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Article

The Philosophical Underpinnings of Epidemics in Buddhist Literature

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Abstract

This paper investigates the representation of epidemics in Buddhist literature and their underlying philosophical significance. While modern pandemics such as COVID-19 raise questions of suffering, responsibility, and resilience, Buddhist texts also contain accounts of plagues and responses to them. Drawing upon canonical and post-canonical sources including the Avadānaśataka, Avadānakalpalatā, Bhaiṣajyavastu, and related Jātakas. This study examines narratives where the Buddha and bodhisattvas confront epidemic outbreaks. The methodology combines textual analysis of Buddhist literature with a focus on the doctrines of karuṇā (compassion), karma, citta-cetasika psychology, and pratītyasamutpāda (dependent origination). The findings reveal that these accounts not only preserve historical memory of crises but also serve as vehicles for transmitting Buddhist philosophical insights: compassion as a moral response, karma as an explanatory framework, mindfulness as a corrective practice, and dependent origination as a model of causality. Rather than offering medical prescriptions, the texts frame epidemics as opportunities for moral reflection and spiritual practice. The study concludes that Buddhist philosophy, rooted in these narratives, provides enduring lessons for resilience and ethical responsibility in times of crisis.

Keywords: *Buddhist literature, epidemics, karma, compassion, dependent origination, South Asia*

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Introduction

History is often regarded as answering the pressing questions of the present, yet the accuracy of those answers depends on the questions we choose to ask. The COVID-19 pandemic, which has affected billions across the globe, has revived long-standing concerns about the nature of suffering, human vulnerability, and collective responsibility. Although pandemics are not new to human history, plagues and epidemics have repeatedly devastated societies; most people of this generation encountered such a crisis for the first time. This has prompted a search for meaning that extends beyond medical or economic explanations and enters the realm of philosophy and spirituality.

Buddhist literature, particularly canonical and post-canonical sources, contains references to epidemics that occurred during the time of the Buddha and in narratives of his previous lives. While such episodes have often been treated as mere historical events or demographic disruptions, their inclusion in Buddhist texts suggests deeper moral and philosophical purposes. These accounts record communal crises and transmit lessons in ethics, compassion, and spiritual practice. This paper examines selected narratives of epidemics within Buddhist texts to highlight the philosophical underpinnings they contain. By analyzing these sources, the study aims to demonstrate how Buddhist thought interpreted epidemics as physical or social phenomena and as opportunities to reflect on karma, compassion, mindfulness, and dependent origination.

Despite scholarship on Buddhist philosophy and the historical aspects of plagues, little research has focused specifically on how Buddhist texts weave epidemics into their ethical and doctrinal frameworks. Previous studies have either prioritised the medical-historical context or approached these narratives as folklore. This paper seeks to fill that gap by combining literary, historical, and philosophical readings of epidemic accounts in Buddhist literature. It contributes to a deeper understanding of how Buddhism provides enduring ethical models for responding to crises, thereby offering relevant insights for contemporary global challenges.

Buddhist Textual Accounts of Epidemics

Buddhism has various texts that carry information regarding the pandemic/epidemic situation. For example, Vāsubandhu's (fl. fourth-fifth century) Treatise on the Treasury of Abhidharma, a sixth-century translation, states that-

"Non-human beings will spit poison, causing epidemics, and whoever encounters the poison will perish due to their incurability." (Capitanio, 2021)

The Abhidharma Treatise Spoken by the Buddha on the Establishment of the World, translated during the sixth century, also describes:

"When the minor calamities arise in the first eon of the world's abiding after the formation, a great epidemic and all manner of sicknesses will arise everywhere throughout Jambudvīpa. The people of all countries and lands will meet with epidemics. Anger and wickedness will arise in the minds of all ghosts and spirits, and they will harm the people of the age." (Capitanio, 2021, referencing Foshuo lishi apitan lun 佛說立世阿毘曇論, T. no. 1644, 32:215c1-4)

In the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, we have terms like Nyen Rim used in their Gyüzhi texts (The Fourth Medical Treatises or The Four Tantras) to explain Pandemic-like situations and offer medical and non-medical remedies. We also have the manuscript of the Dhāriṇī of Parṇaśavarī referring to the pandemics.

