

THE MEDICAL STUDENTS' OATH OF ANCIENT INDIA

by

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THE HIPPOCRATIC OATH is universally known in the western medical world. A document comparable in antiquity yet unknown to most modern physicians is the oath of initiation of medical students that is found in the *Charaka Samhita*. The *Charaka Samhita* is a highly-esteemed ancient medical text. The approximate dates of composition and the general contents of the *Charaka Samhita* were briefly discussed in a previous article.<sup>1</sup> A translation of the students' oath from Sanskrit, followed by a brief commentary on the text, is given below.\*

THE OATH OF INITIATION

1. The teacher then should instruct the disciple in the presence of the sacred fire, Brahmanas [Brahmins] and physicians.

2. [saying] 'Thou shalt lead the life of a celibate, grow thy hair and beard, speak only the truth, eat no meat, eat only pure articles of food, be free from envy and carry no arms.

3. There shall be nothing that thou should not do at my behest except hating the king, causing another's death, or committing an act of great unrighteousness or acts leading to calamity.

4. Thou shalt dedicate thyself to me and regard me as thy chief. Thou shalt be subject to me and conduct thyself for ever for my welfare and pleasure. Thou shalt serve and dwell with me like a son or a slave or a supplicant. Thou shalt behave and act without arrogance, with care and attention and with undistracted mind, humility, constant reflection and ungrudging obedience. Acting either at my behest or otherwise, thou shalt conduct thyself for the achievement of thy teacher's purposes alone, to the best of thy abilities.

5. If thou desirest success, wealth and fame as a physician and heaven after death, thou shalt pray for the welfare of all creatures beginning with the cows and Brahmanas.

6. Day and night, however thou mayest be engaged, thou shalt endeavour for the relief of patients with all thy heart and soul. Thou shalt not desert or injure thy patient for the sake of thy life or thy living. Thou shalt not commit adultery even in thought. Even so, thou shalt not covet others' possessions. Thou shalt be modest in thy attire and appearance. Thou shouldst not be a drunkard or a sinful man nor shouldst thou associate with the abettors of crimes. Thou shouldst speak words that are gentle, pure and righteous, pleasing, worthy, true, wholesome, and moderate. Thy behaviour must be in consideration of time and place and heedful of past experience. Thou

\*The text of the oath quoted is taken mostly from *Charaka Samhita*, Shree Galabkuverba Ayurvedic Society Jamnagar India 1947, vol. 5, pg. 326. Where modifications are made, the modification is based upon the original text in Sanskrit.

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shalt act always with a view to the acquisition of knowledge and fullness of equipment.

7. No persons, who are hated by the king or who are haters of the king or who are hated by the public or who are haters of the public, shall receive treatment. Similarly, those who are extremely abnormal, wicked, and of miserable character and conduct, those who have not vindicated their honour, those who are on the point of death, and similarly women who are unattended by their husbands or guardians shall not receive treatment.

8. No offering of presents by a woman without the behest of her husband or guardian shall be accepted by thee. While entering the patient's house, thou shalt be accompanied by a man who is known to the patient and who has his permission to enter; and thou shalt be well-clad, bent of head, self-possessed, and conduct thyself only after repeated consideration. Thou shalt thus properly make thy entry. Having entered, thy speech, mind, intellect and senses shall be entirely devoted to no other thought than that of being helpful to the patient and of things concerning only him. The peculiar customs of the patient's household shall not be made public. Even knowing that the patient's span of life has come to its close, it shall not be mentioned by thee there, where if so done, it would cause shock to the patient or to others.

Though possessed of knowledge one should not boast very much of one's knowledge. Most people are offended by the boastfulness of even those who are otherwise good and authoritative.

9. There is no limit at all to the Science of Life, Medicine. So thou shouldst apply thyself to it with diligence. This is how thou shouldst act. Also thou shouldst learn the skill of practice from another without carping. The entire world is the teacher to the intelligent and the foe to the unintelligent. Hence, knowing this well, thou shouldst listen and act according to the words of instruction of even an unfriendly person, when his words are worthy and of a kind as to bring to you fame, long life, strength and prosperity.'

10. Thereafter the teacher should say this—'Thou shouldst conduct thyself properly with the gods, sacred fire, Brahmanas, the guru, the aged, the scholars and the preceptors. If thou hast conducted thyself well with them, the precious stones, the grains and the gods become well disposed towards thee. If thou shouldst conduct thyself otherwise, they become unfavourable to thee'. To the teacher that has spoken thus, the disciple should say, 'Amen.'

#### COMMENTARY ON THE TEXT

Several features of the text are discussed under the appropriate titles. To make specific references to the particular passages easier we have arbitrarily divided the oath into various sections which are serially numbered. The numbers given refer to the sections of text being discussed.

#### *A. A Religious Oath*

The spirit of the oath is essentially religious and it is apparently administered in a ritualistic manner. The student takes the oath in the presence of the 'sacred fire, Brahmanas and physicians' (section 1). If he follows the oath he will be rewarded; otherwise the 'precious stones, the grains and the gods' become 'unfavourable' to

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him (section 10). The prayer 'for the welfare of all creatures beginning with the cows and Brahmanas' (section 5) is reminiscent of ancient Verdic prayers.<sup>2,3</sup>

### *B. Asceticism in the Life of a Student*

According to ancient Indian tradition, men go through four stages in their life, namely the life of a student, householder or married man, retired person, and a monk. During the student stage a form of asceticism was practised.<sup>4</sup> The instructions concerning growth of hair and beard, not eating meat, not carrying arms, and being celibate (section 2) are to be understood in this context. These statements do not imply that a physician should remain a celibate for his entire life. Rather it is a general requirement for all students, medical and non-medical. 'Not carrying arms' also has special significance in that this instruction implies that students of medicine did not necessarily have to come from the Brahman class; in practice, as Brahmans did not carry arms at any time,<sup>5,6</sup> this statement would be redundant.

