

Buddhism, Sri Lanka and Dermatology

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This study of the ancient medical writings of Buddhism and Sri Lanka illustrates learning in Dermatology that developed in parallel and in some cases in advance of knowledge elsewhere in the world.

Origins of Buddhism in Sri Lanka



Figure 1 Foot print of Buddha, 100CE⁷. Buddha was not sculptured until 100-200CE as a mark of respect. Prior to this foot-prints and Sanskrit symbols were used to depict Buddha and his features.

Buddhism originated in India. Gauthama Buddha (Siddhartha) (563- 483BC) (fig 1) is considered to be its founder. Buddhism was conveyed to many other nations (fig 2) during Indian Emperor King Asoka's era (304BC- 232BC).

Buddhism became the main religion of Sri Lanka (fig 2) following the visit of Mihindu (fig 3), a Buddhist priest and the son of King Asoka (250BC).



Figure 2 Buddhism was conveyed to many other nations during King Asoka's era (304BC-232BC)



Figure 3 Mihintale Rock Temple¹², Sri Lanka. Here King Devanampiyatissa (Sri Lanka 247-207BC) met Buddhist monk Mihindu from India. Thereafter, Buddhism played a major role in Sri Lankan civilisation.

Buddhist Medical Writings

Buddhist teachings were transferred down the generations through the oral tradition as sutras. They were written copied onto ola leaves (fig 4) for the first time in 29-30BC in Sri Lanka. This ola leaf manuscript is known as Thripitaka (Pali Canon) (fig 5).

The Buddhist medical teachings have received relatively little attention in the West. There are many writings of interest and relevance to Dermatology.



Figure 4 A chapter of Thripitaka (The Pali Canon) written on ola leaf¹¹ in the ancient Pali Language: the first written record of Buddhist teachings. Contains material of interest to medical historians.



Figure 5 The complete Pali Canon⁷. Each Buddhist temple has a copy for the Priests, scholars of the Pali language.

Knowledge of Dermatology (anatomy and disease) in 500BC

Girimananda Sutra¹ revolves around human body and illnesses. This sutra contains what Buddha preached to his disciples when one of his priests, Giriminanada suffered from a terminal illness.

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

Girimananda Sutra¹ describes 48 medical conditions including skin diseases. These include **leprosy, boils/abscesses, scrofula, ringworm, scabies, pustular eruptions, plethora, fistula and sexually transmitted diseases**. This may be the first descriptions of these skin diseases.

There were specific words in Sanskrit to describe these body parts and illnesses which suggest that these diseases may have been known well before 560BC.

The Perfect Body

Lakkhana Sutra² mentions 32 major and 80 minor physical characteristics of a human being who has the potential to be a "great man" (fig 6). It describes in intricate detail perfect proportions of the face, hands, chest, feet, skin, hair, eyes, teeth & tongue. The ideal of **one hair per follicle** and body hair curling clockwise are two of many intriguing observations in this sutra.

The description of height being equal to the arm span describes the proportions of the "Vitruvian Man" (fig 7). This opens the intriguing possibility that Da Vinci may have been influenced by Eastern writings.



Figure 6 A sculpture of Buddha with the physical characteristics of a "great man"(Mihintale, Sri Lanka)⁷.

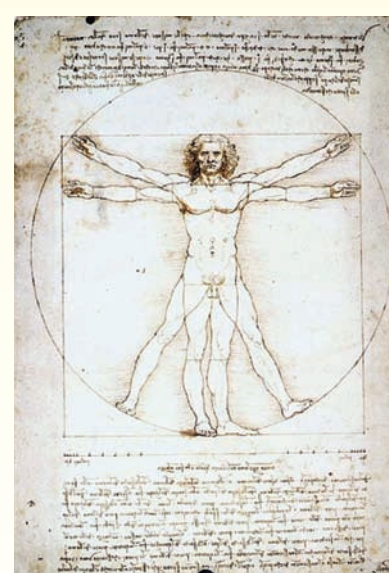


Figure 7 Leonardo da Vinci's (c.1490) "Vitruvian Man" is drawn with similar body proportions described in oldest Buddhist literature². Was this da Vinci's inspiration?

