, “How do we cure the

suffering of human beings and cure diseases that arise from an imbalance in the four elements?” The doctor responded to his son, “We live our lives through four seasons of three months, or six seasons of two months in some parts of the world. Whether four or six, we must live according to the seasons, eating food that corresponds with hot and cold, warm and cool. In this way, our bodies will benefit. A good doctor is well learned in prescribing the right food and medicine to adjust the four elements and nourish a patient's body during a particular season. When the season and the food are in balance, so too will the body be in balance.”

Eating a reasonable amount and adjusting what we eat according to seasonal changes are two important factors in maintaining balance among the four elements and allowing qi to circulate unimpeded through our bodies. We automatically dress differently when the seasons change in order to comfort and protect ourselves during a particular temperature change or altered weather conditions. If we adopt this practice and adjust our diet in accordance with the weather and seasons, we help our bodies stay balanced and guard against disease.

2. Greed, Anger, and Ignorance

Greed, anger, and ignorance, sometimes referred to as “the three poisons,” are also reasons why people are afflicted with sickness. When one is stuck in any one of these destructive mental states, one opens the door and invites disease. The *Vimalakirti Sutra* [*Vimalakirtinirdesa Sutra*] states, “All the diseases I have right now are derived from illusory thoughts I have had in the past ... because human beings are attached to a ‘self,’ afflictions and diseases have the chance to be born in their bodies.” When one allows oneself to be ruled by the three poisons, the psychological and physical health hazards are numerous and can be quite debilitating. The following explanations provide insight into how greed, anger, and ignorance cause illness.

a. Greed

Greed is defined as an improper and excessive desire for something. For example, one is more likely to overeat when one is having a favorite meal. Such greed can then lead to an overly full stomach, and the food will not be digested well. Some may like food so much that they eat too frequently. This type of desire, which cannot be satisfied, can cause

obesity, fatigue, and heart problems. Greed is never without consequences.

People can also have excessive desires for sensory experience. In the *Interpretation of Great Techniques of Stopping Delusion and Seeing Truth [Mohe Zhiguan Fuxing]*, it is stated that excessive attachment to what we perceive through sound, smell, sight, taste, and touch can cause both psychological and physical illness. A person may cling to the experience of these five sensations, which can cause an imbalance in one's rational thoughts and disturb one's ability to make moral choices. Physical health problems can also arise. In the Buddhist health theory, those who are too attached to physical appearance will suffer from diseases of the liver. Those who are too attached to sounds will suffer from kidney diseases. Those who are too attached to aromas will suffer from lung diseases. Those who are too attached to taste will suffer from heart diseases. And those who are too attached to the sensation of touch will suffer from spleen diseases. Thus, when we encounter the multitude of sensations that are a natural part of daily life, it is

best to maintain a balanced attitude and practice the Middle Way.³

In order to maintain optimum physical and mental health, the Middle Way is also the best way to approach sleeping, eating, and exercising. When one sleeps too much, one will not have a clear mind. When one eats too much food that is high in cholesterol and sugar, one is gradually increasing the risk of poor health and could ultimately face chronic diseases, such as diabetes or heart disease. In today's fast-paced society that promotes excessive work and watching hours of television, people do not exercise enough, and eventually this has an adverse affect on their bodies. Additionally, nowadays people are constantly exposed to a noisy and stressful environment, which can cause people to become sick more easily. If one decreases greed and desire and approaches life with the attitude of the Middle Way, one can lead a healthier life.

b. Anger

The fourteenth volume of the *Treatise on Perfection of Great Wisdom* states that, “Anger is the

³ In practicing the Middle Way, one avoids both extremes of indulgence and asceticism.

most toxic emotion compared to the other two poisons; its harm far exceeds all of the other afflictions as well. Of the ninety-eight torments,⁴ anger is the hardest one to subdue; among all psychological problems, anger is the most difficult to cure.” Although anger is a psychological problem, it can also lead to severe physical consequences. For example, when aversion and anger arise in a person, the blood vessels become constricted, causing a rise in blood pressure and thus increasing the risk of a heart attack. In writing about anger, Venerable Puneng Song from the Qing Dynasty states,

*A good doctor always discovers
The cause of a sickness first.
Anger is quite harmful
To someone who is ill.
The relationship between a patient's pulse
And his illness is delicate.
With the correct prescription,*

⁴ Sometimes referred to as "temptations" or "afflictions," mental torment, such as greed, anger, sloth, jealousy, and many others, inhibit one from residing in the true, original pure mind.