### *C. Student-Teacher Relationship*

The relationship of the student to the teacher is that of '... a son, a servant or a supplicant' (section 4). This same close relationship was the general practice for students and teachers of all subjects in ancient India.<sup>7,8</sup> In Sanskrit, the word for son—Tata—can also be used to refer to disciple or student. Moreover, the student not infrequently assumed his teacher's name. The words servant or supplicant are better understood from the Ancient Indian saying on raising a son. 'Until age five, he should be treated as a king; from five to sixteen years, as a slave or servant; and after sixteen years, as a friend'. During this period the student is under the complete protection of his teacher who supplies him with all the necessities of life.

Even though the student is sworn to obey his teacher, '... there shall be nothing that you should not do upon my behest,' still he is given freedom to disobey when he thinks that the teacher's instruction runs contrary to law or moral principles (section 3). This principle applied not only to medical students, but to all students.<sup>9</sup>

### *D. The Dedicated Physician*

The oath contains a very eloquent passage revealing the dedication and high moral principles required of a physician (section 6). There is no doubt that the patient's welfare comes above any personal considerations of the physician.

### *E. Protocol of Conduct*

It seems that the physician was expected, in his bearing, speech and his approach to patients, to act in a particular manner which was considered befitting a physician. This protocol of conduct is given in section 8.

### *F. The Physician's Right and Obligation to Deny his Services*

Section 7 deals with the concept that the Ancient Indian physician should refuse or withhold treatment to certain individuals. This refusal was based upon the moral status of the patient as an enemy of the king or the public or one wicked. Service could also be refused because the illness was considered incurable or if the patient was an

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unattended woman. On superficial examination it might appear that section 7 is in conflict with the ethical ideas expressed in section 6. However, we find in both passage 6<sup>10,12</sup> and passage 7<sup>13,14</sup> echoes of very ancient Indian thought. Moreover, there is no fundamental contradiction between the two passages.

#### *G. Postgraduate Education*

Section 9 deals with the acquisition of knowledge by a practising physician after graduation. It is most eloquent and profound. The concept that there is no limit to the science of medicine reappears in various forms in ancient medical texts and represents the Indian concept of the limitlessness of the unending search for knowledge.

#### *H. The Successful Physician*

The life of a physician is not that of an ascetic for he desires 'success, wealth and fame as a physician,' (section 5). The rigorous code of the student is seen as the way of attaining success or 'long life, strength and prosperity'. The idea that the ethical and conscientious practice of life goes with worldly prosperity, fame and a better life after death was a widely-accepted concept in Ancient India.<sup>15,16</sup>

#### DISCUSSION

This oath appears to be an indigenous product of Indian thought and culture. As pointed out in the commentary, most of the ideas found in the oath can be traced to similar concepts and sayings in the non-medical Indian literature of antiquity. The style of the oath, the rituals involved, the asceticism required of the student, the student-teacher relationship, the emphasis on the limitlessness of knowledge, the association of worldly prosperity, fame and ethical practices: all these are in conformity with the mainstream of Ancient Indian thought and practices.

It is interesting to compare briefly a few aspects of this oath with those of the Hippocratic Oath. They are both essentially religious covenants; both offer rewards for fulfilling the covenants and punishment for transgression. In both, the student-teacher relationship is very intimate and similar to the relation between a father and son. Furthermore both express the high moral principles expected in the practice of medicine. A few topics are mentioned in the Oaths of Charaka that are not found in the Hippocratic Oath, namely student asceticism, the duty to withhold services under specified conditions, the value which places the patient's life above that of the physician.

As we have seen, the ideas expressed in the Oath of Charaka are in conformity with the mainstream of Ancient Indian thought, and nothing in the oath seems to be contradictory to prevalent Indian teachings and practices of the times.

On the other hand, as Edelstein points out 'the so-called oath of Hippocrates is a document, uniformly conceived and thoroughly saturated with Pythagorean philosophy. . . . In spirit and in letter, in form and content it is a Pythagorean manifesto<sup>17</sup> . . . the document originated in a group representing a *small* segment of Greek opinion.'<sup>18</sup> 'Far from being the expression of the common Greek attitude toward medicine or of the natural duties of the physician, the ethical code rather reflects opinions which were peculiarly those of a small and isolated group.'<sup>19</sup>

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'Since the rules proposed show no affinity with any other Greek educational theory or practice, it seems permissible to claim that the Hippocratic covenant is inspired by Pythagorean doctrine'.<sup>20</sup> Pythagorean doctrine itself is thought to be highly influenced by Eastern thought.<sup>21</sup>

'Iamblichus, the biographer of Pythagoras, tells us that he travelled widely, studying the teachings of Egyptians, Assyrians and Brahmins'.<sup>22</sup> Rawlinson writes 'It is more likely that Pythagoras was influenced by India than by Egypt. Almost all the theories, religious, philosophical and mathematical taught by the Pythagoreans, were known in India in the sixth century B.C.'<sup>23</sup> It is conceivable that the Hippocratic Oath was influenced by Ancient Indian teachings and practices via the Pythagorean school.

On the other hand, we have seen that the oath found in the *Charaka Samhita* is the embodiment of concepts and practices of the Ancient Indian community in general and not as in the Hippocratic Oath that of a small sect possibly of foreign origin.

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