

Health and Fitness of Buddhists in the Kathmandu Valley

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Abstract

This study, entitled "Health and Fitness of Buddhists in the Kathmandu Valley," was carried out to identify the techniques for achieving good health and physical fitness in Buddhists. The necessary information was taken from the eleven monasteries and Bihar in the Kathmandu Valley. The major sources of data were primary and secondary. This study was based on an explanatory research design. Buddhism strongly believes that human characteristics like greed, anger, and ignorance are the three most serious psychological diseases. Buddha also presented his teachings on avoiding all evil, killing and harming living beings, cultivating good and cleansing one's mind. It is very important to achieve good health and physical fitness. Through meditation and walking meditation, the body achieves a greater state of balance, physical conditions improve, fighting against diseases is regulated, and breathing is regulated. Our minds become focused, clear, and organized. Unnecessary desires and improper thoughts are eliminated. Therefore, the researcher has concluded that Buddhist rules and the code of conduct are the best ways to achieve good physical, mental, and spiritual health and fitness.

Keywords: *Health, Physical Fitness, Meditation, Exercise, Buddhism, and Mental Health.*

Introduction

Suffering (Dukkha) is an inseparable part of human life. It is illustrated in the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path as the fundamental teaching of Buddhism. Buddhist teaching points out that all aspects of human life consist of suffering, or *Dukkha*. All human beings have experienced sickness, both mentally and physically, as long as they are alive, which they have not yet eliminated completely. Malice, jealousy, anger, illness, fear, anxiety, doubt, etc. are psychological issues that create physical and mental health problems. Physical illnesses can be easily detected and cured, but mental illnesses are

much more dangerous and create more miserable conditions than physical illnesses.

Health is wealth; therefore, we should keep both mind and body healthy and fit. The health of a person depends on physical exercise, meditation, and a balanced diet. Physical exercise is the practice of preventing various diseases and illnesses (Vaidya, 2005). Buddhist dharma is a better way to make the body and mind healthy and fit. The human mind and body are interdependent. A healthy body influences a healthy mind, and a healthy mind influences a healthy body. Buddha's teaching is focused on impermanence, suffering, and the non-self. His teaching also emphasises the importance of health (Vaidya, 2005). In this context, the famous philosopher Plato said, A healthy body is a healthy mind. A healthy mind is able to judge, make decisions, examine ourselves, clearly identify the nature of our obstacles, and work to resolve them. The essence of his teaching is to bring peace and happiness into one's life. The ultimate goal of Buddhism is to get rid of miseries and find liberation by attaining a supramundane state (Shakya, 2011). In regard to health, Buddha said, *Arogya parama labha*, which means health is the highest gain. In monastic rules, diet, taking medicine, cleaning the rooms, cutting nails, brushing teeth, water management, meditation, etc. are mentioned for achieving good physical and mental health (Tuladhar, 2009).

In Buddhism, the monastic rules that govern the lives of Buddhist monks contain the codification of health practice. It was the first model of health care practice (Tuladhar, 2009). The medicine practices are performed to care for diseases in Buddhist monasteries and Bihar. The Buddha realised that the life of the dispensation depended on the good health of the monks. All the monks, including him, should be in good and sound health for the welfare and liberation of all beings. For this reason, He gave extreme importance to keeping monks healthy. He always paid sincere attention to keeping the monks free from diseases and also paid due attention to keeping the dwelling place neat and clean, which helped protect the monks and nuns from communicable and contagious diseases (Shakya, 2011).

The Buddha was affectionate and devoted to his disciples. He instructed the monks present there to give serious thought to all forms of sickness that might occur in life and also emphasised the need to provide health services selflessly, which is regarded as the highest service among all the services (Dhammanada, 1993).

Human characteristics such as greed, anger, and ignorance are understood as the three serious psychological diseases. The Buddha taught that greed could be cured by the contemplation of impurity, anger by the contemplation and

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practice of kindness, and ignorance by the contemplation of the true nature of all things and the cultivation of wisdom. These are the medications that the Buddha encouraged everyone to use in order to heal diseases of both body and mind (Yun, 2016).

Chinese medicine illustrates seven internal and six external causes of diseases. Happiness, anger, anxiety, a brooding mind, sadness, fear, and shock are the internal ones, and coldness, summer heat, dryness, heat, dampness, and wind are the external causes of diseases. The seven internal elements, also referred to as emotions, are believed to cause illness because they directly impair the healthy functioning of our five main organs (i.e., the heart, liver, lungs, spleen, and kidneys). Extreme levels of either happiness or fear damage the heart; anger harms the liver; anxiety harms the lungs; a brooding mind affects the spleen; and shock hurts the kidneys (Yun, 2016). Therefore, the researcher concluded that healthy and balanced emotion is essential to maintaining physical and mental health.