We can heal ourselves.

As doctors examine their patients to determine the cause of illness and the proper medication to prescribe, one of the most essential ingredients of treatment is pacifying the patients' emotions. Anger causes poor circulation, which can have devastating effects on the entire body. It acts as a blockade, causing the body and mind to be less receptive to treatment. When agitated emotions subside and the patient is able to experience a sense of tranquility, recuperating is both easier and quicker. Anger and hatred are particularly detrimental to the healing process, and in fact, often worsen the problem.

c. Ignorance

When one is ignorant, one is unable to understand or see things as they really are. Many of us are like this when it comes to illness. We are unable or unwilling to look at the root of the illness. Instead of pinpointing the true cause and effect that will help us to eradicate it, and instead of using wisdom to guide us to the proper care, we take a detour and become distracted by ineffective remedies. We sometimes look for a "quick fix," using unsubstan-

tiated methods, unscientific therapies, or unsound doctors. Meanwhile, the illness is usually causing both physical and psychological suffering. Using wisdom to investigate the actual causes of illness will help us to set foot on the road to complete and long-lasting recovery.

While it is usually easy to detect the symptoms of a physical disease, we often remain ignorant of the symptoms of psychological diseases. They follow us like a shadow. We do not examine the constructs of our minds with wisdom and awareness, and poor psychological health follows. If we remain blind to our psychological diseases, the problems may multiply and cause more severe sicknesses within our bodies. Modern scientists agree that anger, extreme unhappiness, anxiety, terror, sadness, and other emotions can impact one's physical well being. According to recent medical research, "When a person is unhappy, angry, or under pressure, the brain will release hormones called adrenaline and nor-adrenaline, which can act as toxins." In addition, if the body is influenced by extreme emotions for a long period of time, illnesses induced by the emotional imbalance or stress are harder to cure. For example, a digestive

disorder rooted in a prolonged emotional condition is more difficult to cure than one caused by an external factor. There is scientific evidence, not just religious theory, that emotions indeed impact the healthy functioning of the body. Therefore, it is in our best interest to cultivate awareness of our emotional condition, handle our emotions well, and not become too attached to or controlled by them.

In Buddhism, there are eighty-four thousand methods that are used to cure eighty-four thousand illnesses. For instance, the Buddha taught that to eliminate greed, one could use the contemplation of impurity. Once a person meditates on impurity, he or she will experience a decrease in desire. The Buddha taught people afflicted with anger or hatred to practice universal kindness and compassion in order to reduce their hostility. When they feel themselves becoming angry, they should become mindful of the meaning of compassion. In doing so, they will understand that getting angry is not an appropriate or helpful response. Gradually, their angry words and thoughts will dissipate.

If people are ignorant, they should contemplate cause and effect and the law of impermanence to help

them nurture the mindset of non-attachment. Nothing arises outside of dependent origination and nothing that arises lasts forever; all phenomena will one day cease to exist. Since everything behaves like dust, which comes and goes, what is the purpose of being attached to it? Realizing there is no immunization for impermanence helps to reorient our minds from ignorance to wisdom and allows us to live with greater overall health.

Master Hanshan Deking from the Ming Dynasty said, “No one can be born, grow old, get sick, or die for you. This suffering, only you must bear. All bitterness and sweetness one must experience on one's own.” Accepting the inevitability of suffering and impermanence with equanimity is like taking a dose of the finest medicine. Thus, when we adjust our emotions, subdue our temper, and act generously toward others, we will find our way through life's problems with more ease and reduce the chance of illness. If we apply these principles of Buddhist medicine to nurture our minds and restore our bodies, generosity will emerge from greed; compassion will emerge from anger; wisdom will emerge from ignorance, and health will emerge from sickness. When

we treat the poisons of the mind and act with equanimity in all circumstances, there will be harmony of body and mind and diseases will be kept at bay.

