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Using Cannabis in Buddhist Culture: Based on the Pāli Canon

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore the Buddhist view on using cannabis by examining the Pāli canon and the ethics in using it as a medicine. Debates about if cannabis can be used as medicine have been going on for a long time. Some studies claim that it has medical benefits, but using cannabis is still illegal in many countries around the world. The paper will explore the Pāli Buddhist texts on cannabis by focusing on Buddhist ethics in using cannabis as medicine. The paper will begin with a brief history of cannabis in India, including the pro and cons of cannabis. Then, the research will explore and discuss the Pāli Buddhist texts related to this area in terms of Buddhist ethics. The paper tries to answer the following questions: does it violate the five precepts by using cannabis for medical treatments?

Keywords: Moral, precept, Buddhist ethics, vinaya

Introduction

The five precepts are the common conduct code in Buddhism that help devotees behave in a moral and ethical way. The five moral conducts are to abstain from taking life, to abstain from taking with is not given, to abstain from sensuous misconduct, to abstain from false speech, and to abstain from intoxicants as tending to cloud the mind. However, the five precepts are not commandments. Lay Buddhists freely undertake and choose to apply the precepts into practice with intelligence and sensitivity. Due to the change of social and technological development, preserving the five precepts in the current world faces more challenges than ever before. One of the challenges is using cannabis for medical purposes because it can be an intoxicant as well. Buddhists should not ignore this issue or use cannabis without knowing if it violates Buddhist teachings.

Cannabis is one of the oldest medical plants in the history of mankind, but the debate over the therapeutic benefits of medical cannabis has been flaring up recently in many cultures around the world. Cannabis has multiple usages, including use the stem for its fiber, obtaining edible spice/oil from its achene, extracting medicine and psychoactive substances from its resin glands.¹

In India, cannabis domestication dates back to 5000-4000 BCE.² Cannabis is known in India as ganja or bhang. The Ayurvedic and Siddha systems of India medicine contain a number of references of Cannabis. According to Tajnighuntu and Rajbulubh text of India, Cannabis was used for treatment, such as clearing phlegm, expelling flatulence, inducing costiveness, sharpening memory, increasing eloquence, appetite stimulant, gonorrhoea, and general tonic.³ Moreover, in Hinduism, cannabis is considered as a holy plant, and it is used in Hindu festivals like Shivratri even today.⁴

¹ Booth, *Cannabis*, 33.

² Chandra and Jain, *Foundations of Ethnobotany (21st Century Perspective)*, 65; *Bulletin on Narcotics*, 24.

³ *Medicine, Marijuana and Medicine*, 137.

⁴ Schultes, *Random Thoughts and Queries on the Botany of Cannabis*, 11; Winterborne, *Medical Marijuana Cannabis Cultivation*, 290.

On the contrary, in some countries, such as Thailand, cannabis is regulated as a drug because it can be harmful. As Parker, a member of the American Academy of Pediatrics, says that using marijuana, one type of cannabis, is addictive and can affect the brain, including “impairing short-term memory and decreasing concentration, attention span, and problem solving, which clearly interfere with learning.”⁵ For one who is addicted, stop using it may suffer withdrawal symptoms, such as insomnia, depression, anxiety, nausea, chills, and stomach pain.⁶ These are the negative aspects of cannabis which are the reasons to legalize cannabis in many countries. However, should cannabis be banned entirely because of its side effects because researches do show some unique medical benefits?

Cannabis in the Pāli Canon

Siddhartha Gautama, the Lord Buddha, was born in the Lumbini province in the Himalayan foothills of present-day Nepal. Many cannabis strains were cultivated in this region. Despite the influential role hems played in legends surrounding Siddhartha’ birthplace, cannabis seems conspicuously absent in Buddhist rituals.⁷ There are no Buddhist texts referencing the Buddha’s use of intoxicants. However, there is one passage in the Vinaya (Khandhaka Mahāvagga) mentioned about hemp, one type of cannabis. The Buddha stated that:

“Now at that time the venerable Pilindavaccha had rheumatism in the limb. “I allow, monks, the sweating-treatment.” He got no better... **“I allow, monks, sweating by the use of all kinds of herbs.”** He got no better. “I allow, monk, the great sweating.” **He got no better. “I allow, monks (the use of) hemp-water.”** He got no better. “I allow monks, (the use of) a water-vat.” “I allow the application of the sweating treatment (sedakammakarana), having got into a vessel or vat filled with not water.” Kotthaka is usually s store-room (Pli Tv Kd 6).”⁸

Two aspects are worth noting in this passage. First, the Buddha allowed the monks to use all kinds of herbs. Although the Buddha did not mention cannabis directly, his words implied that all kind of herbs, including cannabis, can be used as long as it is for the venerable’s treatment. Second, the Buddha allowed the monk to use hemp-water as a medicine. This text makes it clear that the Buddha approved cannabis for medical purposes.

Moreover, using cannabis for medical treatment does not violate the five precepts, including the fifth precept, which is “I undertake the training rule to abstain from fermented and distilled intoxicants.” The precept seems to deny intake of intoxicants. However, the actual purpose of this precept is to prevent heedlessness caused by taking intoxicating substances. Especially, in the case of using intoxicants for its medical benefits to sustain life. Life is meaningful because only if one is alive one can cultivate the mind until the end of suffering. For the same reason, taking medication containing alcohol, opiates or other intoxicants for genuine medical reasons does not count as a violation to the precepts, nor does eating food flavored with a small amount of liquor.

To determine whether an action is good or evil, violating or not violating precepts, Buddhist ethics takes into three components account: the intention that motivates the action, the effect the doer experiences consequent to the action, and the effect that others experience as a result of that action. This standard can apply to situations in our daily life, including using cannabis. If our intention is good, rooted in positive mental qualities, such as compassion and wisdom, and if the doer experiences a positive result and caused no harm to him/herself or others, then that action is good, wholesome, or skillful.

⁵ Parker, *Cannabinoids and the Brain*, 67.

⁶ Agrawal, Faruqui, and Bodani, *Oxford Textbook of Neuropsychiatry*, 332.

⁷ Clarke and Merlin, *Cannabis*, 223.

⁸ Horner, *Vinaya Pitaka (The Book of the Discipline)*, IV (MAHĀVAGGA):278–79.

Conclusion

Although taking cannabis seems to be violating the fifth precept rule, the main factor of judgment should lie in the intention of such behavior, just as the Buddha told the monks to use all herbs and hemp-water for venerable Pilindavaccha's disease. Buddhism affirms the importance of good intention. Positive intention has the power to lead to a better future. Using cannabis or any kind of plant with good volition, such as treating diseases, does not violate the fifth precept or any of the five precepts. However, in practical situations, using cannabis should be proceeded with caution to prevent any side effects.

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