



Schools and medical training

of Tibetan physicians and medical ethics of Tibetan Medicine

- Schools and training of physicians in Tibet.
- Teaching traditions from the 8th to the middle of the 20th century.
- Method of study, ethics, and relationship between master and disciple.

SCHOOLS AND TRAINING OF PHYSICIANS IN TIBET

The training method of Tibetan physicians is strongly inspired by the Indian medical systems. Aside from elemental astrology (*Jungtsi*) and politics, Tibetan scholars in Tibet adopted Dharma from the 7th to the 21st century, an Indian secular science and training system of oral and practical teachings. The great scholar Gedhun Choephel¹ said in his *Tamgyud-sergyithangma*²

“Positive aspects of Tibetan civilization in the Snowy Land look like a copy-painting of the Indian Dharma and culture that have remained unchanged.”



Nagarjuna³

It is certain that medical training, ethical code of physicians and related culture, even if they were transformed into Buddhist doctrine and concept, owe a lot to Indians. Tibetan scholars especially discovered the inspiration of the ‘middle way’ concept of Nagarjuna acarya’s teachings and have been since greatly influenced by his medical tradition and training system for the treatment of the body/mind. The elder Yuthok indeed saw Nagarjuna acarya in his vision when he visited South India and received all Dharma and medical instructions from him.

First school for Tibetan Medicine

The first school was created in the 8th century when the Tibetan king Trisong Deutsan, pretending to be sick, invited nine foreign physicians to attend him. The king was pleased to see their skill and knowledge on medical science and wished to propagate these traditions in Tibet. The physicians received gold and silver in reward, and the king asked them to teach their traditions to young Tibetans. It is probable that they taught theory and practice orally, according to their traditions. They translated their works on medicine and offered the king a text called *mijigpeitsoncha*, 'fearless weapon'. Traces of their teaching and style of training have still not been found as of today.

The training system was thus very different from one foreign master to the other as they came from seven countries and cultures.

Yuthok schools for Tibetan Medicine

Yuthok Yonten Gonpo the Elder⁴ (708-833) was a great master since his childhood. He went many times to India, Persia, China and Nepal in order to study the original systems, and he especially studied the Buddhist Medical system of India. He founded the Kongpo Menlung School in Tibet⁵, mentioned in the history of Tibetan Medicine, where a great number of Tibetan physicians were trained. According to Yuthok's biography, the first curriculum for Tibetan Medicine was actually made there. It had four levels of degree:

<i>Menpa Rabjampa</i>	Physician who possesses unlimited knowledge, a great expert
<i>Menpa Bhumrampa</i>	Physician who can orally recite 100,000 slokas, an expert
<i>Menpa Kachupa</i>	Physician who graduated in the Four Tantras, a general practitioner
<i>Menpa Duerawa</i>	Physician who graduated as a nurse and naturopathy practitioner

The training tradition Like the Buddhist tradition of teaching and learning, the training tradition comes from India. The methodology of learning is principally to memorize and study the medical texts in class and from the personal tutor, and especially practice through oral teaching. The oral transmission of the text and practice is one of the primary figure of Tibetan Medicine, and all physicians need to receive it from the proper lineage or from his master. This is a direct healing energy tradition that came to the physician with unbroken lineage from Medicine Buddha. It is called a *Lung*, 'oral transmission'.

Yuthok Goshi Rethang School

Yuthok Yonten Gonpo the Younger (1126-1202) founded the Yuthok Goshi Rethang School in the central upper region of Tibet. He revised the 'Four Tantras' and wrote the famous work 'Yuthok's supplement to the Four Tantras' and *Yuthok Nyingthik* a medical spiritual practice for Tibetan physicians. He taught the 'art of healing' in his school not only to Tibetan students but also to students who came from Mongolia, Siberia, Nepal, Bhutan, China and the Himalayan countries.

The training system was a Buddhist way of teaching and learning following the same curriculum as the elder Yuthok School.

Jangpa, Zurkhar and Gongmen traditional Schools

Jangpa Namgyal Daksang (1395-1475) was a great master in Buddhism and Medicine from the northern parts of Tibet, as Zurkhar Nyamnyid Dorjee (1439-1475) was a master and physician from the central-southern part of the country. They founded the Jangpa School and the Zurkhar School of Medicine according to their respective traditions. Later, their schools became the most influential in the history of Tibetan Medicine as many great scholars graduated from there. Then, in the 16th century, Gongman Konchog Phendar, also a brilliant Tibetan physician who



had learned all the healing systems in Tibet, created his own tradition called the *Gongmen* School or Tradition.⁶

The training system was either a traditional teaching in the monastery as well as a training given by individual masters, or a following of family traditions.

