

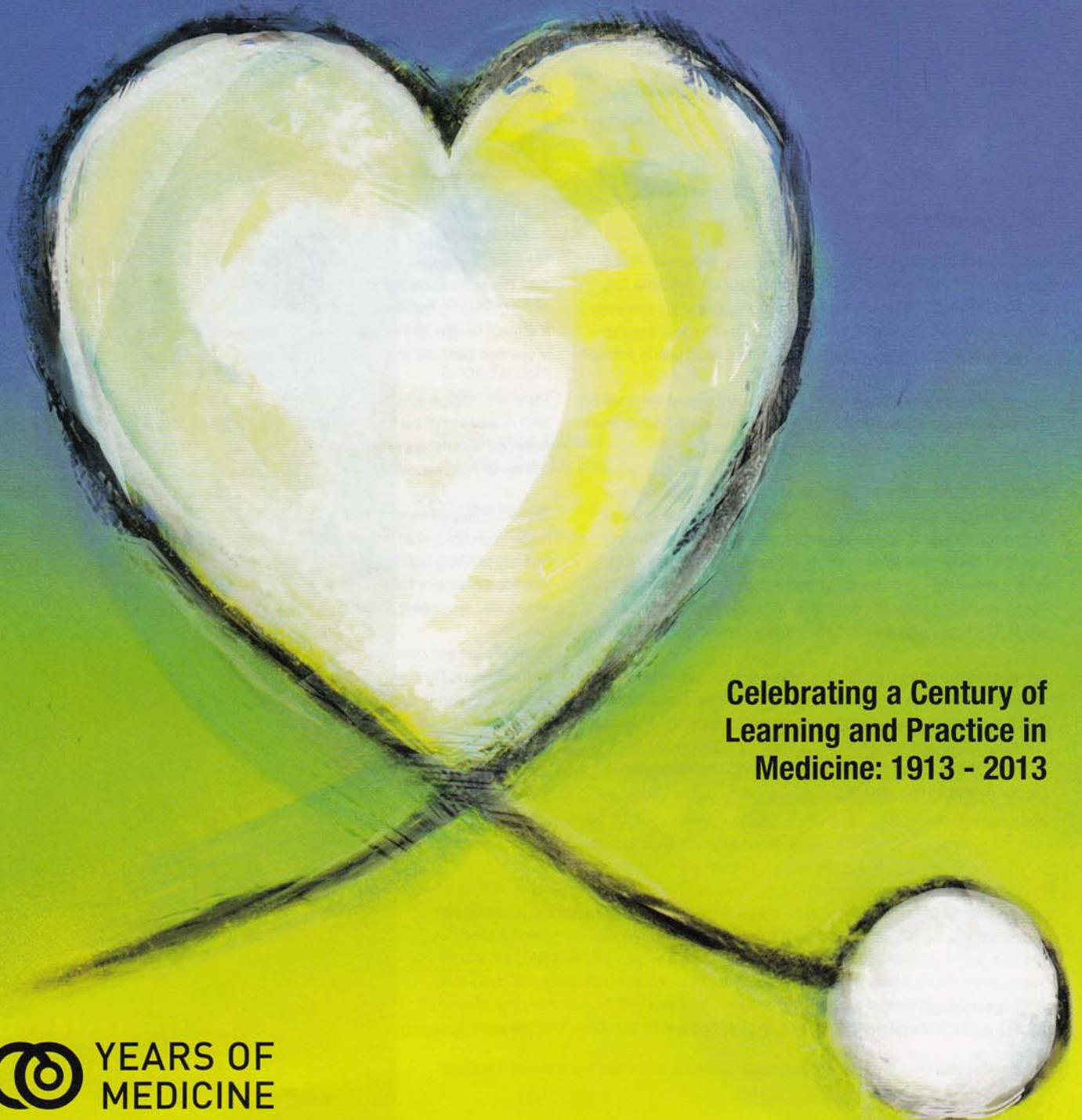
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100 YEARS OF
MEDICINE

