

# Origin of Tibetan Medicine: Psychological Reflections

**Dr. Eric Soreng\* & Sera Sonam Ongmo Wangdi\*\***

\*Assistant Professor

Department of Psychology  
University of Delhi  
Delhi

\*\*Research Scholar

Department of Psychology  
University of Delhi  
Delhi

## ABSTRACT

Tibetan medicine is an age-old tradition dating back to more than two thousand five hundred years in Tibet and the Himalayan region. In Tibet this practice is called the '*Sowa Rigpa*', which means healing the imbalance of the body in a scientific way. The primary aim of Tibetan medicine as with other systems of medicine is to relieve human beings of physical sufferings and to restore equilibrium of the imbalances in the bodily functioning. The present paper is based on deciphering and rediscovering its mythological origin and significance.

Religion is social; spirituality is individual's connection to the divine depending on one's interest and capacity. On the collective level, besides secular education, religion imparts wealth of mythological and mystical knowledge that is inaccessible to common man's intelligence; it gives a world-view on God, world and the nature of man. Religion has always propagated something beyond earthly and human concerns. The Transpersonal aspect does not negate or is against what is worldly and which makes the lives of the earthlings; rather it encompasses the mundane in order that man may have a holistic perspective. Unless man has the sense of something Transpersonal he can never transcend. In Jungian understanding, we cannot solve all the problems all the time we can only transcend them. As all world religions emphasize universal brotherhood, love and is against killing, religion promotes peace and harmony, attempting to suppress communal violence. As religion is against human discord, it teaches: 'Thou shall not kill'. It urges the individual not to indulge in crime and even self-injury. The commandment of Moses does not state the 'other' therefore it is open to interpretation, to respect others' life and one's own. On the individual level, religion encourages moral living and develops conscience. With its meditative practices, religion also serves a therapeutic purpose; religion has a healing function.

Long before medical science became a separate secular discipline, the gods and goddesses of healing undertook the care and welfare of souls in accordance to the human sufferings of the times. In Tibet, since the inception of Buddhism in the seventh century A. D., the divine providence has been offered to the race by Sanskrit mantras like '*Om Mani Padme Hum*' directed to Avalokitesvara, the divine protector of Tibet. Although the advent and establishment of Buddhism had immense influence on the religious way of life, the history of medicine in Tibet has pre-Buddhist roots. To what extent Bon religion has influenced Tibetan Medicine is a subject of separate research. The term 'Tibetan' in this context is not merely referring to an ethnic group in China, India and spread world-wide, the term also represents a theological legacy, evolved from Bon and Buddhist traditions, and is intimate to its unique medical practice. Even though it is physiological and pharmacological, Tibetan Medicine is an integral part of Tibetan religion. Herein, medicine is one with religion. Traditionally, Tibetan monks have theological and scientific (medical) qualifications.

Tibetan Medicine has an elaborate mythological and historical past. Myths concerning the beginnings of Tibetan Medicine have a character of historical flow as if since its inception it was destined to grow, ever calling more monks to contemplate, doctors to practice and seekers to research. In the present

paper only a few selected myths are placed systematically to construct a comprehensive view pertaining to the origin of Tibetan Medicine and interpret the same.

### **TIBETAN MEDICINE: THE CIRCLE OF BUDDHA**

The circle of Buddha consists of divinities—Buddha and Brahma along with his disciples. In the mythical time, Buddha taught Brahma the *gCher-mthon Rigs-pa'i brGyud* in 3500 chapters. The Medicine Buddha taught *rGyud-bzhi* at IT-na-sdug.

#### **Buddha: The Divine Healer**

IT-na-sdug is either one part of place of the Buddha called Gañs-chan mTs'o-skyes or it refers to a quaternary period of stay in the medicine jungle in Uddiyāna. Buddha made a mountain plateau in that jungle on which he created IT-na-sdug. Innumerable devas, rishis, Buddhists and even non-Buddhists encircled Him. Buddha was omniscient for his congregation and decided to turn the Wheel of Medical Science. To bring His intention to effect, He took the form of the Medicine Buddha and immersed into an ecstatic deep absorption—*samādhi*—called 'Expelling Four Hundred and Four Diseases'. Rays of different colors emanated from his chest in different directions, dispelled all the diseases, and the rays retreated back into His chest.

The rishi Lord Rig-pa'i Ye-shes (Wisdom of Knowledge), then, emerged from His chest, stayed in the sky before Buddha's attendants and addressed: "Friends, all those who wish that people should be healthy and live a long life and if they fall sick that they should be cured ought to learn the Science of Medicine. Because health is of the first importance in any undertaking; all those, too, who want to meditate and reach Nirvāna and those who want wealth and happiness ought to learn the Science of Medicine" (Rinpoche and Kunzang, 1976). The address was followed by the emanation of light from the tongue of the Medicine Buddha, dispelling all the diseases, and the rays retreated back into His tongue.

