

Spirituality and Healing, Roger Gottlieb  
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“Spirituality” is a popular but widely abused term. Religion scholar Roger Gottlieb sheds light on a number of the complexities enfolded in this all-purpose concept. In Buddhist philosophy, the term is not so common. Buddhist teachings tend toward pragmatic language, cautioning students against vague and potentially misleading understandings of enlightenment. This response draws on my study and practice of Zen Buddhism, particularly Japanese Soto Zen, which emphasizes meditation, ethics, and community practice. My particular scholarship explores the relationship of Buddhist concepts to modern environmental thought. “Healing,” from my perspective, includes social and environmental healing as well as personal healing – a whole systems approach.

In this chapter, Gottlieb asks several key questions which offer a springboard for further dialogue. First, do spiritual practices such as meditation, mindfulness, and yoga and cultivated attitudes such as acceptance, compassion, and gratitude help people heal? Second, if they help with physical health, are they necessarily spiritual in nature? Third, if they are part of the healing process, do they change the nature of that healing, i.e. generate spiritual as well as physical healing?

The Four Noble Truths, the first teaching that the Buddha is said to have received and offered to his followers, is a form of medical diagnosis laying out a path to healing. This foundational teaching is a reference point for all schools of Buddhism, laying the groundwork for much of Buddhist philosophy. The first truth points to suffering as a fact of human existence, to be understood as universal and inescapable, the primary medical ailment. This includes the suffering of sickness, old age and death, and the many dissatisfactions of not being well nourished physically, mentally, or emotionally. The second truth points to desire or grasping after alternative states as the source of this suffering, in other words, the urge to find a way out of the basic human condition. Often this leads people to choices that perpetuate or increase suffering. To counter the seeming hopelessness and all-penetrating nature of this condition of human life, the Buddha offered the third truth: there is a way out. This is the liberatory project of Buddhism: to find relief from suffering through awakening. The fourth truth prescribes the eight-fold path with specific healing practices: right understanding, right intention, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right meditation. Healing, in this sense, leads to release from suffering and cultivation of the capacity to help others heal.

One of the primary sources of suffering in the western approach to ailments is the dualistic view of body/mind as separate and distinct. This is certainly what I learned in biology, particularly anatomy – that the body is a collection of organs held in place by bones, muscles, and skin – all independent parts with their specialized functions. Doctors in hospitals have been known to refer to patients as “the broken leg in room 202” or “the face burn down the hall.” Treatment of disease and discomfort is based on isolating the afflicted part and analyzing its medical needs. Buddhist teachings, in contrast, admonish students to avoid simplistic and incorrect views. Mind and body are viewed as one dynamic whole, unified in experience and response to the world.

Emotions are studied in depth for their physical and spiritual insights. In Zen the non-dualistic view encompasses mountains and rivers as the body writ large, with humans and all other beings the expression of the same dynamic forces. Solutions to suffering take a broad systems approach to the body/mind in a vast universe of complex causes and conditions.

Gottlieb raises an important question about using spiritual practices in healing – how do you know if the health effects are truly spiritual? From a Buddhist perspective, the answer is clear. Health benefits can be said to be of spiritual benefit if they meet these conditions: First, they reduce suffering, i.e. fulfill the diagnostic approach of the Four Noble Truths. Second, they develop a greater sense of interdependence between self and other, i.e. a dynamic, interpenetrating view of the universe. Third, they generate an acceptance of impermanence as the true nature of all things. Gottlieb speaks of these various aspects as witnessed by those dealing with chronic pain and illness. Each of these conditions is a path to liberation or awakening in Buddhist thought, thus yogic practices for health are already rooted in the spiritual aims in Buddhism.

Gottlieb is right to raise this concern for at least two reasons. It is well known that Zen training was used in Japan to develop an unmatched fierceness in samurai warriors. But these warriors were engaged in generating suffering during wartime, not relieving it. This conundrum has been examined in depth by Buddhist scholars; Buddhism, like all world religions, has its flawed applications. A second, less obvious problem, is that physical suffering in some Buddhist countries has been blamed on “karma,” i.e. the victim’s behavior in an earlier time or former life. While people may increase their vulnerability to certain kinds of illness through personal choice, they also may experience suffering as innocent victims of environmental toxins. Despite its systems approach, the popular Buddhist understanding of health does not always reflect the latest scientific thinking.

In the Blue Cliff Record, a famous collection of Zen koans, the teacher Yunmen said, “Medicine and disease subdue one another. The whole earth is medicine. Where do you find yourself?” Illness is said to contain its own antidote, sometimes quite literally as well as spiritually. The experience of being deeply ill or in unremitting chronic pain defines a different life, one that breaks with established norms or boundaries. That fact and the vulnerabilities that go with it call into question all our assumptions, driving us to find new ways of working with what seems impossible to grasp. The Buddhist teachings are filled with stories about the challenge of accepting and facing existing conditions, pointing out that this very moment is the only one we have for healing. Taking up this practice is at the heart of Buddhist commitment, but not only for personal liberation and transformation. Of equal importance is the social transformation that is possible in working with healing. The Three Jewels in Buddhist philosophy are said to be the Buddha (teacher), Dharma (teachings), and Sangha (community); the health of the sangha is core to supporting the health of the individual. Each person who undertakes the journey of healing is thought to bring medicine to the wider social circle – family, friends, caregivers, sangha mates – who, in turn, strengthen the spiritual community.

The social model of health is finding new receptivity in western medical circles, based on the well-established success of cancer and other support groups, but also looking at systems aspects of health and healing. In a study on quality of life and bicycle commuting, I was introduced to

the Northwest Health Foundation of Portland, Oregon, a philanthropic group engaged in preventive grantmaking strategies to “encourage the social and environmental conditions that enable everyone to live a healthy and productive life.” Research shows that primary interventions to produce healthier neighborhoods, i.e. through safe bicycle and walk routes, access to healthy food, and freedom from crime, are ultimately more effective than last-minute emergency room actions. NWHF is pro-actively investing in health-giving social systems to mitigate individual suffering and build resilience. This approach is not only less expensive in the long run but has multiple reinforcing feedback loops that produce a healthier social system.

Gottlieb’s explorations are critical to our times, as new medical threats arise from superbugs, climate disasters, and accumulating environmental toxins. “Resilience” has become a key goal in climate change planning with people seeking ways to adapt to rising seas and powerful storms. The western medical model does not have all the answers to the challenges we face in human health. As new forms of suffering emerge, the teachings and practices from the Buddhist traditions may offer new insights in meeting the healing challenges of the future.