Mettā: Loving Kindness in Medicine

Steven KH Aung

Medicine involves a blend of the sciences and the humanities, and an integral part of its successful outcome with patients is “loving kindness,” which is known in Buddhism as mettā. While the sciences provide the objective and empirical evidence for the various treatments of patients, the arts and humanities of medicine are linked with the healing of the patient. However, medicine without mettā is incomplete and nonsensical; it is without emotion and thus unable to completely heal the patient physically, mentally and spiritually. Without treating all of these aspects in a patient, there is an imbalance in health. If a person is physically fit but his or her mind is troubled with baggage, the patient is still not completely healed.

In order to have physical healing, the art of communication through the 6 senses (sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch and intuition) is essential in delivering a comprehensive treatment of the whole body. Mental healing takes place if both the practitioner and the patient are pure in spirit and have no emotional pollutants in their minds. Spiritual healing will only occur when our bodies, minds and spirits are healed with loving kindness and blessings. Mettā enhances the art of healing in the body.

In Traditional Chinese Medicine, the heart is associated with the spiritual part of the body. If the heart is healthy physically and spiritually, and if it is complemented with a healthy, positive and energetic environment, the healing process will automatically follow. The spiritual aspect has a vital role in healing, therefore it is important to develop one's spiritual energy to enhance the body's healing process.

I would like to share my most treasured experience with His Holiness, the 14th Dalai Lama during my meeting with him on January 21, 1991 in Dharamsala, India. I was very fortunate to have had the opportunity of personally meeting with him, even if I was only given 15 minutes. Prior to the meeting, I prepared three questions that I wanted to ask His Holiness on this rare occasion. However, before I could ask any of my questions, his assistant had asked me to leave as my 15 minutes were up due to some introductions and short exchanges of pleasantries. My heart sank upon hearing that I had to leave. The

thought of not being able to ask the questions that I had so carefully prepared was very unfortunate. But to my complete surprise, the Dalai Lama leaned toward his assistant and whispered loud enough for me to hear: “Dr. Aung still has three questions in his pocket to ask me. Let him stay.”

Until then, I had told no one – especially His Holiness – that I had three questions neatly scribbled in my pocket. Then it dawned on me. He knew why I came to see him. From that point, I knew that the meeting would change not only the way I practice medicine, but more importantly, how I would see and live life.

My first question to His Holiness was: “What is the most significant contribution of Tibetan Medicine to the world?”

He replied that Tibetan Medicine has introduced to the world a kind of medicine that is not simply focused on the removal of illnesses of patients. It has taught practitioners that medicine is also about giving an overall positive effect of wellness – not only to the patient but also to the practitioner. This includes giving blessings, treatments, and self-cultivation by regularly practicing Qi Gong, yoga, meditation and exercise.

From this, we can say that the practice (would service be an acceptable word here?) of medicine that doctors provide should not be just medicine. Medical practitioners should provide medicine that has been endowed with blessings of loving kindness for the patient. We should be wholeheartedly giving patients more enriched and enhanced treatments, not simply relieving them of their pain and symptoms. In order to do this, Tibetan medicine emphasizes that physicians should be able to cultivate their own purified positive healing energy in order to treat and heal themselves and their patients.

Some physicians treat their patients with pharmaceutical or herbal medicine, while others perform surgery or acupuncture and provide rehabilitation. In specific situations, physicians may provide psychotherapy and counselling. However, beyond the physical and mental healing that modern medicine is

able to give, every patient deserves spiritual and emotional guidance from their physicians and therapists in order to initiate the spiritual healing process and enrich the power and effectiveness of the treatment.

My second question was: “What should I bring back to Canada to contribute to Canadians and the world?”

