

# Buddhist Medical Ethics for Patient Treatments

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## Abstract

This article presents Buddhist medical ethics for patient treatments. Buddhist ethic does not only focus on guidelines for doctors or nurses, they also emphasize patient treatments called “Buddhist medical ethics.” It is created to teach all patients to understand natural truths, physical non-beauty, the impermanence of all things and mindfulness of deaths. According to Buddhist ethics, five patients’ behaviors of the can be used to identify whether they can be cured or not. The five behaviors are: 1) the way the patient eats or does something unpleasant, 2) get more pleasant disease, 3) refusing treatments, 4) concealing the illness, and 5) lack of patience. If the patients demonstrate these five behaviors, they are difficult to cure. When doctors, nurses or health care providers treat patients, they need to know the patients’ rights according to the Buddhist ethics. The patients’ rights involve some treatments that are disagreeable or unpleasant for the patients, compassion that the doctors, nurses, and health care providers give to the patients and acceptance of the waste matter coming from the patients. In addition, Buddhist Ethics also include interpersonal treatments in the Sangha (group or organization). The doctors, nurses, and health care providers should treat all patients equally without separating the patients by class, as represented in Buddha’s teaching: “who wants to treat me could treat the ill monks”. In the Sangha, monks have people such as Upajjhàya (Preceptor), Acariya (Teacher), Antevàsika (Student), Co-Upajjhàya (Co-Preceptor), and Co- Acariya (Co-Teacher), as a kin to relatives. These relatives are going to take care of them throughout their lives or vice versa. Without these people as relatives, an ill monk has to be treated by the Sangha.

**Keywords:** Patient Treatment, Buddhist Medical Ethics, Buddhist Patient Treatment

## 1. Buddhist Ethics for Patients

According to Buddhist Disciplines, there are three types of patients. The first one is the incurable patients. The second one will recover whether they are cured or not. The last one will not recover if they are not cured (A.I 162/121/20). According to Buddhism, a patient status is determined by the natural rules entitled “Tilakkhana” (The Three Characteristics). “Tilakkhana” outlines the three characteristics of illness. The first characteristic is called *Dukkha*. It means the pain and flu states of a patients, but does not include something unusual in the patients’ bodies. Pain and flu states can cause the patients slight or serious suffering. The suffering from pain and flu can also affect the patients’ minds. Consequently, the patient may present with mental problems such as frustration, furiousness, and resentfulness. These feelings make patients feel weak in their bodies and minds until they do not want to follow the doctors’ and nurses’ treatments. Thus, their sickness can become worse and worse. As a result, Buddha regulated the ethics for patients as described in the information below.

## 2. Contemplations for Patients

When a man has an illness, he will get a weak mind and un-healthy body, hence the Buddha has thought the principles for patients to understand the nature of life, strength the mind to be able to accept the truth and face of the illness and death mindfully. They’re called contemplation. Buddha once visited a sick monk who had the flu. He used the monk sickness as a case study and preached to other monks saying that the monks must; 1) consider that they can see the ugliness in their bodies, 2) recognize sewage mixed in food, 3) perceive unpleasant things in the world and 4) contemplate the uncertainty of bodies and accept death.” (A.III 162/121/22)

The author thinks that the five Dhammas that Buddha intended to preach to the priests are to help them understand the truths of the world, life and death since it is the usual part of our being and that we do not need to suffer. The five Dhamma can be summarized as follows.

**1. Contemplation on the ugliness in the bodies:** This contemplation means the contemplation to see that our sick bodies are not beautiful because they are the center of the diseases. They are in weak states when they are the homes of various species of worms and parasites.

**2. Contemplation on sewage mixed in food:** This contemplation is of the disadvantages of eating enjoyable foods that cause suffering when excreted. Food enters the body only one way via the mouth, but it is excreted nine ways. For example, if food comes out of eyes, it is tears. If it comes out of the mouth, it is saliva, vomitor phlegm. If it comes from the nose, it is mucus. If it comes from the ears, it is cerumen. If it comes from the anus, it is called excrement. If it comes from the urethra, it is called urine. If it comes from pores in the skin, it is called sweat or perspiration. While we eat, we enjoy eating. However, when we evacuate food, we all separate and hide from each other - not let anyone see us.