Nevertheless, it was in the avadāna (Pāli: apadana) texts that one finds various instances of epidemics hitting a village or a city, taking place both during Buddha's time and during his previous births (much like our present situation, the whole world is facing). The contents of the avadāna vary greatly, and there is no question that they represent several different genres of literature. While many avadānas do purportedly deal with events in the life of the historical Buddha, some, like the Jātakas, tell of Buddha's previous births. (Granoff, 1998)

The first katha (story) is from Avadānaśataka. The date of the text is unknown, but it has its translations in other languages like Chinese (Zhuanji baiyuan jing), Japanese (Senjū Hyakuengyō), Hangeul (Korean) (Ch'anjip paegyŏn kyŏng), Tibetan (Rtogs pa brjod pa brgya pa), datable around the 9th century A.D. and later. Avadānaśataka is closely associated with the Mūlasarvāstivāda school. The text consists of a hundred chapters, and the chapter relevant to us is the 14th Chapter - Itī. It tells about a village named Nāḍakanṭha where an epidemic had broken out. At the same time, Buddha incidentally passed through the Kalandakanivāpa in the Veṇu grove near the village. The residents of Nāḍakanṭha had done everything in their capacity, venerated various gods, but their sufferings did not see an end.

"ततो जनकायो रोगैः पीड़ितः तानी तानी देवातासहस्त्राण्यायाचते शिववरुणकुबेरवासवादीनि (Vaidya, 1958, p. 36)

So, when venerating a thousand gods did not help the village, the villagers resorted to Buddha's refuge to aid their dukkha, where even Brāhmaṇas participated-

"न चास्य सा ईतिरूपशमं गच्छति। अथान्यतम उपासको नाडकंथायां प्रतिवसति। स नाडकन्थेयान् ब्राह्मणगृहपतीनिदमवोचत्– एत यूयं बुद्धं शरणं गच्छत, तं च भगवंतमायाचध्वमिहागमनाय।

अप्येव भगवता खल्पकृच्छ्रेणास्या इतेव्र्युपशमः स्यादिति। अथ नाडकन्थेया ब्राह्मणगृहपतयो भगवंतमायाचिंतु प्रवृत्ताः - आगच्छतु भगवानस्माद् व्यसनसंकटान्मोचनायेती।।" (Vaidya, 1958, p. 36)

Next, we see that Buddha heard the villagers' request and went to Nāḍakanṭha with his fellow monks, and through the display of karuṇā, he was successfully able to remove the plague in the region. On seeing this miracle, the villagers, the Brahmins, and the Grihapatis all decided to be devoted to Buddha, and some also entered the sangha. However, we also see that when we witnessed the miraculous act of Buddha, his disciples and monks became curious and asked him how he managed to ward off the illness and the plague.

Buddha beautifully answers that he could do it because of his past actions- the past karmas. He elaborates on how karma does not conclude into the four elements- earth, water, fire, or wind- but rather fruitions in the physical element, where one can sense one's past deeds physically, whether pure or impure. Karma, says Buddha, does not die for hundreds of eons, and always returns when it is ripe. He then recites the story of his past life as Candra Buddha- the perfect one, the tathāgata, the samyaksaṃbuddha. Candra Buddha had also undergone something similar during his life. He was once around a specific royal city; the king of that city was overjoyed and arranged for a grand welcome for Candra. This was also when his city faced a severe epidemic; the people faced significant repercussions due to the plague. The king kindly requested Candra Buddha to appease the pain of the people. To this, Candra Buddha asked the king to put a robe on a banner and parade it around the city, and asked the people to engage in mindfulness, engage in the dhyāna, and keep Buddha in their minds.