Chakpori Medical College

The Chakpori Medical College was built on the top of Iron Hill along the Potala. Traditionally, Tibetans called it 'Vajrapani hill' and 'protector of the Potala'. To fulfil the wishes of the Vth Dalai Lama, regent Desid Sangye Gyatso's (1653-1705) Government built the Chakpori Medicine School monastery on that hill. The place thus became the training center for physicians. Desid Sangye Gyatso personally administrated the Institute, gave the transmission of the Four Tantras, and provided commentaries. He also made 79 excellent Medical thangka illustrations for the training of Tibetan physicians. Such professional medical thangka paintings were not in Asia or Europe⁷ before the 18th century. Chakpori then became the biggest center for the study of medicine and medical spiritual practice. Hundreds of physicians graduated from this institute.

The training system was more systematic than other schools because Desid Sangye Gyatso brought the College under government administration. Generally, the institute only accepted monk candidates and started medical training from teen age. The system was principally based on memorizing the *Gyud-shi* or 'Four Tantras' for a period of nine years. Exceptional students who could give an oral examination on the Four Tantras received special dignity and a certificate, while other students had to give an oral examination on three tantras with supplementary texts. Beside the medical study, the students had to also follow the *Kahigchenmo*, 'the grand rules and regulations of the college', be able to recite medical tantras and prayers, know mandala construction, be able to perform meditation, rites, ritual practices, and Yuthok guru puja. The Medical College issued certificates of recognition of full authority in treatment, in any land within the territory of Tibet.

The Lhasa Mentseekhang



Lamen Khyenrab Norbu

The personal physician of the 13th Dalai Lama, the Ven. Khyenrab Norbu (1883-1962), was the person who had the Lhasa *Mentseekhang*, 'Lhasa Medicine and Astrology school' built. The institute educates both monks and lay people in Tibetan Medicine, Astrology and other sciences. Many physicians who actually graduated from these institutes (Chakpori Medical college and Lhasa Mentseekhang), spread Tibetan Medicine in a short period of time throughout Mongolia, Buryatia, Bhutan, Ladakh, Sikkim, Nepal, China and other countries. Following the 1959 so-called 'Cultural Revolution' and the 'four gangs' control, Lhasa Mentseekhang suffered as much as the other Tibetan cultures. The practice of Tibetan Medicine was banned and all physicians were sent to physical labor places. In the 1970s however, Tibetan Medicine took a breath of fresh air as it received great aid from the Chinese government and was able to build up the shape of the Tibetan medical tradition. It then became an important part and component for the Chinese people's living medical tradition, as it is said in modern Tibet.

The training system of Mentseekhang is mainly based on the Chakpori medical college system. The only difference between the two is the duration of study the Mentseekhang laid down. The training was first of three years for medicine and two years for astrology. The student who learned both had thus to study five years. Later, it was extended up to seven years. Another difference is the semester examination system. The Mentseekhang has a graduation system and curriculum in three stages:

- First oral examination of the four tantras or three tantras including the supplements.
- Second oral examination of *Mentseecho-pyod*, 'supplementary texts of tantras'.
- Third examination as the final graduation that should be made of an oral exam on all the texts that were learned for the previous two exams.

Astrologers had to take their exam according to two points:

- A first year oral examination on elemental astrology *Jungtsi mangag-dhaweioser* and different horoscope practices.
- All the astrology works had to be practically demonstrated with a written examination and be taken under the master's direction.

Mentseekhang issued a certificate of recognition of full authority in the treatment and practice of astrology in any land within the territory of Tibet.

Dharamsala Mentseekhang

The 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet had the 'Tibetan Medical and Astro-Institute' *Mentsee-Khang* built in Dharamsala, India, in 1961 for the preservation of the Tibetan culture and the wisdom of its people.

The training system is formed by the college committee made by physicians. It is an adapted version of the Lhasa Mentseekhang curriculum. The duration of the study is set on five years plus two years of internship practice.

- First year: study of the first tantra and related texts (fundamental of TM)
- Second year: study of the second tantra (detailed explanation of TM)
- Third year: study of oral transmission of the tantras and supplement (Pathology)
- Fourth year: study of the last tantra (diagnosis, pharmacy and therapeutic works)
- Last year: revision of the studies and preparation for the final examination.

Beside the medicine course, there are also studies such as in clinical practice, astrology, Dharma, poetry, etc.

