

BOOK REVIEW

Meena Talim: Foundations of the Science of Medicine and Surgery in Buddhist India

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“Foundations of the Science of Medicine and Surgery in Buddhist India” is a book written by Dr. Meena Talim who is a retired Professor and Head of the Department of Ancient Indian Culture and Pāli, St. Xavier’s College, Mumbai, Maharashtra, India. She is the first person to be awarded Ph.D. in Pāli from the prestigious University of Mumbai. She has guided post-doctoral projects of the scholars from Mumbai and Pune Universities. Now she is the guide for Ph.D. in Ancient Indian Culture and Pāli at Mumbai University, Mumbai, Honorary Professor at K. J. Somaiya Centre for Buddhist Studies, Mumbai, Visiting Professor at University of Mumbai for M. A. (Pāli) and M. Phil. (Pāli) degrees. She has contributed nearly 100 research papers to Indological magazines, and actively participated in national and international seminars and conferences. She has written 7 books for children out of which “King Asoka” won N. C. H. R. T. prize in 1975 in addition to 6 more books for those who are interested in Pāli, Buddhism and Ancient Indian Culture. One of them is “The Foundations of the Science of Medicine and Surgery in Buddhist India” published by Buddhist World Press, New Delhi, India, whose editorial board consists of the 7 eminent personalities – Prof. Sacchidan and Sahani, D. C. Ahir, Dr. K. L. Hazra, Prof A. K. Narain, Dr. Andrea Loseries, Prof S. Pathak and Dr. C. D. Naik.

Prof. Dr. Meena Talim’s commitment was made to Dr. I. B. Horner, former President, Pāli Text Society, Oxford in 1967. The author had written 2 articles viz. “Ancient Indian Medicine according to Buddhist Sources” and ‘Surgery and Surgical Instruments in Buddhist Era’ which were appreciated by the latter in her letter dated 6th September, 1967 in the following words:

Your article on surgery and surgical instruments is also most interesting. Perhaps you’ll collect your articles, expand them a little and make a book.

Prof. Dr. Meena Talim has suffixed the caption as “Buddhist India” in the sense that it would convey a specific period of ancient India, a period that had dominated the Buddhist ethos in the history of ancient India. This period approximately falls between the time of the Buddha (6th century BCE and the rule of King Harshavardhana, 7th century CE). It

seems that she has followed the footsteps of the great scholar of Buddhism, Dr. T. W. Rhys Davids, who has labeled his historical work of the same period as “Buddhist India”. The author does not show at any place, her intention to injure anybody and her presentation is purely of an academic nature. Neither has she intended to dethrone present glory and popularity of Buddhism.

This monograph is divided into 5 chapters as follows.

Chapter 1

The first chapter – “Medicine and its Type” narrates medicines. It explains how to use these medicines for different diseases to maintain good health. All the medicines are made of natural resources mostly plants. Botanical words of the medicinal plants are mentioned wherever necessary. I am wonderstruck to know that she, being a philosopher and a guide in the faculty of Arts, knows botanical names of the medicinal plants. One may find thirty types of medicines and their applications in this chapter. Ghee, butter, oil, honey and molasses were commonly used as medicine. In addition Prof. Dr. Meena Talim has mentioned 30 types of medicines and 4 types of phases or durations for partaking medicine observed in the Buddhist era, which are followed by modern doctors in their prescriptions. Importance is given to the proper diet to keep one’s body sound. 62 types of health drinks and their preparations have been discovered for the first time. Many a time anecdotes are presented to make it more explicit and interesting.

Chapter 2

It is entitled “Diseases and Remedies”. It narrates fifty types of diseases out of which seventeen types of diseases –headache (*sisābhitāpo*), stomachache, bile (*pitta*), arthritis, rheumatism (*angavāto*), cracks, skin disease (*tacābādha*), leprosy, jaundice, constipation (*malabaddha*), dysentery (*pakkhandika*), snake-bite, eye-disease, ear-disease, fistula (*bhagandalābādho*), diabetes (*madhumeha*) and mental disease (*cetasikarogo*) have been studied intensively. Epidemic diseases as well as uncommon diseases have also been mentioned. They are investigated and narrated along with prescriptions of medicines. Practical evidences are narrated in this chapter. Many a times for one type of disease, patients are treated with different therapies namely medicinal and surgical therapies depending upon diagnoses. Similarly for one type of disease two or three types of medicines are prescribed for different patients. Here diagnosis of the doctor is important. Rare types of diseases such as inhuman diseases and uncommon diseases are studied. Generally

there were some people who lived up to 60 years and very few people lived over 100 years. Mahākassapa, Ānanda Anuruddha, Bakula, all the 4 monks and Visākhā, the householder lived for more than a century. All of them were happy till the end of their lives because they were following the *Dhamma*. The life of a person increases or decreases owing to happiness, seasons and diet one takes.

Observations on the wonders of sexology such as hermaphrodites and eunuchs etc. have been narrated only from an information point of view. Hermaphrodites mentioned in this monographs are the human beings with both types of sexual organs but could be classified as male hermaphrodite and female hermaphrodite depending upon how they respond to sex. There are five types of eunuchs. Attempts to find out reasons for them have also been studied by the author. I think these observations are very laudable as so far no one has taken note of sexology.

