

Buddhist Nun: A perspective of health and hygiene

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Abstract

This paper analyses nuns' lives, roles, and contributions in various cultural, religious, and social contexts. Further, it provides a comprehensive understanding of nuns' diverse roles within their communities, focusing on their spiritual practices, social interactions, and societal impact. The analysis adopts a multi-faceted approach in examining nuns' lives, encompassing historical, anthropological, and sociological perspectives by using primary and secondary sources, including interviews and textual analysis; the research sheds light on the motivations that drive women to pursue the path of religious devotion and embrace a life dedicated to service and contemplation.

Keywords: *Buddhist Nuns, Bhikkhunis, Monastic Life, Spiritual Practices, Health and Hygiene, Meditation, Self-care, Mind-Body Connection, Mental Health.*

Introduction:

Buddhist nuns, also known as Bhikkhunis or Bhikkhunīs, have long been an integral part of the Buddhist tradition, playing essential roles in preserving and propagating the teachings of the Buddha. Living within the structured framework of monastic life, these devoted women follow a path of spiritual cultivation, mindfulness, and compassionate service. However, beyond their spiritual journey, little attention has been given to the unique health and hygiene practices they adopt, which contribute to their overall well-being (Sundara, 2019). This paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of Buddhist nuns' health and hygiene practices, examining how their spiritual beliefs and monastic lifestyle intertwine with their approach to self-care. By exploring the practices and attitudes of these women concerning health, the study seeks to shed light on the holistic approach they embrace, addressing physical, mental, and spiritual dimensions of well-being. Key areas of investigation in this paper include the historical evolution of nunneries, the role of nuns in promoting education, healthcare, and social welfare, as well as their contributions to art, culture, and spiritual development. It delves into the challenges nuns face, including issues related to gender equality, cultural stereotypes, and the evolving dynamics of religious institutions. The research explores the impact of modernisation and globalisation on nuns'

lives, examining how these factors influence their traditional roles and practices. It also investigates how nuns adapt to societal changes while preserving their unique spiritual heritage. This research investigates Buddhist nuns' health and hygiene practices to understand their holistic approach to maintaining physical, mental, and spiritual well-being. The study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining surveys, interviews, and observational data to comprehensively analyse Buddhist nuns' unique lifestyles and beliefs concerning health and hygiene.

The research begins by exploring Buddhist nunneries' historical and cultural context, examining how traditional teachings and ancient practices influence their approach to health and hygiene. It investigates the role of spirituality in shaping their attitudes toward self-care and the interconnectedness of mind, body, and spirit. Central to the study is examining Buddhist nuns' daily health routines and hygiene practices. This includes the exploration of dietary habits, exercise regimens, herbal remedies and alternative therapies for health maintenance and healing. The research also investigates the role of mindfulness and meditation in stress reduction and its potential effects on overall health.

Furthermore, the paper delves into the communal living environment of nunneries and its impact on health and hygiene practices. It analyses the support systems within these communities, including mutual care and social interactions, and how they contribute to the well-being of the nuns. In addition, the research addresses the challenges faced by Buddhist nuns in maintaining their health and hygiene practices, such as limited resources and access to modern medical facilities. It explores how traditional knowledge and practices are adapted to cope with contemporary health issues. The paper also discusses the potential implications of the findings for promoting health and hygiene practices in wider contexts beyond Buddhist communities. It highlights the value of a holistic approach to health, which integrates physical, mental, and spiritual aspects for overall well-being.

Thus, the study offers valuable insights into Buddhist nuns' health and hygiene practices, providing a deeper understanding of their unique lifestyles and beliefs. By examining their approach to well-being from a holistic perspective, the research contributes to the growing body of knowledge on the intersection of spirituality, health, and hygiene. It underscores the potential relevance of traditional practices in promoting well-being. It may inform public health strategies incorporating cultural and spiritual dimensions for a more comprehensive approach to health care.