V. The Medicine of Buddhism

The occurrence of a disease is closely related to one's mental health, physical health, spiritual health, behavior, habits, living environment, and even the society and culture in which one lives. Harmonizing all of these elements and engaging in specific practices can help to bring about optimum health and prevent illness. Gaining awareness about the cause of illness and conducting our lives in a manner that nourishes and maintains long-term good health can drastically improve our overall well-being. The Buddha offers us several suggestions and practices that can serve as medicine for all aspects of our lives.

Practice Healthy Dietary Habits: A Chinese proverb says, “Troubles are caused by words flowing out of the mouth; illnesses are caused by food going into the mouth.” Using caution and moderation in what we consume is an important practice for good health. Before consuming any food, we should de-

termine if the food is fresh, if it is thoroughly clean, and how much is a reasonable amount to eat.

The *Sutra on the Teachings Bequeathed by the Buddha [Fo Yijiao Jing]* states, “When we eat, we should regard our food as medicine, for consuming too much or too little is not healthy. A regular and proper dose can support our bodies, cure our hunger, relieve our thirst, and prevent us from becoming ill. Like bees gathering honey, they take what they need, but they don't consume the whole flower.”

As the *Simplified and Amended Handbook of the Four Part Vinaya [Sifenlu Shanfan Buque Xingshi Chao]* states, we should adjust the type of food we eat according to the seasons, consuming various combinations of food in order to maintain the body's equilibrium. Our bodies are susceptible to different ailments depending on the season, and a diet conscious of this fact offers a better chance of staying healthy.

The *Regulation for Chan Monastery [Chanyuan Ging'gui]* outlined five contemplations to be mindful of when we take our meals:

Consider the work that went into the food and where it came from.

Reflect on my virtues and conduct, and if they

*merit this offering.
Guard the mind against faults, greed in
particular.
Regard it as wholesome medicine for healing
the weakened body.
For the sake of attaining the Way, I shall
receive this food.*

One should maintain a balanced diet and approach food with a gracious attitude. When our bodies are given the right amount of food, our digestive organs will function properly, and our metabolism will be in prime condition, thus preventing digestive disorders and other health problems. Being mindful of and grateful for the food we consume contributes to the health of our minds and bodies.

Meditation: Our mind is constantly exploring the world around us and, as a result, illusory thoughts are always arising and ceasing. Our overactive minds rarely get a chance to rest. The constant stream of thoughts we experience can affect our ability to concentrate without interruption and can have a negative effect in our daily lives. In addition to psychological health risks, one's physiology can also

be adversely affected by an overwhelming amount of mental activity. The brain can cease to function properly due to the continual clutter of thoughts or an instance of severe mental excitation. For example, when one experiences a tremendous surprise, the face may appear discolored, the hands and feet become cold, and one's ability to concentrate normally may become impaired. However, if one takes a deep breath to slow down the heartbeat and calm the emotions, the presence of tranquility will return the body to its normal state and the chance for harming any vital organs will decrease.

Through the meditative practice of breathing slowly and concentrating on the breath, one's psychological and physiological well-being can dramatically improve. In *Medicine Chan*, written by a Japanese physician, three specific physical benefits derived from meditation are mentioned: 1) increased energy and prolongation of the prime years of life, 2) improved blood circulation, and 3) a renewed endocrine system.⁵

⁵ System of glands that secrete hormones directly into the lymph or bloodstream.

Through meditation, the body achieves a greater state of balance and breathing is regulated. Our minds become focused, clear, and organized. Desires are dissolved and improper thoughts are eliminated. When our minds are clear and focused at all times, even as we walk, sit, and sleep, we will be calm and peaceful, which eventually results in a greater degree of overall health—both mental and physical. Master Tiantai Zhizhe recognized the significant impact that meditation can have on overall health. He commented that if meditation is practiced on a regular basis and applied to daily occurrences with wisdom, all 404 illnesses could be cured.

