



Buddhism Psychology and Medicine

By

Diane Robinson Kerr

© 2013

The Four Noble Truths

The essence of enlightenment attained by the Buddha was the understanding of the true nature of suffering. He understood profoundly, that all of life, even pleasure, results in suffering. The fundamental cause of all suffering is spiritual ignorance and attachment. In His great compassion for all sentient beings, The Buddha not only understood the cause of all problems as described in the four noble truths but the remedy. He could be considered as a divine physician with a prescription for all of mankind. These four noble truths can be understood and viewed in a medical context as well as a spiritual one which is a perfect example of the holistic nature of these teachings. For instance:

1. Life means suffering. All composite phenomena suffer. This is the diagnostic step.

2. The origin of suffering is attachment. Insatiable desire, or craving, any type of grasping causes suffering. This is the understanding of the causes.

3. The Cessation of suffering is attainable. The removal of the causes brings freedom from illness. The attainment of nirvana.

4. The path to the cessation of suffering. The eightfold path. The remedy prescribed for this universal malady is the eightfold path, the daily practice of Dharma that leads to nirvana or freedom. Treatment leads to the removal of the causes of illness.

The Mind and its Functions

Trapped in samsara, the sentient being must free itself from the three poisons if it can ever escape and achieve nirvana. The three poisons are ignorance, attachment and aversion. From these three flow a river of possible mental distortions capable of creating both physical and mental illness. The whole idea of self as a separate, fixed identity flows from ignorance of the true nature of reality and the actions that this attitude inspires. Attachment has a host of manifestations from greed to fear. Aversion and hate is the very currency of life when trapped this way. When we look at the world, we see that the effects of these three poisons is painfully clear. The nightly news is full of the details.

Modern day research in quantum mechanics for instance, is proving what contemplatives have known for centuries. The physical world is a manifestation of the spiritual one. This means that the body is not only affected by the mind but is cured by it as well. As the mind gets healthy so too does the body. Self-healing is inevitable if following the medicine prescribed by The Buddha, namely, the eightfold path which can be divided into three parts: 1. Wisdom, 2. Ethical conduct, and 3. Mental development.

The path is clear and can appear simple yet it demands commitment, fortitude and practice. The following list of attributes may seem like an impossible ideal, however, it is a description of a fully mature, wholesome human being and presents an ideal worth aiming for. 1. The development of wisdom, or right view and right intention, 2. self-discipline in body, speech and mind, 3. right virtue, 4.

concentration, 5. balance and avoidance of the two extremes of sensual pleasure and asceticism, 6. ethical discipline and the development of wholesome thoughts and actions, 7. meditative concentration and the growing ability to live in the present. 8. All of this while cultivating compassion for all sentient beings. This is a tall order but what else is there to do? This gift from The Buddha is not only inspiring but essential. It gives true meaning to the word salvation.

Qualifications and Roles of a True Healer

The goals of curative therapies is to 1. Prevent and cure disease, 2, secure longevity, and 3. achieve liberation. According to the lecture, by the third cent. CE, monasteries began to offer medical services to the community at large and it is at this time that the study of medicine became mandatory. The process of becoming a Buddhist doctor would make any Western student of medicine feel as though they were in early kindergarten by comparison. The curriculum is overwhelming! Following is a partial list. - The study of Ayurvedic knowledge, astronomy, embryology, physiology, pharmacology, alchemy, psychology, philosophy, theology and more! Not only must the student have a broad understanding of these subjects but he/she must also continue to develop their personal, spiritual Dharma in order to be intellectually and spiritually integrated. Nowhere in Western medicine do we find this balance and it is sorely missed. Science is one flashlight or one way of looking at reality and spirituality is another. Each is necessary just as two balanced wings are necessary for a bird to fly.

This practice of the eightfold path is the fire where the clay of potential is developed into the qualities or attributes of a fine doctor. The qualities are an analytical mind and intelligence, understanding, wholesome motivation, appropriate conduct, dedication to healing, complete knowledge of medicine, faithfulness to pledges and vows, altruistic aspiration to achieve enlightenment for all sentient beings, perseverance, awareness of the ways of the world, loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity.

Imagine if this was the standard for all doctors? How different this world would be. As a person born without a pituitary gland which has been responsible for a lifetime of health issues, I have experienced an army of doctors and so called healers. How I longed for one who was a real human being with compassion as well as wisdom. I have had to learn how to be my own best practitioner and I must admit that I have done a pretty good job. To have had a helper of this sort along the way would have been such a solace and made the journey so much easier.