Methodology

The researcher adopted an explanatory research design. The populations of this study were eleven Buddhist people selected from the purposive sampling method from eleven Monasteries and Bihar in the Kathmandu Valley. The researcher had applied in-depth interviews and observation for data collection. After collecting the qualitative data, the researcher analysed it with all previous incidents with the help of a literature review and theoretical framework. The important step in analysing qualitative data is selective coding. In this step, the researcher treats the various codes and relates them to each other's statements. This is the final stage of making analytical sense of the data, creating a storyline around which all other codes and categories are integrated.

Result and Discussion

Nhucche Ratna Tuladhar (2009) illustrated that illness is caused either by internal or external causes and conditions. Path of Purification (*Visuddhimagga*) and other theories mentioned various causes of illness, which can be divided into some main groups:

Consequences of greed, anger and ignorance

Greed is an innate human tendency. It can be defined as an improper and excessive desire for something. For example, if a person cannot satisfy his ideal meal and wants to overeat, this type of desire can cause obesity, fatigue, and heart problems. Yun (20016) states, "*In Buddhist health theory, those who*

are too attached to physical appearance will suffer from diseases of the liver. Those who are too attached to sounds will suffer from kidney diseases. Those who are too attached to aromas will suffer from lung diseases. Those who are too attached to taste will suffer from heart disease. And those who are too attached to the sensation of touch will suffer from spleen diseases." Similarly, Dhammapada verse 199 illustrates greed: *"Let us live happily, free from greed among the greedy. Among men who are greedy, let us dwell free from greed"* (Vaidya, 2005). Therefore, in order to maintain optimum physical and mental health, we should follow the middle way to approach sleeping, eating, and exercising appropriately.

Anger is the most poisonous thing for health. In this context, Yun (2016) states that, *"Anger causes poor circulation, which can have devastating effects on the entire body. When disconcerted emotions decrease and the patient is able to experience a sense of peacefulness, getting better is both easier and faster. Anger and hatred are particularly detrimental to the healing process and, in fact, often worsen the problem"*. Similarly, Dhammapada verse 222 also illustrates anger, *"He who controls his rising anger as a rolling chariot, his I call the real charioteer; others only hold the reins."* Therefore, we must control our anger in the actual situation and at the appropriate time; it makes our lives easy and meaningful. It also brings happiness, an ideal personality, peace, and mental satisfaction to our lives.

Ignorance is a psychological disease that is caused by unhappiness, anxiety, anger, and other emotions. Vaidya (2005) illustrated, *"If the body is suffered by extreme emotions for a long period of time, it helps to make emotional imbalance and affect various psychological diseases"*. Ignorance is also an innate tendency, but it can be improved by knowledge and skills of life. Vaidya (2005) illustrates many ways to minimise ignorance.

"There are eighty-four thousand methods that are used to cure eighty-four thousand illnesses. For instance, the Buddha taught that to eliminate greed, one could use the contemplation of impurity. Once a group of people meditates in a polluted environment, they will experience a decrease in desire. The Buddha taught people afflicted with anger or hatred to practice universal kindness and compassion in order to reduce their hostility. In doing so, they will understand that getting angry is not an appropriate or helpful response. Gradually, their angry words and thoughts will dissipate. If people are ignorant, they should contemplate cause and effect and the law of impermanence to help them nurture the mindset of non-attachment. Nothing arises outside of dependent origination, and nothing that arises lasts forever; all phenomena will one day cease to exist".

Imbalanced emotions are harmful for our physical as well as mental health. Uncontrolled emotions are poisonous for good health; they play a vital role in causing high blood pressure and heart diseases. If we control our emotions and reduce our temper, we will be able to keep our body and mind healthy. One of the respondents said, *"Health and physical fitness help to bring positive impact on students and people's physical, mental, social, emotional, and spiritual health by acquiring some type of supportive relationship and role model with friends, family, and neighbours."* Another respondent said, *"Physical exercise and sports activities are strategies for physical fitness, mental ability, social skills, and opportunities for engagement with interested physical activities and exercises. It provides constructive and qualitative efforts for health and fitness"*. Better health, disease prevention, and body fitness are highly valued in Buddha's teaching. Buddha recommended environmental sanitation, hygiene, safe drinking water, healthy food habits, regular meditation, exercises, etc. for good healthcare and physical fitness practises.

