

The Search for the
Buddha's Toothbrush



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The Search for the Buddha's Toothbrush



We usually think of the Buddha's Dhamma as being "deep, difficult to see, accessible to the wise, and "going against the stream" – and with good reason. The Buddha himself described his Dhamma like this. Further, when we examine it, we see that it deals with some of the most fundamental questions of life and destiny in terms as subtle and as comprehensive as any modern philosopher or psychologist. But while this is true, it is equally true that the Buddha addressed far less lofty but still important issues, issues that are relevant to ordinary human beings, whether they be awakened or not, whether they be professors, postmen or peasants. An example of this less lofty but still important aspect of the Dhamma is what the Buddha had to say about dental hygiene. "Dental hygiene!" some might ask. "What has practicing the Dhamma got to do with dental hygiene?" Well, quite a lot when you think about it. Can you imagine trying to focus on a dhamma desana while you were suffering from a throbbing toothache? Would you be able to take in everything an arahat was trying to impart to you if the only thing you could think about was his bad breath?

The Buddha said that anyone can practice the Dhamma at any time and in any place. But he also said that there are five conditions that optimize the ability to absorb the Dhamma, practice it and increase one's chances of successfully attaining its goal. These conditions are – when one

is young, when one has good health, when one has sufficient food, when the country is at peace, and finally, when the Sangha is united. A sick person is capable of practicing the Dhamma. As the Buddha said: "You should practice the Dhamma thinking, 'Though my body be sick my mind shall not be sick'." While keeping this in mind there can be no doubt that doing anything, achieving anything, is easier when you are free from illness and the worry and discomfort that often accompanies it. The main reason the Buddha recommended to his monks and nuns not to eat after noon was for its health benefits. He said: "I do not eat in the evening and thus I am free from illness and affliction and enjoy health, strength and ease." Clearly the Buddha appreciated the benefits of good health.

In a little-noticed sutta in the Anguttara Nikaya the Buddha advises us to clean our teeth regularly and itemizes the benefits of doing so. The sutta says: "There are these five benefits of using a tooth stick. What five? It is good for the eyes, the breath does not smell, the taste buds are cleaned, bile and phlegm do not get in the food, and food tastes better. These are the five benefits of using a tooth stick" (A.III,250). Ancient Egyptian and Babylonian sources mention teeth cleaning, but this is the earliest known comments on the value of dental hygiene.

It is worth examining what the Buddha has to say here. Is there a connection between the eyes and the mouth? Indeed, there is. An infection in the mouth can spread through the maxillary sinus causing sinusitis, a disease which can cause headaches as well as pain and pressure behind the eyes.

The second advantage of good dental hygiene is that the taste buds, the lingual papillae or rasaharaniya in Pali, are cleaned. The Kusa Jataka says that there are 7000 taste buds, which is quite close to the modern count of between 2000 and 8000 on the average human tongue. Cleaning the teeth removes the white film that often forms on the tongue and can cause halitosis, i.e. bad breath. And of course, a fresh, clean mouth allows the taste of the food to be fully experienced and appreciated.

The *Susrutasamhita*, the classic work on Ayurveda, parts of which may date from only a few centuries after the Buddha, mentions something called *danta sodhana curna* which must have been some kind of toothpaste. Perhaps this was used during the Buddha's time, although he did not mention it. The *Susrutasamhita* also refers to tongue-cleaning (*jihvanirlekhana*), the practice of running a thin strip of metal up and down over the tongue to scrap off the white film that sometimes forms on it. The Buddha does not mention this either.

The only implement the Buddha does mention in relation to dental hygiene is the tooth brush, literally 'tooth stick' (*dantakattha*). This must have been a twig of some tree used either as a tooth pick or to clean the teeth in some way. But what



Roadside vendor selling tooth sticks

tree provided such twigs or sticks? Several Jatakas describe people chewing a *naga lata* twig after meals. This very likely refers to the betel vine (*Piper betle*), a plant closely related to the pepper vine and with an astringent and mildly stimulating juice. Such twigs may have been used as a mouth freshener but they would have limited use as a brush, being too soft and flimsy. The *Susrutasamhita* says a tooth stick can be made out of any of four trees; *nimba*, *khadira*, *mandhuka* or *karanja*. The first of these is of course the Neem Tree (*Azadirachta indica*), the second is Acacia catechu, next is the Honey Tree (*Bassia latafolia*), and the last is the Indian Beech (*Pongamia galbra*). Which of these could be the tooth stick recommended by the Buddha?

When the Chinese monk Xuanzang was in India in the 7th century he visited a monastery which had a tree growing in its grounds from which the Buddha had once supposedly taken a twig to clean his teeth. Xuanzang says that the tree was a willow probably because he did not know the Indian name for it and just called it by a name he and his Chinese readers would be familiar with.

In India today chewing a neem twig is the most common way for cleaning the teeth although it is rapidly being replaced by the modern plastic toothbrush. But even in big cities, first thing in the morning it is common to see neat piles of neem twigs for sale and people standing around vigorously chewing them. The normal way of using these tooth sticks is to chew one end of the twig until it frays and then rub it up and down over the teeth and gums. In villages neem twigs are the only



Neem Tree, *Azadirachta indica*.

toothbrushes available. Presumably it was the neem tree that provided the tooth sticks recommended by the Buddha. If so, it was a very good choice. Although extremely bitter, neem juice has strong anti-fungal and antibacterial properties. Just as importantly, the up-and-down rubbing of the stick removes build-up plaque on and from between the teeth and stimulates the gums. Thus, it seems likely that the Buddha's tooth stick was made of neem.