

PHILOSOPHY OF HEALING TRADITION IN TIBET

(c. 617 A.D – c. 785 A.D)

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Tibet entered its era of glory during the reign of great Songtsen Gampo (c. 617- c.650 A.D.). He was a great conqueror, administrator and also a reformer of the highest order. He laid down the ten moral principles and sixteen rules of the conduct of the people. During his reign, there was good political, trade and cultural ties between Tibet, Persia, India and China, which led to their contribution to the art of healing in Tibet. Many historical texts mention about invitation of various scholars to Tibet from neighbouring countries leading to the translation of their respective medical systems. The Indian physicians translated *Bu-zhags-ma-bu-che-chung* and *sByor-ba-mar-gSar*, the Chinese translated *rGya-dPhyad-thor-bu-che-chung* and the Turks translated *mGo-sNgon-bsdus-pa-De-pho-rMa-bya-dang-Ne-tso-gsum-gyi-dpyad* and consolidation of these three formed a volume called *Mi-'jigs-pa' i-m Tshon-cha* (*The Indestructible Weapon*). Therefore, Songtsen Gampo's period is aptly considered the "Golden Age" in the history of Tibet.

Furthermore, the first International Medical Conference at *Sam-ye* near Lhasa in Tibet was held during the reign of King Trisong Deutsen (c.730- c.785 A.D.). This conference featured physicians from India, China, Persia Nepal, East Turkistan and other neighbouring countries. Elder Youthog Yonten Gonpo (708-833 A.D.), participated in the scholarly debate on the science of healing at Samye during which he earned a great reputation and respect for his profound knowledge. After the conference, Youthog synthesized the essence of various Asian Medical Systems and wrote *rGyud-bzhi*. He also established Tibet's first medical institute called "Tanadug" at Kongpo Manlung in southern Tibet in 763 A.D.

In fact, Tibetan medicine offers one of the finest ways to maintain a healthy mind and body. This healing science is viewed in the west as an esoteric science. However, it emphasizes on self-healing means and techniques.

Tibetan medicine is a science, art and philosophy that provides a holistic approach to health care, and aims to secure physical, mental and spiritual health of an individual. It is a science because its principles are explained and are arranged in a systematic, methodical and logical framework based on an understanding of human body and mind and its relationship to macrocosmic world.

It is an art because it uses diagnostic means based on the creativity, insight, and compassion of the Lord Buddha. And it is a philosophy because it embraces the key to Buddhist principles of altruism, *karma* and law of dependence.

Tibetan medicine is unique in itself and holds the medical essence of all the neighbouring countries. The positive aspects of Indian Ayurveda, Chinese medical system, Greek medical tradition, and practices of Nepal are incorporated into Tibetan medicine. This is basically why it has become a very profound and rich medical system.

The practical application of the lore found in *rGyud-bzhi*, is no different from the teachings of Buddha. The texts clearly say that the complete study and perfect application of the knowledge found in this healing science will cut all mental afflictions, prevent suffering and rebirth in the vicious circle of existence. This science highlights the importance of an overall relationship between our mind, body and environment. The essence of Buddhism is to develop an insight through positive actions and eliminating the negative state of mind, which brings the cyclic sufferings of birth, old age, sickness and death. This mind-body phenomenon indicates that the most powerful healing substances or energies are actually within the human body.¹

According to Tibetan medical science, all kinds of physical and mental sufferings arise fundamentally from *Marig-pa* (delusions). They simply unfold as aftermaths of our own delusions and negative karmic actions prompted by untamed states of mind.

The Tibetan healing science explains that delusion is the root cause of rebirth into the misery of cyclic existence as well as the cause of physical and mental illnesses. Without delusions (*Marig-pa*) karmic actions would not have the power to hurl sentient beings into an unceasing cycle of karmic impermanence, rebirth, and suffering like burnt seeds. The first Dalai Lama said, “tame delusion, the enemy within External enemies might seem harmful, but in future lives they could turn into our friends”².