The following story is from Kshemendra's Avadānakalpalatā. Kshemendra was a Buddhist poet from Kashmir, India. He composed avadānakalpalatā around the 11th century A.D. He organised 108 stories about Buddha and his former lives as Boddhisattvas. In the 99th chapter, titled Padmakavadānam, we encounter another pandemic-like situation. The story begins with a former episode when Buddha was in Śrāvastī, where the people and community of Bhikkhus suffered from illness. He cured them with his glances, which is a drink of immortality-

"श्रावस्त्यां भगवान् पूर्वं रोगाक्रांतजनं जिनः । विध्दे भिक्शुसंघं च स्वस्थमालोकनमृतैः ।" Vaidya, 1959, p. 544

He then spoke to the Bhikkhus, who were quite moved by his karuṇā and love for people, about the instance from another birth, where he had also cured them all. He tells them he was born as King Padamaka of Vārāṇasī, a ruler who wanted to end all the dukkha for his subjects. It was at the same time, when his kingdom saw a terrible plague break out, which was caused by the gods and bad alignment of time and space-

"मया यूयमं कृताः स्वस्थाः पूर्वस्मिन्नपि जन्मनि।। अभवं पद्मकाख्योऽहं वाराणस्यां नृपः पुरा। सर्वार्तिहरणासक्तक्ः प्रजानां जनकोपमः ।। कदाचिद्देवदोषेण वैषम्याद्देशकालयो।" (Vaidya, 1959, p. 544)

The physicians of the kingdom all failed to cure the breakout. They gave up as no medicine or ritual helped them to resolve the situation. Ultimately, the astrologers found the solution- a large Rohita fish. However, the kingdom's bad luck was so much that no fisherman could catch or find that particular fish in the entire state. The absence of fish put the lives of citizens in danger, and looking at such a dire state of his people, King Padamaka felt immense karuṇā and dukkha and could not bear their cries. This led him to take a vow- that may God let him become the remedy for his people's solution, let him be born as a Rohita fish and cure his people's ailments. After taking this vow, he jumped from the roof of his palace and gave up his life for the greater good. His vow worked, and instantly, he was reborn as the fish in the waters of the river Vara.

"रोहितः स्यामहं मत्स्यः पथ्यार्हः सर्वरोगीणाम् । प्रणिधानबलेनेति क्षिप्तं हम्र्यात्तदा वपुः।। तेनार्तिप्राणेधानेन वारायाः सरितोऽम्भसि क्षणेनैवाहमभवं सुमहान् रोहितस्तिमिः"। (Vaidya, 1959, p. 544)

Then, the people ate the flesh of the fish and were cured of all their ailments. You monks were those citizens who were cured, said Buddha. He goes on to tell that he is never sick because he heals other people's illnesses.

The next katha is an extract from a Mahāsūtra. Ārya¬vaiśālī¬praveśa¬mahā¬sūtra from Bhaisajyavastu tells us the story of Buddha rescuing the city of Vaiśālī from the clutches of a colossal epidemic that had taken over the city. It so happened that Buddha was staying in the city of Rājagriha when a Licchavi diplomat from Vaisali arrived. He told Buddha about the dreadful epidemic that had fallen on Vaiśālī and requested him to visit their city to find a remedy for their woes. On hearing this, Buddha took permission from King Ajātashatru, called his disciple Ānanda, and set out for the city. After a long journey, Buddha reaches the Lichhavi state. There, both Buddha and Ānanda took residence in the Āmrapāli grove. He then gives some instructions to Ānanda. He tells him to go to the city gates of Vaiśālī and recite a mantra (a chant). The mantra asks the evil spirits to leave the city, the good spirits to stay, and take physical form. It also mentions Paccekhabuddhas, Arhats, the Śrāvaks, the gods, Śakra, Brahmā, Isāna, Prajāpati, the demigods, and the bhūtas, all wish and instruct for the epidemic to cease to exist. It announces the arrival of the supreme protector, Buddha, and asks the epidemic to leave. Ānanda then acts as instructed by Buddha, goes to the threshold of the city gates of Vaiśālī, and recites

the proclamation. By doing so, Buddha and Ānanda both succeed in quelling the epidemic in Vaiśālī.

