

Propagation & brief history of Tibetan Medicine

Dawa

Visiting Associate Professor, Research Center for Ethnomedicines, Institute of Natural Medicine
(Men-Tsee-Khang: Tibetan Medical and Astrological Institute, Dharamsala, INDIA)

Tibetan medicine is one of the five major sciences, which has a history of nearly three thousand years. This authentic medical system is the resultant of accumulative experiences base on the practical medication by the past erudite scholar's of Tibet. The series of systematic development taken place in the Tibetan medical system includes extracting the best of neighbouring and other healing methods. In addition to that the Tibet's climate, geographical features and the human body composition were taken into account which led this system a unique system with unique characteristics. With these unique features one could recognize that this system was newly evolved in Tibet by the past erudite scholar's continual researches and methods of development with the aforementioned unique characteristics. The history of Tibetan medicine has shown that there was existence of therapy for the poison in the pre-Buddhist era (300B.C.) at the time of *gNa'-Khris bTsan-po*, the first and foremost king of Tibet and practiced by Tibetans. Consequently, the medicinal values of a few herbs, animals, minerals and stones are identified.

(*gZi-brjed Rin-po Chei'gTer-mDzod*), the autobiography of senior Yuthog Yonten Gonpo described that he answered to the questions asked by Indian physicians by substantiating the purgative therapy (diarrhea) from the indigenous *Zhang-gzhung* tradition, the therapies such as fomentation, medicinal bathe and massage from the indigenous Bon tradition and the existence of four subdual therapies (*gNyen-po bZhi-ldan*) from the indigenous Tibetan tradition. This book further stated that the date of Lord Buddha's coming to the world coincided with the date of Lord Shenrab Mebo's visit to *sPu-hring* (name of a district in southwest part of Tibet). The

art of healing was first expounded by Lord Shenrab, a master of Bon religion, to Chebu Trishey, the eldest of Sherab's eight sons. He taught him to master all the arts of healing. He learned to have a penetrating understanding of the *gSo-byi'nad-'um nag-po* (A Black Book of Therapy), *gSo-thabs-kyi dPyad-'bum Khra-po* (A Colorful Book of Medical Recipe), *gSo-byed Kyi Sman-'bum dKar-po* (The White Book of Health care), *gSo-dPyad mDo-dgu* (The Nine Compilations of Accessory) and *gSo-rig dPyad-rgyud zdla-zer* (A Moon Crystal Healing Tantra). His contributions in the art of healing were well stated in the autobiography of senior Yuthog Yonten Gonpo. Moreover, the practice of antidote developed and practiced by Shebu Trishey substantiated that the *Zhang-zhung, dPyad-bu* Trishey's art of healing was one of the earliest art of healing developed in Tibet.

During the reign of *Gri-gum bTsan-po* (Around 100 B.C.) the highly successful development of the farmer and nomadic life style led to the ways and means of producing *Chang* (Tibetan wine) from parched barely, butter from milk which resulted into applying residual barley from *Chang* (Tibetan wine) on fresh wounds and melt butter for bleeding. These developments further strengthened the art of healing by finding a few medicinal values of the materia medica.

During the reign of the 28th King of Tibet, *Lha Thotho Ri Nyantsan* (254-374 A.D.), the Indian physicians *dGa'-Byed Bi-byed* and *Bi-dGa'Lha-mDzas* came to Tibet. The king requested them to remain in Tibet to teach and practice, and he was extremely delighted about their contribution in the art of healing and gave his daughter *Yidkyi Yolcha*

as a bride to *dGa'-Byed Bi-byed*. *dGa'-Byed Bi-byed* and *Yidkyi Yolcha* gave birth to a son named *Dung-gi Thorchog*. He learnt many arts of healing and became eminent in his field. There was five successive lineage after him and served as personal physician to the kings of their times till the 33rd King of Tibet, *Songtsen Gompo* (617 A.D).

