

Buddhism and Medicine



AN ANTHOLOGY OF PREMODERN SOURCES

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Cover image: Mural painting of Bhaiṣajyaguru, Shanxi province, China, 1476–1496.
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17. Two *Sūtras* on Healing and Healers from the Chinese Canon

MARCUS BINGENHEIMER

The two short *sūtras* below depict the Buddha as a “Supreme Physician” and relate the Four Noble Truths to four medical skills as defined in traditional Indian medicine.¹ A recurring metaphor in them is that through his teaching, the Buddha ends suffering or unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*), just as a physician pulls out a poisoned arrow.²

The first *sūtra* translated below survives in two Chinese versions. Together, these two texts are somewhat mysterious. They are found in two Chinese collections of early *sūtras* that were translated around 400 C.E.: the *Grouped Āgama Sūtras*³ and the shorter *Alternate Translation of the Grouped Āgama Sūtras*.⁴ The latter is translated here. In both collections, they are part of the *Vaṅgīsa Collection*, the group dedicated to *sūtras* featuring the poet Vaṅgīsa.⁵ Their Indian (or Central Asian) origin is beyond doubt, and in form and content they are clearly part of early *sūtra* literature. No other parallels in Chinese, Sanskrit, Pāli, or other Prakrits have been identified so far, however.

In all likelihood, the two are later additions to the canon. Very generally speaking—and bearing in mind there are exceptions to this rule—the absence of close Pāli parallels for these types of *sūtras* in Chinese is indicative of a later origin. If there is both a Pāli and a Chinese version, we can strongly assume that the text did exist in some form before the first century B.C.E. (when the Pāli canon was first committed to writing). Another reason to date the texts to a later period is that both versions of the *sūtra* mention the names of four “good physicians,” three of which do not appear elsewhere in the Buddhist scriptures. This is remarkable: exemplary persons tend to be repeatedly mentioned. Among the four, only Jīvaka frequently appears as a physician in *sūtra* literature (see, e.g., chapters 1§4, 8, and 20); the other three (so far) resist identification.

Vaṅḡisa's verse in the *Alternate Translation of the Grouped Āgama Sūtras* is longer than its counterpart in the *Grouped Āgama Sūtras*, which is again probably due to later additions.⁶ Both texts, however, directly address the audience. This is especially obvious in an unusual line in the *Grouped Āgama Sūtras*: "To the physicians who have come to this assembly, I now make known to you."⁷ In fact, this might be a remnant of the actual context in which the verse was first preached. The verse could have originated with a monk addressing an assembly that included several physicians. In this case, the three names in the *sūtras* that resist identification could have been the names of actual members of the audience, whom the lecturer compared to the famous Jīvaka. This would explain why these names do not appear elsewhere in the Buddhist canon as exemplary physicians.

The *Alternate Translation of the Grouped Āgama Sūtras* version translated below combines different sets of four. It mentions four physicians, the four skills of a physician, four branches of medicine, and the Four Noble Truths.⁸ The association of the four skills of a physician and the Four Noble Truths is well attested in other texts, such as in the "Discourse with the Parable About Physicians."⁹

This text also purports to be an early *sūtra*, but like those with Vaṅḡisa, probably belongs to a later stage. The Chinese version of the text used for the translation below was written by Dānapāla (fl. 980–1017), and therefore is relatively recent, but a version of the Indian text must have existed much earlier, as there is a parallel text in the *Grouped Āgama Sūtras*.¹⁰ The two Chinese translations are approximately six hundred years apart. A comparison shows how certain categories and details changed in the interim. Nevertheless, that Dānapāla around 1000 C.E. believed the *sūtra* deserved to be retranslated attests to the motif that associating the four skills of a physician with the Four Noble Truths had remained popular within Buddhism from its inception throughout the first millennium.

FURTHER READING

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- . 2008. "Reflections on Comparative Āgama Studies." *Chung-Hwa Buddhist Journal* 21: 3–21.
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- Bingenheimer, Marcus, Anālayo, and Roderick Bucknell. 2013. *The Madhyama Agama* (Middle Length Discourses). Vol. 1. Berkeley, Calif.: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research.

