

Can The “Fourfold Cause Of Matter” According To Theravāda Buddhism Provide New Insights For The Clinical Setting With Psychosomatic Patients In Myanmar?

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Abstract

The objective of this paper is to present the Theravāda Buddhist approaches for an explanation of the somatic factors in psychosomatic diseases. It tries to raise the awareness of persons working in the health field about the patient’s subjective explanations of their symptoms. Many psychosomatic patients will refer to the Buddhist teachings looking for the causes of their disagreeable bodily feelings. In a literature review of the Sutta Piṭaka and Abhidamma Piṭaka and the popular commentary Visuddhimagga I examine the “fourfold cause of matter” (*catubbidho paccayo*). This gives the necessary background information. These fourfold causes should not be confused with the Four Noble Truths - which contain the essence of the Buddha's teachings - or with the four elements (earth, water, wind, fire), that are used as explanation pattern for unbalance in traditional Burmese medicine. A very recent work from the year 2017 by Pyi Pho Kaw discusses the causes of illness in the Burmese Buddhist medical system. Here also the link between these four causes of matter and possible symptoms is reinforced. I add some own impressions in an unsystematic way, collected as participant observer in Myanmar. The findings result in the author’s conviction that there is a model of explanation that is not widely known yet. The Visuddhimagga is for almost all the Saṅgha members a basis of their teaching to the lay persons. About 90% of the patients and of the medical staff in Myanmar are Buddhist. Thus it can be assumed that there is some common basis for interaction. It is concluded that there should be further discussion how to react in case the patient points out that he believes his symptoms are related to the “fourfold cause of matter.”

Keywords

Somatic symptoms, Theravāda Buddhism, Patient’s explanation

Introduction

In this paper I will only describe the theoretic background. We need to explore more of course about its practical application. However up till now we have no data for a case study.

In the Pali English Dictionary *catubbidho paccayo* is defined as the fourfold cause of material form and consists of *kamma*, *citta*, *utu* and *āhāra*.¹ “Material form” here corresponds to any agreeable or disagreeable feeling in the body. These are for medical doctors somewhat unfamiliar terms for somatic sensations. I will give later possible translations for *kamma* (or karma as popular term). Its understanding is central in this paper. We will go into detail

¹ Rhys Davids, T.W. & Stede, W. (1993). Pali-English Dictionary, Dehli, 384.

when we argue in favour of its relevance in the patient's perception. *Citta* can be translated as mind, *utu* as climatic conditions, *āhāra* as food.

We are interested in explanations of the somatic factors in psychosomatic diseases when patients refer to the Theravāda Buddhist teachings looking for the causes of their disagreeable bodily feelings. This they do frequently, as any medical doctor in Myanmar will confirm. It is our conviction that this reasoning should be taken up seriously and not neglected during the treatment. It is argued that any therapeutic intervention on psychosomatic diseases either with drugs or through behavioural therapy remains insufficient if the underlying deep belief about *kamma* (and the other three factors of *catubbidho paccayo*) is left out.

Discussion

Abhidhamma Piṭaka

The teachings of the Buddha are subdivided in the three baskets, the *Tipiṭaka*.

Let me start with the *Abhidhamma Piṭaka*. One book in the *Abhidhamma Piṭaka* is called the *Dhammasaṅgani*. In its commentary - the *Atthasālinī* - it is written that the body *kāya* can be fourfold: 1. *kammasamuṭṭhāna (upādiṇṇaka)* = *kamma* generated; 2. *āhārasamuṭṭhāna* = food generated; 3. *utusamuṭṭhāna* = temperature generated; 4. *cittasamuṭṭhāna* = mind generated.²

In the most revered commentary *Visuddhimagga* (The Path of Purification) by Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa it is written: "*Kamma*, consciousness, temperature and nutriment constitute this fourfold condition for materiality beginning with *kamma*"³ (*Rūpassa pana kammaṃ cittaṃ utu āhāroti ayaṃ kammādiko catubbidho paccayo*).