During the reign of the 13th dynasty, *'Brong gNan Lde'u* buried himself in alive after infected with leprosy caused by *Sa gDon* (Spirit of the soil) to prevent this epidemic disease to the coming dynasties. As testament laid-down by his father the prince, *dKon-pa bKhra-la* invited the reknowned Tibetan physician known as *Wa-zha' sMan-pa* from the *Wa-zha'-yul* (A country belongs to the *Wa-zha* dynasty). He did manage to open the eyes. Consequently, the prince instantively saw a Tibetan argali sheep at the *sKyed-shod sTag-mo* (A Happy Female Tiger Valley) mountain and named him as *sTag-ri gNyan-gzigs* symbolizing a person who saw a Tibetan argali at the *sTag-ri* (Tiger hill). These historical evidences substantiated the existence of precaution and prevention for epidemic diseases in Tibet and the highly skilful technique in the field of eye surgery.

The selectively choicest, highly intelligent and courageous Thumi Sambodha came to India to fulfill the wishes of the 33rd King, *Songtsen Gompo* i.e to study Sanskrit. He returned to Tibet after finishing the thorough study on Sanskrit and made necessary correction in the old Tibetan handwriting and other Tibetan sciences. Consequently, he invented the authentic Tibetan handwriting that is being used at present. This revolution brought tremendous change in the Tibetan sciences in general and art of healing in particular that led to the translation of other choicest indigenous medical system into Tibetans.

With the objectives of development in the field of Tibetan medicine the Tibetan King, *Mes-Ag-Tshom* (8th century) convened the first international conference on Tibetan medicine by inviting the nine reknowned physicians from India, China, Islamic

countries and Dolpo (Nepal). This conference further strengthened Tibetan medicine.

Following are brief life history of some prominent scholars who contributed in the field of Tibetan medicine.

- The senior Yuthog Yonten Gonpo was born at *Toelung Kyina* in year 708 A.D. He became proficient in all the major and minor sciences in general and art of healing in particular and considered as a crown of the Tibetan medicine. With this foundation as base and extracting the best of other indigenous systems he composed *rGyud-bzhi* (Four-Tantras). He established Tibet's first medical institute at Kongpo Manlung, educated and took care of more than one thousand medical students. He devoted his whole life (125years) to the propagation and promotion of Tibetan medicine. He also composed medical texts for the future generation practitioners and he further promoted Tibetan medicine in Tibet.
- The junior Yuthog Yonten Gonpo was born in year 1126 A.D. and respected as the second medicine Buddha. He composed numerous beneficial medical texts for the medical students and patients. He did the continual addition to the *rGyud-bzhi* (Four-Tantras) and thus it became a full-fledged medical text.

The *Jang-Zur* tradition of Tibetan medicine came into being in the 15th century and enriched this art of healing by writing numerous commentaries based on *rGyud-bzhi* (Four-Tantras). They also educated and took care of an infinite number of students.

- Regent Sangye Gyatso (1653-1706 A.D.): He became proficient in all the major and minor sciences and especially eminent in the field of Tibetan medicine and Astrology. The well-illustrated new medical thankas on *rGyud-bzhi* (Four-Tantras) were produced after scrutinizing the old medical thankas. Consequently, he

produced seventy-nine medical thankas. He wrote *rGyud-bzhi's* (Four-Tantras) commentary *Be-sNgon* (Blue Lapis Lazuli) and history of *Man-Ngag Lhan-Thabs* (Supplementary Text to the Quintessence Tantra) and numerous books on Astrology. He established Lhasa Chagpori Medical College with the objectives of fulfilling the wishes of the great 5th Dalai Lama.

- De'umar Geshe Tenzin Phuntsok was born in 1720 A.D. He was eminent scholar in the field of Tibetan materia medica. He wrote many books including *Drimed Shelgong* (A Stainless Crystal Heap), *Drimed Shelphreng* (A Stainless Crystal Rosary), *dPyad-kyi Lag-Len* (A practical experiences on accessory therapies), *Ro-sDeb-kyi sByor-ba* (Compounding of medicine base on taste) and *sMan-gyi sByor-Tshad* (Quantum of medicinal ingredients).
- Rev. Khyenrab Norbu (1883-1962 A.D): He was highly proficient in all the major and minor sciences and established Lhasa Men-Tsee-Khang in the year 1916 to preserve and promote Tibetan medicine as wished by the great 13th Dalai Lama. He educated and took care of an infinite number of medical students; and wrote many books on Tibetan medicine and astrology.

In order to preserve and promote the rich Tibetan culture, the Men-Tsee-Khang (Tibetan Medical and Astrological Institute) was established in the year 1961 at Dharamsala in Himachal Pradesh, India under the auspices of His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama.

