

The Tibetan Medical System

A talk by Dr. Tenzin Choedrak, Senior Physician to H.H. The Dalai Lama.

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Dr.Choedrak: I would like to start with a short introduction on the origin and history of Tibetan Medicine. The Tibetan medical system dates back some 3000 years. Near Mt. Kailash and Lake Manasarovar there was a land called Olmo Lunging. It is the native land of the original Tibetan religion: Bon religion and of course the Tibetan people themselves. The founder of the Bonpo religion, Lord Sherab Mewo, taught the Tibetan Medical system to his favorite son and disciple called Chetku Trishe who wrote many commentaries and supplementaries on Tibetan medicine. There are around 30 commentaries.

This system prevailed till 255 AD, for 1300 year. But during the 2nd century AD two Indian physicians came from South India to Tibet to propagate their own system of medicine. And it was the first influence of Ayurvedic medicine in Tibet. Later during the 7th century, 33rd King of Tibet, Song Tsen Gompo invited many distinguished physicians from India, China, Persia and neighbouring Asian countries to Tibet to formulate their system of medicine.

In the VIIth century, during the reign of king Trisong Deutsen, in the Samye monastery was held a big conference of the Asian system of medicine and the king invited physicians from India, China, Persia, Kashmir, Nepal and many other independent provinces. It was probably the first international conference in Tibet. There, they discussed their own system of medicine and one volume of medical science was compiled collectively.

During the same conference, the older Yuthok Yuten Gompo (there are two Yuthok Yuten Gompo, the older one and the younger one (1126-1200), the Older one, represented Tibet to the conference. He is now considered as the father of Tibetan medicine.

When the delegates discussed the various systems of medicine, all of them were so surprised by the knowledge of Yuthok Yuten Gampo that they hailed him as: "The Master of Medicine".

During the century that followed many Indian classical texts were translated into Tibetan by famous translators like Vairochana, Rinchen Sangpo, etc... The famous works of Nagarjuna, Chandrananda, Avogosha are still preserved in their entirety.

During the 11th or 12th century, younger Yuthok Yuten Gampo collected and summarized the essence of the different medical systems available and a very large volume of the Tibetan medical system was compiled. It consisted of 156 chapters called the " Four Great Tantras." It is still regarded as the main text of the Tibetan medical system and practiced as such.

In the concluding chapter, there are specific mention of prophecies made for the future (asked by the disciples to the master). During this particular period, people were very obedient, they had in their mind only love and compassion. This moral value is high.

So the prophecy reads: "There will be a time, when the material progress will be so great, that the value of love and compassion as well as the positive attitude of the mind will gradually diminish. There will be many conflicts between different ideas and ideologies. Due to the great material progress, there will be a lot of advancement in science and technology, and due to this, people will engage in the destruction of their own environment. There will also be a lot of ecological destruction and the earth will be completely shaken, polluted and the ecology destroyed; due to which lots of allergies may arise. Like vapors coming out of the earth and ultra- violet rays will affect the people, all will give rise to many different diseases.

On the other hand, due to the excessive use of chemicals and industrial pollutants, the atmosphere will be polluted. The pollution of the atmosphere will directly affect the earth, the environment and all forms of vegetation which on consumption will adversely affect the useful organisms in our body

which provide immunity thereby inviting different kinds of disorders with different manifestations.

All the types of vegetables that we consume consist of six different tastes: sweet, sour, salty, bitter, acrid, astringent. We are consuming them everyday. So, the six tastes of the vegetation are polluted by the pollutants. We are therefore polluting ourselves, we are destroying ourselves by destroying our natural environments.

