

The Buddha and the Toilet



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Essays on Buddhist History & Culture

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Most of us take our modern toilets and the sewerage system attached to them for granted. And perhaps it is understandable; thinking often and deeply about human waste would not be a particular pleasant or edifying exercise. However, knowing something about the subject can impart an appreciation to the advantages of modern civilization and help dispel the common habit of idealizing the past.

The three reasons why life expectancy and the world's population are now higher than they have ever been in history are – modern food production, the development of modern medicine, and the invention of the water seal or flush toilet and its attachment to a sewerage system. Throughout most of history and in most cultures, people defecated in or near their homes. Even where attempts were made to dispose of faeces in some way it usually involved dumping it in water (rivers, lakes and ponds) which polluted the drinking water. True, the Romans and some others had excellent public toilets, but then the waste deposited in them was simply flushed beyond the city walls where it accumulated in fetid and stinking bogs, breeding flies and disease. A Sanskrit Buddhist text mentions that outside Rajagaha “there was a huge pit and the townspeople used to haul their urine and faeces there and dump in that pit. When it rained water would also flow into it and so there would be worms in the pit.” This was no minor matter! Even today it has been estimated that nearly half the population of India defecate in the open, a major cause of hundreds of thousands of work days lost every year because of absenteeism due to water born disease.

This is particularly ironic given that an Indian, perhaps the greatest Indian, the Buddha, actually turned his mind to the very mundane issue of safe disposal of human waste. The Buddha was not a sanitation engineer, but he was concerned about human well-being, an aspect of which is good health. “Health is the highest benefit” he says in verse 204 of the Dhammapada.

Although few people are aware of it, in the Vinaya the Buddha gave detailed instructions on how to build a practical and hygienic toilet. Such a toilet (Pali *vaccakuti*) consisted of what would now be called a pit latrine; a cesspit (*vaccakupa*) covered by a stone or plaster slab (*paribhanda*) with a small hole in it. On either side of the hole, the Buddha advised, there should be raised platforms (*vaccapaduka*) on which one stood or squatted. The purpose of these was to keep the feet dry from any water that might be splashed on the floor. After finishing, one was asked to either wash or wipe oneself with grass or a piece of wood. Outside the toilet there should be a water pot for washing the hands when finished.

The Buddha understood the importance of hygiene and insisted that the toilets in monasteries be regularly washed and swept. In the Vinaya he also spoke of what might be called toilet etiquette. On nearing the toilet one should make a coughing noise to let whoever might be inside know that someone is coming. If someone is inside they should likewise make a coughing noise to indicate that the toilet is already occupied. The robe should be taken off before entering so it cannot be spoiled, and properly hung up. One should not groan while relieving oneself, clean one's teeth or spit on the floor. Also, after finishing, the water containers should be refilled as a courtesy to the next person (Vinaya II,222).

Apparently not all monasteries had toilets like those just described. Rather, chamber pots (*gunthakataka*) were an alternative and the contents were disposed of later. The Vinaya mentions a nun emptying a chamber pot by throwing its contents over the wall and into the street where it landed on the head of a passing brahman. He is described as being far from happy (Vin.IV.265).

When the Chinese monk Yijing was in India during the 7th century he took careful notes on how Indian monks conducted themselves including while they were in the toilet. Apparently it was the norm to make balls of finely ground earth and take them with into the toilet. Some were used after defecating to wipe oneself before washing while the rest were used together with water to clean one's hands after having finished. It should be remembered that there was no soap in those days so this was probably the most hygienic alternative.

The heart of Buddhist meditation is Right Mindfulness (*samma sati*). In the early stages of this practice, the meditator becomes aware of the gentle in and out movement of the breath and then expands it to becoming aware of all aspects of himself or herself; the whole body, feelings, the mind and then the contents of the mind. But if one can only be mindful while sitting in a quiet room, one will only be aware of a small part of one's life, the least interesting parts. To be really fruitful, mindfulness has to flow into everything one does. In the famous Satipatthana Sutta the Buddha said: "A monk has full awareness while coming and going, while reaching out his hands or drawing them back, while putting on his robes and carrying his bowl, while eating and drinking, chewing and tasting, even while defecating and urinating. He has full awareness while walking, standing and sitting, while falling to sleep and waking up, while talking and remaining silent." When the Buddha said that we should be mindful "even while defecating and urinating" (*uccarapassavakamme*), he was saying that all activities no matter how ordinary and commonplace, should become an object of lucidity and presence. When done with mindfulness, every action, from the loftiest to the most mundane, becomes an opportunity for spiritual growth.

Anyone walking around the ruins of Anuradhapura, Ritigala or the ancient ruins elsewhere in Sri Lanka may well come across an ancient toilet, sometimes now called urinal stones. These interesting and sometimes attractively decorated objects were set up in monasteries for reasons of hygiene. While their decorations owe everything to ancient Sri Lankan culture the concept behind them is Indian and owes everything to the Buddha.