With the profound blessing and gratitude of His Holiness the Dalai Lama the popularity of Tibetan medicine enhanced extensively in every nook and corners of the world.

Fundamental Concepts of Tibetan Medicine

The five elements in relation to the *rLung*, *mKhris-pa*, *Bad-kan*, seven bodily constituents and three excreta are the fundamental basis of Tibetan

medicine and methods to balance unhealthy state of the body into healthy state. The diet, behavior, medicine and accessory therapies are respectively used to treat patients. It is the art of healing with true Buddhist concept of bringing peace to the mind and knowledgeable preventive measures are taken into account base on the body's nature and excess/-deficiency of the five-cosmophysical elements induced by the manifestation conditions such as diet and behavior.

When we are talking on the formation of the human body, it is basically formed by the union of the fertile sperm (*Khu*) and egg (*Khrag*) with the very subtle consciousness of an individual being and potency of the very subtle, invisible continuum of the five elements. The food that we ingest must have qualities of the five elements to strengthen our body. Moreover, we have healthy body if we depend on the wholesome diet and behavior base on the seven types of humoral constitutions. The excess, deficiency and disturbance in the quantum of five elements, three humors, seven bodily constituents and three excreta imbalances the body that give rise to numerous disorders. So, potency and qualities of the diet and medicine containing five elements could treat this imbalance state of the body. Thus, the formation of the body, arisal of the diseases and lastly, treatment of the disease by potency and qualities of the diet and medicine containing five elements correlates only with five elements.

Basis and origin of Tibetan medicine

- 1) Five elements
- 2) Three humors — *rLung*, *mKhris-pa* and *Bad-kan*
- 3) Seven bodily constituents
- 4) Three excreta

Identification of five elements in Tibetan medicine

The five elements stated in the Traditional Tibetan Medical System are earth, water, fire, wind and space. These elements are referred not only to the elementary particles that one can see but referred to

the very subtle elementary particles that one can not see by the naked eyes but have same basic characteristics and qualities. For example, water particle dissolves in the atmospheric particle has qualities of the water element, fire particle has fire like characteristics and referred to all warmth.

Everything in this universe when they disintegrate and die, we consider that it has been caused due to excessive or too little the amount of five elements. In the beginning of human conception, we regard the importance of five subtle elements to be present along with the sperm and ovum and consciousness of the fetus. For e.g. the sperm helps in the formation of bones and nervous system etc., similarly the woman's ovum for the formation of muscle tissues, vital and hollow organs, seven bodily constituents of the body & to regulate the color of blood etc.

Likewise, earth element helps in the formation of muscle tissues, bones & the strength of smell. Water helps for the formation of blood and the moistness within our body and the sense of taste. Fire for the warmth and the formation of vital & hollow organs and the constituents of the body, the color of blood and the sense of sight. Air for breathing, blood circulation, the physical movement, growth and the sense of touch. The space helps to retain the empty cavities, like the space within our body and the sense of hearing.

In order to maintain the proper function of the five elements within our body, it also depends upon the various diet and beverages which in fact possess the qualities and potencies of the five elements. The difference in taste, potency & qualities of the diet are also said to have been caused by the influence of these 5 elements. Failing to understand the required proportion of diet to our body there by consuming the diets in disproportionate quantity will ultimately lead to imbalance in the three humours and other bodily constituents, leading to ill health and disease. Therefore in order to maintain our body in good health, we must understand the formation or origin of six taste, eight qualities and

seventeen secondary qualities. With the proper knowledge & understanding of these cases, we will know, when and which are the suitable diets for the 7 human body types in accordance to the various geographical and seasonal changes, thereby helping our body to restore back to health or to maintain in sound health.

The formation of 6 taste due to strength of the 5 elements;

Generally the various choice of delicacies or medicine we can find at present has the presence of all the 5 elements, however due to the strength variation of the 5 elements, all these taste can simply be summarized into the six taste. These taste which are sequentially arranged in the order of sweet, sour, salty, bitter, hot and astringent taste play the greatest role in giving strength and maintaining our body in health from the former taste to the later respectively. Thus sweet taste has the greatest potential when consumed proportionately to the human body types and other various influencing factors. However in contrary to this, if someone consumes the taste either in excess or too low, this affects the 5 elements and others related to these elements to grow in excess or to weaken to rupture into diseases.