With a mind that is free from the exhaustion and confusion of constant thinking, we can accomplish significant achievements in our lives, instead of merely thinking about doing so. Through acting, instead of just thinking, one can more authentically experience each moment and ultimately encounter the truth of life.

Paying Respect to the Buddha: The benefits of paying respect to the Buddha are numerous and come in many forms, nurturing both physical and mental health. Bowing to the Buddha increases the strength

and flexibility of the body. When one bows, one's neck, hands, arms, waist, and legs stretch, giving the whole body an opportunity to exercise. By stretching the body, stiffness decreases and blood circulation increases, thus reducing the chance of becoming ill.

Although bowing results in distinct physical benefits, the act of bowing and the resulting benefits have more to do with our state of mind than physical action. Our mental presence when bowing is of utmost importance. When we bow, we should show respect and sincerity, remaining deep in concentration as a slow bow is performed. As we pay respect in this manner, we should contemplate the Buddha, and then expand our focus to include unlimited Buddhas in all directions. When we pay respect to unlimited Buddhas, unlimited beings are benefited. All true nature is empty, including the Buddha's and ours. However, though empty, if one bows before the Buddha with a sincere and respectful heart, an amazing spiritual experience can occur. Contemplating the truth of emptiness teaches us to reorient our self-centered way of being and realize that the notion of self is merely illusory. Bowing, therefore, is performed not only to express our deepest gratitude to

the Buddha and all Buddhas; it is also an effective way to eliminate our ignorance, decrease our attachment to self, dissolve the burden of karma, and cultivate our spiritual practice. As we can see, bowing is a healthy gesture that nourishes both the body and mind.

Repentance: Confession is another practice that helps to restore and maintain our health. It is like clean water that washes away the dirt from one's heart and the dust from one's mind. A story about Tang Master Wuda offers an example of how confession can be a healing agent. Master Wuda had a man killed in a previous life. Seeking revenge in future lives, the man who was killed was reborn as a sore on Master Wuda's foot. No doctor could cure the sore because it was a manifestation of Master Wuda's bad karma. After seeking guidance from an arhat who helped him to realize his wrongdoing, Master Wuda repented with a sincere heart, cleansed his wound with pure water, and the sore disappeared. Only the heart of repentance could cure Master Wuda of his ailment. Thus, all of us should repent of our mistakes and misdeeds to the Buddha and vow not to repeat the same behavior and create more bad karma. In addi-

tion, with the heart and mind of a bodhisattva, we may compassionately repent for all beings, thereby relieving their suffering as well as our own. Psychologically, repentance is believed to release impure thoughts and worrisome guilt that act like toxins in our bodies. It alleviates our mental burdens and reduces the potential for illness.

Reciting Mantras:⁶ Mantras are powerful in curing diseases when recited with a sincere heart, deep concentration, and proper intentions. The *Great Compassion Mantra and the Medicine Buddha Mantra* are two such examples. When recited, each mantra generates a tremendous amount of merit and has amazing healing and transforming effects.

Reciting the Buddha's Name: Many people are distressed by anxiety, agitation, improper desires, and delusional thoughts. These torments not only disturb our psychological well-being and eventually take a toll on our physical health, they also hinder our ability to perceive the truth of life and attain enlightenment. When we recite the name of the Buddha, the torment

⁶ Also known as a "dharani," a mantra is a powerful spiritual practice of reciting a word, sound, or verse, used to cultivate wisdom, deepen concentration, and effect a change in consciousness.

of improper and delusional thoughts will cease and our mental anguish will evaporate. The heart calms down, the mind is awakened and purified, and no greed, anger, ignorance, or other toxins will arise, thus giving us greater protection from illness and delivering us from our ignorance. Reciting the Buddha's name also helps us to reduce our bad karma, eliminating as many misdeeds as there are grains of sand in the Ganges River. A Buddhist saying tells us, "Reciting the Buddha's name once can diminish one's bad karma, and bowing to the Buddha can increase one's good karma." Thus, reciting the Buddha's name is an effective practice for healing the distress of our minds and bodies, as well as benefiting our cultivation and awakening us to the truth of life.

