

Health and Disease, Sickness and Well Being: Depictions in the Vinaya Pitaka and Jataka Narratives

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Abstract : The relationship between religion and medicine is much evident in the context of Buddhism. This paper is an attempt to look at the processes of social and cultural evolution of scientific creativity in the field of medicine and institutionalization of medical practices. The objective of the paper is to understand the Buddhist responses towards health as understood from the Vinaya Piṭaka and the Jātaka. This work is a result of the analysis of two important Buddhist texts: the Vinaya Piṭaka and the Jātaka. Broadly the Vinaya Piṭaka is concerned with the growth of Buddhist monasticism. The Vinaya Piṭaka is considered one of the most important sacred texts of the Buddhists, and contains rules for monastic life. These rules deal with such aspects as formal meetings of the saṅgha (monastery), expiation, confession, training, and legal questions. The Jātaka stories, on the other hand, are in the form of folk narratives, and provide a major source of medical consultation for all classes. These texts help us to ascertain the 'proficiency and perceptions' of the prevailing medical traditions. The Jātakas are a collection of 547 stories about the past lives of the Buddha, who is represented in anthropomorphic and animal form. The Jātaka connects itself between existing cognitive environments related to ethics and Buddhist didacticism. These stories are a reflection of the connection between the past and contemporary times (in the sense of time of creation of the story) as well. This is visible through the narrative strategy of the text, where every story is sub-divided into the story of the past and story of the present, and there is a significant identification element or connection that established at the end of each story. The minimal presence of philosophical content and the adoption of a narrative strategy make it possible for more of everyday life. This study gives me an opportunity to raise questions about how far were the body and mind closely interrelated in the Buddhist perceptions, and also did the society act like a laboratory for the Buddhists to practice healing activities? How far did religious responses to afflictions, be they leprosy or plague or anger, influence medical care; what impact did medical practitioners, religious authorities and the regulation of medical activity and practice have on healing the body and the mind; and, how has the healing environment been viewed. This paper is working with the idea that medical science in early India was not only for the curative purpose of diseases, but it fulfilled a greater cause of promoting, maintaining and restoring human health. In this regard, studying these texts gives an insight regarding religious responses to epidemics, from leprosy to plague, as well as to behavioral disorder such as anger. In other words, it deals with the idea about healing the body and healing the soul from a religious perspective.

Keywords : food for health, folk narratives, human body, materia medica, social sickness

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