Chapter 3

It is heartening that the Pāli literature could record “Surgery and Surgical Instruments”. It explores surgeries which were carried out in Buddhist India. Surgeries carried out in 11 types of diseases have been located and detailed information about them has been narrated. This chapter records the knowledge of the surgical instruments used in ancient India. Prof. Dr. Meena Talim has divided the chapter into 2 parts – Part I Surgery and Part II Surgical Instruments. Some scholars like to remark without any reason mostly as an *orbiter dictum* that the fall of science of surgery was because of *ahimsā* taught by the Buddha. It shows their ignorance of Indian History and of Buddhism and perhaps desire for making false charges. Surgery was a treatment for an ailing person in order to help him get rid of pain.

The author has discussed the causes of the decline of knowledge of surgery and categorically emphasized that Buddhism is not responsible for such decline. The Buddha never discouraged surgeons who were householders. Jīvaka who graduated (*snātaka*) from Takkaśilā University, was a devout Buddhist and a renowned royal physician and surgeon, but he was never advised by the Buddha to discard surgery. On the other hand the Buddha allowed Jīvaka to perform a surgery on his foot. There are many instances in the life of the Buddha that indicate that he was never against surgery. The Buddha advised children who were blind by birth to go for surgery. So surgery was advanced to such an extent in the Buddhist era that blind people by birth could see the beautiful world after surgical operations. There is an example of the well

trained and experienced surgeon in Sivi Jātaka (No. 499), who preferred not to use surgical instruments for removal of eyes, indicating thereby that priority and importance was given for treatment of a disease by medicine rather than operating and damaging a tissue. The monk Nāgasena of the 1st century praises surgeons. At times the author has taken the help of Charak and Susruta to understand them. Susruta, who was the noble physician in the court of king Kaniska, is supposed to be the father of Ayurveda. The author has discussed 3 methods that a surgeon pursues in modern operations viz. pre-operative (*pubbakamma*), operative (*padhānakamma*) and post-operative (*pacchakamma*), which were practised by the surgeons like Jīvaka Komārabhacca of the ancient Buddhist era. An example of the cranial surgery on a certain merchant of Rājagaha narrated in the *Mahāvagga* is given to make the readers understand that even complicated surgeries were performed by him. Surgeries on fistula (*bhagandalābādho*), cranial surgery (*sisābādho*), hernia, foot, rheumatism, boil, abscess, knotty boil, wounds, arrow-stricken patient (*sarābādho*) and hydrocele are narrated.

It is really notable that the author has found surgical instruments from Pāli literary sources and given illustrations. According to Susruta there are one hundred and five surgical instruments. The author has discovered seventy one surgical instruments found in the Pāli literature, which have been line-drawn with intuition and from Pāli sources. The surgical instruments were made of iron (*ayo*), silver, gold, tin (*tipu*), lead, copper (*tambaloha*) a kind of copper (*vekantaka*), vessels of wood and clay. *Nakhasattha*, *vatthiyanta*, *suci*, *salākā*, *pharasu*, *kuddāla*, *pothanikā*, *lonasakkharikā*, *kusapatta*, *satthakanī*, *yantamukha-satta*, *ulūka*, *antamukha-satta*, *kuñcika*, *lohacakkalaka*, *phaladeepa*, *deepa*, *dīparukka*, *deepakapallikā*, *jalūka*, *natthudāni*, *musala* and *ukkhaliare* are some of the seventy one kinds of instruments. A glossary of surgical instruments is given at the end of this book.

Chapter 4

This chapter is on “Diseases of Women” It is mainly based on gynecological issues. Prof. Dr. Meena Talim has made her best efforts to find information on the diseases of women in the Pāli literature. She has collected tid-bits about this specialized branch of medical science and presented them in this chapter. The author is surprised to find that the topic was systematically and enthusiastically studied in the Buddhist Era.

Most of the diseases of women are related to gynaecology. So she started the chapter with “*Utusavanā*”– menstruation. At this stage of life a woman faces some difficulties which are explained here.

The methods of contraceptive used by the people are also mentioned here. The contraceptives were made of 4 types namely wax / resin, wood, flour and clay or mud. A list of 11 types of deformities of women is given, who can't conceive.

