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What is healing?

What do we mean by healing? Do we mean healing of the physical body, healing of the psyche/soul/mind, or both of these. What is the connection between body and mind? Many modern healing techniques regard successful healing as the cure of the presenting physical problem, whether this be symptoms of cancer, AIDS, chronic fatigue syndrome, or some other illness. If the person does not recover from the presenting physical problem, or if that problem recurs or another develops at a later time, this may be regarded as failure. It is not uncommon in these situations for the therapist or organisation that has been helping the "sick" person to infer or state that the person must have done something wrong, that they haven't stuck strictly enough to the diet or meditated enough or done whatever else it was that they were supposed to do. In these situations the person can become very guilty, depressed or angry. In many cases, they just give up hope. To avoid these problems, it is necessary to consider a more comprehensive view of healing that incorporates not only physical healing but mental healing.

Mind is the creator

To understand healing from the Buddhist perspective, a useful starting point is to consider the Buddhist concept of mind. The mind is non-physical. It is formless, shapeless, colourless, genderless and has the ability to cognize or know. The basic nature of mind is pure, limitless and pervasive, like the sun shining unobstructedly in a clear sky. The problems or sickness we experience are like clouds in the sky obscuring the sun. Just as the clouds temporarily block the sun but are not of the same nature as the sun, our problems or sickness are temporary and the causes of them can be removed from the mind. From the Buddhist perspective, the mind is the creator of sickness and health. In fact, the mind is believed to be the creator of all of our problems. That is, the cause of disease is internal, not external.

Unlimited potential

You are probably familiar with the concept of karma, which literally means action. All of our actions lay down imprints on our mindstream which have the potential to ripen at some time in the future. These actions can be positive, negative or neutral. These karmic seeds are never lost. The negative ones can ripen at any time in the form of problems or sickness; the positive ones in the form of happiness, health or success. To heal present sickness, we have to engage in positive actions now. To prevent sickness occurring again in the future, we have to purify, or clear, the negative karmic imprints that remain on our mindstream. Karma is the creator of all happiness and

suffering. If we don't have negative karma we will not get sick or receive harm from others. Buddhism asserts that everything that happens to us now is the result of our previous actions, not only in this lifetime but in other lifetimes. What we do now determines what will happen to us in the future.

In terms of present and future healing, the main objective is to guard our own actions, or karma. This requires constant mindfulness and awareness of all the actions of our body, speech and mind. We should avoid carrying out any actions that are harmful to ourselves and to others. Buddhism is therefore a philosophy of total personal responsibility. We have the ability to control our destiny, including the state of our body and mind. Each one of us has unlimited potential - what we have to do is develop that potential.

Healthy mind, healthy body

Why do some people get ill while others remain in the best of health? Consider skin cancer. Of all the people who spend many hours out in the sun, some will develop skin cancer and others will not. The external situation is the same for all of them, but only some will be affected. The secondary cause of the skin cancer - the sun - is external, but the primary cause - the imprints laid down on the mindstream by previous actions - is internal.

Also, people with similar types of cancer will often respond quite differently to the same treatment, whether this be orthodox or alternative. Some will make a complete recovery. Some will recover temporarily and then develop a recurrence. Others will rapidly become worse and die. Logically one has to look to the mind for the cause of these differences.

Buddhism asserts that for lasting healing to occur, it is necessary to heal not only the current disease with medicines and other forms of treatment, but also the cause of the disease, which originates from the mind. If we do not heal or purify the mind, the sickness and problems will recur again and again.

This introduces the notion of "ultimate healing". By ridding the mind of all its accumulated "garbage", all of the previously committed negative actions and thoughts, and their imprints, we can be free of problems and sickness permanently. We can achieve ultimate healing - a state of permanent health and happiness. In order to heal the mind and hence the body, we have to eliminate negative thoughts and their imprints, and replace them with positive thoughts and imprints.

