

Buddhism, Health, and Healing in a Chinese Community

Hongyu Wu

Introduction

Through fieldwork conducted among members of the Greater Boston Buddhist Cultural Center, this project explores the relationship between people's religious practice, health, and healing. I address how the Center members' religious beliefs influence their views on health; how they interpret illness within the vocabulary of their religious beliefs and their culture; and what the whole repertoire of healing provided by their religion and culture is. The Buddhist Cultural Center, established three years ago, is a branch of Foguangshan (Buddha Light Mountain) Temple, one of the largest Buddhist institutions in Taiwan.

Master Xingyun, the founder of Foguangshan, is an ardent advocate of Humanistic Buddhism. In his view, a Buddhist should not withdraw from the world. Instead, a Buddhist should focus on being engaged in the world—on caring for the living rather than the dead; benefiting others rather than benefiting oneself; and aiding others rather than practicing Buddhism for one's own salvation.¹

In contrast to many other Buddhist sects, Master Xingyun teaches that the Pure Land that is free from suffering and full of happiness exists not only in the Western World of Amitabha Buddha or the Eastern World of the Medicine Buddha, but in this world as well. Although suffering is one of the Four Noble Truths that Buddha taught, the ultimate aim of Buddhism is to teach people how to liberate themselves from suffering and gain happiness. The primary teaching that people should absorb concerns the importance of karma, that is, the law of cause and effect. As the saying goes, "A bodhisattva (enlightened being) cares about the cause, while lay people care about the result." If a person wants a good result, he should create a good cause; therefore, every one should observe the Five Precepts (no killing, no stealing, no sexual misconduct, no lying, and no intoxication). In this way people can establish good ties with other people and all sentient beings through their proper behavior, amiable

speech, and good intentions. If a person is suffering from bad luck, he should not complain; the bad luck was in fact caused by his past misdeeds. He should examine his own actions and try to mend his behavior through generosity, compassion, diligence, and patience. On the other hand, if a person enjoys good luck, he should appreciate what he has and radiate what he has to other sentient beings through giving, caring, and compassion. Therefore, Master Xingyun advocates that people practice Buddhism in daily life and for the present world. If everyone is compassionate, patient, diligent, and ready to give, the Pure Land can be realized in this world. (One point I want to clarify is that this Buddhist community belongs to the Mahayana tradition; therefore, it is different from Tibetan Buddhism and from Theravada Buddhism in Southeast Asia.)

In recent years, the Humanistic Buddhism advocated by Master Xingyun has become very popular among Chinese people around the world. His speeches about Humanistic Buddhism have been translated into English, French, and Spanish. Foguangshan has established many branches all over the world to meet the religious demands of Chinese immigrants, as well as to promote Buddhism. The Greater Boston Buddhist Cultural Center at 950 Massachusetts Avenue, Cambridge, is such a branch. Approximately fifty people attend this center on a regular basis. Many of them are from Taiwan, and there are also some students and scholars from Mainland China, some Vietnam-born Chinese, some Euro-Americans and Jewish Americans. Meditation classes for adults are offered every Tuesday and Thursday evening, and a meditation class for children is held every Wednesday night. Herb teas and vegetarian food are also served at the Center.

During 2001–2002 I conducted structured interviews with nineteen people who frequent the Center and in-depth interviews with the two Center priests. Not all of the nineteen informants identify themselves as Buddhists. Two are Catholic, and one was

born Christian but converted to Buddhism a few months before this project began. Although some were born into families with Buddhist traditions, they explain that they have made their own choice to believe in Buddhism. Most of the informants were or are being educated in the United States, and many of them have lived in the United States for several years. Because of such circumstances, their understanding of the relationship of Buddhism and the Buddhist community to health and healing is unlikely to apply to their contemporaries in Taiwan and Mainland China.

Is Buddhism Good for One's Health?

All the Center members I interviewed believe Buddhism has been helpful to their health. When I asked them to rate their health, 68 percent were very confident of their health; 21 percent thought their health was normal, meaning sometimes they got sick, but recovered quickly; 11 percent felt they were not healthy, but they believed that their physical situations improved after they started to practice Buddhism.