After that heavenly vision, rishi Lord Yid-las-Skyes came to make his obeisance to the Medicine Buddha and His emanation Rig-pa'i Ye-shes. He circumambulated the Medicine Buddha and Rig-pa'i Ye-shes three times and sat down in the sky before them and making the gesture of request with his hands, said: "Great Lord Rig-pa'i Ye-shes! You said one should learn the Teachings of Medicine. All these attendants here want people to be happy. So can you, please, tell us how to learn it?"

Then Rig-pa'i Ye-shes taught them the *rGyud-bzhi* in 156 chapters by method of question and answer. The devas and the rishis heard the teaching as the medical texts entitled *gSo-dpyad hBum-pa* (100,000 ślokas on Medicine) and *rTsa-ra-ka sDe-brgyad* (Sanskrit *Charaka-ashta-varga*) respectively, while the Hindus heard it as the *dBaṅ-phyug Nag-po'i rGyud* (Treatise of Mahādeva, Sanskrit *Kṛṣṇa-Īśvara-Tantra*) and the Buddhists heard it as the text *Rigs-gsum mGon-po* (About the Three Protectors of Knowledge). Only Yid-las Skyed understood the complete meaning of *rGyud-bzhi*.

#### **Hypothetical Interpretation**

IT-na-sdug, whether within or without, is symbolic of the plane of mystical consciousness of Buddha in terrestrial space—quaternary period—for the fullness, to have life in abundance, within the human situation in order that there could be tangible achievement, of health, from the realm or loftiness of the spirit or touching the root of life—the mountain—through herbal medicine, the jungle, preceding allopathic medicines, as a prerequisite for any undertaking, religious or secular. The cosmological myth presents the *Axis Mundi*—the mountain—, which commonly features in the primitive healing traditions, namely shamanism. While Yahweh gave the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai for virtuous living, Buddha too revealed the science of medicine on the sacred mountain for healthy life.

It is always believed in the myths that in the beginning mankind had no medical suffering and along with longevity man also possessed virtues. But due to human shortcomings sickness, sin, aging and death entered the world. The First Clearance is the emanation of compassion by Buddha considering the human conditions. It is the creative force to impart spiritual strength and healing to mankind. Focus on the chest is elementary because the heart resides therein, which is central to personality, life. Egyptian physicians had recognized the importance of heart and its pulse, which they called the 'voice

of the heart' (Ronnberg, 2010). Checking the heart beat is basic in the practice of medicine. Accompanying the First Clearance is the emanation of Buddha to initiate medical wisdom to strengthen human endeavors, console human limitations and make spirituality and health a blessing central to human phenomena.

Lord Buddhagave innumerable teachings in his lifetime, which were mainly oral transmissions to his students. The Heart Sutra is one of the most essential teachings among them, which focuses on the concept of Emptiness.

The Second Clearance, of consuming and devouring, is also a pristine emanation of creative power, though in more tangible terms. Thus with the clearing up of diseases, it is the beginning of translation of Buddha's emanations into tangible knowledge for the immediate benefit to the body. Focus on and emanation from the tongue is to sustain, nurture and activate the forces of life, as signified by the tongue of goddess Kali; and it reminds us animals licking and lapping their young ones to stir them into life (Ronnberg, 2010). Tongue also has essential role to play in tasting and eating, which again is connected to health. Health nurtures and also decays us.

In the cultural context in Tibet, showing one's tongue is a gesture of thanking someone and expressing the feeling of gratitude.

The Second Clearance, on the whole, is the emanation of integral consciousness for good health and spirit. Medicine having mystical basis is a holistic approach to human existence.

The congregation according to the mode of the seekers and merit received that which was disseminated by Buddha on the Mount.

### **Brahma's First Medicine and Cure**

In the Golden Age, human beings lived in the blissful state of *samādhi*, and had no gratification for food. They had beautiful luminous bodies and there were no sun, moon and stars. They possessed miraculous powers and could even fly through the air. They lacked nothing in such a heavenly state of being.

One day a man ate bitumen because of his previous life's habit and began suffering from indigestion. Brahma heard his lamentation and thought, "How could one cure this?" He then remembered the medical text taught by Buddha Sha-kya Thub-chen in which drinking boiling water was recommended to cure indigestion. Brahma acted upon the remembered teaching, taught the sick man to drink boiling water, thus cured him. Therefore it is believed that the first disease was indigestion, the first sick being was human, the first medicine was boiling water and the first doctor was Brahma.

