

**The Sauna:
A Little-known Buddhist Innovation**



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Essays on Buddhist History & Culture

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It is the Buddha's philosophy that does and always has, attracted most attention and this is only understandable. However, philosophy is by no means the only legacy the Buddha has left for us; there are many others. One of these which seems to be very much neglected nowadays is what he said concerning the importance of good health - how to achieve it, how to maintain it, and why it is important to do so.

Most people will be familiar with his comment on this subject in Dhammapada verse: "Good health is the highest gain," but this is by no means the only thing he said on this matter. The Buddha made suffering (dukkha) the central concern of his philosophy – identifying its causes, explaining the means to overcome them, and finally, encouraging the application of those means to one's life. He added to this by saying that there were two types of suffering, physical and psychological, and of the first of these, the most obvious is being afflicted with sickness and disease.

One of the most distorted and pernicious misunderstandings of the Buddha's Dhamma is that he taught the notion that anything experienced by individuals, pleasant, painful or neutral, is caused by something they did in the past, i.e. their kamma. If this were true, it would mean that being sick has its origin in some past moral failing. However, the Buddha taught no such thing. He criticized this notion as being "beyond personal experience and what the world generally holds to be true," that it is the result of "muddled thinking" and to refute those who asserted such a notion "would be fully justified" (Anguttara Nikaya, Book of Threes, sutta 61).

While it is true that everything has a cause or causes, it is equally true that not every cause has a moral dimension and thus is not kammic. In fact, most of the effects we experience are not kammic. In the Milindapañha, Nagasena summed up the Buddha's position on kamma well when he said: "What happens as a result of kamma is much less than what happens as a result of other causes. The fool goes too far in saying

that everything that happens is a result of kamma.”

Recognizing sickness as a source of pain and suffering, the Buddha encouraged his disciples to cherish their health and take steps to maintain it. He defined good health as “having well-being, an even digestion, not overly cold or overly heaty but balanced and conducive to striving”, and he lauded good health as one of the “five good fortunes”, “the highest gain”, and he identified one of the five factors of striving as “being free from illness and affliction.”

His emphasis on the value of good health meant that from an early period, and for many centuries after, Buddhist monks had a close involvement in medicine and healing. One of the unexpected and little-known outcomes of this emphasis on good health was the development of the steam bath or sauna. I suspect that most people will be surprised to know that saunas are mentioned in the Tipitaka, the Buddhist scriptures.

A sauna is a room or enclosed space designed to induce sweating, for either hygienic or medical reasons. The sweat can be induced by wet heat, i.e. steam, or dry heat. In the Vinaya, the rules for monks and nuns, the Buddha gave detailed instructions on how a sauna should be laid out and used; the words for sauna being ‘hot house (jantaghara) or more specifically ‘fire room’ (aggisala). The sauna should have, he said, a brick, stone or wooden floor, not earth, so as to avoid it becoming muddy.

There should be a drain to remove water accumulating on the floor and a pipe for letting out the excess steam, and thatch roofing should be avoided as it would allow too much steam to escape. Seats and benches were to be arranged around a fire and there were bowls or troughs of water for sprinkling on the body and on rocks heated by the fire in order to produce steam. Clothes should be hung on wall pegs, the Buddha instructed, and he forbade monks to sit in the sauna naked.

Apparently there were four kinds of ‘sweating treatment’ (sambharasada) - using steam made from water with certain herbs in it; steam made from water with cannabis leaves in it; what was called ‘great sweating; and something called udakakottaka, which may have meant soaking in a tub of hot water. The normal procedure was to smear fine clay on the body, probably as an abrasive to remove old skin, and rub or massage the limbs until the clay was washed off by the sweat. We are informed that the monk Pilindavaccha was suffering from something

called pabbavata, probably rheumatism, and that the Buddha advised him to undergo the sweating treatment.

There is archaeological evidence for saunas from Italy and Mexico predating the 5th century BC, but the Buddha's description of them is the oldest literary reference we have of such facilities and how to use them.

Indian Buddhist monks introduced the sauna to China from where it spread to Korea and eventually to Japan. The Daito Seiiki Diary of Genjo Sanzo (602-664 CE), mentions



Chinese Buddhist temples with saunas that were open to the public. These sometimes also provided medicine and food for the benefit of the poor and the sick. From the introduction of Buddhism in Japan during the Nara Period, many of the larger temples had saunas from which

the modern Japanese baths, the sento, evolved. In the beginning, these baths were meant mainly for the monks but occasionally they were open to others. Records mention that the wife of the Emperor Shomu, Koumyou Kougou (701-760 CE) allowed the sick the opportunity to bathe six days every month and even personally washed them as an act of piety and humility. From the Kamakura period (1185-1333), it was normal to make temple baths available for the sick. When public saunas and baths were established apart from temples they continued to be built in the style of temples, a tradition that continues even today. However, since the 1960s when Japanese houses were more commonly designed with bathrooms, public saunas and baths have declined in popularity.

From India, the sauna spread in the western direction also, to Iran and eventually to Turkey. The Finish and Mexican Mayan saunas seem to have developed independently from Indian influence.

As Buddhism declined in India so did the sauna, although exactly why they didn't persist is not clear. Perhaps the Hindu concept of ritual washing in sacred rivers became widespread saunas were seen as unnecessary, or perhaps it was the idea of people of different casts mixing together, including in saunas, was the cause.



It was not until the Muslims came to India 12th century that the idea of steam baths or saunas became common again. Interestingly, the oldest sauna in India still operating is the Qadimi Hammam in Bhopal which was established in the early 1700s.