**3. Contemplation on unpleasing things in the world:** This contemplation is to point out to see the truths that the human world is actually full with sewage that is unpleasing to all. Things we can see are only their crusts that cover the ugliness inside them. In this Dhamma, if we look crudely, we may think that Buddha made patients see the world as something that was boring and unwanted. However, “unpleasing” here does not mean “boring and unwanted”. The real meaning of “unpleasing” here is that there is nothing to be gained by benignly being pleased with things, particularly when we are happy. We always believe that our bodies are important, but when we are sick, we ask, if the bodies are ours then why can't we control them and recover from sickness successfully. Buddha let the patients contemplate this because he wanted to tell the patients to learn that actually the world still had an unavoidable rule to control everything. The rule was “Tilakkhana”, the three characteristics of



These five Dhammas are the obstacles for the treatment. If the patient demonstrates at least one Dhamma, it affects to the whole treatment. For instance, eating one type of injurious food can cause diseases to get worse despite being cured many times. It does not matter how many treatments to cure are used. They are useless. If a patient keeps the symptoms secrets, because they do not want an injection or operation, the doctors cannot perform the treatments properly.

For the patients who can be easily cured, Buddha taught in the opposite way, as following:

“Priests! The sick priests who have the five Dhammas are easily cured. The five Dhammas are the sick priests make themselves comfortable, they will feel comfortable [1], they take medicine [1], they tell their symptoms to their health care providers whether they feel worse or better, and the stability of their symptoms [1], and they endure their suffering, have strong bodies, and would not consider suicide [1].

Priests! The ill priests, who have these five Dhammas, are easily cured. (A.I 22/164–163/123)

Phramaha Somchai Gusalajitto (1996: 107) summarized the five Dhammas of the sick: priests who are easy to be cured as follows.

1. Making themselves relax their bodies.
2. Knowing how to evaluate themselves in the proper relaxation.
3. Taking medicine according to the prescription.
4. Telling the real symptoms that appear to themselves.
5. Being enduring with all the pain caused from their sickness or the processes of the treatments.

These ethics are Buddha’s teachings when he taught the priests to take care of each other as patients and health care providers. These five Dhammas are also applied generally to all patients, doctors, and nurses in the present. They are proper and helpful to all health care providers and patients.

#### 4. Ethics for Doctors and Nurses

In fact, there are many Buddhist Dhammas that can be used as ethics for doctors and nurses such as the Sublime States of Mind (*Brahmavihara*) and principles of kindly treatment (*Sangahavatthu*). However, here, we will focus on the ethics of health care providers towards *Mettā* (Loving Kindness) and *Karunā* (Compassion). The Buddhist ethical imperative for physicians throughout the ages is based on love. It is specifically referred to as loving kindness (*Mettā*) or compassion (*Karunā*) which is manifested in the practice of loving care. Physicians from the earliest time have been called upon to practice this Buddhist moral ideal by serving all patients with loving kindness and having only the benefit of their patients in mind. Loving care is therefore at the heart of Buddhist health care ethics (Pinit Rattanakul, 1999: 1). For the health care providers (doctors, nurses or others), Buddha taught five principles as following:

“Priests! The health care providers for the monks must have five Dhammas, and someone who should not be a health care provider will also have five Dhammas. The monk who should not be a health care provider does not prescribe medicine for the monk patient [1], does not know when the monk patient feels it is convenient or brings uncomfortable things in while taking comfortable things out [1], is revengeful to the treatment [1], does not have sympathy and is vengeful [1], is always disgusted with the dirtiness of urine, vomit and saliva [1], does not know how to express to the patient with dharma to make him cheerful and encouraged [1]. All monks! The monk who was the health care provider who has the five Dhammas should not look after the ill monk.”

All these five characteristics in the Buddha’s teaching were the characteristics of the person who was not suitable to be a health care provider because that person does not have any knowledge about medicine for the patients. He also does not know injurious food and good food for the patients, but he focuses on greed, is disgusted by urine, waste evacuation, vomit and saliva. He does not know how to encourage the patients and how to support the patient to have a strong mind in order to fight with pain and disease.

Conversely, a person who can be a health care provider is stated in the Tipitaka as in the following doctrines.

