

MEDICAL SCIENCES IN THE VINAYA PIṬAKAS: A STUDY MAINLY BASED ON THE BHESAJJAKKHANDHAKA AND ITS PARALLEL VERSIONS

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The Vinaya Piṭaka is a big treasure for exploring various pieces of information about ancient India. Medical sciences are among this vast body of information. The extant Vinaya Piṭakas therefore form a huge mine for studying medical materials. These medical records – about medical cases (with their treatments and sometimes equipment) and materia medica – are, however, succinct and difficult to comprehend. Very few scholars have carried out studies on these medical materials. They have only focused on one or two Vinaya Piṭakas, or merely studied certain aspects of these materials. A more comprehensive perusal and explanation of this ancient medical information found in the Vinaya Piṭakas is wanting. The objective of this paper is to examine and interpret such information – to discuss the various medical sciences found in the Vinaya Piṭakas and to explore the large corpus of materia medica retained in these materials. The main sources used for this study are the extant versions of the Chapter on Medicine of the Vinaya Piṭakas – viz. the Bhesajjakkhandhaka of the Theravāda Vinaya, the Bhaiṣajyaskandhaka of the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya, the Bhaiṣajyadharmakas of the Mahīśāsaka and Sarvāstivāda Vinayas, the Bhaiṣajyavastu of the Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya, and the relevant vargas in the Mahāsāṃghika Vinaya. Other medical information scattered in other parts of the Vinaya Piṭakas is also explored. The approach of this paper is primarily medical interpretation – to examine the medical materials in these sources and to understand them. The materials are interpreted via three aspects, which are the ancient meanings of the word hermeneutics: narration (by describing individual diseases/drugs according to the same or similar materials from different Vinayas), explanation (by using the commentarial and ayurvedic explanations), and translation (by rendering them into modern medical terminologies). The medical accounts are categorized and scrutinized by means of ayurvedic science and modern medical science. Diseases and treatments pertaining to various medical specialties such as general medicine, toxicology, dermatology, ophthalmology, psychiatry, and surgery can be identified. Cases such as autumnal disease, wind disease, water disease, insanity, snakebite, eye problems, skin diseases, anal diseases, etc., are interpreted and discussed. The materia medica retained in the Vinayas – mostly vegetative (such as various medicines of root, stem, leaf, flower, fruit, etc.), as well as some mineral (such as salts) and animal (fats and meat) – are also examined. Through such an attempt of interpretation, information on the ancient medical sciences in the Vinaya sources may be better comprehended. Ancient Indian medical sciences preserved in the extant versions of the Vinaya Piṭaka, moreover, can be known and understood by medical historians. The significance of this paper is to demonstrate how the knowledge of different sciences/disciplines, especially that of modern science, can be used as a tool to interpret and to help understand the ancient Indian knowledge.