This next story is a version of the famous account that we are all very aware of, the Ṣaḍdanta Jātaka. The version referred to is from Kalpadrumaavadāna. Kalpadrumaavadāna māla begins with an elaboration of stories from Avandānasatakam; however, Ṣaḍdantaavadāna is not one of them. The text is a collection of amplified and versified stories, borrowed from older collections and framed in a dialogue between King Ashoka and Sthavira Upagupta. (Feer, 1895, pp. 31–85)

In this Sanskrit version of the story, we find a reference to the plague. The account is as follows-

"*The Ṣaḍdanta, shining like the snow and covered with spots of gold, lives on the southern flanks of the Himalayas with his two wives, Subhadrā and Bhadrā (cf. Sanskrit Subhadrā' highly virtuous', Bhadrā' virtuous'). One day, Ṣaḍdanta gives Subhadrā a beautiful lotus, but Bhadrā, receiving nothing, is jealous. She addresses an old muni (sage), expressing the wish to marry a king in her next life and to have a throne made from the six tusks of the Ṣaḍdanta. Again, she dies fasting. Reborn into a noble family, she marries King Brahmadatta. She tells him that she wishes to construct a throne from the six tusks of an elephant she has seen in a dream and that she will die if she cannot have her wish. A hunter is summoned, but he knows that the Ṣaḍdanta is a bodhisattva and that to kill him would be a great sin. Bhadrā insists, and so a second hunter is summoned. Brahmadatta first pays him, only later specifying the task. The hunter insidiously dons a saffron garment but digs no pit and does not hide. Subhadrā sees him and warns her husband. The Ṣaḍdanta ignores her warning, saying there is nothing to fear from the saffron garment, but is immediately shot with an arrow. While deploring the hypocrisy of the hunter, the Ṣaḍdanta protects him for the sake of his garment; he comforts Subhadrā, saying it is his karma that is to blame. He asks the hunter why he has come, and the hunter, feeling remorse, reluctantly responds that Queen Bhadrā has sent him to collect the elephant's tusks. Recalling his past lives, the Ṣaḍdanta now breaks off his tusks against a rock; the whole world trembles. He dies and achieves Buddhahood. As the hunter returns to the queen, bearing the tusks, his hands fall from his arms, rotten away. The new throne is constructed, but when Bhadrā is seated upon it, she dies and falls into hell. Plagues and invasions destroy the kingdom of Brahmadatta."* (Richter, n.d.). The basic story of Ṣaḍdanta Jātaka is followed in this version as well, with just minor characteristic changes from the Pāli version.

Methodology

This study employs a textual-historical and philosophical approach. Primary sources include Buddhist canonical and post-canonical texts that contain references to epidemics and related crises, such as the Avadānaśataka, Avadānakalpalatā, Bhaiṣajyavastu (Āryavaiśālīpraveśamahāsūtra), Jātaka tales, and Tibetan medical traditions. These works were analysed in their Sanskrit, Pāli, and Tibetan versions and available translations to identify depictions of epidemic outbreaks and their resolutions.

The method involved two levels of analysis. First, the textual narratives were examined in their historical and literary context to understand how epidemics were represented. Second, these accounts were interpreted through key Buddhist philosophical frameworks, including karuṇā (compassion), karma, citta-cetasika psychology, and pratītyasamutpāda (dependent origination).

Secondary sources, such as Granoff (1998), Appleton (2013), Harvey (2012), Capitanio (2021), and others, were used to provide comparative perspectives and scholarly interpretations.

Results

Several Buddhist texts record episodes of epidemic outbreaks and describe how they were addressed. These narratives vary in detail and genre but collectively demonstrate the recurring theme of epidemics as moments of moral and spiritual trial.

The Epidemic at Nāḍakaṇṭha (Avadānaśataka)

The 14th chapter of the Avadānaśataka recounts an epidemic in the village of Nāḍakaṇṭha. Despite rituals and offerings to multiple deities, relief came only when the villagers sought the refuge of the Buddha. By displaying karuṇā (compassion), the Buddha could remove the plague, leading villagers and Brahmins to become his followers (Vaidya, 1958; Appleton, 2013).

King Padmaka's Sacrifice (Avadānakalpalatā)

Kshemendra's Avadānakalpalatā (11th century CE) narrates the story of King Padmaka of Vārāṇasī. When a plague devastated his kingdom and no medicine was effective, Padmaka vowed to be reborn as a rohita fish whose flesh would cure his

people. He sacrificed his life and was reborn as the fish, whose body healed the afflicted (Vaidya, 1959; Granoff, 1998).

