Buddhist Perspective on the Importance of Healthy Thinking Towards Healthy Living

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ABSTRACT

Health problems have been a millennium challenge faced by the present world. Many strategies have been taken by the world health organization and the United Nations Organization to overcome this burning problem which clasps the world. It is mentioned in the Buddhist text The Dhammapada, that good health is the greatest wealth that one could possess. In most of the Buddha’s teachings, it is clearly stated that health plays an important role in one’s life. The Buddha can be regarded as the greatest physician who lived on earth. The metaphor of physician and disease often occurs in Buddhist literature. The Buddha is described as the supreme physician (bhisakko), the peerless surgeon (sallakatto anuttaro). The Buddha’s method of exposition of the Four Noble Truths is comparable to that of a physician. Like a physician, the Buddha

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first diagnosed the illness (suffering), next he discovered the cause for
the arising of the illness (cause for suffering), thereafter its removal is
considered (cessation of suffering), and lastly the remedy (path leading to
the cessation of suffering) is administered.

In Buddhism, sickness is categorized as physical and mental; mental
sicknesses are regarded as serious as or more serious than physical
sicknesses. The Salleka sutta, Vattūpama Sutta, and Sabbāsava Sutta of the
Majjima Nikāya” can be cited as examples. According to these discourses,
a number of mental sicknesses that can be affected by the individual are
included such as greed, hatred, delusion, ill-will, and jealousy. Because of
these defilements, one”s mind can be polluted and as a result, one can be
afflicted by physical illnesses. The mind of the individual is pure by birth;
it is polluted with the external defilements that enter. Therefore, Buddhist
teachings focus more attention not only on the physical diseases but also
on the mental diseases. If one”s mind is pure, it influences the healthy
living of the individual.

The objective of this research paper is to discern the relationship
between physical illnesses and the mental illnesses and to discuss how
Buddhist teachings on healthy thinking could contribute to the healthy
living of the individual.

Today most of the people in the contemporary world have been affected
with any of the diseases – either physical or mental. It has been shown
that the main reason for these diseases is the wrong way of thinking. It
can be argued that many such situations can be avoided if people change
their wrong attitudes and views and adopt Buddhist principles in healthy
thinking.

**Keywords:** Healthy Thinking, Healthy Living, Mental Illnesses,
Physical Illnesses, Physician.

**BACKGROUND REMARKS**

Health problems have been a millennium challenge faced by the present
world. According to the MDG 6 report of the United Nations Organization
globally, nearly 23% of all people living with HIV are under the age of
25, and young people (aged 15 to 24) account for 41% of new infections among those aged 15 or older.\textsuperscript{1} In 2009, an estimated 2.6 million people were newly infected with HIV. This represents a drop of 21% since 1997, the year in which new infections peaked. On the other hand, in 2009, 33.3 million people were living with the virus – a 27% increase over 1999. Sub-Saharan Africa remains the most heavily affected region, accounting for 69% of HIV infections, 68% of all people living with HIV, and 72% of AIDS deaths. Globally, in 2009, about 16.6 million children were estimated to have lost one or both parents to AIDS, up from 14.6 million in 2005; 14.8 million of those children live in Sub-Saharan Africa. Globally, deaths from Malaria are down by an estimated 20% from nearly 985000 in 2000 to 781000 in 2009. These records show how people are affected by HIV and Malaria within a short period of time, but it is difficult to count the real numbers who have been affected by various diseases globally. However, many strategies have been taken by the World Health Organization and the United Nations Organization to overcome this burning problem which clasps the world.

**BUDDHISM AND HEALTH**

The Buddha, the distinguished religious teacher, whose compassion is focused on all living beings, especially on sick people, is a supreme personage ever born in this universe.\textsuperscript{2} Most of the time in Buddha’s life was devoted to helping the innocent and the sick people whose lives are in agony. It is mentioned in The *Dhammapada* that good health is the greatest wealth that one could possess.\textsuperscript{3} In most of the Buddha’s teachings, it is clearly stated that health plays an important role in one’s life. As stated in Pāli Canon, sicknesses can be categorized as Physical Sicknesses and Mental Sicknesses.\textsuperscript{4} On one occasion the Buddha had preached: “Oh! Bhikkhus, there are two types of sicknesses. They are physical and mental sicknesses. Although an individual may live for two to three years

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1. Combat HIV/AIDS, Malaria and other Diseases; MDG 6, Millennium Development Goals.
3. Ārogya Paramā Lābhā…, DP 76 p.
4. AN II, Roga Sutta,
free from physical illness; sometimes for a hundred year in good physical health by means of treatments.” But the Buddha preached that it was quite difficult to come across any person who is free from mental illness even for a short time except an Arhant. This is due to the difficulty of curing the mental sicknesses. This emphasizes that although physical sicknesses can be cured, mental sicknesses cannot be cured easily. Therefore, between these two types of diseases mental sicknesses are regarded more serious than physical sicknesses.