Defining nuns:

In the context of the study on Buddhist nuns from the perspective of health and hygiene, nuns refer to women who have chosen to lead a monastic life following the teachings of Buddhism. These

dedicated women, known as Bhikkhunis or Bhikkhunīs, commit themselves to pursuing spiritual awakening and liberation from suffering through the observance of the Vinaya, the monastic code of conduct established by the Buddha.

Buddhist nuns live within nunneries or monastic communities, following a structured and disciplined way of life. They engage in various spiritual practices, including meditation, chanting, and mindfulness, to cultivate Wisdom, compassion, and inner peace. Beyond their spiritual journey, these nuns also adhere to health and hygiene practices that align with their belief in the interconnectedness of mind, body, and spirit.

The term “nuns” in this study specifically refers to women who have taken full ordination within the Buddhist monastic community. As ordained members of the sangha (monastic community), they play essential roles in preserving and disseminating the teachings of the Buddha, contributing to their communities through spiritual guidance, education, and social welfare activities. Their commitment to health and hygiene practices reflects their holistic approach to well-being, emphasising the importance of self-care and communal support in pursuing a balanced and fulfilling life.

Origin of Buddhist Nun:

The order of Buddhist nuns (bhikṣunī sangha), according to tradition, started only a few years or five centuries after the order of Buddhist monks (bhikṣu sangha). The Buddha’s aunt and foster mother, Mahaprajapati, is credited with founding the bhikṣunī sangha when she asked him for permission to join the sangha, and after some reluctance, he gave it to her. The bhikṣunī prātimokṣa (Pali: bhikkhuni pāṭimokkha), a summary of the precepts or rules found in the bhikṣunī Vinaya, or monastic code for nuns, governs the life of Buddhist nuns. Like novice monks, a novice nun must first follow the ten training guidelines for novice nuns (srāmaṇerikā), which include refraining from murder, theft, lying, sexual activity, intoxicants, untimely food, singing, dancing, using cosmetics and ornaments, sitting in high or luxurious chairs or beds, and handling silver or gold. The Vinaya mandates that a nun spends two years as a siksamana before performing the upasampada to become a bhikṣunī. She needs this time to acquire further training and ensure she isn’t pregnant, unlike a bhikṣu (completely ordained monk) (fully ordained nun). The number of precepts required to become a bhikṣunī varies across the various Vinaya schools: 311 for Theravada, 348 for Dharmaguptaka, 364 for Mūlasarvāstivāda, etc. bhikṣunī ordination’s heritage was spread to China, Korea, Taiwan, and Vietnam, where these nations saw its resurgence. The lineage vanished in India and Sri Lanka in about the 11th century but was restored there in the late 20th century. In the twenty-first century’s first decade, there were thought to be 60,000 or more bhikṣunī (Tsomo, 2013).

Buddhist nuns: The definitional nuances:

Buddhist nuns, also known as Bhikkhunis or Bhikkhunīs, hold a significant place within the Buddhist tradition, and their role and status may vary across different Buddhist cultures and lineages. The term “Buddhist nuns” carries several definitional nuances that are worth exploring:

1. Spiritual Devotion: Buddhist nuns are women who have chosen to dedicate their lives to the Buddhist path of spiritual awakening. They commit to observing the monastic precepts and follow a disciplined lifestyle centred around mindfulness, meditation, and studying Buddhist teachings.

2. Ordination: To become a fully ordained Buddhist nun, one must receive the Bhikkhuni ordination, which traces its origins back to the time of the Buddha. The ordination process involves taking vows, including those of celibacy, renunciation of worldly possessions, and adherence to the Vinaya rules.

3. Vinaya Rules and Monastic Life: Bhikkhunis adhere to the Vinaya, the code of conduct for monastics, which governs their daily lives and interactions. The Vinaya provides guidelines on matters such as ethical conduct, proper dress, and rules related to health and hygiene.