Using the Dharma as Medicine: Our world is ailing from a broad range of modern diseases that, while not actually classified as standard medical illnesses, still cause overwhelming suffering and need to be treated. Some of these are environmental diseases, which include pollution, resource destruction, and loud noise; and some are societal diseases, including violence, harassment, materialism, kidnapping, and crime. There are also educational diseases,

such as the physical and emotional abuse of students and the growing lack of respect for authority, and economic diseases, such as opportunism, greed, and corruption. There are also religious diseases, which could be explained as superstitious practices, religions that encourage harmful practices, and incorrect interpretations of religious concepts. Relationship diseases refer to infidelity, polygamy, and rape, and mental diseases include jealousy, distrust, and resentment.

We may seek a doctor's help for physical illness, but the diseases listed above can only be cured by our own efforts to develop our character, cultivate wisdom, and practice the Dharma. Buddhism can be used as a medicine to cure our minds of destructive and unhealthy thoughts, which create the conditions for all of the diseases mentioned above. A pure mind creates a pure world, and the wondrous Dharma is the perfect medicine to guide us to healthy thoughts and behavior, and healthy lives.

In particular, the six paramitas⁷ can be used to cure six kinds of diseases described in Buddhism: 1)

⁷ Literally meaning "crossing over to the other shore," paramitas are the core virtues of the bodhisattva path.

generosity cures greed, 2) upholding the precepts cures violation of the precepts, 3) tolerance cures hatred, 4) diligence cures laziness, 5) meditation cures the frenzied mind, and 6) prajna-wisdom cures ignorance. The medicine of the six paramitas enables us to treat our minds and to generate peace and harmony in all aspects of our lives. When we embrace the Dharma, we can resolve daily conflicts with more ease and develop a healthy mind and a gracious character.

Master Shitou Wuji created a recipe of ingredients that can be used to turn an unhealthy mind into a healthy one. In the spirit of Master Shitou Wuji, I created my own recipe for health:

One strand of compassionate heart

One slice of morality and original nature

A pinch of cherished good fortune

Three portions of gratitude and appreciation

One package of sincere words and actions

One piece of upholding the precepts and observing the Dharma

One piece of humility

Ten portions of diligence and frugality

*Combine all cause and effect and unlimited
skillful means,
Establishing affinities.
The more the better!*

*Top it off with all your faith, vows, and
practice.
Use the pot called magnanimity,
Use the heart called open-mindedness.
Don't burn it!
Don't let it dry out!*

*Lower your hot temper by three degrees,
(Mellow out and toss in a little gentleness.)
Put into a bowl and grind into small pieces,
(Like people entering each other's hearts and
cooperating with one other.)
Think everything over three times.
Give encouragement as a pill.
Each day take this medicine three times,
Drink it down with the soup of love and
compassion.
Remember when you take the medicine,
You cannot have clarity in speaking
While at the same time a muddled being,*

*Or benefit yourself at the expense of others,
Ambushing others from behind,
And harboring malice within,
Using a smile to mask the desire to strike,
Or speaking from both sides of your mouth,
Creating disharmony just for the heck of it.
Refrain from engaging in the seven above,
Along with no jealousy or suspicion.
Use self-discipline and truth to calm the
troubled heart.
If you can do this, all ills will disappear.*

VI. The Contribution of Monastics to Medicine

In India, most monastics are well educated in the five courses of study, especially in medicine, which they are required to study. Because knowledge of medicine is mandatory for monastics, throughout Buddhist history there have been many well-known monastic physicians, medical scholars, and medical texts. For example, in the Buddhist sutras, we find countless references to and discussions about medicine. Evidence also demonstrates that Buddhism has made a significant contribution to the world of

medicine not only through the development of respectable health theories and principles but also through actual practice. While by no means an exhaustive list, the following are brief accounts of Buddhist masters who have stood out in the history of Buddhist medicine.