At this point now it might be proper to try to explain about the meaning of *kamma*. *Kamma* actually means wholesome or unwholesome actions by body (*kāya-kamma*), speech (*vacī-kamma*) or mind (*mano-kamma*). The Buddha Gotama said that volition (*cetanā*) is *kamma*. (*Cetanāhaṃ, bhikkhave, kammaṃ vadāmi*).⁴ The interpretation of *kamma* as fate is a western misconception, but it can be found in Myanmar as well. However in the *Visuddhimagga* we find about *kamma* as one of the reasons for (agreeable or disagreeable) feelings: "It is only **when it is past** (my emphasis) that *kamma* is a condition for *kamma* originated materiality."⁵ That means we can consider past *kamma* as one of the four reasons for the patients somatic experiences.

In the same way *Bhadanta Anuruddhācariya* writes in the in Myanmar widely used *Manual of Abhidhamma, (Abhidhammattha Sanghaha)*. "Material Phenomena arise in four ways:

² Darlegung der Bedeutung (Atthasālinī) (2005). Der Kommentar zur Dhammasaṅgani, Oxford, 166.

³ Buddhagosa B. (1997). The Path of Purification, Visuddhimagga, Kandy, 694.

⁴ Nibbedika Sutta, AN 6.63.

⁵ Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa; The Path of Purification, Visuddhimagga, Kandy, 1979: 695.

kamma, mind, seasonal conditions and food. Therein the.....moral and immoral *Kamma*....produce.....material phenomena born of *Kamma*, at every moment, commencing from conception.”⁶ The translator of the *Visuddhimagga* adds here: “For when the fruit arises from *kamma* that is actually past it does so because of *kamma* having been performed and **because of storage**” (my emphasis).⁷

The *Mahāthera Ledi Sayadaw* (born 1846 A.D.) who kept alive the *Dhamma* when it was on the verge of disappearance speaks of the “Four Producers of Material Phenomena” and says: “*Kamma* means moral and immoral actions committed in previous existences” and “*Citta* means mental concomitants existing in the present life.”⁸

This much I could find in the *Abhidhamma Piṭaka* and its commentaries about *catubbidho paccayo* as the four causes of any somatic (material) phenomena. We have *kamma* done in the past and we have *kamma* being performed now. We have to differentiate the two. When the patient speaks of *kamma* as a cause for his feelings he mostly means *kamma* of the past, coming to fruition now. He might not consider that he is also performing *kamma* this very moment. But this is not relevant for this study here because we want to gain insight into the patient’s perception of the causes for his (disagreeable) feelings.

Sutta Piṭaka

The second book of the *Tipiṭaka* is the *Sutta Piṭaka*. Here we have one discourse, where the Buddha talks about the eight causes and conditions for pains and illness. In the *Sīvaka Sutta* the Buddha admonished the wanderer *Sīvaka*, that *karmic fruition* is only one of eight causes for illness, it doesn’t stand alone. The other seven are imbalance of the four elements (earth, water, wind, and fire), weather changes, improper care and external triggers.⁹

In another discourse the Buddha confirms the use of medicine for illness but points out that the medicine that never fails is the Eightfold Noble Path. “Monks, doctors give a purgative for warding off diseases caused by bile, diseases caused by phlegm, diseases caused by the internal wind property. There is a purging there; I don't say that there's not, but it sometimes succeeds and sometimes fails. So I will teach you the noble purgative that always succeeds and never fails.... “¹⁰

Also there is the frequent mention of the Seven Factors of Awakening *bojjhanga*. They are mental qualities. When recited and practised have healing qualities for bodily diseases. Two leading disciples of the Buddha recovered when listening to the recitation, *Mahā Kassapa*

⁶ Anuruddhācariya B. (1968). A Manual of Abhidhamma, Abhidhammattha Sanghah, Kandy, 302.

⁷ Buddhaghosa B. (1979). The Path of Purification, Visuddhimagga, Kandy, 695.