The strength within the various taste also plays the role in determining the numerous number of potency and qualities. For e.g. very sweet taste; sugar & not very sweet taste like the rice, flour, potato and banana are all categorized under the sweet taste. Among the medicinal plants such as *Glycyrrhiza glabra*, *Carthamus tinctorius*, *Polygonatum cirrhifolium* are similarly grouped under the sweet taste. Though all these various plants and diets are having the similar taste, but they have different seed or cause along with the variation in the strength of five elements. These factors influence the plants and diet to have difference in degree of sweetness and likewise to the potency and qualities. We can apply this same principle to other types of taste. When we think about the formation of six taste from the five

elements. Generally, all these five elements play the role in the formation of each of these six taste. However to be more specific, a bi-combination of elements defines the six different taste. For e.g. greater degree of;

Earth	&	Water forms sweet taste.
Fire	&	Earth, sour taste
Water	&	Fire, salty
Water	&	Air, bitter
Fire	&	Air, hot
Earth	&	Air, Astringent

Three humours:

Three types of humours are being defined to be present in the human body to carry out various functions of our body. Each of these 3 humours has subtypes of 5 humours, making a total of 15 humours. These 3 humours have a total of 20 different characteristics. Furthermore, the required amount of these humours, their general & specific locations and functions are lucidly mentioned in the medical text. When the humours are in balanced state they play the role in maintaining our body in healthy state. On the other hand if the humours get disturbed then they would manifest in the form of illness and diseases.

The general functions of the humours:

rlung (wind);

Helps in breathing, thought, speech and almost all the movements of our mind, body and speech including throwing out waste matters from our body, transformation of the bodily constituents and assimilation of nutrients to the various parts of our body, perception of the sense of sight. Infect *rlung* humour is involved in various internal and external functions of our body.

mkhris-pa (bile);

This humour is involved in restoring our digestive heat or the bodily heat. Helps in digestion, gives heat to various parts of our body, to gain physical beauty and radiance, courage and intelligence.

bad-kan (phlegm);

To maintain both physical and mental stability, increase courage and sleep, connects the joints, maintain smoothness and flexibility, the sense to be more tolerant and to bear pain and suffering due to thirst, hunger and depression.

In order to maintain the balance within the three humours, their required quantity to our body and their proper function. It all depends upon the four conditions, time factor, demonic influence, diet and behavior. Neglecting the vital influence of these conditions play to our body will lead to unhealthy intake of diets and indulging in wrong behaviour which will lead to imbalance within the humours and disease.

7 bodily constituents:

Generally we can simply describe the seven bodily constituents as the backbone for sustenance of body and mind. The seven bodily constituents are nutritional essence, blood, muscle tissues, fatty tissues, bones, bone marrow and regenerative essence.

- 1) Nutritional essence; helps to increase and sustain the remaining six bodily constituents and particularly the blood.
- 2) Blood; helps to increase all most all the bodily fluids and serves as the main factor for sustaining our life.
- 3) Muscle tissue; serves as protective covering for our body, both internally and externally.
- 4) Fatty tissues; provides smoothness & oily nature within various parts of our body.
- 5) Bone; supports our body to stand or sit by its frame of skeletal system, maintain our human figure and in some cases as a protective covering.
- 6) Bone marrow; helps in providing nutrients and energy to our body as well as to increase the regenerative essence.
- 7) Regenerative essence; serves to give skin luster, radiance and as the seed of conception.

Transformation of the bodily constituents:

All the bodily constituents including the nutritional

essence are all dependent on the digestive heat or the three metabolic functions of *bad-kan*, *mkhris-pa* and *rlung*. These three humours involved in the digestive process helps to break down the food particles, then to digest and to separate the essence from the waste matter respectively.

The nutritional essence first gets absorbed through the tiny nutrient absorbing channels between the stomach and small intestine. These nutrients were passed on to liver and get transformed into blood by the 3 digestive heat. Then later transformed into muscle tissue, to fatty tissue, to bone and then to bone marrow and finally it get transformed into regenerative essence.

3 excretions:

Feces, urine and perspiration are the ones described as the commonly known excretions. Apart from these, teeth, nails, ear dirt and all other dirt that comes out from the 9 orifices are all included under the bodily excretions. The waste matter of the diet we intake is the urine and feces.