Sixteen of those interviewed thought Buddhism was helpful for health, because Buddhism has corrected their own wrong understanding about existence and has changed their perspectives so that they can view people and the world around them in a much more optimistic and active way. This has helped them maintain their mental health. Because the mind and body are closely related, a peaceful mind and happy heart naturally lead to physical health. One member remarked:

Buddhism is good for the health of my mind. I always have the feeling that Buddha is with me and always ready to help me. Before I believed in Buddhism, I tried to find some help when I was suffering. Now I find Buddhism. It gives me a lot. My attitude towards life has changed, and also my life has changed. . . . I feel much happier than before and my physical health has been improved too. (interview 16)

Another Center member explained:

I think Buddhism is good for the health of both your mind and body. It can calm you down and help you to adjust to the stress of the outside world. Many physical illnesses are caused by mind. If the mind is always in peace, and your mood is always balanced, then your body will be naturally good. (interview 13)

These were typical answers. Of the sixteen members who felt Buddhism had corrected their misperceptions, twelve told me that they felt that their physical health had been improved because Buddhism had changed their attitude and the way

they reacted to the outside world. One told me that she had suffered from stomach aches since she was nineteen, and her bad temper would make her stomach ache much worse. After she had adopted a Buddhist attitude, this problem had been alleviated:

Ten years ago, before I started to believe in Buddhism, I went to see the doctor almost every week, but Western medicine could not cure my stomach ache, and had some side effects too. A friend suggested I go to see Chinese medicine doctors. At first I was not willing to accept his suggestion. I did not want to accept people's suggestions before I believed in Buddhism. After I began to believe in Buddhism, I become more willing to accept other people's suggestions. Then I went to see the Chinese doctor. He told me that I should give up ice cream and Coca-Cola. I did not follow his suggestion at first. [Now that I have] learned Buddhism, it teaches me how to control my desire for these unhealthy foods. I mean, Buddhism is good for my health because it teaches me to control my desire. After I believed in Buddhism, I became much happier and more peaceful than before. I used to lose my temper, but now I have been greatly improved. That is also good for my health. (interview 3)

For these individuals, mind, body, and life have formed a circle. The key to making this circle a good one and not a vicious one is Buddhism. It is not difficult to follow their logic: Buddhism enables them to have a healthy mind. This healthy mind enables them to have right reactions toward life, people, and the world. Right reactions lead to good and harmonious relationships with others and the environment, and happiness and peace follow. Happiness and peace are the roots of their physical health. The same person told me, "Buddhism can change your reaction toward the outside world. You know the reaction is very important. A positive reaction can lead to a very good result. You can have a good karma" (interview 3). Another said: "Buddhism can change your perspective to view things. You will not be attached to trifles. You will be much more open-minded. When you become more open-minded, you will become tolerant, happy, and less stressed. If you are always in a happy mood, your body will become much healthier" (interview 12).

Keeping to a vegetarian diet is another important element in protecting one's health. Unlike Theravada Buddhism and Tibetan Buddhism, in Chinese Buddhism a vegetarian diet is very important. Buddhist priests must keep to a very strict vegetarian diet; lay Buddhists are not required to be vegetarian, but many of them consider a vegetarian diet a way to practice Buddhism. Ten of the nineteen interviewed observe a permanent vegetarian diet; five have vegetarian food for one or two meals every

day; four eat a vegetarian diet on special occasions every year, and some may keep to a vegetarian diet for several days each month. Twelve people felt a vegetarian diet is good for one's health. A vegetarian diet can protect people from cardiovascular diseases. As one informant told me, "Vegetarian diet is good for health, especially for [someone like] me, in my fifties who is easily [susceptible to] cardiovascular diseases" (interviews 11 and 12). Nine of the vegetarians told me that they felt very different after they had been on a vegetarian diet. A woman of twenty-four said, "When I ate meat, even if I slept eight hours a day, I still felt sleepy; but after I became a vegetarian, even if I sleep only six hours or less, I feel very energetic." That a vegetarian diet increases energy was the typical answer I was given about the relationship between vegetarian diet and health. I was also told a vegetarian diet has helped cure constipation. One said that her freckles have faded from her face because a vegetarian diet has helped cure her constipation, and she could release the poisonous elements in her body every day.