4. Different Lineages: The status of Buddhist nuns can vary depending on the Buddhist tradition and country. While some Buddhist cultures have strong Bhikkhuni ordination lineages, others may have limited or no formal Bhikkhuni sangha.

5. Gender Equality and Social Role: The recognition and treatment of Buddhist nuns can reflect the attitude toward gender equality within a particular Buddhist community. In some traditions, nuns may hold positions of authority and contribute actively to monastic life and society, while in others, they may face challenges related to gender discrimination.

6. Contribution to Society: Buddhist nuns often play essential roles beyond their spiritual practice. They may be involved in charitable activities, education, spiritual guidance and community support. Their contributions extend to healthcare, social welfare, and promoting gender equality.

7. Community and Communal Living: Nunneries, where Buddhist nuns reside, provide communal living and spiritual practice spaces. The supportive environment fosters sisterhood, mutual care, and collective well-being.

8. Holistic Well-being: The life of a Buddhist nun encompasses not only spiritual aspects but also a focus on holistic well-being. Their health and hygiene practices emphasise the interconnection between the body, mind, and spirit.

The Perspective of Buddhist nuns about a healthy society:

The perspective of Buddhist nuns about a healthy society is rooted in the principles of compassion, Wisdom, and interconnectedness. From their spiritual vantage point, a healthy society goes beyond physical well-being. It encompasses mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects that contribute to the overall welfare of individuals and the community. Several key aspects characterise the perspective of Buddhist nuns on a healthy society:

- 1. Compassion and Caring:** Buddhist nuns emphasise cultivating compassion and loving-kindness as fundamental qualities for building a healthy society. They advocate for treating all beings with kindness and understanding, promoting harmonious relationships and reducing conflict and suffering.
- 2. Ethical Conduct:** The teachings of Buddhism, including the precepts observed by nuns, emphasise ethical behaviour as a cornerstone of a healthy society. Upholding principles such as non-harming, honesty, and integrity fosters trust and social cohesion.
- 3. Mindfulness and Mental Well-being:** Buddhist nuns recognise the significance of mental well-being and advocate for mindfulness and meditation. Individuals can better navigate challenges and contribute positively to society by cultivating inner peace and emotional balance.
- 4. Education and Wisdom:** Education is seen as nurturing Wisdom and critical thinking, enabling individuals to make informed decisions that benefit themselves and society. Buddhist nuns often contribute to education and promote lifelong learning as essential for personal growth and societal progress.
- 5. Social Welfare and Service:** Buddhist nuns actively engage in charitable activities and social welfare initiatives. They exemplify a life of service and selflessness, working to address the needs of the vulnerable and marginalised, thus fostering a sense of interconnectedness and shared responsibility within society.
- 6. Environmental Stewardship:** Buddhist nuns recognise the interconnectedness between humanity and the environment. They advocate for environmental stewardship and sustainable practices, recognising that a healthy society is intrinsically linked to the well-being of the natural world.
- 7. Gender Equality and Inclusivity:** Buddhist nuns often challenge gender stereotypes and advocate for gender equality within religious and societal contexts. Their perspectives on a healthy society embrace inclusivity, ensuring everyone has equal opportunities and access to resources and support.
- 8. Cultivation of Inner Qualities:** Beyond material progress, Buddhist nuns emphasise cultivating inner qualities such as contentment, gratitude, and altruism. These virtues contribute to a sense of well-being and harmony within society.

In this, the perspective of Buddhist nuns about a healthy society revolves around fostering compassion, Wisdom, and ethical conduct while recognising the interdependence of all beings and the environment. Their focus on mental well-being, education, social service, and inclusivity reflects their belief in creating a harmonious and sustainable society that promotes the welfare of all its members. By embodying these principles, Buddhist nuns exemplify a vision of a healthy society that goes beyond mere physical health and encompasses the holistic well-being of individuals and the collective.