Four elements for health and fitness

According to Buddhism, the body is composed of earth, water, fire, and wind. Our soul is reborn in one of the six realms of existence on Earth (Shakya, 2011). Chinese medicine believes the body is comprised of a unique system of subsidiary channels that transmit vital energy, blood, nutrients, and other substances through the five organs and six internal regions in one's body. When this complex circulatory system is flowing properly, the four elements are in balance, the major organs of the human body can perform their essential functions, and the body remains healthy and fit.

The above-mentioned four elements are able to cause many diseases. For example, the earth element is related to diseases that make the body become heavy, stiff, and painful, such as arthritis; the water element afflicts the body with diarrhoea, stomach aches, and difficult digestion; the fire element causes fever, constipation, and problems urinating; and lastly, the wind element is related to breathing difficulties and vomiting (Tuladhar, 2009).

Diseases and illnesses depend on our food, eating habits, and environment, so we should eat food according to the season and conditions of our body. Seasonal changes are two important factors in maintaining balance among the four elements and circulating blood through our bodies. Therefore, our food and eating practices should be considered in accordance with the seasons and weather; it makes our bodies healthy, fit, and balanced.

Food for health and fitness

Food is a necessity for the physical and mental growth and development of people. The required energy is obtained from various foods (Shakya, 2011). It means all living beings depend on food. Balanced, fresh, and hygienic food is needed for all living beings to grow well, stay healthy, and work hard, but excessive food may be the cause of diseases. Many illnesses come from not eating sufficient food (Yun, 20016). Buddha also said that when a person suffers from diseases, one or more medications may be necessary for curing them and keeping them healthy for a period of time. The illness of hunger will come back over and over again until the time of death. We are always only one or two meals away from the discomfort of hunger. Regarding food, there is a famous Chinese proverb, "Troubles are caused by the words flowing out of the mouth, and illness is caused by the food going into the mouth". Using caution and moderation in what we consume is an important practice for good health (Vaidya, 2005).

In pursuit of truth, Siddhartha Gautam practised meditation without taking food. His body became weak and feeble, and he couldn't concentrate properly on his body and mind. Only later, when he accepted the offer of a bowl of milk from a lady devotee, Sujata, could he rejuvenate his body. He gained energy and finally accomplished his goal. Thus, following the middle path, i.e., taking a moderate quantity of food, he was successful in attaining enlightenment and becoming Buddha.

Exercise for health and fitness

Buddha recommended physical exercises for maintaining good physical and mental health. He emphasised walking meditation for physical exercise. He also walked every day for maintaining good health and fitness of the body. Buddha used to walk sixty to seventy kilometres regularly for the propagation of his teaching (Jha, 2011). When there are special people for meeting, he wants to see them walking the entire distance. The alms round in the fore noon usually makes a monk walk around a village, sometimes in more than one village. In the very first exhortation, the Buddha said to his first group of disciples, "Walk, monks, on tour for the blessing of the many folks, for the happiness of the folk, out of compassion for the world, for the welfare, the blessing, and the happiness of gods and men" (Ratnapala, 1993). Walking a considerable distance each day became an integral part of the monks' lives. Surendra Kumar Shakya illustrated physical exercise in his master's degree thesis (Shakya, 2011). One of the respondents said, "*Physical exercise and sport activity help to build and maintain healthy bones, muscles, and joints, make people free from chronic diseases, and improve their stamina. Similarly,*

it promotes psychological well-being, and reduces stress, anxiety, and depression".

Regarding physical exercise, Buddha prescribed the rules of cleaning the rooms and monastery and walking up and down to be healthy and fit. If monks clean the rooms and monastery, it is a kind of physical exercise that helps to maintain cleanliness and neatness. Similarly, walking up and down helps to reduce overweight and other illnesses; it is also a kind of physical exercise.

Meditation for health and fitness

Meditative practice is very useful for maintaining good health and physical fitness. This meditation, as practised by Lord Buddha and the sages who have followed him, may be summed up as one pointedness of mind, though this is not attained by most people without a great deal of effort. Meditation is a better way to achieve good physical and mental health. Nowadays, many Buddhists practise meditation every day. They believe that meditation concentrates on psychological and physiological well-being. Webb (2008) illustrated the benefits of meditation: *"Physical exercise increases energy, prolongs the prime years of life, improves blood circulation, and renews the endocrine system. Through meditation, the body achieves a greater state of balance, and breathing is regulated. Our minds become focused, clear, and organised. Desires are dissolved, and improper thoughts are eliminated. When our minds are clear and focused at all times, even as we walk, sit, and sleep, we will be calm and peaceful, which eventually results in health and fitness"*.