The inner enemy

The basic root of our problems and sickness is selfishness, what we can call the inner enemy. Selfishness causes us to engage in negative actions, which place negative imprints on the mindstream. These negative actions can be of body, speech or mind, such as thoughts of jealousy, anger and greed. Selfish thoughts also increase pride, which results in feelings of jealousy towards those higher than us, superiority towards those lower than us and competitiveness towards equals. These feelings in turn result in an unhappy mind, a mind that is without peace. On the other hand, thoughts and actions directed to the well-being of others bring happiness and peace to the mind.

Conscious living, conscious dying

It is important to consider what happens to us when we die. The Buddhist view is that at the time of death the subtle consciousness, which carries with it all the karmic imprints from previous lives, separates from the body. After spending up to forty-nine days in an intermediate state between lives, the consciousness enters the fertilised egg of its future mother at or near the moment of conception. New life then begins. We bring into our new life a long history of previous actions with the potential to ripen at any time or in any of a myriad ways. The state of mind at the time of death is vitally important and can have a considerable effect on the situation into which we are reborn. Hence the need to prepare well for death and to be able to approach our death with a peaceful, calm and controlled mind. Death itself can be natural, due to exhaustion of the lifespan, or untimely, due to certain obstacles. These obstacles arise from the mind and can be counteracted in different ways. One method commonly employed in Tibetan Buddhism to remove life obstacles is to save the lives of animals that would otherwise have been killed. For example, animals can be rescued from being slaughtered or live bait can be purchased and released. For those with a life threatening illness, it is important to understand that being free of that illness doesn't mean that you will have a long life. There are many causes of death and death can happen to anybody at any time.

Not just pills and potions

Tibetan medicine is popular and effective. It is mostly herbal medicine, but its uniqueness lies in the fact that in the course of its preparation it is blessed extensively with prayers and mantras, giving it more power. It is said that taking such medicine will either result in recovery, or, if the person is close to death, they will die quickly and painlessly. (Another theory, based on personal experience, is that it tastes so bad you want to recover quickly so that you can stop taking the medicine!)

Blessed pills and blessed water are also used extensively. The more spiritually developed the person carrying out the blessings or the healing practices, the more powerful is the healing result or potential. These pills often contain the relics of previous great meditators and saints, bestowing much power on the pills.

Many Tibetan lamas actually blow on the affected part of the body to effect healing or pain relief. I have seen a person with AIDS with intense leg pain have his pain disappear after a lama meditated intensely and blew on his leg for twenty minutes. Compassion is the power that heals.

Visualisation can also be very powerful healing. One method is to visualise a ball of white light above your head, with the light spreading in all directions. Imagine the light spreading through your body, completely dissolving away all sickness and problems. Concentrate on the image of your body as completely healed and in the nature of light.

This type of meditation is even more powerful when combined with visualising holy images and reciting mantras. I often tell my Christian patients to visualise the light as Jesus, with the light emanating from him.

In the Tibetan tradition, there are many Buddha figures (deities) which can be visualised while reciting their mantra. The Medicine Buddha; Chenrezig, or Avalokiteshvara (the Buddha of Compassion); or one of the long-life deities such as Amitabha are commonly used. Deities can be in

peaceful or wrathful aspects. The wrathful ones are often used to cure heavy disease such as AIDS.

If you are not comfortable with these images, you can use other objects such as crystals, or simply visualise all the universal healing energy absorbing into you, transforming your body into light, and imagine yourself as totally healed.

Over the centuries many people have used these methods and have recovered from their illnesses, even from conditions such as leprosy, paralysis and cancer. The aim of these practises is to heal the mind as well as the body, so that the diseases or problems will not recur in the future.

Also, many diseases are associated with spirit harm. Lamas and other practitioners will often recite certain prayers and mantras or engage in ceremonies to stop the spirit harm and allow the person to recover.

A seven year old girl I knew had petit-mal epilepsy as the result of spirit harm; the epilepsy disappeared after various rituals and prayers had been performed. Whenever she had an epileptic attack, the girl would see a frightening apparition coming towards her. After the initial prayers had been performed, however, her attacks lessened and she would see a brick wall between her and the frightening figure. This wall was the colour of a monk's robes. Eventually the attacks and visions disappeared altogether.