Family physician tradition and medical training

Physicians who come from a physician's family are highly respected in Tibet. They are also called 'a patient's friend' in the ethical code of physician (in Tibetan Medicine). The tradition according to the historical record goes back to the 7th century when trans-Asian and Arabian physicians visited Tibet and left their medical traditions there. Their disciples developed the system of family physicians, which contributed in the development of Tibetan Medicine. For example the Drangti, Nyapa Choesang and Yuthok families have a high position in the history of Tibetan Medicine. There were physicians in each and every town and village, and many of them came from the family tradition. The tradition holds today some collection of special experience on the treatment and medicine formulae called *mengag*, 'oral secret teaching' that is usually known to be a secret tradition of the lineage. The tradition is still alive in Tibet, Bhutan, Nepal and Indian Himalayan countries and contributes in the field of development of Tibetan Medicine in Asia.

The training system must have been very different in the ancient time among the physician families. But later, in the 12th century, the trainings basically became similar and all physicians adopted the *Gyud-shi*, the four tantras. However many of them sent their children to study in the other schools which gave higher quality of training and expertise. Later, the oral family tradition was instructed and taught after the graduation. After the 14th and 15th century, the family training tradition had a much lower training system whereas the school training system had a better quality in the monasteries, Chakpori Medical College, Lhasa *Mentsee-Khang* etc.



Monastic medical schools

Many big monasteries like Amdho Tashikhyil, the Kumbum of Gelugpa school and the Sakyapa school of Buddhism have their medicine school within their walls, called *menpadratsang*. The Nyingmapa school of medicine is at Mindroling monastery, Kagyupa's in Kathog, and Palpung monasteries in Derghe (Kham). The monasteries created their own medicine school for two reasons. First of all, medical science became the Bodhisatva's practice of altruistic life to help others. Therefore monks could adopt this practice to gain their spiritual life. Finally, the monasteries are close to big cities, and so interested people are able to study the science of healing directly, without going to Chakpori and Lhasa *Mentsee-Khang*.

The training: Each medicine monastery has its own rules and regulation, called *Chayigchenmo*, but it isn't necessarily the same teaching or curriculum everywhere in Tibet. Therefore many different traditions and schools have developed with their basic texts of study and practice, but they have unanimously adopted the *Gyud-shi*. Teachers were first mainly invited from the previous medical schools and later from the Chakpori medical College.

TEACHING TRADITION FROM THE 8TH CENTURY UNTIL NOW

The study of Tibetan Medicine today has greatly changed. According to the history of Tibetan Medicine, we could find in the past, four different modes of study and teachings:

- From the 8th to the 10th century, the medicine taught was greatly supported by the government and the type of school that was run by family tradition. The training method of physicians could also be taken from systems of different countries.⁸
- From the 10th to the 16th century, medical schools were run by monasteries and private families. The medical training system could have come from India, after master Lotsawa Rinchen Sangpo (10th century), and been much influenced by Dharma medicine and Mahayana altruistic teachings.
- From the 17th to the 20th century, medicine schools were run by the government, monasteries, and in private practices.
- In the 20th century, the system of teaching and studying medicine began to adopt some new knowledge, concept and practice. Following its contact with modern methods, it is changing into a modern school style of study and practice.

Conclusion on the Buddhist way of training physicians.

The Buddhist way of studying, following three processes of training and learning, binds medicine and Dharma. The method is tailored to reach a complete knowledge of body and mind, and disorders of the self and others.

- At first, the trainee should strictly follow the concepts and boundaries laid down by the master, and the tradition of the school.
- Then, he should understand the theory and its practice.
- Finally, the trainee should awaken his mind to the deepest understanding of the science of medicine and mind, which is beyond tradition and discipline, and where no master or subject exists, and nothing is to be learned.

METHOD OF STUDY AND RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MASTER AND DISCIPLE

The search of the proper master is the secret of learning the art of medicine.

According to the traditional Tibetan culture and belief, the right way to study and receive complete education on body/mind and spirituality depends on the relationship between the student and the master. This is fundamentally important for Tibetans because the study of medicine is not merely 'learning the art of healing' but acquiring the complete understanding of the self. The tradition comes from the Dharma practice where the master is regarded as the Buddha's representative and is even considered to be more important than the Buddha himself when it comes to personal practice. The ethical code of Tibetan medicine says⁹:

"The master is the source of all knowledge and higher experiences that one can acquire within a short period of time if the master is pleased by their genuine sincerity"



But one needs to cultivate the knowledge in the blank slate of mind from childhood¹⁰. The master may be able to open his heart to the disciple and give him the moon-like nectar that cools down the heat of delusions. But for that to happen, the disciple should have the capacity to receive and digest it. The pre-requisite for the disciple is to be sincere and genuine and keep good relationship with the master; The disciple should pay respect to the master from the beginning to the end. To become a good disciple or student, one should cut off their ego, pride and negative desire, totally rely on the master, and always be ready to serve him with any task asked. The student should offer his body, mind and speech authority to the master without prior

conditions and give sincerity and loyalty without deceit. These qualities will help the student win the teacher's heart and unite with the master's body/mind and consciousness, and the true knowledge will be transferred to the student.