⁸ Ledi Sayadaw, M. (1965). The Vipassanā-Dīpanī; Union Buddha Sāsana Council, Rangoon, 18.

⁹ Dhivan, T. J. (2017). Illness, Cure, and Care; Selections from the Pali Canon, in: Salguero, Pierce, C.; New York.

¹⁰ Virecana (Tikicchaka) Sutta, AN 10.108.

and *Mahā Mogallāna*.¹¹ Even the Buddha himself had to ask to recite these factors, when he had a bodily disease. He subsequently recovered.¹²

In the *Satipatṭhāna Sutta*¹³ we have among others the fields of contemplation the body (*kāya*) and the bodily sensations (*vedanā*). Here one doesn't consider the causes of these phenomena at all, one just observes without investigation in any causes. In *Vipassanā* courses, where the author had a chance to participate, three of the four causes are kept as stable as possible - providing healthy food, a temperature controlled meditation room and encouraging an attitude of a balanced mind. In this way one doesn't need to worry about those three, the one of the four ways of material phenomena left is *kamma*. In this way one can get oneself rid of past *kamma*. This contemplation or mindfulness "is not interchangeable with mindfulness techniques in Western psychotherapy."¹⁴

Viniya Piṭaka

The third book is the *Vinaya Piṭaka*. Here we can find one story, where the Buddha himself takes care of a sick monk and advises the *Saṅgha* not to neglect the sick. In another story, *Jīvaka*, the medical doctor, treated the Buddha successfully with a purgative.¹⁵

All these examples from the *Tipiṭaka* show that somatic disease can and should be treated with medicine, the best medicine available. This doesn't exclude the practise of the *Dhamma*; actually it is highlighted as the superior medicine.

We can see that *kamma* is one of the causes for bodily disease and thus for psychosomatic sensations, but not the only one.

Recent commentaries

Nalini Galmangoda has written a concise treatise about *rupa* (matter) and says *rupa* is the only ultimate truth (*paramattha sacca*) that can be seen (viewed). "*Rupa* arises due to four main factors."¹⁶

She enumerates after accordingly the four conditions - *catubbidho paccayo*. This is in accordance with our research above.

According to her analysis 18 *rupas* are directly and concretely produced and conditioned by the "fourfold cause of matter" namely the four *mahā bhūtas* (earth, water, wind and fire),

¹¹ Mahā Kassapa Thera Bojjhaṅga Sutta, Mahā Mogallāna Bojjhaṅga Sutta; Samyutta Nikaya.

¹² Gilana Sutta SN 46.16.

¹³ Satipatṭhāna Sutta MN 10.

¹⁴ Schoedwell, S., 'Genetic loading...' published online: 07.8.2018.

¹⁵ Dhivan, T. J. (2017). Illness, Cure, and Care; Selections from the Pali Canon, in: Salguero, Pierce, C.; N. Y.

¹⁶ Galmangoda, N. (accessed on 26.8.2018). Rupa (Matter).

the five physical sense organs, four objective material phenomena (visible form etc...), the two sexual phenomena, the heart base, the life-faculty and nutriment.

Utu is normally defined as temperature in the sense that it is experienced as both heat and cold. In Abhidhamma though, *utu* is identical with the Fire Element (*tejo-dhātu*).

Nalini Galmangoda explains that some *rupas* are exclusively born of *kamma*, e.g. the two sex faculties and the “seat of the mind” (heart base).

Contrary to western belief “seat of the mind” is located not in the brain but in the heart region.

Pyi Phyo Kyaw (2018) examines in her recent work the “Causes of Illness in a Burmese Buddhist Medical System” and cites Hsaya Kyi as follows: “All being in the three worlds, which are the world of the living beings, the world of the conditioned things and the world of physical things, are depended on and conditioned by four causes: Karma, consciousness, temperature and nutriment.”¹⁷ So this is the same teaching again.

