

Eliot Tokar

*Tibetan Medicine: Ancient Wisdom for Modern Health and Healing*

Week One: “What Is Tibetan Medicine?”

April 2, 2018

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Hello, and welcome to this Tricycle video series on Tibetan medicine. I'm Eliot Tokar. I'm a traditional Tibetan medicine doctor and a writer and lecturer on the subjects of Tibetan medicine and many issues regarding healthcare and medicine. I have a practice here in New York City, and I've been in practice since 1993.

I was privileged to be one of the first Westerners to receive extensive textual and clinical training in Tibetan medicine. I began my training in 1983 with the esteemed Dr. Yeshe Dhonden, former personal physician to the Dalai Lama and the winner of the 2018 Padma Shri Award from the Republic of India. In 1986, I was accepted as an apprentice by the renowned lama and physician Dr. Trogawa Rinpoche, who along with Dr. Dondin was one of the founders of the Tibetan Medical Institute (the Men-Tsee-Khang) in Dharamsala, India. He was also the founder of the Chagpori Medical College in West Bengal, India, which continues the lineage of the Chagpori Tibetan Medicine College, first established in Lhasa, Tibet, in 1696.

In this first video, we're going to talk a little bit about Tibetan medicine. What is the essence of its understanding? What does it contribute to modern discussions of healthcare? How can it inform us as dharma students? Tibetan medicine, or what's also called in Tibetan *sowa rigpa*, is an ancient system of medical science that merges a dharmic view of our existence with an empirical system of medical science. Tibetan medicine has been a clinical practice for many centuries, especially through the Himalayan region, and subsequently in South Asia, East Asia, and in Eastern Europe. It also started to be practiced in Western Europe and North America in the latter part of the 20th century.

This system of traditional Asian medicine provides the modern world with an enormous wealth of clinical and scientific information accumulated throughout Asia and contextualized within a Buddhist perspective. In talking about any field of medical science, modern or traditional, we're

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talking about systems that sit on three legs: the first is belief, the second is the clinical experience of doctors and patients, and the third is scientific objectivity and empiricism.

Let's talk about that first component which I mentioned, belief, and in this case the relation of Tibetan medicine to Buddhism. In Buddhist philosophy an important topic of discussion and debate, one that monks learn when they first enter the monastery, is the ability to define if things are the same or different from one another. The traditional view is that Tibetan medicine and Buddhism are separate and distinct systems. But senior teachers explain that they're different in the way the fingers are separate from the hand.

The Buddha taught that spiritual ignorance is the primary cause of suffering, and he likened dharma to a kind of medicine. Tibetan medicine also sees ignorance as the most basic cause of the thousands of forms of illness and disease that it both describes and seeks to individually diagnose and treat. There are Buddhist practices that relate to medicine—the most famous of which is the Medicine Buddha practice, with its mantra “Ta-Dya-Tha / Om Bhe-Kha-Dze Bhe-Kha-Dze Ma-Ha Bhe-Kha-Dze Ra-Dza Sa-Mu-Dga-Te So-Ha.” There's also *Yuthog Nyingthig* [a school of tantra] practice, which is done mainly by Tibetan doctors.

There are secondary forms of healing, like mantra healing for example, which was done mainly by yogis and lamas using the power of their practice to heal through mantra. There are also consecrations done on Tibetan herbal medicines when they are manufactured. Senior teachers and doctors have made the point, and Tibetans understand well, that the ingredients are what makes the medicines effective. Were the ingredients collected correctly? Were they identified correctly? Were they collected in the right regions at the right times of year? Were they processed and mixed correctly? This is what makes the medicines function properly.

The consecrations also have an important role. Traditionally, medicines are always consecrated and Tibetans have well understood the roles of Buddhism and medicine. Tibetan Buddhism is an

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important vehicle through which Tibetan medicine doctors traditionally form their sense of medical practice. These practices focus us, the doctors, on taking the most compassionate view of our patients and not seeing them as merely defined by their illness. Dharma allows Tibetan medicine doctors to understand the impermanent nature of the suffering that results from illness. For patients, this relationship of spirituality to medicine allows people to understand and heal the suffering caused by illness by recognizing its impermanent nature, even while pursuing medical treatments for their illness or disease.

My teacher Dr. Trogawa Rinpoche best explained the relationship between Buddhism and medicine when he remarked, "My external practice is the practice of medicine. In my inner thoughts, I meditate on the medicine Buddha." Now, this comment does not simply tell us that Dr. Trigau was a Buddhist. Traditionally, a doctor's work becomes an ongoing practice towards spiritual development. Spiritual practice emphasizes awareness and intuition in addition to the healing which we physicians continually strive for.

Given the different extents to which Tibetan doctors engage in spiritual study and practice, there isn't a standard prescription for spiritual practice. And certainly in the modern context we're likely to see people practicing Tibetan medicine in a more secular form. It is also not necessary for patients using Tibetan medicine to be Buddhists or have any knowledge whatsoever about Buddhism for them to gain the benefits from this form of healthcare. But still, the primary, classic principle of Tibetan medicine is that spiritual practice is the bedrock of a doctor's practice. For patients, the primary means of ending suffering, whether spiritual or physical, lies within attaining spiritual understanding.

Tibetan medicine is a prime example of a true integrative medicinal practice. It also addresses, in part, the current debate over issues of cultural appropriation. The history of Tibetan medicine exemplifies medical integration. It shows us how aspects of world cultures such as religion, medicine, music, food—everything—are mostly based on cultural groups sharing information.

