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Leprosy and the Buddhist Tradition

How do religions envision sickness? The Buddhist view on leprosy is an interesting case-study...

Leprosy and Karma-At first glance, one is shocked by Buddhism's seemingly hard and fatalistic view of leprosy: This disease, along with various congenital physical handicaps and mental illnesses, as well as the Ebola and AIDS viruses, is a prime example of what Buddhists call a "Karmic type" of disease [the other types being diseases which arise from 1}disharmony of the physiological systems; 2}immoderate eating or drinking; 3}disruption of daily rhythm of living; 4}bacteria and viruses, and spiritual malaise].

A "Karmic type" of disease is considered as "retribution," as a matter of course, for heavy sins in one's past lives. Besides the usual list of mortal sins such as murder and unfiliality, leprosy is seen as punishment for such transgressions as slandering and doing harm to monastics, disparaging the Sutras, and damaging Buddhist temples. To cure karmic illnesses, one must undertake rigorous spiritual practice, repentance, and perform numerous good deeds.

Furthermore, ever since the beginning of the Buddhist tradition in 6th century BC India, no person with leprosy, boils, ringworm, tuberculosis, or epilepsy could take the tonsure and become an ordained monastic; these prohibitions are still enforced today.

Another "view" of lepers in Buddhism is used as a major type of Buddhist contemplative practice. Here lepers are seen not as suffering fellow humans deserving of our empathy and care, but primarily as a pedagogical tool for Buddhist meditation in the quest for enlightenment. Through meditation upon lepers' disfigured bodies and their suffering we can reduce our attachment to the body, part of the larger goal to end craving for sensual pleasures. For it is our desires which lead to attachment to the illusionary world, thereby engendering our sorrows and suffering. This is illustrated by the Buddha's famous simile of the lepers:

"Suppose there were a leper with sores and blisters on his limbs, being devoured by worms, scratching the scabs off the openings of his wounds with his nails, cauterizing his body over a burning charcoal pit. Yet he would find a certain measure of relief in scratching and cauterizing his wounds. So too, beings who are not free from lust for sensual pleasures, the more they indulge themselves, the more their craving increases, and the more they are burned by their fever."

Buddha, the King of Physicians-And yet, the Buddha is often praised in the Sutras for his thorough training in the traditional medicine of his times. Buddhism from the very start linked Buddhist spirituality to healing, and showed how inextricably linked is the body and mind. Known in the Buddhist canon as "the King of Physicians," the Buddha advocated the Dharma, through which we rid

ourselves of the “three poisons” of greed, anger, and ignorance. We cure greed through contemplation of impurity, cure anger through contemplation of kindness, cure ignorance by the contemplation of the true nature of all things (emptiness) and the cultivation of wisdom. In this way, Buddhist cultivation would “heal” our sufferings, even though some physical illnesses may not be cured.

Indeed, monastics were required to study medicine (intended for self-help and care of fellow monastics), medicine being one of the “the five sciences,” including also language, arts and mathematics, logic, and Buddhist philosophy. Not surprisingly, monks and nuns gained popularity among the laity for their medical knowledge, so much so that monastics were often criticized for working like worldly professionals rather than concentrating on preaching and propagating the Dharma. However, as Buddhism spread from India throughout Southeast and East Asia, Buddhist abbots encouraged their disciples to study of medicine as an excellent conversion tool; Buddhist temples established early “hospitals” and related charitable institutions for monastics and also for laypeople.

Practicing Compassion-And always, Buddhists have stressed selfless practice of compassion towards all sick and handicapped people, not only to help others but also to “heal” one’s own spiritual suffering and to reduce one’s own karmic burdens.

In the Indian Buddhist canon, there are many accounts of Buddhist monks and nuns who worked among lepers, attending to their physical illness as well as preaching to them the Dharma. These hagiographic accounts detail how the monastics cared for and encouraged the leprosy patients, changing their bandages, draining their sores, feeding and bathing them.