1. A VERSE BY VAṅḡISA¹¹

Thus have I heard. Once, the Buddha was staying at Sāvattthī at the Jeta Grove in the Anathapiṇḍika Park.

At that time, the Buddha told the monks: "In this world, a good physician, who can cure the four [aspects of an] illness, can be considered a royal master [of his

art].¹² What four? First, one has to know well what kind of illness it is. Second, one has to know whence the illness came. Third, one has to know well how to cure it. Fourth, once cured, one [has to know] how to prevent it from arising again. People call someone who can do this a good doctor.

The Buddha too has realized a fourfold teaching. The Tathāgata, the Arhat, the Fully-Awakened One, the Supreme Physician,¹³ is moreover able to relieve sentient beings from the fourfold poisoned arrow [of suffering]. What four? They are suffering, the arising of suffering, the end of suffering, and the path to end suffering.”

The Buddha [further] told the monks: “Birth and old age, illness and death, grief and lamentation, [physical and mental] suffering, this is the [fourfold] poisoned arrow.¹⁴ A worldly doctor does not know the causes and conditions for the arising of suffering, or how its arising can be ended. He does not know the causes and conditions for old age, illness and death, grief and lamentation, physical and mental suffering, and how to end these. Only the Tathāgata, the Arhat, the Fully-Awakened One, the Supreme Physician knows the causes and conditions for the arising of suffering, and how to end suffering. Moreover, he knows the causes and conditions for old age, illness and death, grief and lamentation, physical and mental suffering, and how to end these. The Tathāgata is skillful in pulling out the fourfold arrow of suffering; he is therefore called the Supreme Physician.”

At that time, the Venerable Vaṅgīsa was in the assembly and thought, “I now shall eulogize the Tathāgata’s parable explaining the extraction of the fourfold poisoned arrow.” With that, he rose from his seat, and addressing the Buddha with folded palms, he spoke this verse:

I now bow to the Buddha,
 Compassionate with all living beings,
 The best and first among those to be honored,
 Who can extract the poisoned arrow.¹⁵
 In the world, there are four types of physicians
 Who can heal four types of illnesses,
 To wit: curing illness of the body,
 [Illnesses] of children, [illnesses] of the eyes, and [illnesses caused by]
 poisoned arrows.¹⁶
 The Tathāgata cures illnesses of the eye
 Far better than worldly physicians.
 With the scalpel¹⁷ of wisdom
 He removes the cataracts of ignorance [from our] eyes.
 The Tathāgata cures the ailments of the body
 Better than worldly physicians.
 The therapies of worldly physicians
 Can only cure the four material Elements,
 But the Tathagatha well distinguishes
 [Between] the six elements [of the world], [and] the eighteen elements [of
 perception],¹⁸

And by these teachings can cure
 The body so heavily afflicted by the Three Poisons.
 He can cure the illness of childlike ignorance¹⁹
 Better than anybody else.
 Therefore, I praise
 Gotama the Great Teacher.
 A royal physician was Jialiu,²⁰
 Who often offered medicine to people.
 Other illustrious physicians
 Are called Pohulu,²¹
 Zhanpi²² and Jīvaka.
 Royal physicians such as these
 Can heal various illnesses.
 These four physicians,
 Whomever they cure will get better,
 But although people do get better, illnesses will return,
 And in the end, death cannot be avoided.
 The Tathāgata, [however], is the supreme physician.
 Those whom he cures
 Have their poisoned [arrow] pulled [and by that] exhaust the occasion for
 suffering,
 Forever abandoning birth and death,
 Never again [do] they suffer pain.
 Endless, innumerable,
 Billions of beings
 End their suffering, are cured by the Buddha
 [And this suffering] will never return.
 Today, I make known to this assembly,
 To all of you who have joined this meeting:
 The sweet nectar, the potion of deathlessness
 You should all strive to imbibe,
 All should receive it with faith,
 In the supreme healer of eyes!
 In curing the body, pulling out the poisoned arrow,
 No physician is his equal.
 Thus, let us sincerely
 Bow to the Venerable Gotama.

