



The Resolution of Duality in Tibetan Medicine

by

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There is an old Hopi prophecy that tells the story of how the four tribes of humanity, red, white, black and yellow were scattered to the four corners of the earth. Each was given a special talent or gift and each was asked to master one of the elements: earth, water, wind and fire. The red tribe was given insight and the element of earth; the white tribe was given movement and fire; the black tribe, emotional wisdom and water; and finally, the yellow tribe, time and wind.

The myth continues to describe how each tribe forgot that the others were family. They forgot the unity that once existed and as a result, forgot the importance of the lessons they were learning for the benefit of everyone. As a result, compassion died. Great divisions followed resulting in conflicts and estrangement. The myth describes how the great wars and disasters of the world are the ‘shakings’ necessary to awaken the world and inspire them to return to the garden of unity someday. This divisive thinking continues and is also evident in the radically different points of view between the East and West.

Rooted in Greek thought, dualism emerged. The soul and the body were viewed as entirely different essences with no real interaction with each other. The body/mind dichotomy was firmly ensconced in emerging psychology by the ground-breaking thinking of Rene Descartes. However, some of these seeds of dualistic thought date back to Zarathustra and we can still perceive their influence in Western psychology, philosophy, religion and especially, medicine.

Meanwhile, in the East, a very different understanding of reality was taking place. From four key traditions, namely, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism, the metaphysical understanding deepened that the Universe, although multi-layered, is essentially one, including the reality of all sentient beings. While Western science focused primarily on what could be determined outwardly by the senses in the material world, Eastern thought focused on the internal perceptions of reality. While Western science developed physical tools of perception like x-ray and MRIs, Eastern science was refined by insights into the nature of reality via the royal route of meditation. From Eastern traditions, a medical model emerged quite different from the Western one. Tibetan medicine, because of the rich history of its contemplative

culture, offers a detailed tapestry of medical knowledge based on compassion and the understanding of the oneness of reality.

Historical Background of Tibetan Medicine

Tibetan medicine both in India and Tibet stems from Āyurveda, a pan-Indian medical system.

Beginning in India, it spread to Tibet around the 5th century along with the spread of Buddhism.

According to the following quotation, the Sanskrit medical texts arrived later by Vairochana, the disciple of Saint Padmasambhava.

It is widely believed that Saint Padmasambhava was invited to Tibet from India during the reign of King Trison Detsen in the early 7th century, and is credited with the establishment of Dharma in Tibet. Saint Pamasambhava was renowned for his mastery of all the tantric practices. His disciple, Vairochana, went to India and procured and translated various Sanskrit medical texts and is now referred to by the title rGyud-bZhi or the Four Tantras. This knowledge was passed on by Vairochana to Yuthog Yonton Gonpo, who is the first great doctor-saint of Tibet. The second Yuthog Yonton Gonpo produced a new version of the text called the Eighteen Auxiliary Aids, which has remained the standard accepted version to this day. (Guru Maa, 1997)

Buddhists accept that the origins of Āyurveda medicine were taught by the god Brahmā but they claim that the Buddha Kāśyapa taught it to the god Brahmā and he later transmitted the medical instructions to other gods where it eventually descended to Ātreya, one of the founder of Āyurveda. There are other Buddhist traditions that claim other sources such as Śākyamuni who manifested as Bhaisajyaguru, the medicine Buddha. Eventually, four medical Tantras were written down and placed in the Dakini palace at Oddiyāna. According to Tulku Thondup in his book *The Healing Power of the Mind*. “Tibetans see as a *terma*, or a mystical revelation discovered by Trawa Ngonshey in the eleventh century.”

Regardless, and although Buddhist tradition acknowledges the roots of Āyurvedic medicine as a pan-Indian system, according to class notes, it does not accept its Hindu origin willingly. It is hard to know how the knowledge exactly filtered through the ages, as there are obviously many different opinions, but the fact that the fundamental philosophy has maintained its integrity, giving it strength to carry forward through its evolutionary changes, is remarkable. Thankfully, due to the encouragement of the Dalai Lama and other support, Tibetan medicine has continued to flourish regardless of the Chinese

invasion of Tibet. The advanced medical school in Dharamsala India progressively develops the traditions established by the four medical Mantras established so long ago.