In China, Master Buddhasimha was dedicated as the Honorable Imperial Master of the East Jin Dynasty by Emperors Shi Le and Shi Hu. He was exceptionally skillful in reciting curative prayers and administering medicine. He tended to many patients who were paralyzed and in great pain, and were without hope of finding a cure for their ailments. Master Buddhasimha never gave up on them, faithfully devoting his heart to caring for them as they suffered, prescribing the proper medication, and finding a lasting cure for their diseases. Master Zhu Fatiao came to China from India, and stayed in Changshan Temple most of the time. He was quite famous for his ability to cure people, and patients journeyed hundreds of miles to seek his help. After skillfully diagnosing the problem and prescribing the appropriate treatment, nearly all of his patients were restored to good health.

Master Faxi lived during the Tang Dynasty. When he resided in the capital, he assumed full responsibility for all of his patients' needs and cared for them personally, including cleaning up their excrement. He never complained about this task or considered it filthy or difficult. On the contrary, he was always enthusiastic and joyful as he tended to his patients. Both the patients and fellow monastics praised his compassionate conduct. Master Faxi not only cured patients' physical diseases, he also patiently brought them the knowledge of the Dharma to comfort them when they were feeling hopeless or in pain.

Buddhists have also been credited with contributing to the cure for leprosy, a dangerous and contagious illness that often drove people away from those suffering with the disease. However, many Buddhists chose not to avoid victims of leprosy, but instead worked among them to help ease their suffering and cure their debilitating illness. Many monks put forth great effort to help leprosy patients, caring for them, encouraging them, changing their bandages, draining their infected sores, and doing their laundry. These monastics risked their lives by performing services

that most people avoided. Their tenderness touched many people.

VII. Conclusion

Numerous physical and mental diseases afflict us and cause us great suffering. While Buddhist medical theories acknowledge and treat the devastating effects of physical diseases, they regard diseases of the mind as the most destructive to health and happiness. According to Buddhism, people suffer from disease when they:

Cannot

Settle into peace of mind

Control anger

Resolve hatred

Calm a fearful heart or

Dissolve sadness and worry.

Cannot

Cease arguing

Stop competing

Practice humility and offer tolerance to others

Recognize when quietude is appropriate or

Maintain a healthy balance of qi.

Cannot

Endure life's difficulties

Lead a simple lifestyle

Practice proper etiquette

Cease their fear of death or

Reorient erroneous perceptions.

All of these diseases are caused by our rigid attachment—to an idea, belief, person, appearance, possession, emotion, status, or experience—to anything at all. If we can understand the true meaning of detachment and the true nature of emptiness and treat all illness with this awareness, we will then have the perfect miracle medicine to remove the roots of disease. Both the body and mind need to be taken care of, and the medicine of Buddhism is the ideal remedy. Use the Dharma to heal your mind, and the path of true health will open up for you.

Venerable Master Hsing Yun

Founder of the Fo Guang Shan (Buddha's Light Mountain) Buddhist Order and the Buddha's Light International Association, Venerable Master Hsing Yun has dedicated his life to teaching Humanistic Buddhism, which seeks to realize spiritual cultivation in everyday living.

Master Hsing Yun is the 48th Patriarch of the Linji Chan School. Born in Jiangsu Province, China in 1927, he was tonsured under Venerable Master Zhikai at the age of twelve and became a novice monk at Gixia Vinaya College. He was fully ordained in 1941 following years of strict monastic training. When he left Jiaoshan Buddhist College at the age of twenty, he had studied for almost ten years in a monastery.

Due to the civil war in China, Master Hsing Yun moved to Taiwan in 1949 where he undertook the revitalization of Chinese Mahayana Buddhism. He began fulfilling his vow to promote the Dharma by starting chanting groups, student and youth groups, and other civic-minded organizations with Leiyin

Temple in Ilan as his base. Since the founding of Fo Guang Shan monastery in Kaohsiung in 1967, more than two hundred temples have been established worldwide. Hsi Lai Temple, the symbolic torch of the Dharma spreading to the West, was built in 1988 near Los Angeles.