The chapter narrates information about barrenness of women. It is heartening to observe that a very positive aspect has been established and a ray of hope is kindled in the minds of such women. It is mentioned that “no woman in this world is barren”, every woman has the capacity to bear a child. However, there are certain causes that hinder conception and they are to be rectified. These causes are not only narrated in detail but also information is given as to how to activate conception. This is a boon to barren women. It is also mentioned that viviparous creation was also known to them. This is a very advanced type of technology. We can imagine how advanced Buddhist India was! The portion indicating 7 points about conception without sexual intercourse (*ajjhācāra*) can't be totally agreed on by the students of science. These points might have been added to *Samantapasādikā* by pseudo monks while it was being compiled because the Buddha has clearly stated that birth of a child is a scientific process. Besides we have information about pregnancy, miscarriage and birth of a child. There are 4 types of delivery. One of the types is when the child comes out of the vagina keeping the head upward, feet downward and both the hands spreading out, with open eyes. This type is very painful and this might be the reason why Mahāmāyā died on the seventh day after the birth of Siddhartha Gotama in a standing position. She also states that Pāli sources wrongly conceived the notion that Mahāmāyā died because her uterus was a holy place which no other creature can occupy. The author authoritatively states the way he was born and puts forth her opinion against such superstition. Thus causes of death of queen Mahāmāyā, the mother of Siddhartha, are also mentioned in this chapter. I appreciate her confidence in writing the scientific truth to which I fully agree. This could be the reason why he could touch the earth with his feet immediately after his birth. There were pediatricians (*dāraṅgikicchakā*) to look after children. An interesting survey of an infant till it grows up to ten years, as found in *Mugapakkha Jātaka*, is reproduced here. Perhaps it is the first time such a type of research work has been done about women from the pious pages of Pāli literature.

Chapter 5

This chapter deals with “Nursing, Hospitals and Homes of Destitutes”. Nursing was considered an important aspect of medicine in Buddhist India. We get information about it in Pāli literature. The message given

to us is that a patient needs kind help on humanitarian grounds and it should be provided to him, whether the patient is your kith and kin or not. Most of these instructions about nursing are provided by the Buddha himself. One can understand the way nursing was performed in hospitals and there was a class of attendants mentioned in the *nikāya[s]*. Nursing as an important faculty of medical science is a great asset to physicians and surgeons. The Buddha always encouraged the order to nurse their fellow brethren. Information gathered from the Vinaya Piṭaka indicates that 5 types of help could be provided to sick monks. The Buddha had recommended that they should be provided with proper food, medicine and nursing to enable them to get rid of the diseases at the earliest. *Mahāvagga* has mentioned 5 rules for sick monks while *Cullavagga* indicates 12 allowances for them. Allowances to nuns also are mentioned in the Pāli literature. *Patimokkha* rules have relaxed some rules for ailing nuns. They are mentioned in *Pārājika*, *Sanghādidesa*, *Nisaggiya*, *Pācittiya*, *Patidesaniya*, and *Sekhiya* rules. In modern times we have separate wards in hospitals for different types of patients. Monks and nuns suffering from different diseases were given specific areas depending upon their needs in Nursing Homes or hospitals (*gilānasālā*). There were *Osadhālaya* or *Bhesajjāgara* or *Bhesajjālaya* – a house where medicines were stored which were very useful to ailing persons. There were also dispensaries (*vicikicchā* or *cikicchā*) where diagnosis was made and treatment along with medicines were given to sick persons. Health-care of the people was not neglected. There seem to be a group of elderly monks who supervised the condition of ailing monks in a capacity of “*gilānapucchakā*”. *Āṅguttaranikāya* mentions 2 types of attendants, viz., good and bad types depending upon how they serve patients. There were also senior attendants and junior attendants. The senior attendants were considered as ideals to serve patients. Interestingly we are also apprised of “Houses of the Destitute” (*anāthasālā*). In these houses of destitute men but rarely women, criminals, dacoits or king’s defaulters were kept with their hands and feet cut off; with no one to look after them. They were laid down in such a pitiful condition that they were not provided with food, medicine or nursing. So naturally they were awaiting death. Hence, out of compassion, monks and some lay devotees used to visit them and serve them. The analytical approach of the author is very convincing.

Prof. Dr. Meena Talim has labouriously worked on the topic i.e. “Foundations of the Science of Medicine and Surgery in Buddhist India” which enumerates for the first time nearly more than thousand years (6th BCE to 7th CE) of history of the Ancient Indian Science of Medicine and Surgery. A thorough, exhaustive and historical record of medicament has been presented on the basis of original sources. Her scrupulous and

methodical survey throws a flood of light on various unexplored areas such as; thirty types of medicines, sixty two types of health-drinks, fifty types of diseases, out of which seventeen types are studied intensively, rare diseases, surgery for eleven types of diseases, seventy one surgical instruments; diseases of women, causes of barrenness, conception, contraceptives, pregnancy, birth of a child, nursing, hospitals and attendants, houses of destitute and many such allied topics.

The book written by Prof. Dr. Meena Talim “The Foundations of the Science of Medicine and Surgery in Buddhist India” has potential credibility to create interest in the minds of people of all sections of society. It is a new, challenging, virgin interdisciplinary monograph, honestly and sincerely undertaken by her. The author’s writing stands the test of researchers and it surpasses all controversial writings relating to the responsibility of Buddhism regarding medicine and surgery. Her work is praiseworthy. It indicates the tremendous efforts taken by her in gathering the scattered information of medicine and surgery in the Pāli literature. I am sure it will serve to be a precious possession for those who are interested in the History of Medicine, Buddhism, Pāli and Ancient Indian Culture.

Prof. Dr. Meena Talim’s research is to find out the hidden truth of the origin, growth and glory of various branches of medical science and their relation to the maintenance of health common to all humanity.