Philosophical Background

The four noble truths taught by the Buddha, are the fundamental basis upon which the principles of diagnosis and treatment rely: Life means suffering, the origin of suffering is attachment, the cessation of suffering is attainable, and the path to the cessation of suffering is the eightfold path. The first one has a diagnostic aptitude that assists the doctor to determine not only the fundamental, universal cause, spiritual ignorance, but to understand how this manifests in the disease of the patient. This leads to the second truth and the discovery needed to identify the actual causes of the illness. The next truth is now the beginning of the purification stage. The doctor must now discover the actual causes of illness and what is needed so that the patient may move closer to nirvāna resulting in a better state of health. The last truth is the therapeutic stage. Now the doctor must develop the remedies necessary— The eightfold path of course being the master remedy. The eightfold path is called the Middle Way because it avoids the extremes of sensual indulgence on one end or extreme asceticism on the other. This middle path is the general remedy the Buddha offered as the cure for all human disease. Logically, we see how this relates to the causal basis of all suffering which is ignorance.

We see by this brief description of Buddhist thought, that the division or the veil between the body and the mind is very thin if existent at all. According to Buddhism, all suffering is considered a result of mental attachment and obscurations. Suffering falls into three categories: manifest suffering which includes fear; disappointment, physical pain, etc. The second is the suffering of change and the third is all-pervasive suffering always present in some form in our lives. Regardless of whatever medical intervention or modality is used, the underlying motivation of Tibetan medicine must include the healing of the mind for true healing to occur. If spiritual ignorance is the real cause of all suffering then the objective must be to combine spiritual education with the remedy. The goal then of medicine based on this awareness must be to assist the patient to achieve awareness of ultimate reality and the understanding

of the concept of emptiness. The doctor must be accomplished in this domain in order to successfully help the patient.

The Buddhist notion of emptiness affirms that ultimate reality is knowable, that there is a ontological basis for phenomena. This emptiness is not non-existence as in non-reality but rather empty of all the illusion we assume is every-day reality. Not only is this ultimate reality knowable but our awakened relationship with it can provide useful knowledge and wisdom about the world we live in and how to improve our health. This knowledge can allow the patient to become responsible eventually, for their own healing. Of course karma can have physical consequences that are unavoidable but even those can be modified somewhat with spiritual insight to graciously accept it as a process of eliminating karma and the development of spiritual attributes.

Healing Modalities

The use of mantras to manipulate vital energies and transform the mind are one of the key tools used by Tibetan practitioners. The three types are protective, supplicatory and consecratory. The tantras acknowledge that the power of the mantras stem from their ability to transform the mind. A Tibetan doctor must be spiritually evolved enough to not only determine what mantra to use but how to use it. This training is extensive and an important part of the curriculum. Its importance indicates again the soteriological understanding underlying Buddhism that really everything is a product of mind or everything *is* mind: Non-physical, formless, shapeless, colourless, pure, limitless and pervasive, Mind.

Many other modalities are used including dietary therapy, massage, yoga, of course meditation and visualization but most fascinating is the attitude toward medications. The extensive training in herbology, gardening techniques, astrological considerations in terms of growth and cultivation, all of this specialization is layered on top of the understanding that anything in the universe can be made into a medication! This is because everything is a part of consciousness; a part of the great nothingness and so it is the *intention* that matters; the intention put into the medication that matters. That is why the mantras, the intensive training in herbology, all of it, is really about the precise manipulation of consciousness and

how to impact the mind of the patient so that the patient can discover the innate health inherent in their true nature. This does not deny the use and effectiveness of temporal methods used but even those are not ends in themselves; the goal is the purification of the mind from karmic imprints and obscurations in order to obtain liberation and ultimately, healing.

Conclusion

The Hopi prophecy foretells a time when all of the tribes will come back together and remember they are family. Each will share their expertise and gifts and in this way, the whole picture of reality will finally be complete. This is known as the “mending of the hoop.”

Buddhism inspired medicine brings such a profound knowledge of consciousness and its workings while Western science brings a rich spectrum of physical modalities and excels in its diagnostic abilities to understand the physical world. Each bring such important gifts but it is my opinion that each must also leave behind what doesn't work. Western science must leave behind its narrow, materialistic viewpoint and Buddhist medicine must leave behind any superstition that may have crept into Buddhism from the different cultures it has touched.

Each side is of great benefit to help in this process and vitally important that the discussions between each side continue. Out of these discussions, the Buddhist realization of the oneness of mind or consciousness, can hopefully end the struggle of mind/body dualism. By the use of Western scientific observational methods, medical science can discover the secrets of the interaction of consciousness and the brain. These are only two possible outcomes that will transform the world of medicine and our understanding of it.

Tibetan Buddhist medicine is governed by compassion. This is its historical roots; its ongoing directive, and its greatest gift to humanity. “Compassion is the best healer. The most powerful healing comes from developing compassion for all living beings, irrespective of their race, nationality, religious belief, or relationship to us...”Zopa, Rimpoche (2001). I agree.

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