Buddhism, Sri Lanka and Dermatology

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Origins of Buddhism in Sri Lanka

Buddhism originated in India. Gautama Buddha (Siddhartha) (563-483BC) (fig 2) is considered to be its founder. Buddhism was conveyed to many other nations (fig 2) during the reign of Emperor King Asoka’s era (124BC-232BC).

Buddhism became the main religion of Sri Lanka (fig 2) following the visit of Asoka (fig 2), a Buddhist priest and the son of King Asoka (250BC).

The complete Pali Canon7 describes 48 medical conditions including skin diseases. These include leprosy, eczemas, furunculosis, fungal and viral infections.

The Perfect Body

Lakkhana Sutta mentions 32 major and 80 minor physical characteristics of a human being. It specifies that a human is a “great man” if they possess body parts that are proportionate to one another.

Knowledge of Dermatology (anatomy and disease) in 500BC

Girimana Sutta refers to the human body and its diseases. This sutra describes what Buddha preached to his disciples when one of his priests, Giriminanda, suffered from a terminal illness.

This sutra describes the human body components of skin, nails, teeth, muscles, bones, bone marrow, heart, kidneys, liver, lung, spleen, and blood fluids. Skin is categorized as head hair and body hair. This may be the first description of plera and also the first description of vellus and terminal hair.

Girimana Sutta describes 48 medical conditions including skin diseases. These include leprosy, boils, abscesses, scurvy, ulcers, scabies, pustular eruptions, plethos, fistulae, colds, and sexually transmitted diseases. This may be the first description of these skin diseases.

There were no specific words in Sanskrit to describe these body parts and illnesses which suggest that these diseases may have been known well before 500BC.

Knowledge of Dermatology (symptoms and diseases) in 500BC

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Buddhist Medical Writings

Buddhist teachings were transferred down the generations through the oral traditions. These were written down on to leaves (fig 4) for the first time in 29-30BC in Sri Lanka. This leaf manuscript is known as the Tripitaka (Pali Canon) (fig 5).

The Buddhist medical texts have received relatively little attention. There are many writings of interest and relevance to Dermatology.

The First Description of Psychodermatology

Buddhism philosophy is centred on mind over matter and is open to reason and critical inquiry. “Karma” is believed to play a major role in the occurrence of some of the skin diseases.

Buddha is believed to have treated many people, disciples and civilians who suffered from skin diseases (fig 6). A Buddhist monk Puthajata Tissa once suffered from an unsightly skin rash consisting of multiple boils/ abscesses. Buddha nursed and cared for this sick monk and taught his disciples the importance of treating the sick. He stated “he who treats the sick treats me”.

In Glima sutta, Buddha highlights natural history of illnesses and discusses aspects of treatment. (table 1).

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