In summary, we can say that the essential ingredients in the healing process, for both the person doing the healing and the person being healed, are compassion, faith, and pure morality.

Changing our minds

Another powerful method of healing in Tibetan Buddhism is to meditate on the teachings known as thought transformation. These methods allow a person to see the problem or sickness as something positive rather than negative. A problem is only a problem if we label it a problem. If we look at a problem differently, we can see it as an opportunity to grow or to practice, and regard it as something positive. We can think that having this problem now ripens our previous karma, which does not then have to be experienced in the future.

If someone gets angry at us, we can choose to be angry in return or to be thankful to them for giving us the chance to practice patience and purify this particular karma. It takes a lot of practice to master these methods, but it can be done.

It is our concepts which often bring the greatest suffering and fear. For example, due to a set of signs and symptoms, the doctor gives the label 'AIDS' or 'cancer'. This can cause great distress in a person's mind, because they forget that it is only a label, that there is no truly existent, permanent AIDS or cancer. 'Death' is another label that can generate a lot of fear. But in reality 'death' is only a label for what happens when the consciousness separates from the body, and there is no real death from its own side. This also relates to our concept of 'I' and of all other phenomena. They are all just labels and have no true, independent existence.

Lama Zopa Rinpoche, a highly realised Tibetan Lama, says that the most powerful healing methods of all are those based on compassion, the wish to free other beings from their suffering. The compassionate mind - calm, peaceful, joyful and stress-free - is the ideal mental environment for healing. A mind of compassion stops our being totally

wrapped up in our own suffering situations. By reaching out to others we become aware of not just my pain but the pain (that is, the pain of all beings).

Many people find the following technique powerful and effective: think "By me experiencing this disease or pain or problem, may all the other beings in the world be free of this disease, pain or problem" or "I am experiencing this pain/sickness/problem on behalf of all living beings."

One voluntarily takes on suffering in order for others to be free of it. This is similar to the Christian concept of regarding one's suffering as sharing the suffering of Jesus on the cross. Even death can be used in this way: "By me experiencing death, may all other beings be freed from the fears and difficulties of the death process."

We have to ask ourselves "What is the purpose of my life? Why do I want to have good health and a long life?". The ultimate purpose of our life is to be of benefit to others. If we live longer and just create more negative karma, it is a waste of time.

Giving and taking is another powerful meditation. As you breathe in, visualise taking the suffering and the causes of suffering from all living beings, in the form of black smoke. When breathing in the black smoke, visualise smashing the black rock of selfishness at your heart, allowing compassion to manifest freely. As you breathe out, visualise breathing out white light that brings them happiness, enjoyment and wisdom.

Developing compassion is more important than having friends, wealth, education. Why? Because it is only compassion that guarantees a happy and peaceful mind, and it is the best thing to help us at the time of death

We can use our sickness and problems in a very powerful way for spiritual growth, resulting in the development of compassion and wisdom. The highest development of these qualities is the full realisation of our potential, the state of full enlightenment. Enlightenment brings great benefit to ourselves and allows us to work extensively for others. This is the state of ultimate healing.

I have outlined some of the concepts that are the basis of the Buddhist philosophy on healing. Many of these methods were taught by Lama Zopa Rinpoche at Tara Institute in Melbourne in August 1991 during the first course given by Lama Zopa specifically for people with life-threatening illnesses.

Some of these ideas may appear unusual at first, but please keep an open mind about them. If some of the ideas appear useful to you, please use them; if not, leave them aside.

May you achieve health and happiness.
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Healing Anger book. Read 35 reviews from the world's largest community for readers. All the world's major religions emphasize the importance of the pract...Â He approaches it from a Buddhist perspective, too. No disrespect towards the Dalai Lama, but it seems that maybe Thurman has been there himself. I'm sure the Dalai Lama has been angry, but he's the Dalai Lama!