Mindfulness plays a very important part in the Buddhist way of life, not only in sitting practise but also in daily life. In the latter, it is the quality of carefulness, both in respect of things such as possessions or the action of one's body and of mental stages, as when a Buddhist guards himself with mindfulness so that unskillful states decline or are not permitted to arise and skillful states are increased and made stable (Yun, 2016). Buddhists are taught in great detail how to be mindful of the body, its movements and position, its impermanence and decay, and the patchwork nature of the feelings: pleasant, painful, and neither pleasant nor painful of the moods of the mind. One of the respondents said, *"Regular practice of physical activity helps children and young people to build and maintain healthy bones, muscles, and joints, helps control body weight, helps reduce fat, and helps develop efficient function of the heart and lungs".* The other one said, *"Physical education and sports activities help to prevent and control the feelings of anxiety and depression in people. It provides too much entertainment and fun for us"*.

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As a factor in meditative states, mindfulness is intensified to become that quality that does not permit the mind to wander from one object to another, even when concentration has become most suitable (Sankrityayan, 1994). It is therefore quite invaluable for the attainment of any sort of mental concentration. Lord Buddha said about mindfulness: This is the only way for the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow and lamentation, for the destruction of pain and grief, for reaching the right path, for realising Nirvana (Sankrityayan, 1994).

Happiness and joy are the best ways to achieve good health. Both factors have to be abandoned by one who wishes to progress to ever-finer meditational absorption, a difficult thing to do if one has once experienced them. Indeed, many meditators get stuck at this point, assuming that this blissful peace is the highest possible attainment.

The psychic powers are the basis of all the miracles' so prominent in many religious teachers' lives. They found connections between Lord Buddha, his discipline, and his tradition up to the present day (Yun, 2016). The difference between these occurrences in non-Buddhist traditions and in Dharma is that in the former, they seem to be mysterious embellishments that overawe people, are inexplicable, and only operate among those to whom God gives them. In the latter, it is notable that Lord Buddha rarely used them, and then only for some very good purpose (Sankrityayan, 1994). They are a part of mental development that anyone sufficiently perseverant may experience. For Buddhists, the mind is the seat of all troubles, and it is also through its culture that one experiences enlightenment.

The benefits of paying respect to the Buddha are numerous and come in many forms, nurturing both physical and mental health (Yun, 2016). Bowing to the Buddha increases the strength and flexibility of the body. When one bows, one's neck, hands, arms, waist, and legs stretch, giving the whole body an opportunity to exercise. By stretching the body, stiffness decreases and blood circulation increases, thus reducing the chance of becoming ill (Sankrityayan, 1994).

Buddhism is an effective way of reducing ignorance and cultivating our spiritual and mental health. Vaidya wrote (Vaidya, 2005): "*When we bow, we should show respect and sincerity, remaining deep in concentration as a slow bow is performed. As we pay respect in this manner, we should contemplate the Buddha and then expand our focus to include unlimited Buddhas in all directions. When we pay respect to unlimited Buddhas, unlimited beings benefit.*" Therefore, we can interpret that paying respect to the Buddha is a major way of getting physical, mental, and spiritual health.

Conclusions

The researcher concluded that Buddhists are positive for health and physical fitness, but some barriers, such as facilities, equipment, dress for participants, and the learning environment, are hindering Buddhists participation in physical exercise and sports activities in and out of monasteries and Bihar. The findings highlight that health and physical fitness help to keep people healthier and have a better quality of life, improve sleep, and reduce stress, greed, anger, and ignorance. Similarly, it is essential for the development of individuals mental, physical, social, and spiritual aspects. Hence, a well-organised and properly administered physical education programme is always essential to improving health and fitness.

According to Buddhism, anxiety, frustration, and depression are symptoms of an unhealthy mind. Mental suffering is often categorised by environmental and social influences. Therefore, if people meditate only 20 minutes a day, they will be able to improve their performance on tests of cognitive skill, in some cases doing 10 times better than the people who did not meditate. They also perform better on information-processing tasks that are designed to induce deadline stress. Therefore, the researcher concluded that health and physical fitness are very important for all ages and sexes to achieve physical and mental health.

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