For some of the community members, to keep a vegetarian diet is a moral issue. One said:

To have vegetarian food is healthy because it does not hurt animals. Things are interdependent; if you hurt a sentient being, there is a reacting force that will hurt you too. . . . If a person hurts some animals, he will have the sense of fear. But for me, I don't hurt anyone, and I am completely free from fear. . . . Being free from the sense of fear and anxiety is good for your mental health as well as your physical health. (interview 8)

For her, to be a vegetarian means practicing the virtue of compassion. Through compassion, people can establish a harmonious relationship with all sentient beings and be free from the sense of fear and anxiety as well. This can help people achieve both peace of mind and physical health.

To keep a proper diet is very important for people's health in both Buddhist traditions and Chinese traditions. The Buddhist Cultural Center also serves some traditional Chinese herb teas with ginseng, chrysanthemum, and the fruit of the Chinese wolfberry. These teas can give people energy and cleanse the poisonous elements from their bodies.

Eight of those interviewed felt that meditation is also good for their health. Although several of them thought that meditation is not the only way to be a good Buddhist, all eight still felt meditation was beneficial. "I just feel very relaxed when I practice meditation" (interview 13). Or, "I feel very relaxed and fresh after I practice meditation" (interview 12). For practitioners, meditation helps them concentrate their attention on one thing and calms them

enough to free them of stress. Sometimes, practicing meditation can change a person's character; especially for some quick-tempered persons, it is an effective way to calm down. One told me that after she took up meditating every day, "by and by, I find there are some changes both in my mind and my body. I am not so quick-tempered as before" (interview 17). From the perspective of traditional Chinese medicine, bad temper is very harmful for one's body, especially for one's stomach. Therefore, to practice meditation can both release one's stress and help ease bad temper, thus improving one's health.

Five of those interviewed also thought that to observe the precepts—such as no killing, no lying, no intoxication—gives them peace of mind and keeps them from smoking and consuming alcohol and drugs and other things that are bad for one's health.

Why Do People Get Sick?

About 75 percent of the informants thought that imbalance of mind and body, or the imbalance of the basic elements in one's body, is the main reason that people get sick. This view is influenced by both Chinese traditional medicine and Buddhism. These two traditions emphasize the balance between one's mind and body, the balance of the basic elements in one's body. "The imbalance of one's body and mind may cause illness. For example, you take too much food, but you cannot digest the food. The taking in and excreting are not well balanced, it is natural that you will get sick. If you easily get angry, not peaceful in your mind, your mind is not well balanced. If your mind or your body are not in balance, after a long time, you will get sick" (interview 4). "You get ill because your four basic elements are not in balance" (interview 13). (According to Buddhism, the four basic elements are earth—body; water—blood, saliva, or urine; fire—body temperature; and wind—breath.)

Six informants also thought that illness is caused by karma. One said:

I think there are two kinds of illness. The true illness is cancer or some other disease like this. The so-called false illness means that you don't take good care of your body. If you take some medicine, or have a good rest, or if you put on more clothes to keep you warm when you get cold, the illness can be cured. The true illness means some incurable diseases. I think from the Buddhist perspective, everything has its cause and effect. That is why some people get cancer but others do not. . . . It is karma. Maybe you did something bad in your past life or in the past of this life. . . . (interview 13)

One of the priests, the Venerable Miaojué, also told me: “From the perspective of Buddhism, what a person did in his past life leads to the disease of this life. If a person killed a lot of sentient beings in his past lives, what he got in this life might be diseases or a short life span.”

Ten informants also felt that bad life habits, such as eating too much, or eating unhealthy food, or living an irregular life, are other causes of illness. Five people told me that the pollution of the industrial world and DNA also cause illness.

What Is the Healing Repertoire?

Another question related to that of why people get sick is, what are their healing resources? Most of the informants did not feel it necessary to go to the doctor for medical care if they just get a cold. They usually use some traditional ways, such as ginger soup with brown sugar or some herb tea or a good rest, to help themselves recover from a cold.

