

# **The Excellent Merits of Healing and Nursing the Sick**

**Translation of Venerable Yen Pei's talk, delivered in Mandarin,  
on 22 November 1971, on the 2<sup>nd</sup> anniversary of  
Singapore Buddhist Free Clinic**

In human life, sickness is very tormenting. It may be said that there is no suffering bitterer than that of sickness. Therefore, it is greatly meritorious and virtuous to provide the sick with medicines and treatment. It may also be said that there is no greater merit than that of nursing and healing the sick.

According to Buddhist teachings, there are four major forms of suffering in human life, namely the suffering of birth, old age, sickness and death. Of these four, it must be said that the suffering of sickness is much more severe than the other three. Separation through death is indeed most sorrowful, but a lingering sickness makes life even more full of inexpressible misery, when one can neither live well nor die. The suffering of birth and the suffering of death is over within a short time. The suffering of old age may span over a longer period of time, but if one remains physically healthy in old age, one will not experience too much agony. Yet, if one contracts a sickness or often gets afflicted with sicknesses, one will be unbearably tormented by the suffering involved.

During the Three Kingdoms (220 A.D. – 280 A.D.) era in China, there was a man called “The Reckless Zhang Fei” in the state of Shu Han. Being mighty and powerful, he may be said to fear nothing and nobody. He fought bravely in wars, always dashing forth regardless of dangers. Once, he even told people boldly, “I do not fear anything at all!”

When Zhang Fei said this, the regent Zhuge Liang (181 A.D. – 234 A.D.) unhurriedly wrote the Chinese character of “sickness” on his palm, then showed it to Zhang Fei and asked him, “Are you afraid of this?”

Upon seeing the character, Zhang Fei immediately said, “I dare not say that I am not afraid, as everything will be uneasy if one gets sick.”

Therefore, there is a Chinese saying, “A hero only fears the torment of sickness.”

When one is in good health, one may not appreciate its value, but once one experiences the torment of sickness, one knows how unbearable it is. If a pleasant condition arises which is, however, not conducive to recovery from sickness, one cannot enjoy it freely. On the contrary, an unpleasant condition may arise which one does not wish for, but for the sake of regaining health, one has no choice but to force oneself to accept it, such as undergoing a surgery. In particular, in the case of chronic diseases which are difficult to cure, one may lose one’s life as a result, so the suffering involved is even more tremendous!

The greatest misfortune during sickness is to encounter a doctor devoid of medical ethics, who is not skilful in his diagnosis of sicknesses, but has a way with extortion from patients. As a result, treatment is delayed and a patient might even lose his family fortune for the treatment. It is mentioned in Discourse on Medicine Buddha that “if the sick meets a doctor who prescribes wrong medicines, he meets with an untimely death”. It is lamentable that this often occurs in the world. There are many sicknesses which are unlikely to endanger human life, but result in death due to lack of proper and timely treatment.

Sickness attacks all people without discrimination. Whether one is rich or poor, of high status or low status, male or female, old or young, one can get afflicted with sickness if one is slightly careless, thus becoming thin and emaciated. Is there any greater agony than this in human life?

It is said in Discourse on the Extensive Play (Lalitavistara Sutra), "...sickness takes the vigour out of sentient beings, damaging their faculties, physical appearance and strength. It will drain one's wealth, grain and treasury to the last. Sickness constantly humiliates sentient beings, causing them harm and vexation, as well as spoils all pleasurable conditions. It torments them like the unbearably scorching sun."

Such is the torment of sickness, so we should "seek medication whenever we fall sick, or take active measures to prevent sickness". We must not take sickness lightly. The torment of sickness makes one troubled and unable to have peaceful happiness. Now we shall probe further: why do people fall sick?

Generally speaking, sickness is due to lack of moderation in food and drink, inadequate nutrition, poor hygiene, overexertion and various other reasons. Our bodies are but causal combinations of the Four Elements (earth, water, fire and air) and Five Aggregates (forms, sensations, perceptions, mental formations and consciousness), so it is absolutely impossible for us not to fall sick at all. It is said in Buddhist discourses, "Lack of regulation of one element can give rise to any of a hundred and one sicknesses; lack of regulation of the Four Elements can give rise to any of four hundred and four sicknesses." Regardless of the cause, sickness inevitably brings various forms of distress.