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It's not based on the ownership or heritage, intellectual or otherwise, as property by any one group. Tibetan medicine, for example, integrates native Tibetan medical knowledge with primary influences from the Indian Vedas (in the form of what we know as Ayurvedic medicine) and the Persian Arabic *Unani* medical system, as well as the Hellenic Greek medical tradition and influences from Chinese medicine. By intentionally synthesizing knowledge from these various medical systems, Tibetans created a systematic approach to medical science, drawing upon thousands of years of accumulated empirical knowledge, clinical practice, and intuition about the nature of health and illness.

In the beginning of the fourth century, many new ideas regarding medicine began to enter Tibet. The first influences came from India from what we now know as Ayurvedic medicine. Around the seventh or eighth centuries the Tibetan government began to sponsor conferences where doctors skilled in the medical systems of other regions—places like India, Persia, Greece, and China—presented and debated their ideas regarding health and the treatment of disease.

Doctors demonstrating superior knowledge and abilities were invited to contribute to Tibet's medical understanding. In the eleventh century, this knowledge was codified into a unique system that we now know of as Tibetan medicine, especially in the form of its primary texts, the *gyuzhi*, or the four medical tantras. It's worthwhile to note that even at the time of the fifth Dalai Lama there was an understanding of the importance of obtaining empirical, clinical, and scientific data to build the medical system.

When we think about the ancient world, many times we don't think about the ways in which people utilized science and technology, but Tibetan medicine is a prime example of this. One way to illustrate what Tibetan medicine is is to look at how it differs from biomedicine.

Biomedicine (also known as allopathic medicine, or western medicine) is the model that many of us know and most people in the world are most familiar with. It's obviously a very powerful model of medicine. Biomedicine is characterized by a focus on reductionism, quantitative

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measure, and mechanism. It excels at isolating and measuring aspects of physical function such as those revealed in the medical tests you may get when you see a medical doctor.

Traditional Asian medicine systems take a different approach. They are by and large ecological and qualitative in approach. They assume that understanding the essence of biological function in health resides in finding interdependent relationships—such as between the body and the mind; behavior, diet, and physical function; and between humans and nature, such as expressed in things such as the effects that climate and environment have on our health.

Tibetan medicine is a health-based model. The first thing that we study in detail is the characteristics of a normal, healthy individual. That study is quite detailed and extensive. Tibetan medicine also utilizes what we call “differential diagnosis,” or we could say “individualized diagnosis.” For example, if a Tibetan doctor were to see ten people for the same biomedical diagnosis, most likely that doctor would come up with ten different diagnoses for each of the individual syndromes those people have. Also, we tend to see people and deal with cases of what are called multi-factorial illnesses. What does this mean?

People can have all kinds of problems. One patient could come in with insomnia, anxiety, a low immune function, joint pain, and sinus problems. Or the patients could have major conditions like high blood pressure or Sjögren’s disease [an immune system disorder]. Typically in biomedicine they would have to see different specialists to have an appropriate diagnostic regime. In Tibetan medicine, we have a means by which we understand why all these different problems and illnesses are coherently making up one particular syndrome, and then we treat on that basis.

Now, all medical systems are interested in the organs, the systems, and the substances of the body in physiology and pathology. But traditional Asian medical systems like Tibetan medicine are primarily interested in the principles of function. In other words, what causes all those organ

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systems and substances to come into being in the first place? What maintains normal function during our life? What factors cause a distortion in function that lead to illness and disease? Now, those of you who are not familiar with Tibetan medicine but familiar with other systems might understand these principles in forms they take, for example, as *prana* in Indian medicine or *qi* in Chinese medicine.

Tibetan medicine is concerned with understanding the laws of nature, and most importantly in what constitutes balance. The qualities that exist in nature are then defined in the physics of Tibetan medicine or its system of elements. Those elements are earth, water, fire, wind, and space. What are these elements and what does this system mean?

Tibetans lived in direct contact with the natural environment. They understood through direct experience as well as study that natural environmental forces directly correlate with and influence the functioning of all things in the natural world, including the human organism—that is our bodies. Tibetan medicine defines the qualities of the basic forces of nature in the theory of the five elements. These forces are named for their most identifiable manifestations: earth, water, fire, wind, and space. By understanding these forces as present within all things—even an object’s sense of taste, for example—we can determine whether such things are the result of individual elements or a combination of such.

Let’s think about those elements. Earth has the qualities of firmness and stability and therefore provides the basis of physical existence and development. Water creates moisture, so it gives rise to all kinds of fluids. Wind creates motion, so it enables all aspects of circulation and movement. Fire creates such things as heat, but then also transformation, dynamic function, and activity. Finally, space provides the potential for the existence of the other four elements in the first place. In fact, space is so essential to everything else that sometimes this is described as a system of four elements with space deleted because it’s understood as a necessary factor for everything else to occur.

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Our physical bodies are made up of combinations of the qualities described by those five elements. They also make up our bodies' three principle functions, which are called *nyepa* [humors]. These are *lung*, created by the element of wind, *tripa* created by the element of fire, and *badken* created by the elements of earth and water.

In the following videos, we're going to use those three principles of function to move through our discussion of Tibetan medicine, as well as to discuss the relationship of Tibetan medicine to our day-to-day life, health, and even spiritual practice.