The Epidemic at Vaiśālī (Bhaiṣajyavastu – Āryavaiśālīpraveśamahāsūtra)

During an epidemic in Vaiśālī, the Buddha travelled from Rājagṛha at the request of Licchavi envoys. With Ānanda, he performed rituals at the city gates, invoking protective deities and proclaiming the end of the plague. This episode underscores the Buddha's role as protector and healer of communities (Bhaiṣajyavastu Translation Team, n.d.).

The Ṣaḍdanta Avadāna (Kalpadruma Avadāna)

In a Sanskrit retelling of the Ṣaḍdanta Jātaka within the Kalpadruma Avadāna, the tragic death of the bodhisattva-elephant is followed by karmic retribution. Queen Bhadrā and King Brahmadatta's kingdom collapses under the weight of plagues and invasions, linking moral transgression to collective calamity (Feer,1895).

Discussion

The analysis of Buddhist narratives on epidemics demonstrates that such accounts were not intended as medical treatises but as vehicles of philosophical instruction. Each story embeds principles of Buddhist thought within the context of a collective crisis.

Compassion (Karuṇā) is most apparent in the story of King Padmaka in the Avadānakalpalatā, which illustrates compassion as the central virtue in responding to suffering. By sacrificing his life to be reborn as a fish that cured his subjects, Padmaka exemplifies the Abhidhamma definition of karuṇā as removing others' suffering (Vaidya, 1959; Granoff, 1998). Such accounts highlight how epidemics were interpreted as opportunities to cultivate altruism and empathy.

Mindfulness and Mental Discipline are shown through narratives such as those in the Avadānaśataka and Āryavaiśālīpraveśamahāsūtra, which emphasise the role of mindfulness, chanting, and concentration practices as means of overcoming communal crises. These episodes resonate with Buddhist psychology, which distinguishes wholesome (śobhānā cetasika) and unwholesome (akuśala cetasika) mental states. By encouraging meditation and mindfulness, the texts stress that epidemics are not only physical challenges but also tests of mental resilience (Appleton, 2013; Harvey, 2012).

Karma, the doctrine of karma, appears repeatedly, especially in the account of Candra Buddha. Here, the ability to remove plagues is attributed to the fruition of past

virtuous deeds. Karma is presented not merely as individual fate but as a collective determinant of circumstances, reinforcing the Buddhist ethic of moral accountability (Shulman, 2008; Ronkin, 2005).

For Dependent Origination (Pratītyasamutpāda), the Ṣaḍdanta Jātaka illustrates how ignorance (avidyā), craving (tṛṣṇā), and attachment (upādāna) set in motion a chain of causality that culminates in destruction. Epidemics in these texts are thus situated within the twelvefold chain of dependent origination, underscoring the interdependence of human actions and collective suffering (Laumakis, 2008).

These narratives demonstrate that Buddhist responses to epidemics are not prescriptive medical interventions but moral frameworks for resilience. They highlight how communities may draw upon virtues of compassion, mindfulness, and karmic responsibility to endure crises, which remain relevant in modern pandemics such as COVID-19. This study is limited by its reliance on textual sources and does not evaluate archaeological or epidemiological evidence. Further research could compare Buddhist narrative strategies with responses to epidemics in other religious traditions, providing a broader cross-cultural perspective.

Conclusions

In seeking accounts of epidemics and pandemics in Buddhist literature, the expectation might be to encounter systematic medical descriptions or prescriptive treatises. Instead, what emerges from the sources is a repertoire of narratives that, while not medical, nevertheless propose remedies-ethical, spiritual, and philosophical- collective suffering. These stories demonstrate that the Buddhist response to crises was not framed in terms of pharmacological cures, but in terms of cultivating karmic awareness, compassion (karuṇā), loving-kindness (mettā), and wholesome mental states (kuśala cetasika and citta). Though composed in antiquity, these principles transcend time and remain relevant in the contemporary world, where global crises test human resilience and solidarity.

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