Lord Buddha taught, suffering is experienced due to ignorance arising by not recognizing the meaning of selflessness. This inner enemy has no positive qualities at all, it is only to be fought and destroyed. Buddhist philosophy states that only through proper learning and genuine

practice of Buddha *Dharma* one can liberate from imprisoned mind to total freedom and true self-realization.³

According to Tibetan Buddhist tradition, people suffer a lot from creating otherness in their own mind because of one's strong view of self and others, which in-turn brings jealousy, envy, greed, possessiveness, etc. There is no meaning to look after this self because one can not fulfil the demands of an ego. Tibetan medical theory states that the three mental poisons (*Dug-gsum*) which are desire ('*Dod-chags*), hatred (*Zhe-sdang*) and ignorance (*gTi-mug*) arise from the root delusion.⁴ These three mental poisons may be explained here in the context of Buddhist philosophy:⁵

(i) '*Dod-chags* (Desire) :

Desire has its root in the fundamental delusion or in other words, in ego of the mind. It distorts all virtues. All of us have strong desire for beautiful objects and pleasurable experiences. The failure to achieve these desires will lead to mental tension, anxiety, depression, delirium and other mental disorders. Human desires and attachment are insatiable. They like to live long to experience the pleasures of life. When they fail to achieve these selfish desires, they undergo stress, anxiety, depression and even suicide.

In Tibetan Buddhist tradition, craving has the same qualities as wind humour. So the people of *rLung* (suffering from wind or air) type are dominated by attachment and leads to *rLung* humoral diseases. Many people these days suffer from mental ill health, frustrations and nervous breakdown because of their failure to achieve contentment with what they have. In Tibetan medical texts desire is symbolized by a bird, which is seen as a very active creature.⁶

(ii) *Zhe-sDang* (Hatred):

Hatred also originates from the chief delusion and distorts reality. It leads to flame of anger towards those who annoy us. It is a very untamed state of mind, very uncivilized, very rude and very uneven. It increases *mKhris-pa* (bile) which produces hot energy and temperature and leads to frustration, anxiety, depression, worries and burns the heart. The disturbance of *mKhris-pa* produce derange energies and as a result fails the function of determining bile to make decision. Hence, it weakens the heart and memory. When someone is under the sway of anger, one loses the characteristic of human beings and becomes no different from wild bulls and elephants.⁷

Anger will decrease our power of virtue and will cause us to lose our possession, friends and even one's precious life. Hatred has the characteristics of *mKhris-pa* humour. So people of *mKhris-pa* type are most closely related to hatred. In the medical texts of Tibetan healing

science, anger and hatred are symbolized by a snake, which is seen as a very aggressive creature. It is believed and practically proved that hatred gives rise to *mKhris-pa* humoral disorders.⁸

(iii) *gTi-mug* (Ignorance):

Ignorance also has its root in the chief delusion. Due to delusion, people ignorantly engage and indulge in unwholesome life style, unvirtuous activities, clinging to wrong views and failing to distinguish good from bad. This causes instability of mind and physical discomfort.⁹

Ignorance has the same dark and heavy characteristics as a *Bad-kan* (phlegm) humour. So the people of *Bad-kan* (phlegm) type are closely associated with ignorance. And in Tibetan medical texts, ignorance is symbolized by a pig, which is seen as a very ignorant animal. It is believed and practically proved that ignorance gives rise to increase of *Bad-kan* (phlegm), as a result, it brings dullness, heavy sleep, weak memory and lack of sensual clarity.¹⁰

Besides these three mental poisons, the primary causes of physical human sufferings are said to be disturbed states of *rLung* (wind), *mKhris-pa* (bile) and *Bad-kan* (phlegm) humours which are also said to be near causes of disorders. The dynamic equilibrium of these functions ensure optimal health. The *rLung* energy controls all movement, the *mKhris-pa* energy regulates heat and the *Bad-kan* energy regulates body fluids.¹¹

In general, the *rLung* energy corresponds to Air, the *mKhris-pa* energy corresponds to Fire and *Bad-kan* energy corresponds to Earth and Water elements. According to the function of these three principles, energy is to maintain harmony between the hot and cold energies of the body.