Priests! A monk who is a health care provider must have five Dhammas. They are; the monk who knows how to prescribe medicine to the patients [1], knows when the monk patient feels it is convenient or brings the comfortable things in while taking the uncomfortable things out [1], is not revengeful to the treatment [1], has sympathy and is not vengeful [1], is not always disgusted with the dirtiness of urine, vomit, and saliva [1], knows how to express to the patient with dharma to make him cheerful, and encouraged [1]. All monks! A monk who is a health care provider who has the five Dhammas above should look after the ill monk.” (A.III 164/121/22)

Phra Srisutthipong explains the characteristics of the health care provider according to the Buddha’s teaching as in the following details.

- 1) To be able to prescribe medicine means knowing how to treat patients.
- 2) To know what to do and not providing injurious food to patients means knowing the proper food and the unwanted food.
- 3) To be sympathetic and treat patients without any payment.
- 4) Not to be disgusted with the dirtiness of urine, vomit and saliva.
- 5) To be a person who can persuade and encourage patients by using Dhammas occasionally. (Siwalee Sirilai, 1986 : 108-109)

The examples could be expressed for the ethics above in the treatment for the patients in the case of a child patient who is HIV infected. The doctors and nurses might follow the following ethics.

1. Knowing how to prescribe medicine is defined as knowing how to treat patients correctly. Medical professionals who are the health care providers need to have knowledge about all types of AIDS. They need to know how the HIV virus spreads, how to protect themselves and others from contracting HIV.

2. Knowing injurious and good food for patients and providing nutritional food or proper medicine to release pain and help extend the child patient’s life. It includes social welfare that can be beneficial to the child patient such as providing enough milk.

3. Being sympathetic and treat patients without any payment. Medical professionals should basically be sympathetic to their patients. That is “love” that they all wish to see their patients recovering, released from suffering, or having reduced pain. In addition, they may devote themselves to their treatment, performing the treatment without a lot of payment. They need to consider the family status of their child patients as well.

4. Not being disgusted by the patients urine, vomit or saliva. It includes not being disgusted at the child patient’s status as this could, importantly, lead to a violation of the rights of AIDS children and adults.

The above four points are the doctrines used to treat the body. They are physical treatments.

5. Being a person who can persuade and encourage patients by using Dhammas occasionally. Medical professionals should use psychology to cheer up their child patients to make them have some hope to survive and to fight with all the suffering. They may tell stories to the children who are HIV infected speaking politely to them, making them feel warm, and doing some other things to show that they love their child patients and give warmth to them, and thereby the child patients will do not feel alone. This is the way to treat psychologically that can help the patients feel better (Phramaha Rattana Panyapa, 2000 : 155).

## **5. Seven Factors of Enlightenment: the Fundamentals of Buddhism to Encourage Mental Wellness of Patients**

In the seven factors of Enlightenment, there were miracle stories that the patient could recover sooner after listening to seven factors of enlightenment (The awakening Dhamma). There are the particular meanings and the implementation concepts; in case of illnesses regarding to the seven factors of enlightenment as follows:

1. Sati (mindfulness): it was related to the reflection of individual’s mind. To apply this illness recovering, it is for individuals to control their mind avoiding the other affective factors such as angriness.

2. *Dhamma Vijaya* (truth-investigation) : to seek for the ways to soothe and to encourage oneself through the Dhamma realization
3. *Viriya* (effort; energy) : to encounter firmly the suffering and the difficulties
4. *Piti* (zest, delight) : to recall the hope leading to the upper level of satisfactory mind
5. *Pasaddhi* (tranquility) : to be calm without stress, excitement, nervousness
6. *Samādhi* (concentration) : to control steadily mindset
7. *Upekkhā* (equanimity) : after obtaining the steady mindset, it would lead to the impartial mind.

According to the possibilities of health and mind recovery after listening to the seven factors of enlightenment, the researcher pointed out that the patients would: be faithful toward Buddhism, have a genuine understanding of the Dhamma concepts, have experiences in the Buddhism practices. Moreover, the patients would be mindful and conscious—the same way as Maha Kassapa. As they, the patients were mindful, they were able to figure out the Dhamma concepts related to the illness, and the aforementioned concepts would be implemented for the encouragement, and the attempt to overcome suffering which finally led to the satisfactory mind as well as the genuine understanding of human mindset. According to the nature of human, the body and mind were interchangeably driven throughout the life, and it was said that the fresh mind would possibly lead to the healthy body. The patients reaching the concepts as mentioned earlier would be delighted and calm; the patients with slight illnesses would be recovering, the patients with moderate illnesses became better, and the patients with serious illness would be calm for reaching the final destination of life. These were the benefits of implementing the seven factors of enlightenment in illness recovering.