Holistic Approach to Health and Hygiene: A Buddhist Way

The tradition of Buddhist nuns dates back to the time of the Buddha, who, after much deliberation, granted women the opportunity to join the monastic community and pursue the path of enlightenment. Over the centuries, these dedicated women have contributed significantly to the propagation of the Dharma (Buddhist teachings) and the establishment of nunneries, providing spaces for spiritual practice and communal living. Buddhist nuns' health and hygiene practices are deeply rooted in the principle of interconnectedness (Findly, 2000). In their pursuit of liberation from suffering, they recognise the significance of nurturing both the body and the mind. This approach considers that physical well-being is interwoven with mental and spiritual health, and each aspect influences the others. The main attribute of health hygiene is as follows:

(i) Dietary Habits and Mindful Consumption:

The study investigates the dietary habits of Buddhist nuns, which are often aligned with the principles of mindfulness and compassion. Their practice of mindful eating emphasises awareness of food origins, the impermanence of life, and the impact of consumption on the environment and living beings. Such dietary mindfulness fosters good physical health and nourishes spiritual growth.

(ii) Physical Activity and Mental Well-being:

Physical activity is an integral part of Buddhist nuns' daily routines. Engaging in walking meditation, yoga, or other forms of mindful movement contributes to their mental clarity, emotional balance, and physical vitality. These practices also help reduce stress and promote inner peace, which is fundamental to their spiritual journey.

(iii) Hygiene Rituals and Mindful Self-care:

The research explores the hygiene rituals and self-care practices followed by Buddhist nuns. These rituals, rooted in mindfulness and intention, become acts of devotion and self-purification. By maintaining personal cleanliness and a clean living environment, nuns create conducive conditions for spiritual contemplation and growth.

(iv) Community Support and Collective Well-being:

Nunneries serve as communities of support, where nuns care for each other's well-being. This communal living environment fosters a sense of sisterhood and mutual responsibility for health and hygiene. The study examines the role of social interactions and collective practices in promoting overall well-being within these communities. Buddhist nuns face challenges maintaining their practices despite their profound dedication to health and hygiene. Limited resources, access to healthcare, and the pressures of modernisation may require adaptation of traditional practices while preserving their spiritual essence.

Health and Hygiene: A Buddhist Perspective

Health and hygiene in Buddhism are viewed from a holistic perspective that encompasses physical well-being and mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects. Buddhism emphasises the interdependence of mind and body, recognising that overall health is achieved through balance and harmony in all dimensions of life. Health is an essential aspect of the practice of Buddhism. Understanding Buddhist ideas on pain, suffering, and enlightenment is necessary to comprehend the Buddhist concept of health. Buddhism has a holistic approach to health. Health is the absence of disease and the harmonious balance of the body, intellect, emotion, and spiritual dimensions. According to Ratanakul, "Buddhism attributes Karma as an important contributing factor to health and disease. In the Buddhist perspective, good health is the correlated effect of good Karma in the past and vice versa." (Ratanakul, 2004:162)

The correct interpretation of the Buddha's teachings is what creates this peace. Buddhism and spirituality are strongly related in how they see health (Wijesinghe 2013; Wiist et al. 2012). Being spiritual is crucial because having a proper understanding of life's purpose and engaging in healthy behaviours that adhere to Buddhist teachings are the primary sources of good health (Hewapathirane, 2004). It necessitates that one cultivates the right understanding, practice meditation, exercise moderation, and show compassion to reach the goal of life, the accomplishment of enlightenment.

Several key perspectives on health and hygiene in Buddhism are as follows:

- 1. Mind-Body Connection:** Buddhism emphasises the connection between the mind and body. Mental states, emotions, and thoughts can profoundly impact physical health and vice versa. Practices such as mindfulness meditation aim to cultivate mental clarity and emotional balance, which are believed to contribute to physical health and overall well-being.
- 2. Prevention and Self-Care:** Buddhism advocates for preventive measures and self-care to maintain good health. Observing ethical conduct (right action) and following the precepts (moral

guidelines) help individuals lead a responsible and wholesome lifestyle, minimising the potential for harmful actions and their consequences.