2. THE DISCOURSE WITH THE PARABLE ABOUT PHYSICIANS²³

Thus have I heard. Once, the Buddha was staying at Sāvattthī with a great multitude of monks.

At that time, the World Honored One told the monks: “You should know that if a good worldly physician, in knowing about diseases and their cures, is fully en-

dowed with four [skills], he can be called a king among the physicians. What four? First, he has to recognize which diseases there are and which medicines to use against them. Second, he has to know the reason why diseases arise, and use medicine accordingly [to prevent the arising]. Third, if diseases have arisen, he cures them by making them exit [the body]. Fourth, [he must know] to cut off the source of the disease, and let it arise no more. These are the four [skills of the physician].

“What is the meaning of ‘he has to recognize which disease it is and which medicine to use for it’? It means he first has to identify that there are such and such symptoms, and then use such and such cures accordingly to heal them, and let [the patient] regain well-being.

“What is the meaning of ‘he has to know the reason why diseases arise, and use medicine accordingly [to prevent the arising]’? It means he must know whether a disease is caused by Wind, Bile, or Phlegm [i.e., the *tridoṣa*, and] whether it arises from the heart, the joints, or in the digestive tract. Knowing from whence these diseases arise, he uses cures accordingly and lets [the patient] regain well-being.

“What is the meaning of ‘if diseases have arisen, he cures them by making them exit [the body]’? It means he must know whether a disease can be evacuated through the eyes, through the nose, etc., by various cures. Some [diseases] are evacuated by a nasal wash with fumigated water, some are evacuated by guiding breath through the nasal cavities, some are evacuated by vomiting or a laxative, some are evacuated by making the whole body sweat. Thus, wherever in the upper or lower body [diseases arise], they are evacuated accordingly.²⁴ Knowing thus the various ways diseases can be evacuated, he uses the cures skillfully to let [the patient] regain well-being.

“What is the meaning of ‘to cut off the source of the disease, and let it arise no more’? It means he has to know that the origins of a disease have such and such characteristics and accordingly are done away with. To enable [the patient] to always attend to their affairs with vigor, [the origins of the disease] are skillfully done away with, the disease is never allowed to arise again, and [the patient] gains well-being. These are the four ways in which to know about diseases and their cures.

“The Tathāgata, the Arhat, the Fully-Awakened One, is also like this. Having appeared in the world, he has proclaimed the four best Dharma medicines. What four? The noble truth of suffering, the noble truth of the origin of suffering, the noble truth of the ending of suffering, and the noble truth of the way. These four truths, truly understood by the Buddha, are a teaching he taught for the sake of all beings to make them cut off [further] arising. Once the causes for the arising of suffering are cut off, all of the sufferings of old age, illness, death, grief, lamentation, and physical and mental suffering cease forever. The Tathāgata, the Arhat, the Fully-Awakened One, has proclaimed these best Dharma medicines, so that all sentient beings can abandon all suffering. O, monks, like a wheel-turning, anointed king is endowed with four armies by which he obtains mastery, the Tathāgata, the Arhat, the Fully-Awakened One, is just like this.”²⁵

After the Buddha had spoken this discourse, the monks were delighted and upheld it faithfully.

