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The Siddhar Approach to Human Life and Health

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Abstract

The Siddhar tradition represents one of the oldest systems of philosophical thought and healthcare in Tamil culture. The Siddhars advocated a way of life centered on physical well-being, mental purity, spiritual realization, and harmony with nature. This article explores the Siddhar perspective on human life and health, highlighting their views on the relationship between the body, mind, and soul. It discusses the role of Siddha medicine, the concept of the human body as a sacred entity, and the importance of disciplined living, personal hygiene, proper sleep, and self-regulation in maintaining health. The article also examines the Siddhars' approach to disease diagnosis through the traditional Envagai Thervu (Eight-fold Diagnostic Examination), which includes the examination of the tongue, colour, speech, eyes, body heat, stool, urine, and pulse. Furthermore, it emphasizes the Siddhars' holistic understanding of disease prevention and health promotion. The study concludes that the principles advocated by the Siddhars remain relevant in contemporary society and offer valuable guidance for achieving a healthy, balanced, and meaningful life.

Keywords: Siddhars; Siddha Medicine; Human Life; Health and Well-being; Siddhar Philosophy; Envagai Thervu; Disease Diagnosis; Holistic Health; Traditional Medicine; Lifestyle Practices; Spiritual Health; Tamil Medical Heritage.

Introduction

The way of life advocated by the Siddhars keeps both the body and the mind pure, lives in harmony with nature, and enables an individual to realize the Divine within. As the renowned saying of Thirumoolar states, "The body is the temple and the soul is God." Based on this principle, yoga, medicine, and spirituality regard the human body as the foremost instrument for attaining liberation. This philosophy forms the foundation of the Siddhar tradition. [1]

Who are the Siddhars?

In Tamil, the term *Siddhu* or *Siddhar* is generally understood to mean "one who has attained perfection or accomplishment." In Sanskrit, the term *Siddham* refers to attainment, accomplishment, or realization. Thus, a Siddhar has attained spiritual perfection and higher wisdom. The expression "Anma Paramporulodu Ondriya Nilai" (the state of becoming one with the Supreme Reality) is often used to describe such enlightened beings.[2]

Historical evidence indicates that the term "Siddhar" has been in use since around the 5th century CE. However, it gained wider recognition only around the beginning of the twentieth century. Although the Tamil tradition speaks of nearly two thousand years of Siddha heritage, the term "Siddhar" itself was

not widely employed in the literary records of the Sangam period. Among the earliest references in Tamil literature, the *Tolkāppiyam* mentions the term *Nirai Mozhi Mānthar* (persons of perfect speech and wisdom), which many scholars consider to be an early reference to the Siddhars:

"Nirai mozhi mānthar āṇaiyirkkuṁ
Marai mozhi tānē manthiram eṉba."
(Tolkāppiyam, Seyyul 171:1)

The Number of Siddhars

In Tamil Nadu, there is no definite consensus regarding the exact number of Siddhars. However, based on the various spiritual and philosophical works attributed to them, eighteen Siddhars are traditionally believed to have lived and flourished. Consequently, the Siddhar tradition generally recognizes and venerates a group of eighteen Siddhars. Nevertheless, the classification of the Siddhars into a fixed number of eighteen is a later development and does not appear to have existed in the earliest phases of the Siddha tradition.[3]

However, there is no unanimous agreement regarding this classification. Despite these differences, the names of the eighteen Siddhars that are most widely accepted and traditionally recognized are as follows:

1. Agathiyar (Agastya)
2. Bhogar (Bogar)
3. Thirumoolar (Tirumular)
4. Vaanmeegar (Valmiki)
5. Dhanvanthiri (Dhanvantari)
6. Idaikkadar (Idaikkādar)
7. Kamalamuni (Kamalamuni)
8. Karuvoorar (Karuvurar)
9. Konganar (Konganar)
10. Korakkar (Gorakhnath)
11. Kudhambai Siddhar (Kudhambai Siddhar)
12. Machamuni (Machamuni)
13. Pampatti Siddhar (Pāmpāṭṭi Siddhar)
14. Pathanjali (Patanjali)
15. Punnakeesar (Punnakeesar)
16. Satta Nathar (Sattaimuni/Sattanathar)
17. Pulippani (Pulippani Siddhar)
18. Sivavakkiyar (Sivavakkiyar)

The Period of the Siddhars

The period of the Siddhars has remained a subject of scholarly debate and has not been determined with certainty. Thiru. Mu. Raghava Iyengar places them in the fourth century CE, while Thiru. De. Po. Meenakshisundaranar assigns them to the fifteenth century CE. Thiru. Nilantha Sastri considers them to have lived around the fiftieth century of the traditional era. Western scholars such as W. H. Hunter and Bishop Robert Caldwell have suggested that the Siddhars belonged to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries CE. Thus, there is no uniform consensus regarding the chronology of the Siddhars. Nevertheless, those who have studied Siddha literature and those who have sung and preserved its traditions have all contributed significantly to understanding the Siddhar heritage.[4]

The Way of Human Life According to the Siddhars

Principles

"The body and the mind must be kept in purity;
only then can one attain true liberation."