## 6. The First Sermon: Phra Mahakaspa, the noble one, was getting well by Seven Factors of Enlightenment

Phra Mahakaspa, once, had a severe illness. Buddha visited him in the evening and asked him about his condition. PhraMahakaspa told Buddha about his symptoms. When the pain occurred, it was difficult to endure. The sickness got worse and worse. It had never got better. Therefore, Buddha told Seven Factors of Enlightenment to PhraMahakaspa as follows.

“Mahakaspa! Consciousness of the seven Factors of Enlightenment that I have said are to increase your knowledge, to enlighten and to attain Nirvana. They are endurance, happiness, calmness, meditation, and neutrality of enlightenment. I have already said correctly. A person, who is the best, has done so many things. He has become an expert to gain enlightenment and attain Nirvana. They were all well-established for the person who followed or who behaved, so they would be for enlightenment and Nirvana.

After the Buddha teaching, Phra Mahakaspa replied, “The Perfect one, Buddha, the seven Factors of Enlightenment were nice.” He was very happy and admired the Buddha’s teaching. By listening to the seven factors of enlightenment Phra Mahakaspa recovered after all. (S. 17/195/85)

Listening to the seven factors of enlightenment always appears as a miracle. However, if we consider each factor, Athhajinda Deepadung (1998 : 88) suggested that seven factors of enlightenment were the doctrines focusing on relaxing. That meant the doctrines that can lead patients to relax their minds. Phrarajavaramuni (Prayoon Dhammajitto, 1998 : 19-51) viewed the seven factors of enlightenment as the same as seven robes tied together in a basket, to lift us and gain wisdom that was helpful in considering, lifting, and controlling our minds. More details are explained in the following information.

1. Considering minds with contemplation means that being conscious performs as mirrors to investigate our minds or to see our minds. This means always contemplating constantly on 'you are your mind'. Use your consciousness to view the moment of your mind to see how it is. In the case of being sick, it

means that you investigate your mind to see how much it is frustrated. Then, try to control it not to be frustrated and not to be occupied by something such as irritability and irascibility.

2. Lifting minds means that the person considers one's mind as to whether it feels down or discouraged. It aimed to consider the Buddha's teachings for comprehending how to encourage oneself according to the endurance doctrine. Endurance meant the person was ready to face the pain and difficulties. Happiness was to recall the hope for life that one should get. After one gained the delight, one can encourage oneself in some levels.

3. Controlling oneself means that when one knew that he was absent-minded and uncontrolled, it was like the kite that was getting away from the string, one should be able to control oneself with a calming mind and without stress, not to excite, and not run hurriedly. Meditation means controlling minds to be kept still at some point. Do not let them go anywhere that they want. Finally, the last one, calmness means trying to keep your mind still by ignoring all the things that are happening around you.

In summary, patients should be conscious and investigate their own mind. If the mind falls down too much because of suffering, one needs to lift his mind with Dhamma. That is, one tries to find Buddha's teachings to teach himself to encourage his mind to have endurance. Endurance is the encouragement to fight with all the suffering coming from the sickness where the happiness needs to be included to cheer up your mind. When our minds come to impartiality, that person will be neutral to all things around. This treatment enables patients to be cheerful in two ways: one for enlightening the truth and the other for comforting the health care providers.

## **7. Guidelines to Treat Patients according to Monk Philosophy**

Health problems or treatments for illness do not only happen to common people, but they can also happen to the monks. When Buddha first allowed men to enter the monkhood, he also yielded the preceptor to give instruction about

how to live as a monk right after finishing the ordination. One of the instructions was four basic habits, namely, food, clothing, accommodation, and medicine.

The senior monks taught the four basic essentials: They also told how to get the medicine by macerating urine. This medicine was the easiest to produce and considered to have the best properties in the universe.