Final Thoughts

And what is that ancient path, that ancient road, traveled by the Rightly Self-awakened Ones of former times? Just this noble eightfold path: right view, right aspiration, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. That is the ancient path, the ancient road, traveled by the Rightly Self-awakened Ones of former times. - Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 2011, "*Nagara Sutta*."¹

The Buddha's teachings about medicine and healing were compiled in the four medicine tantras. The underlying teaching is that all disease comes from spiritual ignorance or confusion. In other words, all disease is psychosomatic in nature. Combine this understanding with the awareness and conviction of the illusory nature of physical reality and it becomes evident and clear why Buddhist medicine must deal with the cause, namely, the mind. It is essential then that a practitioner with this awareness must become an expert in detecting, identifying and correcting mental distortions if the body is ever to be truly healed.

The qualities and attributes of a doctor in the Buddhist tradition, hold the remedy. They are the positive needed to fill the negative space. If we look at all of the possible distortions the mind is capable of, it is overwhelming but if we see those as really a lack of reality or an emptiness then it stands to

¹ Thanissaro Bhikkhu. 2011, "*Nagara Sutta*." Retrieved August, 20,2011 from <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn12/sn12.065.than.html>

reason that what that particular emptiness needs is the positive. For instance, when walking into a dark room it would be silly to deny the existence of darkness. It is a reality because we cannot see where we are going and it is easy to trip over what we cannot see. However, when the light is turned on, where does the darkness go? It no longer exists because it is a lesser reality than the light. The light is a true reality because it can be turned on and off. It fills the darkness. The darkness then is really an absence of light. Likewise, if we apply this to a person who lies for example, we see that lying is really an absence of truthfulness and so on. A wise doctor would hopefully be able to not only detect the missing attribute whether physical or mental, but use skill all of those years of skill development in replacing or inspiring the growth of what is missing.

What is so marvelous about the practice of Buddhism is that everyone can learn how to apply the basic principles in their lives. Monks, doctors and Buddhist scholars may have intense areas of knowledge and expertise but the eightfold path is open to everyone. The principles are the same and the goal of nirvana is the same for everyone. Suffering is the call in ourselves and others that insists on an answer. The answer is always there for everyone.

Conclusion

I would like to finish this paper by sharing a dream I had many years ago that taught me about Buddhism which I knew nothing about at the time. I still know little but I feel that this dream helps me to understand it on a very personal level that I would like to share with you.

The River Dream

I became conscious in my dream that I was stuck in the mud of the river bank. The river was singing going to the sea, going to the sea. I spoke to the river and said "I want to go to the sea!" The river answered that I must first free myself from the mud. I tried and I tried but as I struggled to get free,

I became more deeply mired and unable to move. All around me, people were in a variety of predicaments. One fellow was hanging by his shirttails on a tree branch and others were in the water but struggling upstream and drowning. All kinds of variables of being stuck was happening to those around me. I asked the river again how to get free. The river told me to stop struggling and let the sun help me. Patiently I waited while the sun dried things up allowing me to move. At that moment, a little sail boat came down the river. It had a huge orange sun on the sail and an ancient being on the bow of the boat. He was very old, old like rocks are old but he looked so childlike at the same time with crooked little stars all around his head. He was laughing and dancing on the bow of the little boat. He was the master boat builder and his job was to teach us how to make a boat to get down the river safely.

The next thing I knew, I was in a little green row boat heading downstream. Now, there were rules of the river. The first rule was that desire and fear were two sides of the same coin. On the banks, were all kinds of life scenarios and if you desired or feared anything on the banks your boat would automatically go there and get stuck. You would then have to go through a process of detachment to get back into the river. The other rule was that you were either trying or doing. You could not do both. I remember one scene on the banks where these very tall, somber people, dressed in black, lived. They were farmers but they were always trying so they never really got anything done. They also believed that the river was evil but they were all secretly attracted to it so they were always telling on each other and punishing each other. They seemed to be the epitome of fundamentalism. There were many kinds of scenes and situations I was witnessing. In fact, I was so fascinated by everything I was seeing that I forgot where I was going.

All of a sudden, I was at the mouth of the river merging into the ocean! The ocean was singing "I am the sea", "I am the sea." It was doing this in time with the waves like breathing. It was awe inspiring! At that moment, I developed a small leak in my boat. I tried to frantically bail out the boat but the water

just kept coming in until all of a sudden, I smashed into a huge rock. The boat went flying into the air in a million pieces as did I. The next thing I knew, I was in the water and when I went to breathe, the song "I am the sea," came out of me too. I felt such a feeling of peace and as I looked back up the river, I saw that it was all one.