Traditional Burmese Medicine

In Traditional Burmese Medicine we find the again the same expressions. “All humans are conditioned by *kamma* (volitional action) *citta* (consciousness, mind), *utu* (climate) and *āhāra* (nutrition).”¹⁸ Traditional Burmese Medicine works of course a lot with the four *mahā bhutas* (earth, water, wind, and fire: *pathavi-dhātu*, *apo-dhātu*, *vayo-dhātu* and *tejo-dhātu*) and tries to balance them. As a basis for this the “fourfold cause of matter” (*catubbidho paccayo*) is given as above.

The author of this paper can record many instances where *apo*, *vayo tejo* and *pathavi* and the “fourfold cause of matter” (*catubbidho paccayo*) were used as the basis for diagnosis and treatment of psychosomatic symptoms.

Western research

I agree with Schödwell et al. when they speak of a “genetic loading” dealing with Myanmar depressive patients where there is a danger of professionals risking to neglect both the needs and resources of Myanmar patients when blocking out their Buddhist belief system.¹⁹ The same is true with psychosomatic patients in general. Their view about the cause of their somatic symptoms is often connected with *kamma* as it is a central category in Theravāda Buddhism.

¹⁷ Pyi Phyo Kyaw (2017). Causes of Illness in a Burmese Buddhist Medical System, in: Salguero, P., C.; N.Y., 577.

¹⁸ U Win Ko (2013). A Drop of rain in Asia, A brief introduction to Traditional Burmese Medicine, Leipzig, 10.

¹⁹ Schoedwell, S. (published online: 07.8.2018). “Genetic loading.....”

Conclusion

With my paper I wanted to raise the awareness of persons working in the health field about the patient's subjective explanation - *kamma* - when they feel somatic symptoms. I cannot fully support signboards like these below (Picture 1) that I discovered in Myanmar. Here explicitly the results of past actions (*vipāka kamma*: Picture 2)²⁰ as causes for a mental or psychosomatic disease are excluded. This might be good for drug compliance and for the support of behaviour change but leaves plenty of space for doubts in the perception of the patient. So let us show respect to the patient. He believes in the words of the Buddha Gotama, as we explored them above. About 90% of the patients and of the medical staff in Myanmar are Buddhist. Thus it can be assumed that there is some common basis for interaction.

²⁰ ဝိပါက Picture 2

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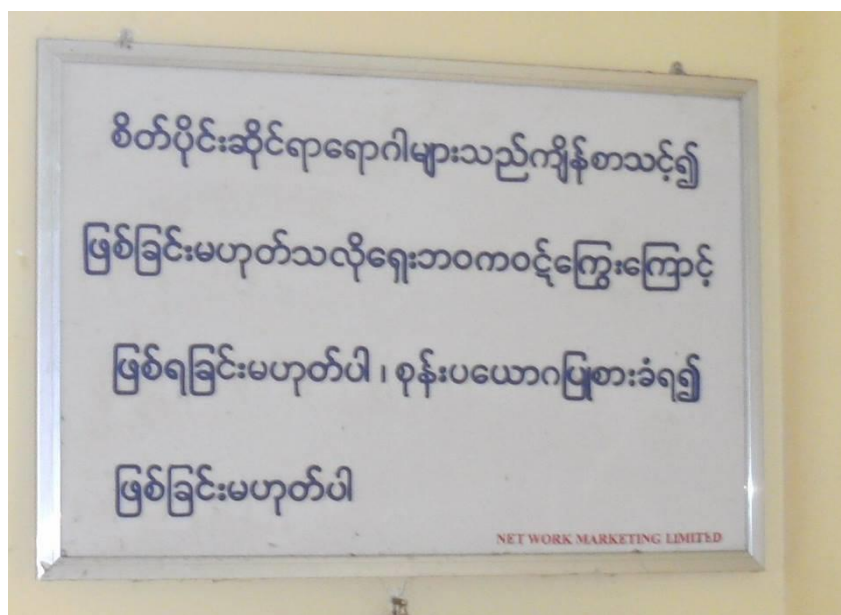
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Picture 1