In general, the causes of sickness pertain to the present life. Buddhism does not deny various causes for sickness that exist in the present life, but further probes into the past and considers many sicknesses as the karmic results of past deeds of killing. It is often mentioned in Buddhist discourses that a person often falls sick or has a short life, due to the karmic results of killing committed in past lives. Therefore, when a person falls sick, he absolutely must not grumble or blame others.

If we do not acknowledge that sickness is caused by past deeds of killing, then what explanation can be offered for the constant strength and vigour of some people, while others are always bedridden with sickness and constantly associated with medicines? It is thus clear that although lack of proper healthcare is a major reason for present sickness, the strong influence of past karma (volitional actions) also cannot be overlooked. Killing is one cause for a short or sickly life. Buddha had also mentioned other causes for being sickly, which include arrogant lack of filial piety towards one's parents and teachers in past lives.

Among the ten chief disciples of Buddha, none was as often afflicted with sickness and pain as Shariputra, who was foremost in wisdom. Buddha investigated the cause of Shariputra's poor health and clearly explained that it was the karmic result of disrespect towards parents and teachers in many of his past lives. It is thus clear that for any sickness, one cannot just look at various causes in the present life. Past conduct is also involved in the arising of sickness.

Therefore, we should understand that sentient beings value their own lives and wish to live on. We should not harm sentient lives wantonly, going against their will to seek survival.

At the same time, we must not slight our parents and teachers disrespectfully, but instead should respect and support them. When our parents and teachers fall sick, we should do our best to take care of them and nurse them, so that they do not experience tremendous torment due to their sicknesses. If we fulfil this, we can overcome sicknesses and prolong our present lives. Even when we get reborn as humans in future lives, we shall also be full of vitality and enjoy good health with blissful happiness.

When a person falls sick, his whole body is in pain. He has no freedom of movement in all daily activities and needs to be given attentive care. At this time, regardless of whether the sick person is related to us or not, regardless of the relationship, we should support him with food and drink, clothing, bedding and medicines. We should do so with equanimity and without discrimination. It is especially important to provide medicines to cure his sickness until he recovers completely.

According to Four-Part Discipline, Buddha told the monks that “whoever wishes to make offerings to Buddha should make the offerings to the sick”. It is thus clear that Buddha placed great importance on relieving the sick.


According to Discourse on Buddha’s Visit to a Sick Monk Without Accepting an Elder’s Invitation, an elder in Shravasti kingdom of ancient India invited Buddha and the community of monks to his home for alms-offering. All the monks went to accept the alms offering, but Buddha did not. Instead, Buddha personally visited a sick monk. This sick monk was bedridden, with urine and faeces excreted on his bed. He could neither move his body nor take care of himself.

Buddha carried him up, cleaned his body, washed his bedding, bathed him and changed his clothes. Then, Buddha arranged clean bedding, carried the sick monk back to his bed, massaged his body and preached to offer him solace.

Thereafter, Buddha said to the other monks, “You all have relinquished your close connections, left your family members and come to me, for the purpose of leading a life of renunciation. In the monastic community, you only have relationships with teachers and fellow monks. Why do you not take care of fellow monks who fall sick?”

After rebuking the monks, Buddha manifested his golden body for all to witness and told them that His golden body was attained by virtue of nursing the sick. It did not arise for no reason. Buddha was exemplary in personally taking care of the sick monk with great compassion. If our family members or relatives fall sick, how could we leave them in the lurch, without caring for them?

Why was Buddha so considerate towards the sick? This was because Buddha “regarded the bodies of sentient beings as His own body, as well as their sicknesses as His own sickness”. Buddha always healed the mind-body ailments of sentient beings skilfully with great loving-kindness and compassion. Buddha thus constantly bore in mind the sicknesses of sentient beings. Since we venerate Buddha and practise His teachings, we should see sick people as if we see Buddha. We should do our best to relieve the sick, offer them appropriate medicines and provide them with things that they need. We should provide proper care in accordance with their wishes and enable them to recover fully. When a person is afflicted with sickness, he lives in agony, with each day passing slowly like a year. If he has a caregiver, this will certainly lighten his suffering.