Quality of the master

To be fully qualified, the master should be well trained and skillful in all existing theoretical and practical medical systems (in the country) and be rich of experience. But he should also have great spiritual knowledge in sutras and tantras, have great patience, few desires, and be highly cultivated in love and compassion towards the disciple and patients.

Unqualified students

Generally, teachers of Dharma, medicine, and other sciences¹¹, keep the knowledge secret or avoid teaching to students who have the following three negative mind sets and intentions:

- A disciple who is like a poisonous contaminated container
- A disciple who is like a closed container
- A disciple who is like a container with a hole at the bottom

A contaminated container refers to negative motivations to learn the art of medicine, such as wishing to become rich, famous, to harm others, to produce mass destructions, etc.

A closed container represents the lack of interest in the studies. It can be the case when someone is forced to learn by the family or situation. It is then useless to learn the art of healing.

A container with a hole at the bottom means there is interest and facility to learn, but also a

lack of the faculty to memorize. The student is then not able to study the art of healing, he ruins himself and cannot help others.

Qualified students

The student should possess the following qualities:

- be intelligent and well learned in reading and writing,
- be ready to make great sacrifices for his learning,
- have no doubt and be sincere and not deceitful,
- act according to his master's will, and
- be able to maintain the awareness of kindness.

Quality to become a good physician

A qualified student trained by a good master will be a good healer or physician and have the six following qualities that can save many patients. He will be called 'Emanation of Medicine Buddha'.

- Intelligence
- Altruism
- Ability to keep words of honor (keeping samaya)
- Skill in medicine practice
- Diligence
- Social, cultural, legal and ethical wisdom

Results of a good physician

Two results will arise from the altruistic life of a physician:

- Temporal results
- The ultimate result

Temporal results: They will come in this life as a gain of respect from others, happiness, powerful and peaceful life, richness and prosperity.

Ultimate result: A physician who has abandoned deceit and desire and who has been engaged in healing will proceed to the unsurpassed state of enlightenment as stated by the Medicine Buddha.

Notes

¹ Ghedhun Choephel (20th century) was a brilliant scholar from his youth, and who studied in Drepung Monastery. He went to India and Nepal with Indian Pundit Rahul Sanskritan as a translator and research assistant. He also visited Cambodia, Burma, Laos, Thailand, Sri Lanka and the famous sacred mountain 'Swat Valley' in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and discovered the origin of Tibetan Buddhist tantra, Dharma and sciences. He translated Dhammapada and wrote books about culture, philosophy, kamasutra, geography, adventure, including 'Debther-Kharpo', a famous book on Tibetan political history.

² Published by the Central Institute of Higher Studies, Sarnath, Varanasi, India page 1

³ Collection of Shelley and Donald Rubin (www.himalayanart.org/image.cfm?icode=974)

⁴ Read more detail in the 'Tibetan Medicine, biography of Yuthok Yonten Gonpo' by Rechung Rimpoche Jampal Kunsang, Wellcome Institute of the History of Medicine, London, 1973

⁵ See footnote no 3

⁶ Arya, Pasang Yonten Tendi Sherpa's 'Bodkyi sowa rigpei logyui kyi Bangzod Yuthog Lama denpei-phonya', pub. in Ladakh 1989

⁷ The Tibetan Medical thangka paintings were first published by the Lhasa Mentseekahng in 1986. The second atlas is from the Buryati collection, published in England in 1992. It is available in major languages.

⁸ The head of the physicians came from India, China, Persia, Nepal, Kashmir, Mustang and Drugu.

⁹ This is a very brief information from the ethical code chapter of the second tantra.

¹⁰ Actually, in Buddhism, the mind is the carrier of all previous karma and latent reflections. Therefore, the mind is not considered to be in a blank slate but, as this life's experiences are yet to be earned by the newly born child, it is mentioned here as blank slate.

¹¹ - 5 Major sciences: Art, Medicine, Grammar, Logic and Dharma
- 5 minor sciences: Semantics, Astrology, Poetry, Lexicography, Art of dance and drama

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