The nutritional essence of diet we intake goes to the liver. The waste matter of the nutritional essence is the *bad-kan* that resides in the stomach.

The blood also has two types, the essence goes to the heart and later turns to muscle tissues and the waste matter of blood turns to bile.

The essence of muscle tissues turns to fatty tissues and the waste matter turns to ear & eye dirt etc.

Essence of fatty tissue gets transformed into bone and the waste matter of fatty tissue transforms into sweat and oily nature of body.

The essence of bone turns to bone marrow and the waste matter of bone into teeth, nails and hairs.

The essence of bone marrow turns to regenerative essence and the waste of bone marrow transforms into feces and oily nature of skin pores.

The waste matter of regenerative essence is the seed of conception.

The materia medica of Tibetan medicine:

- 1) The classification of materia medica
- 2) Taste of ingredients

- 3) Potency of the taste
- 4) Potency of the nature
- 5) Formulation techniques
- 6) Varieties of formulations

1) The classification of materia medica

Depending upon the quality and formation techniques. Materia medica section in Tibetan medicine is classified into 13 varieties. These are summarized under three categories;

- i) minerals
- ii) plants
- iii) animals

However due to global concern and current international laws and regulations, the use of animal products are now being replaced by herbs and plants. So the present pills or medicine produced from this institute consist of 98% plants and the rest of minerals.

2) Taste of ingredients, to illustrate about the taste, we have to deal with

- i) The source of taste
- ii) The classification within the taste
- iii) Understanding the nature of the taste
- iv) Categories of the taste
- v) Role of the taste

i) The source of taste:

The various types of taste including the sweet taste are all based on the five elements. All the drugs are basically formed by the earth element as the basis and then water elements plays the role to make it moist, fire gives heat for the growth. The air helps in movement and assist in growth and finally the space provides space for growth. This method of formation applies to all the physical things, however due to difference in the nature of seed and the variation in the degree of five elements during the period of formation, six taste are originated from the five elements, these flavors bears the characteristic nature and quality of the five elements.

ii) The classification within the taste

Drugs have six different taste; sweet, sour, salty, bitter, hot and astringent taste. These can be further classified into 57 different taste. With the help of five elements numerous medicinal drugs are formed with various kinds of flavor, which can all be summarized under the six taste. Likewise according to cause of formation, sweet taste has the highest potency to give strength & energy than the following taste, which are arranged from the highest potency to the lowest potency respectively.

iii) Nature of the taste

To talk about the nature & flavor of the various drugs formed by these 5 elements. When these drugs come in contact with the taste buds, the sensory perception of the tongue analyzes and differentiates to which kinds of taste it belongs to. Out of the six taste, the sweet taste has pleasant flavor and distinguishes it from the rest of the taste with pleasant taste. When we try with sour taste, it'll make our teeth feel unbearable, could cause our face to become closer towards the center of the face for a brisk moment and causes watering in mouth. The sour taste makes our tongue to feel hot and produce water from mouth. Bitter taste acts as mouth freshener and increases appetite. Hot taste makes our tongue and mouth to burn and cause tears to flow. Astringent taste cling to our tongue and palate with a sense of coarseness, without showing clearly to which taste it belongs to.

iv) Categories of the taste

Apart from the six different taste, drugs have various other flavors of bi-combined taste, tri-combined taste and even with all the six taste. Here are few examples of drugs having single taste.

Sweet taste; *Glycyrrhiza glabra*, *Carthamus tinctorius*, *Vitis vinifera* & *Bambusa textilis*

Sour taste; *Punica granatum*, *Hippophae*

rhamnoides & *Emblica officinalis*

Salty taste; *Sallucidum*, *Saammoniacum* & *Halitum violaceum*

Bitter taste; *Swertia chirata*, *Aconitum heterophyllum* & *Picrorhiza kurooa*

Hot taste; *Piper nigrum*, *Piper longum* & *Capsicum annum*

Astringent taste; *Terminalia belerica*, *Geranium wallichianum* & *Myricaria squamosa*

v) Role of the taste

Can be described in two ways, the general role of the taste and the specific role. As an example, the general role of sweet sour, salty and hot taste helps to subside *rlung* disease. Likewise, bitter, sweet and astringent treats *mkhris-pa* disorder. Hot, sour and salty helps to treat *bad-kan* disorder. Furthermore, the various roles they play have been described extensively under the chapter, role of taste. The benefits of the various taste as well as the harmful effects of the taste when consumed excessively were also mentioned.