### **Hypothetical Interpretation**

Water and food are basic ingredients of life, with the boiling water as the most easily available disinfectant. If food is indispensable to life, the same, at times, becomes the cause of suffering. Dyspepsia—indigestion—is not a disease; it is just an uncomfortable experience, which includes abdominal pain or not feeling hungry because one feels full. It is very common medical condition and at times a symptom of the presence of some other digestive disease. In the myth, eating habit and lifestyle—due to *karma* of the past—is the definitive cause of indigestion. The karma must have been acquired in the *Kal Yug* in the cyclic time and continues into the Golden Age. In the creation time, starting from the Golden Age, change in the lifestyle to gratify consequently to have avarice is predestined.

Among the Tibetans the intake of the boiling water in many medical ailments is a common practice. Under normal circumstances too Tibetans generally have a habit of drinking hot boiling water irrespective of the season.

### **Brahma: The Archetype of the Wounded Healer**

After the Golden Age, having lived for aeons, the lifespan began decreasing and people began facing the inevitable death. Devas, concerned with the human plight, got together to discuss the prevention of

untimely death. Brahma remembered the Vedic science of medicine when he had churned the ocean and eight chalices of nectar of immortality had come forth.

The deathless nectar was stolen by the titans and devas were downcast. In order to recover the nectar, Vishnu came in the form of a beautiful woman to woo the titans. Captivated by her beauty, they entrusted her to guard the nectar when they went for bathing. When the titans were gone, Vishnu and Indra carried the nectar to Indra's palace. When the titans returned, they could not find the nectar in spite of searching everywhere, and learnt that devas have taken away the chalices.

At a carousal of nectar organized by devas, one of the titans, Rahu, disguised himself as deva, drank his share of nectar and fled. Chandra recognized Rahu and informed Vishnu. They chased him and Bhrahma attacked Rahu with his wheel, cutting off his head. However, Rahu could not die as he had consumed the nectar. He threw back Brahma's wheel and wounded Brahma on the cheek. The wound caused acute pain to the extent that Brahma became unconscious and remained so for a long time.

When he regained consciousness, he thought to himself how he could cure his wound. Brahma, then, remembered the science of medicine taught by Buddha Kāśyapa. That remembrance caused the cheek wound to emit the sounds of the letters 'a' and 'tha'. The sound of the letters reminded Brahma of the science of medicine taught by Buddha resulting in the composition of medical text by Brahma.

#### Hypothetical Interpretation

The Tibetan myth is a variation of Indian myth of churning of the ocean.

Collectively, the previous and the present myth present to us the complete spectrum of suffering, from the most basic indigestion to the ultimate cessation of life. The fabled Vedic elixir of life, or that of alchemy, is a matter of greatest human quest to attain immortality in spiritual understanding, or at least longevity in medical sense. Such a quest to become like gods is a war against mortality, struggle to obtain elixir i.e. to become enlightened and to attain liberation from cycles of life and death. Life everlasting is not a medical objective but a spiritual journey. Prolonging life and being prosperous is consequent of the science of medicine.

The eight chalices of nectar, being immediate between terrestrial and eternity, is, in consequence a symbol of regeneration. By virtue of the shape of spirit number eight, the numeral is associated with two interlacing serpents of the Caduceus, signifying the balancing out of opposite forces or the equivalence of the spiritual power to the natural. In the context of the myth, eight chalices of nectar give a mythic definition to medical science in terms of regeneration and the field till present day is represented by the two intertwined snakes.

Nectar is not some magic potion, it is only symbolic of that wisdom and medicine which can heal the bodily loss, renew the health and recover life. Firstly it is medical; secondly it is a spiritual prescription to live a healthy life. Buddha's *samādhi* called 'Expelling Four Hundred and Four Diseases', in natural addition is spirit number eight, has the same symbolic meaning to beget the science of medicine.

In the previous myth Brahma is exposed to human suffering and in the present, Brahma himself experiences suffering. In the myth of the divine healer Balaji, the divine child has a broken jaw—Hanuman; Brahma too has a facial injury. Face is the identity and in both the mythological cases, after the injury, identities are transformed. Brahma, having suffered, reflects on his suffering, recollects the teachings of Buddha Kāśyapa and imparts the medical knowledge to heal the sufferings of mankind. Thus, Brahma is the Wounded Healer.

The sounds of the Sanskrit letters 'a' mean life-breath, energy, happiness and knowledge, while the meaning of 'tha' mean mountain, eating, protection and preservation; they all have contextual meaning in the mythological series on medicine.

On the origin of Tibetan Medicine, we have mythological series wherein Buddha taught the science of medicine and the same was recapitulated by Brahma to pass on the legacy. Buddha taught the medical science and by remembering Brahma, the first recipient, revives the knowledge. It began with Buddha and through Brahma it comes back to the medical teachings of Buddha.



### Reference

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