In general, people have strong will to live on. In particular, a sick person treasures his life more than he usually does, as he has deep fears of degeneration after death. At this time of sickness, we should compassionately share Buddhist teachings with him to offer him solace, as well as take care of him so that he may recover quickly. In these ways, we not only nurse him back to health, but also prolong his life. This is greatly meritorious.

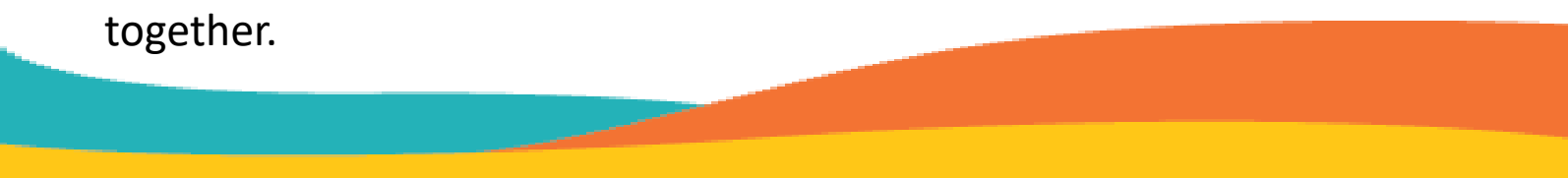
We not only should take care of sick people who live with us. When we walk on a road and happen to see a sick person by the roadside, we should go forward to take a look and make proper arrangements for him. It is inhuman to carry on with our journey and neglect sick people by the roadside.

Therefore, at any time and any place, when we encounter sick people, even if we are not acquainted with them, we should offer them proper relief.

Mahayana Buddhism and Theravada Buddhism hold different views with regard to nursing the sick.

In Mahayana Buddhism, a bodhisattva should take care of any sick person, as well as provide him with medicines and food. If a bodhisattva sees a sick person but does not offer relief, that goes against great compassion and he loses the wonderful function of eradicating suffering.

However, in Theravada Buddhism, care and relief of the sick is focused on teachers and spiritual friends, meaning monastic members who live together.



As they are spiritual companions who learn and practise Dharma together, if they do not take care of one another, who else can they depend upon? A grievous wrong is incurred, if any sickness leads to death due to lack of caregiver. Therefore, Buddha had repeatedly exhorted His disciples to nurse the sick.

In general, people are capable of caring for the sick, but the recovery of a sick person still depends on treatment with medicines. If neither the sick person nor the caregiver has money, what can be done?

In the Buddhist discourses and disciplinary rules, there is repeated emphasis on nursing the sick. The responsibility of caring for the sick is considerably great, so in contemporary society, hospital nurses have to undergo learning and training over a few years in order to be competent. This is because the survival of a patient lies in the hands of the caregiver. Any slight carelessness may lead to death of the patient.

During Tang Dynasty in China, Ch'an Master Zhi Yan set up an asylum for lepers in Stone Town. The patients were afflicted with leprosy, plague, or malignant sores such as scabies. Ch'an Master Zhi Yan stayed together with patients in the asylum. He not only explained the Buddhist teachings to offer them solace, but also took meticulous care of them. He sucked out pus and blood from their sores with his mouth, as well as cleansed the filth on their sores. When he later passed away in the asylum, the colour of his face did not change and an exotic fragrance pervaded the asylum for over ten days.

Ch'an Master Zhi Kuan, who also lived during Tang Dynasty, was full of loving-kindness and fond of charitable giving. In particular, he took initiatives to take care of the sick.

As long as he knew of any sick person who lacked caregiver and medical treatment, he would bring the sick person, whether a monastic member or lay follower, to his own dwelling, regardless of the distance. He personally took care of the sick person, without asking others to do it on his behalf.

If the patient had abscesses and could not get well due to accumulation of pus, the Ch'an Master could not bear to see the patient suffer such torment, so he sucked out the pus and blood in the abscess with his mouth. In this way, he enabled many people to recover, which was highly commendable!

The virtuous ones of ancient times disregarded their own safety in their endeavours to relieve the sick. Their altruistic spirit was truly exemplary. Moreover, it had been inspired by Buddha's teachings. The Buddhist discourses and disciplinary texts demonstrate, in all respects, Buddha's great compassion in empathising with and nursing the sick. Buddha also instructed His disciples to empathise with and nurse the sick.