The useful organisms in our body during normal activity help the proper digestion of food. They protect the body from different infections, give strength and physical radiance. They help every function of the body system. When the pollutants enter the body and defeat the useful organisms they then work together with them to destroy our bodies. Let us take an example to explain: in Tibet before the Chinese invasion, the people were peaceful and living happily. From outside the Chinese invaded Tibet. They left behind a lot of destruction, a lot of tragedy and misery. In the same way, when an external pollutant enters the body, it creates disturbances and disharmony inside our body. Some of the Tibetan medical texts mention 18 types of dreadful disorders which are directly due to the environment and pollution and our indifferent, non-virtuous deeds. To be concise, the principle of Tibetan medicine is based on the law of interdependence. Our human body is formed of five cosmological elements: earth, water, fire, air and space. Our external environment is also formed by these five elements and the medicines that we use to treat the disorders are also made of 5 physical elements, therefore there is an interdependence. Everything is interrelated. The concept of Tibetan medicine revolves around the five elements and the three humors, when there is destruction, as pollution in the outside atmosphere, the outside environment, it will definitely bring disturbances inside our body. This is a concise overview. If you want a detailed explanation, you will have to study the 156 chapters. Are there any questions?

Aurovilian: What are the correspondences of the five elements with body, mind and diet?

Dr.Choedrak: Suppose you take some food having a sweet taste, and you ask the sweet "From where did you come? The sweet will reply, "I come from the environment, from Mother Nature. I was formed by five physical elements. The earth provided me the foundation, the water provided the humidity, the fire provided me heat in order to mature. The air provided me movement and the space provided me room for further development and amongst these elements, the predominance of each of two elements together gives rise to each different taste. This explains how everything is interrelated.

Aurovilian: This I can understand, but when you eat too much sweet, you damage your spleen, the spleen is related to an element. Can you elaborate on this?

Dr. Choedrak: I forgot to mention about the relationship between different food and the different diseases. In Bangalore, when we organized a Tibetan medical week, right after the Holistic Conference, we saw many many patients suffering from asthma and diabetes; almost 40% of the patients had asthma and 30% diabetes. So, these disorders, these diseases are due to excessive use of a specific kind of food which consists of specific tastes and of course an improper lifestyle. If you can consume food having the six tastes everyday there will be harmony inside your body. If you show preferences for one taste, there will be disturbances in your body.

Aurovilian: What are the means of diagnosis for you? When we watched you working we saw that you took the pulse and asked questions to the patients..

What is the background of pulse diagnosis, when do you take the pulse, what are you aiming at, what do you want to get? what sort of concept will guide your diagnosis?

Dr. Choedrak: The concept of diagnosis falls under three major categories: the first category is to see the patient: his physical body, his physical appearance, his urine sample, his five senses organs, etc... This is the first group: *seeing*. The second is *touching or palpitation*. You have to feel the pulse of the patient, the site of the pain, the site of the organ affected and the different energy points which are affected. You have to touch it, to feel it. The third category is *interrogation*: you have to ask the patient about his medical history, his hereditary, his nature of disorders, the possible cause of the disorders, any improper food intake or behavior. The diagnosis should be made from these questions.

Amongst the three major categories, it is the second which is emphasized the most: the pulsology. The subject is so wide. If I have to explain, I won't find the time to explain. You will have to come to the Tibetan Medical College and study, but to be very brief and concise, the main thing that you have to find are the six qualities of hot and cold disorders. In the Tibetan medical system, the diseases are countless but, they are numbered around 1,200, which are condensed into 404 which are further condensed into three humors, and finally to hot and cold diseases. So, you have to find out if the patient has a hot disorder or a cold disorder. You have to study the six different unique characteristics of each hot disorder and cold disorder. Each one has its own distinguishing palpitation, each one has its own feeling. There are so many different palpitations, so many different feelings which vary according to the different disorders and their different manifestations. To be very, very concise, you have to feel the pulse of the radial artery just below the wrist bone. You have to feel with three fingers. Taking the pulse is like the vast ocean having so many waves and ripples. One after the other,

one after the other flows. This can be distinguish in three lines: the first line, the second line and the third line. You have to distinguish the nature of each palpitation in these lines. Both the blood and wind energy flowing in the arteries and circulating through your body act as messengers which carry the message of the whole body, where there is any sort of disorder, in any specific organ. The blood and the wind energy are flowing through the radial artery and tell the doctor "This organ is affected, that disturbance is in the system." The blood and the wind energy act as messengers who tell what is happening inside the body. From that, we infer what particular disease the patient has, from the nature and' fluctuation of the pulse.