Human Life According to the Siddhars

According to the Siddhars, the foremost principle of human life is the purification of the mind. They maintained that a person who possesses a pure and disciplined mind can attain a state of fulfilment and perfection. The mind, body, and soul function together in harmony. The body serves as the instrument through which the soul expresses itself and realizes its experiences. Thirumoolar states that the body is the temple and the soul is the Divine. Therefore, it is through the body that one must cultivate a pure mind and lead a righteous life. Such a life should be characterized by disciplined conduct and actions that promote the well-being of both the individual and society.[5]

The Body and the Soul

The Siddhars considered the body to be sacred and regarded its preservation and proper care as essential. They believed that the body and the soul are inseparably connected.

Thirumoolar expresses this idea in the following verse:

"The body perishes when neglected, and with it the life within declines.
Not knowing the means to preserve the body, I allowed it to waste away.
Then I discovered the method of nurturing and safeguarding the body,
And by preserving the body, I preserved the life within."

This verse of Thirumoolar emphasizes that the body and the soul are intimately linked and that the preservation of the body is indispensable for the preservation and elevation of life itself.[6]

The Siddha System of Medicine

In India, both the traditional Ayurvedic system and the Siddha system of medicine are highly esteemed. Among these, the Siddha system occupies a distinctive place, particularly in Tamil Nadu. The medical knowledge of the Tamil people and the Siddha system have evolved together over centuries. Likewise, the medical traditions of ancient civilizations and those of the Tamil people have developed in close association, reflecting a long and rich heritage of healing practices. Both Siddha medicine and Ayurveda are among the oldest systems of medicine in India. The fundamental principles of Siddha medicine are deeply rooted in the ancient cultural and medical traditions of the Tamil people. Similarly, the origins of Ayurveda can be traced to the early medical traditions of the Aryan civilization. Despite their distinct historical and cultural backgrounds, both Siddha and Ayurvedic systems of medicine have shared and exchanged numerous concepts and therapeutic practices over time.[7]

The Structure of the Human Body

According to the Siddha system, the human body is a remarkable creation of nature. It is composed of five elements and is sustained by twenty-nine vital components. The Siddhars explain that the human body functions through ninety-six fundamental principles (*Tattvas*). In the Siddha tradition, these ninety-six principles collectively constitute the framework and functioning of human existence.

Thirumoolar describes these principles as follows:

"The body is formed of constituent elements;
within it abide the subtle principles.
The channels of movement and the vital forces sustain and govern its functioning."

He further states:
"The body is a temple fashioned by nature;
within it resides the Supreme Reality,
functioning as one with the individual self."

Through such verses, Thirumoolar emphasizes that the human body is not merely a physical structure but a sacred abode governed by profound philosophical principles. According to him, all the ninety-six *Tattvas* play an essential role in maintaining life and ensuring the proper functioning of the human system.[8]

The Siddhar Way of Human Life

The Siddhars prescribed a disciplined mode of living based on the rhythms of nature. They advocated sleeping for six to eight hours a day and emphasized moderation in all aspects of life. They also recommended regular bodily care and cleanliness, suggesting practices to be followed at intervals of fifteen and thirty days in order to preserve health and maintain physical and mental well-being. The Siddhars maintained that one should sleep only to the extent necessary and that excessive sleep is harmful. According to them, six hours of sleep is sufficient to maintain physical and mental health.[9]

The Siddhars' Concept of Sleep

The Siddhars regarded sleep as a natural process that enables the body and mind to recover from fatigue and regain their vitality. They believed that proper sleep brings harmony to the body, mind, and life force, thereby promoting overall well-being.