The Buddha is the supreme personage ever bone in this universe who could cure mental sicknesses of people. As he himself cured all his mental sicknesses, he was clever enough to free other beings from their mental agonies. The Buddha preached to Brahmin Sela on one occasion “Brahmana, I am Sammā Sambuddha, I am the most perfect one, I am the greatest surgeon”6. Hence, The Buddha can be regarded as the greatest physician who lived on earth. The metaphor of physician and disease often occurs in Buddhist literature. The Buddha is described as the supreme physician (bhisakko), the peerless surgeon (sallakatto anuttaro). He himself had preached that he could subdue the evil defilements in people”s minds7.

**INFLUENCE OF MENTAL SICKNESSES TO PHYSICAL HEALTH**

Accordingly, in Buddhism, mental sicknesses are regarded as more serious than physical sicknesses. *Salleka Sutta, Vattūpama Sutta and Sabbāsava Sutta* of *Majjhima Nikāya* can be cited as examples. In *Salleka sutta*, 44 types of mental sicknesses, which occur in the mind, are shown, and the Buddha has prescribed treatments too for such sicknesses.8 Lying, harsh speech, covetousness, corruptness in mind,

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8. MN 1, Salleka Sutta, 56 p.
wrong view, wrong thoughts, wrong speech, wrong activities, wrong way of living, wrong endeavor, wrong mindfulness, wrong concentration, wrong knowledge, wrong freedom, sloth and torpor, doubtfulness, wrathfulness, rancorousness, spitefulness, enviousness, grudging, treacherousness, deceitfulness, stubbornness, pride, indolence, shamelessness, recklessness, laziness, etc. are some of the mental defiling thoughts that originate in the mind.

The mind is always corrupt due to the activation of these thoughts. As a result, human beings suffer, and as a consequence of these mental diseases, the body also suffers much.

It is mentioned in the Vatthūpama Sutta how the mind is polluted due to the defilements and their influence to the healthy existence of the individual. As a cloth that is stained and dirty, and which a dyer might dip into this and that dye be it dark, green, yellow, red or crimson would be dyed a bad color; it would not be clear in color. The reason is the cloth is not clear. Even so, a bad bourn is to be expected when the mind is stained. In the same way, the mind is defiled due to the cankers such as greed, covetousness, malevolence, anger, malice, hypocrisy, spite, envy, stinginess, deceit, treachery, obstinacy, impetuosity, arrogance, pride, conceit and indulgence, some of the defilements.

Because of these defilements, one’s mind can be polluted and as a result, one can be afflicted by physical illnesses. It is mentioned in detail in Besajjhakkhadaka of Mahāvagga Pāli how to treat monks who suffered from various physical diseases at various times. Apart from it, various physical sicknesses are mentioned in Girimānanda Sutta too. In accordance with the Pāli Canon, the mind of the individual is pure by birth; it is polluted with the external defilements that enter.

Therefore, Buddhist teachings focus more attention not only on the physical diseases but also on the mental diseases. If one’s mind is pure, it influences the healthy living of the individual free from physical illnesses.

THE REMEDIES OF CURING MENTAL SICKNESSES

In curing mental sicknesses, the Buddha prescribed a number of medicines. He introduced treatments for physical sicknesses separately and separate treatments for mental agonies. On one occasion, He had preached, “Bhikkhus, there is no other medicine as Dhamma (Doctrine) which can be compared with any other medicine in the universe”. The Buddha further explained that doctors prescribe medicine for sicknesses that arise from bile, phlegm, and air. In the same way, I too prescribe medicine that is called “Ārya” (noble). As a result of my prescriptions, people are released from birth, decay, sickness, death, sorrow, suffering and grief. Doctors cause the patients to vomit. In the same way, I too make people to vomit, by using the Ārya way. As a result of my medicine people are released from birth, decay, sickness and death. They get rid of sorrow, suffering, sadness and grief, etc.

