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Buddhist perspectives on health and healing

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Abstract

This study was begun because of the recognition of the problems in health systems we are presently facing. Those health problems are not only due to the deficiency in scientific and administrative knowledge, but are also the result of the limitation of the paradigm that we currently use to generate the knowledge and the ways to solve health as well as other global problems. The objective of this study is to find an alternative paradigm for understanding health issues by investigating the Buddhist canons. Tipitaka on CD-ROM was used as the basic database for gathering Buddhist principles and perspectives on health and healing. Buddhism looks at all existences in term of integrated factors depending on processes of inter-dependent causal relationships governed by the Three Characteristics or the Dependent Origination. This premise deeply guides the disciples' perceptions and living styles. The broadest meaning of disease in Buddhism involves all kinds of human sufferings, while health is the state of being completely free from all suffering. Health quality is a collective product of previous actions starting from past lives and ending at your last second. While suitable care is given to a patient, he/she should realize the nature of this so fragile, no-self life. These principles will lead patients and their relatives to have less suffering and anxiety. It will be, moreover, a basic belief of a health system that concerns more with the spiritual aspect of life.

Keywords: Buddhist, health, healing

Introduction

Recently, health problems have become one of the most serious issues of humankind. Health expenditure and new chronic, as well as infectious, diseases are increasing every year. Furthermore, the basic health problems such as diarrhea or malnutrition are still the most important causes of human death. Although a number of new strategies such as a primary health care and the universal coverage have been developed and applied to solve problems, the outcomes are still questionable. Most of the poor cannot get those basic health services. The needs for more health facilities and services seem to be unlimited projects. These facts imply that health problems are not technical matters that can be solved by scientific knowledge or administrative strategies. Capra (1982: xvii) pointed out that the health problem is only one facet of the crisis of our perceptions which are based on scientific reality. Although scientific reality has become the major belief system in Thai society that determines our current perception, Buddhist reality, which is deeply infused into Thai culture, has an important impact on the perception as well. An investigation of Buddhist principles and perspectives on health and healing offers an alternative perception for understanding health and illness that may lead to other approaches for managing or solving health problems.

Methodology

This work is a result of documentary research based on the Tipitaka, the three divisions of the Buddhist holy cannon, and some other important Buddhist textbooks.

A summarized book, *Tipitaka for lay people* (Suchiv Poonyanuparp, 1996), was used as a general guideline for understanding the structure and important content of the Tipitaka. Two versions of a Tipitaka on CD-ROM: the Dhammadāna version and the Mahāchulālongkornrajavidyalaya Alumni version were used as basic databases. Although both of them originated from the same official version, it is helpful for cross checking the results of searching. Many Thai words related to health and illness such as disease, healing, drug, etc., were used as keywords for gathering information.

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Buddhadhamma (Phra Dhammapīṭaka (P.A. Payutto), 2000) and *Medicine in Buddhism* (Phra Dhammapīṭaka (P.A. Payutto), 1999) are the other two important textbooks used here. They are very necessary for the interpretation of the Buddhist canon. All of the collected information was thoroughly studied, interpreted, classified and grouped to present here as Buddhist principles and perspectives on health and healing. Nevertheless, the Buddha's words quoted here are traced back to English versions translated from the Pāli canon by many foreigners. Although there are some differences in meanings of those translations, English version is easier for the reader to get further information of each topic.

Principles of Buddhism

Buddhism was brought from India into Southeast Asia around the 3rd Century, CE. During the 13th Century, CE, Theravāda Buddhism from Ceylon (Sri Lanka) was selected to be the only religion of the first Thai kingdom, Sukhothai (Thida Saraya, 2002: 149-150; Srisakra Vallibhotama, 2001: 43). After that, Buddhist principles were integrated into local belief systems and then became the Thai worldview that shaped both cultural ways of life and the core of thought in Thai beliefs and political systems (Thida Saraya, 2002; Keyes, 1989; Chai Podhisita, 1985: 25-53). The impact of Buddhist basic beliefs has been gradually replaced by scientific beliefs and consumerism beginning a century ago, but the limitations of scientific applications turn many organizations toward investigating Buddhism as another point of view and an alternative method for problem solving.

Conclusions

For Buddhism, a religion that denies the existence of one God or other creators, the world and all existences are believed to have originated from many causes that are governed by the natural law. There is no primary cause or a basic component that works as a determinant causing something or an event to happen. Each cause or determinant relates to others while all are interdependent. The results of those inter-related create a variety of effects. The world, in Buddhism, is not perceived as a material entity or a planet that we have to discover its origin or its components. Buddhism is more concerned with the world as a sense-object and mind-object which are observed or recognized by humans through the six sense-organs or bases: eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind. The boundary of the world or all existences is concluded in the realm of consciousness that comes from the twelve bases (āyatana). Existences, in Buddhism, perceive as far beyond the material world (the existence) to include the immaterial spheres that cannot be detected by normal sense-organs and scientific tools. The Buddha mentioned about many other beings or places such as Deva (diety), Yakkha (demon), Peta (hungry ghost), heaven, Niraya Hell, downfall, etc. in many suttas in the Tipiṭaka. For example he stated: "Monks, in the whole world, with the world of Devas, of Maras, of Brahmas of devas and humankind, a Tathāgata is conqueror, unconquered, all-seeing, omnipotent. Therefore is he called 'Tathāgata'.

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