For example, you have different kinds of objects beneath your hand: this is a pen, then a wire, then a rope, and a fine rope and a thick rope. You have different other kinds of objects beneath your hands; you feel different kinds of sensations. According to its nature, according to the size, you can feel this wire or that rope or that string has a certain sensation and this stick has a certain sensation. The doctor has to feel the different sensations and each sensation carries different meanings, it carries information about the different disorders.

Dr. Dorjee: I requested Dr. Choedrak to explain at least the six different qualities of cold and hot disorders.

Dr. Choedrak: When you are taking the pulse of the patient, basically you have to see whether the patient has a hot disorder or a cold disorder.

The different characteristics of hot disorders are: strong, fast, wiry, rolling, firm or superimposing.

Aurovilian: How do you determine the life span pulse?

Dr. Choedrak: The life span pulse is very complex and difficult to explain. It

has a deep Buddhist background which is very complicated. There are three different kinds of life span pulses: actually it is not exactly a pulse. One's life energy circulates through your body. Another life pulse or life energy travels with the air that you breath. And the third wanders out and returns through the ring finger. This life span pulse can normally be detected from the ulna artery, at the base of the wrist bone. The life span pulse should be felt only when the patient is in perfect health. Only then, you can determine how long the patient will live. There should not be any sort of fluctuation or disturbance in the pulse. It should be very regular and normal and if this regular pulse beats 50 times, you will live 50 years. That way, you can determine how long one can live.

Aurovilian: Can you make a diagnosis through the voice of the patient?

Dr. Choedrak: We have to study the five sense organs. The sound is part of one of the five sense organs. The tongue in one of the five sense organs, the sound comes from the mouth. So, it can be also studied.

Aurovilian: Are there different sounds than the voice sound?

Dr. Choedrak: I do not make any diagnosis from the different sounds I hear from people.

Aurovilian: With certain asanas or breathing exercises, yogis can stop their breathing and change the rhythm of their heart. So, how do you calculate the life span pulse in these conditions?

Dr. Dorjee: The life span pulse is not calculated by minute. It is not calculated that way. Suppose there are 10 beats and then it stops and then again 10 times and stops again and then continues in same rhythm. The

pulse goes on beating but there is a fixed interval after 10 beats, then one can say that this person will live for 10 years. If the pulse beats without stop, without interval for 100 times, then one will live for 100 years. We do not count this pulse in minutes. Of course 60, 70 or 80 pulses per minute is alright, but the life span pulse is not counted that way, the beating should just go on without interference, without stop, but having a fixed interval.

Aurovilian: What is the role of visualization in the Tibetan medical system?

Everything is given in these three chapters. There is also a chapter which deals with birth control but usually doctors do not practice it. It is restricted since Buddhist philosophy considers birth control as a sin because it is blocking the birth of an individual which has the seed to obtain buddhahood. One should not block it, one should not control it.

Aurovilian: But we know that there is a particular medicine that a woman can take to avoid pregnancy for one reason or another?

Dr. Dorjee: One chapter deals specifically with this. How to control birth, what are the contraceptives pills, its recipes and all. But Tibetan doctors normally do not encourage contraceptive pills. We have other instructions to avoid pregnancy.

Aurovilian: How can we know the different combination of food (about the tastes in the food)?

Dr. Choedrak: There are separate distinctions for each of the different tastes. For example, for sweet, there are different sweets, there are so many kinds of salt, so many kinds of sour. They are grouped in different categories-in the medical texts. When you take sugar or rice, it is sweet food; lemon,

pickles are sour, etc...You know which is the sweet, the sour, salty and considering the different tastes, you have to see that you take different tastes in equal or moderate quantity to effect the balance of humours (wind, bile and phlegm energy). Everything is interconnected.