Because I practice medicine, His Holiness suggested that I bring back 8 Medicine Buddhas – 8 statues of Buddha with various healing hand mudras (hand positions) that signify various traits and ways of healing that are needed for medical practitioners. I was very fortunate that His Holiness himself ordered the 8 Medicine Buddha statues for me to bring back to Canada. It took 5 arduous years to get these holy gifts to Edmonton, but in the end, it was worth the wait. The 8 Medicine Buddhas are among the most treasured possessions that I have received in my life.

Having the 8 Medicine Buddhas has caused an overall positive effect in my medical practice. I learned to discipline myself by doing the practice of changing the water daily for purification, lighting the incense for blessings, lighting the candles for respect, and offering flowers as a sign of my commitment. The 8 Medicine Buddhas have also helped me to learn more about Buddhism in medicine as part of my commitment to His Holiness. I have dedicated myself to giving the blessings of the Buddhas to all my dear patients, friends, colleagues and to all the citizens of Canada and the world to have good health, peace and harmony. I have placed the 8 Medicine Buddhas on the top floor of my office where the Buddhas can constantly shower my dear patients with blessings of loving kindness. I have also published a book entitled “8 Medicine Buddhas – An Integrative Approach to Inner Harmony and Good Health” to share my experiences and commitment.

My third and last question was: “What is the contribution of Buddhism to Medicine?”

His Holiness emphasized that Buddhism has introduced the practice of the 5 Precepts that are important for medical practitioners to follow: (1) not taking another person's life;

(2) not stealing; (3) not making false accusations; (4) abstaining from sexual misconduct; and (5) abstaining from alcohol and illegal substances. His Holiness also reinforced the 5 treasured principles which have been taught to me by my first spiritual teacher, Sayadaw U Thila Wunta when I was 7 years old: mettā (loving kindness), karuna (consider all patients as family), saydana (providing unconditional treatment), muditta (treating all patients with respect), and uppaka (treating all patients equally regardless of their age, sex or status). I have always integrated all of these values in my medical practice. His Holiness also advised to practice self-cultivation, purification, and to always treat patients with good intention and with love. Medical practitioners learn most from our dear patients and the most complicated patients are our supreme teachers. This has always been the core of the Buddhist approach in medicine.

After my meeting with His Holiness, I have always tried my best to embody his wise words and advice in my practice of medicine. Although the arts and sciences in medicine

are inevitable parts of its development and future, we should always remember that the heart of medicine is not simply about curing the patient: it is more about treating them with loving kindness and respect so that they can have more enriched and empowered lives. It is also important to understand that recycling of negative suffering energy into positive healing energy is vitally important to being a healer.

Every single healing process has an action and reaction. The most important idea that practitioners have to understand is how to transform the negative energy into its positive form in order to wholeheartedly heal our patients. Practitioners have to learn how to take care of themselves physically, mentally and spiritually so that we all become "healers" and not simply medical practitioners.

I wanted to share this experience with all my friends, colleagues and to all the readers of this journal. I hope you enjoyed reading about this short but very meaningful part of my life.

Dr. Steven KH Aung is a highly respected family and geriatric physician, a Traditional Chinese Medicine practitioner (TCM), researcher and teacher. At the University of Alberta, Dr. Aung is a Clinical Professor in the Faculty of Medicine & Dentistry and an Adjunct Professor in the Faculties of Extension, Rehabilitation Medicine, Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences and Public Health. Dr Aung was awarded the Alberta Order of Excellence in 2002, the Queen Elizabeth II Golden Jubilee Medal in 2002, the Diamond Jubilee Medal in 2012, Physician of the Century Award in 2005, and the Order of Canada in 2006. He is also a WHO advisor and consultant in acupuncture standards and cancer pain control, and the Vice-Chair of the World Federation of Chinese Medicine Societies. Internationally, Dr. Aung is known as an advocate of the integration of TCM and Western biomedicine, and his efforts have made Canada a world-renowned centre in complementary and alternative medicine.

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