NOTES

1. I thank Venerable Anālayo for reading through a draft of this paper.
2. This metaphor is elaborated in a number of other early *sūtras* (e.g., T no. 26 *sūtra* 19, or MN 101 [MN II 214]).
3. *Grouped Āgama Sūtras* (ZA), T no. 99 *sūtra* 1220.
4. *Alternate Translation of the Grouped Āgama Sūtras* (BZA), T no. 100 *sūtra* 254. See the contribution of Venerable Anālayo to this volume for another example from the *Samyukta* collection. For an overview of the healing metaphor in early Buddhism, see Anālayo 2015a.
5. The Elder Vaṅḡīsa (Ch. Poqishe) is remembered as the earliest Buddhist poet. *Sūtras* with his poems have been grouped early in their own *saṃyukta*. Some of Vaṅḡīsa's words (though not the ones translated here) are also found in the *Theragāthā* (verses 1209–79).
6. The general pattern of differences between the BZA and the ZA is that the Indian original of the ZA found closure earlier than the original of the BZA, which continued to incorporate small quantities of new material (see Bingenheimer 2011: 45–50).
7. T no. 99, 2: 332c26.
8. In fact, there are eight branches to traditional Indian medicine (see chapter 16§1); the text mentions four for the sake of creating sets of four.
9. *Yiyu jing*, T no. 219. For other examples, see Granoff 2011: 7.
10. T no. 219 has a parallel in ZA *sūtra* 389. The *Taishō* edition does not group T no. 219 among the *Āgama sūtras*, but rather in vol. 4, together with other “simile” *sūtras*. This is probably why it has escaped the attention of Akanuma 1929, who did not list it as a parallel to ZA *sūtra* 389. The latter is translated and discussed in Anālayo 2015b: 20–23. See also similar passage in chapter 20.
11. BZA *sūtra* 254 (T no. 100, 2: 462c9–463a24).
12. *Wangshi*. This is perhaps a mistake for *wangyi*, or “royal physician.”
13. *Wushang liangyi*. On the Buddha as the “Supreme Healer,” see Granoff 2011, which shows how the topos of casting the religious hero as physician also appears in Jainism and Hinduism.
14. Whereas in the Pāli tradition *jāti-jarā-byādhī-maraṇa* alone are traditionally taken as four separate entities (see, e.g., *Sumaṅgalavilāsini* III 984), here the text, or perhaps the translator, seems to parse it in four parts: *jātijarā-byādhimaraṇa-soka-parideva-dukkhadomanassa*. This way the text can speak of a fourfold poisoned arrow or four poisoned arrows. The only comparable passage I found is in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa sūtra* (T no. 374, 12: 428b21–23 and parallels), where hate, greed, ignorance, and arrogance are the four poisoned arrows that cause sickness.
15. *Suttanipāta* verse 560 calls the Buddha the “unsurpassed remover of arrows” (*sallakatto anuttaro*).
16. This enumerates four of the eight branches of traditional Indian medicine: general medicine (*kāya-cikitsā*), pediatrics and midwifery (*kumārabhṛtyā*), ophthalmology (*śālākya*), and toxicology (*agada*). A fifth branch, surgery, is alluded to below.
17. *Pi* (lit., “arrowhead”; Skt. **salākā*) refers back to the poisoned arrow.
18. The “six elements,” or *liu jie* (Skt. *ṣaḍ-dhātavaḥ*): the world as a whole in the Indian cosmology made up of Earth, Water, Fire, Wind, Space, and mind. The “eighteen elements of percep-

tion,” or *shiba jie* (Skt. *aṣṭādaśa-dhātavaḥ*): a doctrine of Buddhist Abhidharma philosophy, which describes how that world is cognized.

19. *Yingyu*. Refers back to the illnesses of children in the lines earlier. In the Indian original, this was perhaps a play on the two related meanings of *bāla* (young/ignorant).
20. ZA parallel has *Jialu* (probably Kâlu/Kâlo).
21. ZA parallel has Bohouluo (perhaps Bâhula/Bâhulo).
22. ZA parallel has *Bizhan poqi*.
23. T no. 219, 4: 802a16–b21.
24. The cures described in this section refer to the *ṣaṭkarman* purification practices in traditional Indian medicine. The nasal wash (*guanbi*) is *jala-netī*. The “guiding of breath” (*yingqi*) could be *kapālabhātī*.
25. The ideal military of the Wheel-turning King consists of four branches: infantry, cavalry, elephants, and chariots.