3) Potency of the taste:

Under this heading, the description of the 8 qualities, 2 healing power, 17 secondary qualities are described.

The 8 qualities; heavy, oily, cool and blunt are the four major qualities and four qualities contrary to the above are; light, coarse, hot and sharp, which makes a total of 8 qualities. Out of the four major qualities; heavy and oily quality are helpful to treat *rlung* diseases, cool & blunt for *mkhris-pa* disease. The other four such as light, coarse, hot & sharp are used to treat *bad-kan* disease.

Two healing power refers to the healing qualities which are inherently present in the drugs such as heavy, cool, oily etc. The strength or healing power of the drugs depends directly upon the habitat and the strength or degree of the five elements, for e.g. If plants having

cooling potency are found on high altitude places with cooling environment. We would describe the plant to be possessed with the highest cooling effect of the moon. Likewise if plants having warming potency are grown at low altitude warmer regions, we would term it as having the highest warming effect adorned with the warm effect of the sun. These plants or drugs adorned with cooling effect will help to cure hot disease and plants possessing warming qualities will help to treat cold disease.

17 secondary qualities; by understanding what kind of characteristic nature the disease has accordingly the secondary qualities can be used to treat the 2 characteristic nature of the disease.

4) Potency of the nature

To define the nature of ingredients, this can be categorized into such as; the nature of minerals, nature of plants etc. For confirming the nature of these ingredients, it depends upon the nature of the elements involved in its formation. This has 8 types;

- i) The strength of the ingredients according to its habitat.
- ii) The correspondence of the nature and its taste.
- iii) Smell potency.
- iv) Healing potency.
- v) Potency of similar type.
- vi) Potency of similar shape.
- vii) Auspicious potency.
- viii) Bestowed potency.

5) Formulation techniques

Under the formulation techniques, 3 different methods are used;

- i) Drugs are classified into a group which have the similar therapeutic value to treat a common disease.
- ii) Drugs having similar taste are arranged and compounded according to the strength of the elements.
- iii) Medicines are formulated according to the

potency of taste, post digestive taste and quality.

6) Varieties of formulation

Besides, knowing the concept of formulation techniques, we have to understand & consider the various conditions such as the severity of the disease, the strength of patient, the age group, the nature of the disease etc. From then, we can formulate medicine based on the medical text and can even prepare new drugs by implementing the various concept & methods mentioned in the text.

Various numbers of formulations are mentioned according to the stage and severity of the disease.

- 1) Decoctions to ripen disease, gather diffused disease and intermingled disease.
- 2) Powder medicine to subside diseases, problems of post digestive taste due to hot & cold diseases.
- 3) Pills to treat disease from its root which were failed to be cured by decoction & powdered medicine.
- 4) Medicinal paste for remains of disease either of cold or hot type of disease diffused in whereas parts of body such as in the channels, joints, muscles and skin.
- 5) Medicinal butter to gain strength & energy as well as to clear the sense of perception.
- 6) Medicinal ash, mainly against cold type of disease influence by the bad-kan humour.
- 7) Concentrated decoction, when medicine are prepared into concentrated decoction, it becomes milder & easier to digest and above all it serves to retain the medicinal value of the plants over a prolong period.
- 8) Medicinal wine, against most types of hot or cold diseases associated with rlung diseases.
- 9) Gem medicine, can be prepared when all other formulations fail to treat the various chronic diseases. This formulation is said to have double effectiveness, than the former ones. Plus it'll help to stop relapses. On top

of these two major characteristics or benefits, it also helps to treat all other types of disorders related to blood, *mkhris-pa*, *bad-kan* & *rlung* diseases. The various medicines formulated from gems can also be consumed by a healthy person to prolong life, stop aging, gain strength and as a preventive measure for hot or cold diseases.

10) Herbal compounds, the various formulas

mentioned above will not treat most of the diseases. However due to certain unavoidable circumstances, such as scarcity of necessary facilities and drugs, complicated procedure in preparing gem medicines and to fulfill the urgent need of medical help in remote areas. Herbal compound is devised for easy access and suitability.