I want to emphasize the importance of right diet and right behavior.

These are the two main factors, or the two main causes which bring the diseases. For example, in Orissa I noticed that people take a lot of sweet, a lot of rice, a lot of mangoes, these foods have a predominance of sweet, taste and therefore people are suffering from diabetes. In Bangalore, many people suffer from diabetes and asthma due to their excessive indulgence in one particular diet. If someone suffering from asthma goes to Tibet where the climatic conditions are very pure, he will not have any attack there. So, the climatic conditions, the behavior and food that one takes have a very important role in keeping the body healthy.

In Western countries, people make animals very fat, and put a lot of chemical fertilizers to get large size vegetables. Medicines are given to animals to grow fat so very often in the West people suffer from obesity.

This is why it is important to maintain the right diet and the right behavior in order to avoid different complications.

In the medical texts, there is a particular chapter on the different seasons and which food should be taken during each season in order to keep a healthy body. Definitely, the external environment, the effect of the change of the seasons, directly effects the internal environment our body. The internal environment changes according to the external environment. If it is very hot outside, the heat develops inside, so during this particular season, you should take food which has cold potencies, which are cold in nature, this way you can bring a balance and harmony between the inside and the outside environment.

Aurovilian: Are there any books in English existing about the cold and hot

disorders?

Dr. Dorjee: We have some translations of the Tibetan medical recipes, of various drugs, the fundamental principles, but not a separate publication about the diet and seasonal disorders. There are abstracts translated by Dr. Choedrak, but these are minimal. From the Tibetan Medical Institute, nothing is translated so far.

Aurovilian: What is a healthy body for you?

Dr. Choedrak: The distant cause, the inherent cause of the disorder is ignorance. Until and unless, one gets free from ignorance, one can not free oneself from disease. Like the bird which flies in the sky is followed by his shadow, he can not escape from his shadow, so if you can't free yourself from ignorance (*maripa*) you can't free yourself from disorder. Generally, *maripa* gives rise to three inborn mental poisons, which gives rise to the three humors. If the three humors are in a balanced state, the body is in perfect health. If they are in an unbalanced state, the body suffers.

Aurovilian: What are the humors?

Dr. Dorjee: Wind energy, bile energy, phlegm energy.

Aurovilian: One general question, does Tibetan medicine have any treatment against cancer or AIDS?

Dr. Choedrak: During my tour in Western countries, I came across cancer and AIDS cases and amongst the cancer, I have cured two cancers of the prostate in Paris. In the United States, I met a lady with an advanced liver cancer who had been sent back home to die by leading doctors in the United

States. She approached me and I gave her Tibetan medicines for six months and after that she got cured. So, the American doctors wanted me to speak about my medicines and I gave them the same medicines to do research, but I have not yet heard about the results of their experiments. In AIDS cases, I have treated many patients, two or three case are reported to be improving. One case in France, in Nimes and also one in the USA We are doing research in these two fields, cancer and AIDS: to study how Tibetan medicines can help these unfortunate patients. We have a Research Department and a research team. I want to do a proper research on the subject.

There are 10 or 15 cancer cases in India which have been completely cured by Tibetan medicines and in the West also there are some cases. But I want to have proper statistics and data on the cure (by Tibetan medicines).

I want to do proper research on cancer and AIDS in Dharamsala where we have many young students which graduated from Central Tibetan Schools. I hope that these students will be able to pursue the research effectively. If necessary funds and facilities are given, we can definitely do proper research in these two fields.

Aurovilian: We have to say good- bye to Dr. Choedrak and thank him very much far the wonderful knowledge that he has accepted to share with us.

Dr.Choedrak: Thank you very much for your kind interest and attention. I am very happy that Aurovilians seem to have a special taste for "religious" matters. Many people look very "religious".