Master Hsing Yun has been guiding Buddhism on a course of modernization by integrating Buddhist values into education, cultural activities, charity, and religious practices. To achieve these ends, he travels all over the world, giving lectures and actively engaging in religious dialogue. The Fo Guang Shan organization also oversees sixteen Buddhist colleges and four universities, one of which is the University of the West in Rosemead, California.

Over the past fifty years, Master Hsing Yun has written many books teaching Humanistic Buddhism and defining its practice. Whether providing insight into Buddhist sutras, human nature, or inter-religious exchange, he stresses the need for respect, compassion, and tolerance among all beings in order to alleviate suffering in this world. His works have been translated into English, French, German, Indonesian, Japanese, Korean, Portuguese, Russian, Sinhalese, Spanish, Swedish, Thai, and Vietnamese.

Buddha's Light Publishing F.G.S. Int'l Translation Center

For as long as Venerable Master Hsing Yun has been a Buddhist monk, he has had a firm belief that books and other means of transmitting the Buddha's teachings can unite us spiritually, help us practice Buddhism at a higher altitude, and continuously challenge our views on how we define and live our lives.

In 1996, the Fo Guang Shan International Translation Center was established with this goal in mind. This marked the beginning of a series of publications translated into various languages from the Master's original writings in Chinese. Presently, several translation centers have been set up worldwide. Centers that coordinate translation or publication projects are located in Los Angeles, USA; Montreal, Canada; Sydney, Australia; Berlin, Germany; France; Sweden; Argentina; Brazil; South Africa; Japan; Korea; and Thailand.

In 2001, Buddha's Light Publishing was established to publish Buddhist books translated by Fo Guang Shan International Translation Center as well as other important Buddhist works. Buddha's Light Publishing is committed to building bridges between East and West, Buddhist communities, and cultures. All proceeds from our book sales support Buddhist propagation efforts.

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Buddhism Practice and Progress 1

Written by: Venerable Master Hsing Yun
Publisher: Buddha's Light Publishing
180 pages, 5.5 x 8.5, paperback
ISBN: 1-932293-24-8, US \$13.00

The Buddha's teachings are contained in an immense number of sutras, treatises, and commentaries, making it a daunting task to acquire an integrative understanding of Buddhist philosophy and practice. In *The Core Teachings: Buddhist Practice and Progress 1*, Venerable Master Hsing Yun outlines and explains the central concepts and practices in simple language. An accomplished scholar of Buddhism, Venerable Master Hsing Yun illuminates these complex concepts with insights from decades of practice. A clear and accurate understanding of the core of the Buddha's



teachings is essential for putting them into practice and progressing on the path of enlightenment. *The Core Teachings* is a precious jewel for beginners and advanced students of Buddhism alike.

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Written by: Venerable Master Hsing Yun
Publisher: Buddha's Light Publishing
180 pages, 5.5 x 8.5, paperback
ISBN: 1-932293-22-1, US \$15.00

This volume gives a partial record of an extraordinary series of lectures given by Venerable Master Hsing Yun in different places around the world. The topics that are covered in these teachings range from the ethical concerns in biological sciences such as euthanasia to personal challenges associated with suicide and depression. Family management in contemporary life has been addressed, especially in regard to dealing with problems of aging and hospice care. We have entered into a new era of cloning, virtual reality, internet commerce, and global life. In *A Look at Modern Social Issues*, Master calmly addresses these potentially troubling issues.



Tending Life's Garden *Between Ignorance and Enlightenment 6*

Written by: Venerable Master Hsing Yun
Publisher: Buddha's Light Publishing
210 pages, 5.5 x 8.5, paperback
ISBN: 1-932293-12-4, US \$13.00

In *Tending Life's Garden*, volume six of the *Between Ignorance and Enlightenment* series, Venerable



Master Hsing Yun meditates on the theme of tending to life with wisdom and compassion, while inspiring us to realize life's beauty and potential for growth. Tending to life's garden is ultimately about affirmation and renewal, just as trimming a rose bush is about expecting it to bloom more beautifully. Venerable Master Hsing Yun captures this spirit perfectly when he reminds us, "When

we pour our life into the stream of the universe, the whole world will jump and dance with us. Then, any season, any age can be the spring of life."