Oils and pastes in Dermatology recorded in 500BC

In **Bhesajyakandhakaya of Maha vagga paliya**⁶ fissured feet is mentioned as a specific disease entity. Treatment with specific oils (wana thel) and pastes are described. These may be the first descriptions of foot eczema and occlusion therapy.

Buddha: the first description of Dermatology nursing care

Buddha is believed to have treated many people, disciples and civilians who suffered from skin diseases (fig 8). A Buddhist monk **Putigatta tissa**⁸ 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 **Gilana suthra**⁵, Buddha highlights natural history of illnesses and discusses aspects of treatment. (table 1).

TYPES OF DISEASES	FOOD	NURSING	MEDICATION
1. Heal	With/ without food and nutrition	With/without nursing	With/ without medications
2. Heal	With food and nutrition	With nursing	With medicatio
3. Doesn't heal	With/ without food and nutrition	With/ without nursing	With/ without medications



Figure 8 Buddha treating the sick priest Puthigatta Tissa who suffered from a skin disease with multiple ulcers/erosions and purulent exudates¹¹.

Table 1 Disease classification according to natural history in early Buddhist manuscripts describes nursing as an important element of treatment⁵.

The first description of Psychodermatology

Buddhist 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.

Rohini⁹, the sister of Buddha's chief attendant Ananda was suffering from a skin disease and was ashamed to walk in public due to the stigma. Buddha linked her condition to anger and treated her by teaching her on how to control her emotions through controlling mind. This can be considered as the first reported practise of psychodermatology.

Early Sri Lankan texts describing skin diseases

Dhesheeya Chikthsa (4th century BC) was the indigenous medicine of Sri Lanka practised prior to the influences of Ayurveda from India.

Sri Lankan King Buddhadasa (340-398 CE) has been reported to have treated both humans and animals according to the manuscript **Mahavamsa**⁸ - The Great Chronicle- (5th century CE). (fig 9).

His comprehensive work on medicine was **Sarartha Sangrahaya**⁹ meaning "An Essence of Medicine- a compilation" (390 CE). The chapter 24 on skin diseases describes **psoriasis, syphilis, leprosy, eczemas, furunculosis, fungal and viral infections**.

Bhesajja Manjusawa¹⁰- "The Pot of Medicine" written by the Buddhist monk Chanawimala (13th century CE), describes **perianal fistula, hot and cold abscesses, elephantiasis, congenital skin diseases and diseases of mouth, eyes, and genital organs**.

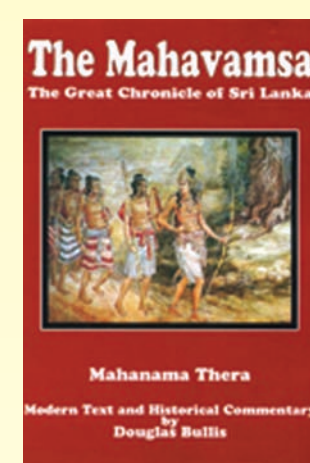


Figure 9 Mahavamsa⁸ - "The Great Chronicle" - describes civilisation in Sri Lanka (543BC - 361CE). It was written in 5th century CE by the Buddhist priest Mahanama.



Figure 10 A copy of the manuscript Sarartha Sangrahaya by Ven. Welivita Sri Saranankara Thero¹³ (1698- 1779).

Conclusions

This study shows that understanding of medicine developed in Buddhist Sri Lanka in parallel with that in Greek and Roman civilisations. Perhaps due to issues of translation, medical historians have, so far, paid little attention to the Pali writings.

This poster indicates particular areas of interest to dermatologists and medical historians.

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