In the episode “Milinda” venerable “Nāgasena” replied to king “Milindu” that the Buddha had preached about various medicines which cured number of diseases. Such medicines help to cure sicknesses of gods and the ordinary people. “Satara Satipaṭṭhāna”, four factors of mindfulness, “Satara sammappadāna”, four factors of right effort, “Stara Iddhipāda, four factors of the basis of miraculous power, Pañca Indriya, five faculties, Pañca Bala”, five powers, “Satta Bojjhaṅga”, seven requisites for attaining the supreme knowledge of a Buddha, and “Ārya Astaṅgika magga”, noble eight fold path are the medicines which Buddha used to cure the sicknesses of all beings. The Buddha treated the minds of the people rather than their physical body. This can be proved by citing the example “The episode of “Kisāgotamī”.

When Kisāgotamī’s only son died, she went to many doctors for medical treatment, but it was in vain. Failing to cure her son ultimately she was fortune to go to the Buddha. She thought even Buddha would give her the same reply as the other doctors, but to her surprise, she got a different reply from the Buddha. The Buddha requested her to fetch a handful of mustard from a house where nobody is died. She made all efforts to find a house where nobody was dead. But she could not find such a place and finally Kisāgotamī realized the truth of life, which means that death comes to everybody.

The Sallekha Sutta has clearly explained how to overcome these defilements by cultivating the right thoughts. The Sutta states that, like an uneven road, although there may be another even road for going by; and, like an uneven ford, although there may be another even ford for going by; even so there is non-harming for a harmful individual to go by; there is restraint from onslaught on creatures for an individual to go by who makes onslaught on creatures; in the same way opposite thoughts should be cultivated when a defiling thought is originated.17

The Buddha advised his disciples how to get rid of the defilements in the Vatthūpama Sutta. A monk thinks that greed and covetousness is a defilement of the mind and having known it thus, he gets rid of the defilements of the mind that is greed and covetousness. In the same way, all the defilements which are polluted the mind should be eliminated.18

In the Sabbāsava Sutta19 of Majjhima Nikāya Buddha has clearly mentioned that the mind is defiled by cankers seriously; also the defilements arise due to the situation of the individual. According to the behaviors of the unwise, cankers that have not arisen arise, and also cankers that have arisen increase. But regarding the wise individual, cankers that have not arisen do not arise and also cankers that have arisen decline.

The methods of getting rid of cankers are mentioned in Sabbāsava Sutta as follows:

The cankers that should be got rid of by vision
The cankers that should be got rid of by control
The cankers that should be got rid of by use
The cankers that should be got rid of by endurance
The cankers that should be got rid of by avoidance
The cankers that should be got rid of by elimination
The cankers that should be got rid of by developed

Cankers can be eliminated by practising these seven methods. Another considerable fact that can be seen in *Sabbāsava Sutta*, the way of identifying and giving treatments to those defilements. The Buddha’s method of exposition of the Four Noble Truths is comparable to that of a physician. Like a physician, the Buddha first diagnosed the illness (suffering), next he discovered the cause for the arising of the illness (cause for suffering), thereafter its removal is considered (cessation of suffering), and lastly the remedy (path leading to the cessation of suffering) is administered. In the same way, the *Sutta* states that cankers should be identified and treated on the basis of the following steps.

This is anguish
This is the origin of anguish
This is the stopping of anguish
This is the course leading to the stopping of anguish

This is the remedial method that should be followed step by step. This is something similar to the method of four noble truths. In the method of controlling, one should control over the sense organ of the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind. When these sense organs are controlled, cankers will be destroyed. When considering the method of using, it is very important to say that using of clothes and lodgings when they are used, individual should reflect that they ward off the cold, for warding off the heat, for warding off the touch of gadfly, mosquito, wind, sun, and creeping things, only for dispelling the dangers of the seasons for the purpose of enjoying seclusion. The wise individual would reflect the fourfold need in the same manner and they are used. This method is considered the method of using. Furthermore, Buddha has clearly preached that cankers to be got

rid of by endurance by avoidance, by eliminated, by method developed.

CONCLUSION

The objective of this research paper is to discern the relationship between physical illnesses and the mental illnesses and to discuss how Buddhist teachings on healthy thinking could contribute to the healthy living of the individual. Today most of the people in the contemporary world have been affected by any of the diseases – either physical or mental. Buddhist view is that all mundane beings suffer from mental disorders (yamhi kupite sattā ummattakā honti).\textsuperscript{21} It has been shown that the main reason for these diseases is the wrong way of thinking. It can be argued that many such situations can be avoided if people change their wrong ways of thinking, attitudes and views while adopting Buddhist principles on healthy thinking.

\textsuperscript{21} Khuddakapāṭha-āṭṭhakathā, P.T.S, 61 P.