According to a disciplinary text of Theravada Buddhism, a pious Buddhist called Visakha invited many monks to her home for alms-offering during a rains retreat. There was a monk who looked haggard and pallid. Even though he came to accept the alms-offering, he merely sat there and did not eat the food.

Seeing this, Visakha felt very puzzled, so she went up to the monk reverently and asked, "Venerable has come here compassionately to accept my alms-offering, but why doesn't Venerable partake of the food and drink?"

The monk who looked sickly replied, “I suffer from a serious disease which cannot be healed regardless of what I eat. However, someone told me that if I get the flesh of a living human as medicine, my sickness can be healed. Yet, that cannot be obtained, so I do not eat anything now.”

Hearing this, Visakha returned to her own room silently. In order to enable the sick monk to recover, she cut a piece of her flesh and then offered it to the monk reverently. After consuming it, the monk indeed recovered from the sickness. At that time when the monk became well, Visakha’s body also returned to its original, unwounded state, by virtue of her compassionate and reverent offering.

According to Discourse on Past Acts of Buddha, Shakyamuni Buddha was a prince in one past life when He was fulfilling the bodhisattva practices. The king contracted a grievous sickness. Even with treatment by all the eminent physicians in the kingdom, the king’s sickness did not show any improvement.

Subsequently, a physician said after observing the king’s condition, “His Majesty’s recovery is not hopeless. The problem lies in getting human flesh from someone who has never been angry. The king will recover from this sickness only if he consumes this.”

Hearing this, the king sent out his men everywhere to seek human flesh from one who has no anger, so that he may get well soon. However, how could they find anyone in this world who had never been angry? In the end, they indeed did not succeed in obtaining such human flesh. Seeing this, the prince thought, “Since birth, I have never been angry.


Now, my father is so seriously sick. If I do not try to heal him, who will save my father?" The prince hence cut his own flesh and offered it to his father, saying, "Most fortunately, I have obtained the flesh of a human who has never been angry. Please consume this immediately. It will certainly enable you to recover completely."

Hearing the prince say that he had obtained the flesh of a human who had never been angry, the king consumed it immediately, without asking about its source. Just as the physician said, within ten days, the king recovered fully from the sickness. This was entirely due to filial piety of the prince. By virtue of the prince's filial piety and the power of his compassion, his wound healed completely when the king recovered, as if his flesh had not been cut before.

The above demonstrates that bodhisattvas and the virtuous ones rescue the sick at the expense of themselves.

Even with advances in medical science in modern times, human sicknesses have not been reduced. We just have to take a look in various hospitals, which are full of patients tormented by sicknesses. Emulating Buddha's compassionate aspirations, various Buddhist organisations in our nation have established charitable clinics to help the sick. These charitable healthcare services depend on donations from Buddhist devotees. Their meritorious giving benefits vast numbers of sick people, by helping them to be free from entanglement in sickness. Their good deeds are thus very meaningful.

This is a long-term charitable cause. As long as there are sick people in society, our charitable healthcare facilities should be continually maintained to serve the needs of the sick.



In Mahayana Buddhism, the foremost duty of a bodhisattva-aspirant is to eradicate the suffering of sentient beings and enable them to gain peaceful happiness. In life, the greatest suffering is none other than that of sickness, while the greatest happiness is none other than that of good health. One who alleviates the suffering of sick people, regardless of whether they are close or distant in relation, whether they are rich or poor, truly puts the bodhisattva spirit into practice!

How could we be indifferent to the sick? If someone is suffering in sickness, how could you leave him in the lurch? Where is your compassion then?

It is said in Vast Collection of the Essence of Buddhist Discipline for Lay Followers, “The competent ones should offer relief and cure, while those who are not competent should entrust others to do so. If one stays far away as if one does not see or hear the sick, wherefore lies one’s loving-kindness and compassion?”

Nobody is willing to fall sick. In the absence of sickness, one can enjoy a healthy life, but it is impossible for people not to get sick. Therefore, when we discover symptoms of sickness in certain parts of our bodies, we ought to seek medical advice immediately, so as not to let the condition deteriorate further. We are needed in society to do many things. Without a healthy physique, even if you have special abilities, you will not be able to fulfil your ambition and make contributions to the masses in society. Hence, one must pay particular attention to one’s mind-body and seek timely medical treatment in times of sickness, so as to live happily with mind-body wellness.