To understand this subject, one has to study the law of Dependent Origination, which can be clearly known through the study of Buddhist law of karma and rebirth. The reason why one has to study the law of Dependent Origination is that all things come into existence depending upon certain conditions and ceases to exist when those conditions don't exist.¹²

It is exceptionally important to avoid meeting any unfavourable conditions in the above dynamic equilibrium state of energies. Because when the balance state of these three principle energies are disrupted by various dietary, behavioural and climatic factors, the three principle energies manifest themselves in gross disorder. These three principle energies transform (manifest) when disturbed. These are obvious from a close perusal of following facts :¹³

(i) *mKhris-pa 'khrugs-pa* (Disturbance of Bile):

Disturbance of *mKhris-pa* burns the bodily constituents. As it is hot and has the nature of fire, although it abides in the lower part of the body, it flares up to the upper part. The Tibetan medicine texts say that all diseases of heat, without exception, arises from this.

(ii) ***Bad-kan 'Khrugs-pa*** (Disturbance of Phlegm):

Disturbance of *Bad-kan* deteriorates the digestive heat of the body. Being the nature of earth and water elements, it retains the heavy and cool characteristics. Due to its nature it falls to the lower part of the body even if the disease abides in the upper body. The texts clearly point out that, all diseases of cold, without an exception arise from it.

(iii) ***rLung 'Khrugs-pa*** (Disturbance of Wind):

rLung is a neutral energy, which prevails over both heat and cold. In other words, it pervades both *mKhris-pa* and *Bad-kan* according to whatever humour is predominant.

If it is on the side of heat ailments or Sun, it aids burning. Whereas if the *rLung* combines with the Moon or cold ailments, it facilitates cooling. The texts of Tibetan medical science explain that it pervades the whole body such as upper, lower, inner and external parts. It disturbs and causes a rise in both the ailment of heat and cold. Therefore, it is also considered as the main cause of all diseases according to its function.

From the above explanation, we come to know that illness is a sign of imbalance between the internal microcosm and the external macrocosm, which is basically brought about by a failure to understand the meaning of “selflessness” or clinging to inherently “Self-existing”.¹⁴

Thus, unless and until we attain an enlightened mind or Buddhahood, we all suffer. Tibetan medicine uses the analogy of clouds, which gather imperceptibly and reach a critical density to bring rain, explaining the various stages of diseases such as accumulation, manifestation and pacification. Just as atmospheric conditions cause rainfall, the seasonal changes, harmful evil spirits, unwholesome diet and improper behaviour can determine the onset of illness.

So to overcome these sufferings, one has to struggle at a practical level, with different means like meditation, virtuous acts under a guidance of proper masters to search for the truth. The Buddha said the root delusion of the ego's self-existence brings about endless craving. And it is said that the entire teachings of the Buddha is on how to prevent sufferings.¹⁵

The Medicine Buddha prescribed how to overcome our suffering and delusion through his teachings, the Dharma, which means “that which holds us to the beneficial”. The Tibetan word for Dharma is *Chos*, which means to cure. The essence of this teaching is to tame the mind and transform negative emotions.¹⁶

People of our age know much about matter but too little about spiritual aspects. With the development of science and technology, people fly to the moon, see the unseen things through microscope, watch stars and planets, see the world instantly through internet and television although no one has time to see one's neighbour.

Despite all these achievements, people of our times still cannot fulfil our ultimate desires like peace of mind, happiness, wisdom and freedom from illness. Instead we see our world filled with conflict, disharmony, war, environmental destruction and social deterioration. So time knocks at our door to watch our self and look into our mind rather than outside. Only through the study of mind and its proper training, we can attain *Bodhichitta* and *Bodhisatva* which would lead us to ultimate happiness and physical health.

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