When sleep is adequate and balanced, both the body and mind become free from fatigue and attain a state of renewal. However, excessive sleep was considered undesirable. According to the Siddhars, too much sleep can lead to physical lethargy, mental dullness, and reduced efficiency. Thirumoolar refers to this idea in the following verse:

"Excessive sleep brings disease;
Excessive sleep weakens the body;
Excessive sleep clouds the intellect;
Excessive sleep destroys one's vitality."
(*Thirumandiram*, Verse 729:6)

In his verse, Thirumoolar explains that the human body is composed of one hundred *nāḍis* (subtle channels), sixty *tattvas* (fundamental principles), and six *adharas* (energy centres), all of which govern the functioning of the body, mind, and life force. Altogether, these constitute one hundred and sixty-six elements that sustain human life.[10]

Theories on Sleep According to Modern Medicine

Modern medicine views sleep as a physiological necessity that allows the body and mind to recover and rejuvenate. During sleep, the body undergoes repair processes and regains its energy. Sleep contributes to physical growth, the restoration of tissues, and the maintenance of cognitive functions such as memory and learning. It also helps regulate emotional balance and supports the healthy functioning of the nervous system. Insufficient sleep can result in fatigue, reduced concentration, memory impairment, mood disturbances, and increased susceptibility to various physical and mental health problems. Consequently, modern medical science recognizes adequate and quality sleep as an essential component of overall health and well-being.[11]

As the saying goes:
"When one sleeps, the body is renewed;
When one awakens, the body is refreshed;
The brain regains its vitality and functions efficiently;
Sleep restores balance and renews life itself."

Principles for a Healthy Life According to the Siddhars

The Siddhars advocated a holistic way of life that emphasized purity, simplicity, cleanliness, discipline, proper dietary habits, self-awareness, and freedom from harmful practices. They considered these principles to be essential for attaining both physical health and spiritual well-being.

Thirumoolar states:
"To preserve the body and protect life,
one must maintain purity and discipline."
– Thirumandiram

Emphasizing the importance of cleanliness, Idaikkattu Siddhar says:
"If the mind is tainted by impurity,
what benefit can life offer?
Without purity,
life itself loses its purpose."

Similarly, Konganar Siddhar highlights the significance of hygiene and purity by stating:
"Even if one possesses profound knowledge and accomplishments,
without cleanliness and purity,
all such attainments become meaningless."
Thus, Konganar Siddhar regarded cleanliness and purity as indispensable elements of a healthy and meaningful human life.

Siddhars' Theory of Disease

The Siddhars developed theories of disease by studying natural phenomena, living organisms, and the relationship between the human body and nature. However, the theories formulated in Siddha medicine are also based on practical experience. Siddha medicine explains the causes of disease through the "Envagai Thervu" (Eight-fold Diagnostic Examination). They are as follows:

(1) Tongue (Nāku):

The changes that occur on the surface of the tongue help in diagnosing diseases. Therefore, examination of the tongue occupies an important place in disease diagnosis.

(2) Moisture/Colour (Niram):

The changes that occur in body fluids are observed and assessed.

(3) Speech (Mozhi):

Changes in speech are observed in Siddha medicine. Variations in the sound of the voice, stammering, and other abnormalities in speech are considered indicators of disease.

(4) Eyes (Kan):

Five aspects are examined in the eyes, namely the colour of the eyes, the secretions present in the eyes, lustre, dryness, and other related characteristics.

(5) Heat (Veppam):

By 5 observing these features, conditions such as body heat, fatigue, dehydration, and various other

diseases can be identified.

(6) Stool (Malam):

By examining the nature of the stool, its consistency, its colour, and other associated characteristics, diseases can be identified.

(7) Urine (Siruneer):

The first urine passed in the morning is used for disease diagnosis. Its colour, quantity, and various other characteristics are examined to determine the nature of the disease.

(8) Pulse (Nādi):

By examining the pulse and understanding the movements of the Vatha pulse, Pitha pulse, and Kapha pulse, as well as their rhythm and pattern, a physician can determine the nature of the disease and make an accurate diagnosis.[12]

Summary

The Siddhar tradition represents a unique system of philosophy and medicine that emphasizes harmony between the body, mind, soul, and nature. According to the Siddhars, the human body is a sacred instrument for spiritual realization and must be preserved through disciplined living, proper nutrition, adequate sleep, personal hygiene, and self-regulation. Their holistic approach integrates preventive healthcare, disease diagnosis through the Envagai Thervu (Eight-fold Diagnostic Examination), and the promotion of physical, mental, and spiritual well-being. The Siddhars regarded disease as a consequence of imbalance in lifestyle and advocated natural methods to restore health. Although developed centuries ago, Siddhar principles continue to offer valuable insights into holistic health promotion, disease prevention, and healthy living, making them relevant to contemporary healthcare practices.

Conclusion

The Siddhars lived a life that was in harmony with nature and followed a disciplined way of living. They did not seek material possessions or worldly pleasures. Instead, they regarded service to society and the attainment of spiritual wisdom as their primary goals. By understanding the relationship between the body and life, they developed medical principles for the benefit of humankind. Their message, “We ourselves are the cause of the diseases we suffer,” remains highly relevant even in today's scientific age. Therefore, by following the principles of healthy living and the medical concepts advocated by the Siddhars, we can lead a healthy and disease-free life.

Declaration

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