When I asked what they would do if they became seriously ill, all of them answered, “Of course, the first thing is to go to the doctor for medical care.” None of them reject biomedical treatment. Eleven informants told me that if they were seriously ill, they would pray to Buddha or Bodhisattva, chant sutras, or practice meditation or repentance. But none believe that these practices alone, without biomedical care, can help them recover from a serious disease. As one person said: “I think chanting sutra or meditation can give you help in your mind. You will feel that you have something to rely on in spirit. But I don’t mean that just chanting sutra or praying to Buddha/ Bodhisattva, without taking medicine, can help you overcome your disease” (interview 11). Another person felt “A positive and optimistic attitude toward illness and death is also important. Buddhism can give me such an attitude” (interview 13).

When I interviewed the priests, I found that they also have the same view, that of helping the sick have a positive and optimistic attitude toward life, disease, and death: “Usually we will use the teaching of Buddha to convince the sick people to have an open mind toward life and death,” said the Venerable Yifa. The Venerable Miaojué also told me of one of her experiences:

I knew a doctor from Detroit, whose mother was seriously ill and hospitalized. He told me that it was incredible that even though he himself was a doctor, he could do nothing for his mother. Medicine or other scientific equipment cannot help him, but Buddhism can. He said that because of me, he knows Buddhism. His mother and he had a very pleasant time in his mother’s last days. He

was so glad to have the opportunity to know Buddhism. Now he told me he was preaching Buddhism when he treated his patients.

Thus, Buddhism as a complement to biomedical care can give people support in their spirit, and can encourage people to be confident and optimistic about life and death. At the same time, Buddhism can help people to establish a harmonious relationship with their sick family members.

One of the noteworthy points that came out of all the interviews is that the informants all emphasized self-reliance. As the Venerable Yifa said of priests:

From the perspective of Buddhism, we [the priests] are not healers. Everyone is his or her own healer. . . . I am just a teacher to teach you to heal yourself. I cannot claim that I have the power to heal you. . . . In fact, all depends on the power of one’s mind. . . . That’s why Buddhism can help some people regain their health, but some cannot. It does not mean that the Buddha is biased, just because the power of people’s mind is different.

Most of the devotees also have the same views on self-reliance:

When I feel bad, I will chant Buddha’s name. As I do this, I feel that I talk to Buddha, and he is talking to me and helping me. I say Buddha is helping me, but it does not mean that I count everything on Buddha. In fact, I depend on myself. I have a Christian friend. She always prays to God when she has problems without doing anything else. I am not like her. For me, Buddha is always on my side supporting me, but I know I myself will do the things. (interview 17)

For the believers, Buddha is not the omnipotent god. Buddha is an enlightened person who is compassionate and teaches people to gain the wisdom that will liberate them from suffering. The believers do not depend on Buddha for his magical powers. What they expect from religion is the spiritual support that encourages them to face disease and death without fear.

Since karma is the cause of some fatal diseases, reducing bad karma is a way to heal. The way to reduce bad karma is to make merit, such as practicing repentance (for example, by attending a certain ritual at which one repents one’s past bad deeds and vows to mend one’s behaviors), making donations, practicing meditation, or observing a vegetarian diet.

Besides making merit, some informants also felt that meditation could reduce bad karma, by calming a person. One individual said, “In fact, to practice meditation or to chant Buddha’s name can distract your attention from the pain” (interview 3).

Another method of healing is vegetarian diet. Two

people told me that they had friends who were victims of cancer. By following a very strict vegetarian diet, their diseases have been well controlled, without any chemotherapy treatments (interviews 1 and 13). In fact, food treatment is a traditional Chinese way to cure some diseases, especially some chronic diseases. In recent years, some hospitals in China have also tried to cure cancers through the use of fresh vegetables or herbs. But, for the Buddhist community, to be vegetarian has another significance: it is a way to make merit to reduce bad karma. Since illness may be caused by killing in a past life, to have a vegetarian diet is the way to stop killing, stop creating bad karma, and repent of one's past misdeed. That is helpful for healing.

