

LETTER TO THE EDITOR**The Buddha did not have epilepsy****Jithangi Wanigasinghe¹, Thashi Chang²**

¹Department of Paediatrics,
University of Colombo,
Sri Lanka.

²Department of Clinical Medicine
University of Colombo,
Sri Lanka.

Correspondence

Jithangi Wanigasinghe
Department of Paediatrics,
Faculty of Medicine,
University of Colombo,
Sri Lanka.
Email: jithangi@pdt.cmb.ac.lk

KEYWORDS

Buddhism, religion, Sri Lanka

Dear Editor,

At the finals of the Tournament of Minds at the XXV World Congress of Neurology in 2021, the following question was asked: ‘Which of these famous people has a different neurological diagnosis from all the others?’ Pictures were shown of van Gogh, Handel, Julius Caesar, Dostoevsky, Salvador Dali, Socrates, Caravaggio and the Buddha. The correct answer was given as Salvador Dali claiming that he had Parkinson disease while everyone else had epilepsy. We note that only the Buddha was a world religious figure among the options given and we write to provide evidence that the claim that the Buddha had epilepsy is incorrect.

There are many famous and important persons who are said to have suffered from epilepsy. Their names are often remembered in books, documentaries and lectures on epilepsy. However, many of them have received this diagnosis retrospectively and it appears to be more speculative than evidence based. Among this list are several famous rulers as well as many sacred religious leaders. Some of them have subsequently been found to have been wrongly diagnosed as epileptic.^{1,2} An interesting article by John Hughes in 2005² investigated the anecdotal reports of epilepsy in 43 important personalities ranging from Pythagoras, born in 582 BC, to the actor Richard Burton, born in 1925. His meticulous investigations revealed that all 43 individuals had not had epilepsy but had conditions that mimicked epilepsy. Interestingly, this list included Handel, whom the quiz claimed to have had epilepsy. Handel apparently had cerebrovascular disease, causing disturbance in vision and paralysis.³

Religious leaders are often included in the list of the eminent with epilepsy. This includes Prophet Muhammad, the Buddha, Apostle St Paul, Apostle St John, Joan of Arc and many others.⁴ A possible reason for the association of religion with epilepsy relates to the rare phenomena of ictal and post-ictal religious experiences (<3%), most frequently associated with temporal lobe epilepsy.⁴ While ictal religious experiences, like other ictal experiential phenomena, have been found to be more common with a seizure focus in the right hemisphere, postictal religiosity, like postictal psychosis and delusions, has been found to be associated with bilateral temporal lobe foci.^{4,5}

Buddhism based on the teachings of the Buddha (born Siddhartha Gautama in the 6th century BCE) is one of the principal world religions with over 500 million followers worldwide. The Buddha’s teachings were initially transmitted through communal recitation by his disciples from one generation to the next and later written down as canonical texts about 400 years after his death in 29 BCE in Sri Lanka. The original scriptures written in the Indo-Aryan language, Pali (the Pali Canon), have been preserved over two millennia in Sri Lanka. They are relied on as the primary sources of the life and teachings of the Buddha.



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Translations of these scriptures into multiple languages are available within the public domain.⁶ In the entirety of the Pali canon, there is no mention that the Buddha was afflicted with epilepsy. The part of the canon which describes the last months of the life of the Buddha, known as the *Mahâparinibbâna Sutta* or *Discourse on the Great Deceased*, describes the Buddha as dying following a brief illness, after not having suffered from any chronic illness.⁷

Although the primary aim of this letter is to set the record straight with regard to epilepsy and the Buddha, we hope that this letter would impress on the ethic of being prudent and respectful to all faiths by either avoiding reference altogether or scrupulously verifying facts if referring to religious figures in secular deliberations or in association with diseases.

We disclose no competing interests.

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