In medieval China (5th to 9th Centuries AD) the official dynastic histories which date from these periods describe how Buddhist monastics cared for lepers, such as visiting pre-existing leper communities (in the countryside, or mountain areas, for instance) or within cities (in a special district of Nanjing, for example) and preaching the Dharma, giving emotional support, washing their clothing, even suck the pus clean from the lepers’ lesions (the last to show the depth of their compassionate commitment to healing the lepers). Some Buddhist temples maintained sanctuaries for leper patients, with separate dormitories for male and female patients: some were physically cured and some not.

Paradigms of Compassion-The Buddhist sutras are not replete with stories of the Buddha himself performing miracle cures, laying on of hands, and healing lepers akin to Jesus of the New Testament. But there are, in the Buddhist tradition, countless historical examples held up as paradigms of compassion for others to follow:

*King Ajatashatru, a contemporary of the Buddha, sixth-century BC, was destined to die on a specific day, however, after meeting the Buddha and following his teachings, he was able to recover from his leprosy, overcome his spiritual sufferings (he had caused the death of his father) and prolong his life by many years

*The Third Chan Patriarch Jianzhi Sengsan (520-612), formally a leper, is said to have been cured through Buddhist belief and practice.

*Japanese Buddhism is also filled with hagiographies of monks, such as Eizon 1201-1290, active in charitable works including concern with the welfare of lepers.

*The Abbot Dao-chi in seventh-century China opened his temple to many lepers. He lived and ate with them, dressed their sores and helped bathe them. Some of his disciples tried to avoid all contact with the lepers and wondered why the Abbot did not fear becoming infected himself? The Abbot explained, "What we call clean or dirty is the result of our discriminating mind. If we do not have any dislikes in our minds, how can aversions arise? When our mind is pure, everything and everywhere is pure. If a monk like myself cannot even let go of this bit of delusion and let compassion arise in its place, I should be ashamed of myself for not living in accordance with the Dharma."

*The Tibetans speak of the great master Gelongma Palmo who lived in the tenth or eleventh centuries AD. Due to her past karma, she contracted leprosy and was cast into the forest by the people. But through devotion and diligence in her devotion to the Kuanyin Bodhisattva, she was able to recover from leprosy. She also developed great love and compassion for all beings. She became an enlightened nun and guided many disciples.

*Tibetan Buddhists also praise Geshe Chekawa, who taught people in a lepers' colony the practice of *tonglen*—breathing in the suffering of their fellows, and breathing out love, and compassion toward them, with intent toward their healing. As they practiced this, many of them got well. In the story, Geshe Chekawa had a brother known to be famous for being a skeptic, who was against all forms of spiritual practice. However, when the brother heard that the lepers had been healed, he slipped down and hid behind a door to listen to Geshe Chekawa teach the method of doing *tonglen*. When Geshe Chekawa noticed that his brother began to improve his character, he realized what had happened—that his brother had begun to do the practice. This change in his brother's personality, even more than the healing benefits of the practice, convinced Geshe Chekawa to teach the practice widely. The practice itself had changed his brother's motivation from a selfishly motivated wish to guard his own health, to a more altruistic one of benefiting others.

The situation today: Over the past hundred years or so, Buddhism and Buddhist medicine; and traditions of Christian charity and church-sponsored medical services; and Western medicine, have all influenced each other, with overall positive results in the fields of healing, medicine, and social welfare.

Today Buddhists in India, Japan, Taiwan, China, and Vietnam are active in all these professional fields; Buddhists today tend to downplay the traditional "karmic explanation" of disease and instead focus on practicing compassion through empathy towards and direct care of leprosy victims, the handicapped, the mentally ill. Yet persons afflicted with leprosy in Japan, for example, still must fight against discrimination and rejection from family and society alike, ostracized to the point of being forced to give up one's name so as not to "pollute" one's family! Japanese Buddhists who visit and give lectures to leprosy patients in Japan cite the example of the Japanese poet Pontaro. He had lost his eyesight and all use of his arms and hands due to leprosy, yet still desired to live and read: he learned to read Braille with his tongue...

**---At the tip of the tongue
As if sucked on
A word pops up---**

Pontaro still expressed hope to live, despite his anger and sorrow about his fate. But in order to go on, one must practice Buddhism, a difficult and life-long path, as we learn to let go of Ego. Yet on this path Buddha beckons to us and says "Come as you are, I will protect you."

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