At the beginning, *the treatment for monk was exchanging the monk carers who favored each other*. Then a problem occurred when one monk got sick, nobody cured or looked after him. Buddha visited the ill monk and found out that the monk had severe diarrhea because he laid down in urine. Therefore, Buddha said, “You were not kind. When you were healthy, you did not help look after the ill monk so nobody cared for you. The other monks were not satisfied and they did not help you.” Finally, Buddha told the Venerable Ananda to bring warm water and they helped clean the urine, changed his clothes, and lifted the ill monk onto the bed. (Phramaha Somchai Gusalajitto, 1996 : 105–106)

After that, Buddha called a meeting and asked the other monks why they did not cure the ill monk. The monks answered that it was because the ill monk did not help other monks. Buddha taught and legislated a practical way as follows:

“Priests! You did not have parents to look after you. If you did not look after each other, who would cure you?”

“, Priests! Anyone who wants to cure me, please cure the ill monk. If here was the senior monk, please look after the ill monk till the death comes to him. If the ill monk had a teacher, the teacher should cure the ill monk until the end of life. If the ill monk had a disciple, the disciple should care for the ill monk till the end of life. If the ill monk had a preceptor, that preceptor should cure the ill monk for the entire life. If the ill monk did not have a preceptor, or teacher, the preceptor and teacher should take care the ill monk together. If anyone did not cure each other, he must be offended in all regulations. (Vin. 155/365/2)

From Buddha’s teachings, I can summarize that if there was an ill monk, the preceptor should cure his disciple. If the preceptor was ill, the disciple should cure the preceptor. In every case, the monks should take care of each other. If there was no preceptor, teacher, or disciple, the monks must cure for the ill

monk. The Buddhist emphasis on compassion finds natural expression in the care of the sick, and according to the Vinaya, Buddha himself stated “Whoever, monks, would nurse me, he should nurse the sick” (James J. Hughes, 1995: 105-106). The Buddha gave the detailed information as following:

“Priests! The preceptor should behave as following:

If the disciple was ill, the teacher should get up early and help cleaning teeth, manage a sitting place, give boiled rice in a clean bowl, then give medicine to the ill disciple. After that, the teacher must bring water for the ill monk to drink by holding the low position before keeping the bowl. When the disciple gets up, the teacher must move back the seat and clean the place.”

“Priests! The disciples should behave correctly to the teacher.

“Priests! If the teacher was sick, the disciple should also look after him until he gets well.”

“Priests! The monk teacher also should behave well to the disciples. The ways were as following:

“Priests! If the disciples get sick, the teacher should get up earlier and clean the place.” (Vin 7/367-382/165-176)

Whenever there were ill monks, the monks were the first people eager in providing treatment. This could happen when the monks knew that the regulation was that the monks should treat each other. In fact, Buddha identified the regulation for the monks systematically. It was the medical ethics of the Monkhood in order to ensure unity of the monks. This means that man is endowed with dignity because he is recognized as person in accordance with Magdalena Supaporn Daode’s (2011 : 34-35) opinion that all persons are equal in dignity and are to be respected from birth till death. Dignity of the person cannot be diminished and no one can talk of a less dignified human being or more dignified human being. The distinction or the separation between a person and life in modern philosophy where only a person is endowed with dignity and cannot be violated created a problem and doesn’t make sense. All human beings have the maximal dignity.

## 8. Conclusion

According to the seven-concept of enlightenment applied in the patients' treatment covering two aspects; the patients and the healthcare professionals, the researcher came up with the guidelines for those working related to patients' treatment such as doctors, nurses, and other related positions. The summaries were as follows:

1. Kindness: it was such the utmost significant issue because the healthcare professionals have to be kind to all patients by paying the sincere attention to all patients as they were the relatives, cousins or family members. By doing this, it would bring the happiness and tirelessness in work place; even in the terrible circumstances.

2. The genuine-healing methods: it was also significant for the healthcare professionals to perceive the appropriate or inappropriate issues for patients including the right methods and the concise healing methods in accordance with the patients' illnesses.

3. The psychological abilities: it could be started from the sympathy which meant to understand the psychological conditions of patients. The healthcare professionals should be able to control their emotions in creative ways and be able to encourage the patients to think positively.

It can be said that the patient treatment was such the significant sacrifice delivered to human being under the weak conditions of mind and body. Although it was considered as the difficult work, it was praised as the countless-worth responsibilities for the human being. Thus, the healthcare professionals should be proud of their works with the delight and the genuine happiness.

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