3. Mindfulness in Daily Life: Mindfulness, a Buddhist core practice, extends to daily activities, including eating, walking, and personal hygiene. Being fully present and aware while engaging in these activities enhances the quality of life and fosters a sense of appreciation for the simple aspects of living.

4. Moderation and Balance: Buddhism encourages the middle path, which promotes moderation and balance in all aspects of life. This includes eating in moderation, avoiding excessive indulgence or self-denial, and maintaining a balanced lifestyle that supports physical and mental well-being.

5. Compassion and Selflessness: Compassion and selflessness are considered essential virtues in Buddhism. By cultivating compassion for oneself and others, individuals are more inclined to care for their health and those around them.

6. Non-Harming (Ahimsa): Buddhism emphasises the principle of non-harming (ahimsa) towards all living beings, including oneself. This principle extends to personal hygiene practices, where harm to oneself or others through negligence or uncleanliness is to be avoided.

7. Mindful Consumption: The Buddhist concept of mindful consumption relates to food and the consumption of media, information, and sensory experiences. Being mindful of what one takes in contributes to mental and emotional well-being.

8. Transience and Impermanence: Buddhism recognises the impermanent nature of all phenomena, including the body. This perspective encourages individuals to take care of their physical health and hygiene while accepting the impermanence of the body and its eventual ageing and decay.

9. Environmental Consciousness: Buddhism advocates for environmental consciousness and stewardship. Nurturing a harmonious relationship with the natural world supports personal and collective well-being.

Buddhism's health and hygiene perspective revolves around cultivating awareness, compassion, and mindfulness in daily life. By emphasising the mind-body connection, practising self-care, and being mindful of actions and consumption, individuals can foster holistic well-being and contribute to the well-being of others and the world around them.

Conclusion:

From the health and hygiene perspective, Buddhist nuns provide valuable insights into these devoted women's unique lifestyles and practices. Rooted in compassion, Wisdom, and interconnectedness, Buddhist nuns' health and hygiene practices reflect their holistic approach to

well-being. Throughout the study, it becomes evident that Buddhist nuns embrace a balanced and mindful way of life, where physical, mental, and spiritual dimensions are interwoven. Their daily routines, which include meditation, mindfulness, and ethical conduct, foster inner peace and emotional resilience, contributing to overall mental well-being. The research also highlights the significance of community support within nunneries, where sisterhood and mutual care create a conducive environment for health and hygiene practices. The communal living setting promotes a sense of belonging and shared responsibility, nurturing collective well-being.

Moreover, the study reveals the emphasis on preventive measures and self-care in the form of ethical living and mindful consumption. Non-harming (ahimsa) and moderation principles guide their choices, minimising harmful actions and excesses. Buddhist nuns' perspectives on health and hygiene transcend individual well-being and extend to societal and environmental consciousness. Their contributions to education, social welfare, and environmental stewardship reflect their commitment to serving others and the world. While facing challenges such as limited resources and adapting to modernisation, Buddhist nuns maintain a deep-rooted connection to their spiritual heritage, finding harmony between traditional practices and contemporary needs. From a health and hygiene perspective, Buddhist nuns underscore the significance of an integrated well-being approach, where physical health, mental clarity, and compassionate living intertwine. Their unique lifestyle, rooted in ancient Wisdom, offers valuable lessons for promoting holistic well-being and cultivating a healthy society. Ultimately, Buddhist nuns' dedication, compassion, and Wisdom exemplify a path of selfless service, embracing health and hygiene practices that contribute to their individual growth and the greater welfare of all beings. By understanding and appreciating the perspectives of Buddhist nuns on health and hygiene, we gain inspiration to foster balance, mindfulness, and compassion in our lives, promoting a healthier and more harmonious world.

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