

When The Buddha Became Sick



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Essays on The Buddha

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The Buddha was long-lived by the standards of the time which is remarkable given that after he became a monk his life was a hard one - eating scraps, often sleeping in the open and spending much of the year walking the Middle Land's dusty roads and tracks including in the summer heat. Although he must have had a robust constitution he did sometimes fall ill and the Tipitaka mentions several incidents of where he was sick enough to require medical attention. Once he is said to have suffered from wind (*vatehi abadhiko*) and asked his attendant to get him hot water to drink. The attendant got the water and a bag of molasses, recommended him take a hot bath, which he did, and then gave him the hot water mixed with the molasses to drink and the Buddha's discomfort abated (S.I,174-5). More than once the Buddha had "a wind problem in the stomach" (*udaravatabhdo*), probably not the wind (*vata*) of Ayurvedic theory mentioned above but intestinal gas of the type which can cause bloating, pain and flatulence. Each time this happened he himself prepared a thin porridge of either sesame, rice or green gram mixed with what was called "the three pungent ingredients", drunk it and was cured (Vin.I,210).

This is interesting because it suggests that the Buddha had at least some basic medical knowledge. This impression is reinforced by several lists of medicines he had drawn up – leaves, roots, resins, fats and minerals – and the instructions he gave on how to prepare them, store them and how long they could be kept for without losing their potency. According to Kenneth Zysk these lists, although short, represents the earliest materia medica to survive from ancient India. Scholars have also pointed out how many of the Buddha's similes draw on medical imagery. How the Buddha acquired his medical knowledge can only be guessed at, possibly from his early education but more likely from the *samana* tradition he was a part of.

Another reoccurring complaint the Buddha suffered from was back pain which only become apparent as he aged, as it commonly does with older men even today. Once he stood outside Jetavana's gatehouse so as not to interrupt the talk being given inside. The talk was a long one and when it concluded he entered the building, sat down and mentioned that his back ached as he stood outside waiting. The monk who had been speaking apologised profusely to the Buddha who, seeing that he had inadvertently embarrassed the monk, praise him and the audience for assembling to listen to the Dhamma (A.IV,358-9). Several other texts mention that when sitting in an assembly hall the Buddha would lean against a pillar suggesting again that his back needed support. Most interesting of all such vignettes is when Ananda noticed the Buddha sitting warming his back in the late afternoon sun. He approached him and massaged his back and shoulders while the two of them talked (S.I,217).

The Tipitaka records three occasion when the Buddha was suffered from a more serious complaint. Once when suffering from an irregularity of the bodily humours (*kaya dosabhisanna*). Ananda consulted Jivaka, the royal physician who had undertaken to treat any monks who were sick gratis, who recommended that the Buddha be "oiled" (*sinehetha*) for several days. It is not certain what this would have involved; being massaged with medicinal oil, ingesting the oil, having it put in the nose or ears or administered as an enema; all treatments mentioned in early Aryurvedic texts. This course of treatment having finished Jivaka then proscribed a regimen of gentle purging for the Buddha which involved inhaling the perfume of several bunches of waterlilies which has been treated with some kind of medicine. Again, how this medicine was administered is unclear, perhaps the waterlilies were dusted with powdered herbs and inhaled with the perfume. After this and again on Jivaka's advice the Buddha took a hot bath and ate only soup until he was back to normal (Vin.I,279-80). On another occasion while staying in Rajagaha the Buddha became "ill, unwell, sick, seriously sick" (*abadhiko hoti dukkhito balhagilano*). This time, rather than take medicine he asked his attendant to recite the seven Factors of Awakening (*satta bojjhanga*) for him which the attendant did and sometime later the Buddha's recovered. The text implies that hearing these aspects of the Dhamma had a role in the Buddha's recovery (S.V,80). In the months before his death the Buddha was struck by two bouts of sickness which left him seriously weakened and probably hastened his demise.

One of the most widespread misunderstanding of the Buddha's Dhamma is the belief that everything that happens to a person is due to some past kamma, usually in a past life. In the Anguttara Nikaya the Buddha called this one of the three wrong and pernicious views (*miccha ditthi*), the other two being that a

supreme god causes everything, and that everything is without a cause (A.I,173). It is easy to see why the Buddha would consider such an idea to be not just false but also harmful. If everything that happens now is due to some kamma done in the past, then logically we would have no freedom to do or to avoid doing anything in the present. If I was good then it would not be due to any decision, choice or effort I make now but to something I did previously. And the same would be true for bad actions. If past kamma was really the cause of everything then Right Effort (*samma vayama*) would not be included in the Noble Eightfold Path, indeed practicing any of the steps on the Path would be pointless. Despite the moral and logical problems with the idea that kamma causes everything, and the Buddha rejection of the idea, millions of Buddhists continue to believe it. Interestingly, even the commentaries seem to endorse the idea. When they comment on the incidents of the Buddha becoming sick they usually attribute it to some bad deed he committed when he was a bodhisattva, just as many people today say when they have a serious accident or get a life-threatening illness that it is due to their past kamma.