Besides all these methods, the community itself plays an important role in healing and helping people maintain good health. For many of the immigrants, when they feel stressed or depressed or when they have problems with family members, the Center is a good place for them to speak out about their anxiety and release their stress. As the Venerable Miaoju told me:

I think our role is just like a counselor or a listening board. When these believers speak of their problems, their sadness, they will feel much released. In the U.S., it is hard for them to find someone to talk to when they have some problems with their family members or with their work. If they speak to us, we don't laugh at them or tell their secrets to someone else. So they can speak of their problems freely. Many believers like to talk to us. That is a way to release their stress.

It is also possible to share some experiences of medical care with the community members. As one person told me: "If I am seriously ill, first I will go to see the doctor. I also go to the Buddhist temple. It doesn't mean that I go to the temple for the magical power of the priests. I think it is a way to establish some good ties with other fellow believers and cre-

ate some good causes so that they will give you some good suggestions, recommend you a good doctor, some good medicine or good therapies" (interview 12). Another told me that she was suffering from symptoms of menopause. After following a fellow believer's suggestion of drinking royal bee jelly, she felt much better. One informant also recommended a kind of herb called "snow lotus" to other people. According to her, it can cure cancer or help prevent cancer and help people maintain good health.

Conclusion

In this community, influenced by Humanistic Buddhism, the members have established a positive and optimistic attitude toward life and the world around them. They consider this a way to maintain their mental and physical health, as well as the right attitude with which to face disease and illness. For the immigrants, the center is also their "home." It provides them with a space where they can share their experiences and speak freely about their problems.

Note

1. Master Xingyun, *The Fundamental Concepts of Humanistic Buddhism* (Taiwan: Foguangshan), 11.

Bibliography

- Bernard, Russell H. *Handbook of Methods in Cultural Anthropology*. Walnut Creek, Calif.: AltaMira Press, 1998.
- Sullivan, Lawrence E. *Healing and Restoring*. London: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1989.
- Birnbaum, Raoul. *The Healing Buddha*. Boulder, Colo.: Shambhala, 1979.
- Website: <http://www.fgs.org.tw>

Appendix: Cumulative Analysis of the Structured Interview on Religion and Health

1. Total Number of Informants: 19
2. Gender:
 - female 13
 - male 6
3. Age range:

•11-20	1	•21-30	3
•31-40	4	•41-50	6
•51-60	4	•61-70	1
4. Ethnic identity:
 - Taiwanese 17
 - Vietnam-Born Chinese 1
 - Euro-American 1
5. Marital status:
 - Single 8
 - Married 11
6. Occupation:

•Retired engineer	1	•Scientist	1
•Businessman	1	•Public service assistant	1
•Housewife	2	•Finance analyst	2
•Officer	3	•High-tech	4
•Student	4		
7. Denomination:
 - Buddhist (have taken part in the initiation ritual) 14
 - Buddhist (have not taken part in the initiation ritual) 2
 - Catholic 2
 - Christian-Buddhist (born a Christian and took part in the initiation ritual ten months before survey) 1
8. Do you think that Buddhism is good for your health? In what way? (Not only one answer can be given to this question.)
 - Buddhism is good for health. 19
 - Buddhism helps people to have a healthy, active, optimistic and tolerant attitude toward life and the world, which is good for mental and physical health. 16
 - A vegetarian diet is good for one's health. 14
 - Meditation is good for health. 8
 - Buddhism helps people avoid habits that are not healthy. 5
9. Do you think that you are healthier than you were before you believed in Buddhism or took part in the Buddhist rituals or the events in this community?
 - Feel healthier after starting to believe in Buddhism. 11
10. Please rate your health:
 - Extremely healthy 1
 - Healthy 12
 - Normal 4
 - Not healthy 2
11. Why do people get sick? (More than one answer can be given to this question.)
 - The imbalance of one's mind and body, or the imbalance of the basic elements in one's body. 14
 - Karma 6
 - Bad life habits 10
 - Pollution or DNA 5
12. Do you think that Buddhist priests can heal you? In what way?
 - Buddhist priests cannot heal people's physical diseases. 5
 - Some Buddhist priests can heal people's physical diseases. 4
 - Buddhist priests are just like teachers and consultants. They can help people maintain a health state of mind. 10
13. If you are seriously ill, what are you going to do? (More than one answer can be given.)
 - First go to see the doctor. 19
 - Religious practice is an alternative or is complementary to biomedical care. 11