

Perception and Transition of Tibetan Medicine in the West

Interview with Renowned Tibetan Doctor
Prof. Dr. Pasang Yonten Arya T. Sherpa



Interviewpartner Pasang Y. Arya T. Sherpa und Sonja Marić

Sonja Marić: In 2013 you and Dr. W. Marić-Oehler, honorary president of DÄGfA and former president of DÄGfA from 1991 to 2010, celebrated the 20th Anniversary of the successful German educational program in Tibetan Medicine for Western MDs (Anniversary event: 1. Symposium Vergleichende Asiatische Medizin – Thema: MindBody). How did your cooperation come about and how did the project develop?

Pasang Y. Arya: My cooperation with Dr. W. Marić-Oehler, the DÄGfA and the Institut für Ost-West Medizin is existing actively from a long time and we have spent a good time of work. The 20th Anniversary is one of the successful German educational programs launched by the Institute. It was my privilege to participate and the result of long time investment in the project became strong evident of scientifically developing Tibetan medicine in western world scientific medicine.

Sonja Marić: Your long term and highly effective cooperation with Dr. Walburg Marić-Oehler is unique and extraordinary. She has initiated the educational program in Tibetan medicine (TM) for Medical Doctors with the aim to propagate and integrate Tibetan medicine into medical practice. Is there anything you would like to tell her during this honorable occasion?

Pasang Y. Arya: Dr. Walburg Marić-Oehler and I have found a common interest in introducing Sowa Rigpa, the Tibetan medicine to Germany. We have a strong and deep working relationship. We succeeded in teaching Tibetan Medicine to many German medical doctors and continue with the programs. She is a person of energy and self-confidence, with ideas and vision, who is able to drive forward the implementation of the project. She respects people and cares and produces great results in study and development. In summary, the last twenty years of our cooperation in Tibetan medicine's education program for German medical doctors became a first such program officially performed with medical doctors and CAM society in Europe.

I would like to extend my sincere congratulations and thanks to Dr. Walburg Marić-Oehler from the bottom of my heart that she may live a long life and hold the science of healing for a longer period. She has been my mentor and guide to the West and Western medicine world. Her initiative for integrating TM in the MD environment has been a primary step and the main condition for the recognition of TM in the Western medical field. Her activities

Dr. Pasang Y. Arya T. Sherpa gibt einen Rückblick auf 20 Jahre Transformation des traditionellen tibetischen Medizinwissens in eine Grundausbildung Tibetische Medizin für westliche Ärzte. Er erinnert an die Herausforderungen und gemeinsame Pionierarbeit mit Dr. Walburg Marić-Oehler bei dieser ersten Umsetzung in Europa. Die Stärken der Tibetischen Medizin sieht er vor allem in der Behandlung von chronischen, psychosomatischen Krankheitsbildern und in der besonderen ethischen Ausrichtung der Tibetischen Medizin. Er stellt heraus, dass für den weiteren Anerkennungs- und Integrationsprozess in Europa ein kontinuierliches Interesse an Tibetischer Medizin seitens der Ärzte sowie eine fundierte Ausbildung und eine Zusammenarbeit mit anderen CAM-Institutionen wesentliche Voraussetzung ist.

in different European CAM Initiatives will be very supportive for the further development.

Sonja Marić: What can you share with us about your experiences regarding the acceptance of Tibetan Medicine in the MD and CAM environment?

Pasang Y. Arya: It is a good and great pleasure of working in this field. I am proud of the opportunity to have participated back then in such prestigious medicine congresses as ZAEN congress and Medizinische Woche Baden-Baden where a space has been found for teaching Tibetan medicine equal to other medicines such as Chinese, Ayurveda and western world's scientific and naturopathic medicines. This was the first of its kind of Tibetan Sowa Rigpa medicine introduction in Europe in Western medicine. However, frankly speaking, I faced a risky task and responsibility ahead of me that created different experiences in the beginning of my work. Perhaps it is a bit difficult to imagine my curiosity and difficulty to go and teach Tibetan medicine to the German medical doctors who will become the first in the history of traditional Tibetan Medicine in Europe. Such work has never been attempted in the past. Dr. W. Marić-Oehler encouraged me by saying "do you know how long ago Chinese medicine came to Germany? This time period is perhaps older than you". So we have successfully continued the program for the past 20 years. Over hundred of German doctors graduated in the basic Tibetan Medicine introduction and basic course.



Diplomverleihung „Grundausbildung Tibetische Medizin“, Studiengruppe mit ihrem Lehrer Pasang Y. Arya T. Sherpa und Ausbildungsleiterin Walburg Marić-Oehler



Walburg Marić-Oehler und
Pasang Y. Arya T. Sherpa im Gespräch

Sonja Marić: Could you define for us, in plain language, what Tibetan medicine, Sowa Rigpa (Tibetan), the 'science of healing' is about?

Pasang Y. Arya: Sowa Rigpa, the Tibetan medicine, is one of the five sciences of Tibet and means 'science or method of healing'. The

basic standard treaties are the 'Four Medical Tantras' or Gyudshi. The treaties cover the healing subject of body, mind, pathology, diagnosis, medicine, nutrition and behavioral therapy, external and internal clinical therapies. It is also called 'So ched' the 'healing therapy' or 'sman', the medicine, which is performed by 'sman pa' the doctor or physician. Sowa Rigpa has a history of over 2000 years.

One basic concept is to accept that mind is principal and all came from and is related to it. Even the body is a product of mind like an apple tree came from the tiny seed which itself derived from the invisible energy concentration. The ordinary people's mind is said to have three emotions: desire, hatred and closed mindedness. They are of psychic nature and they create the three humors in the body: wind, bile and phlegm which are physically corresponding to three body channel functions such as nervous system, blood and lymphatic systems. These three systems are like a motor that runs the body system and the mind guides it. Theoretically it is said that they are neutral, hot and cold and bearing wind, fire, earth and water elements. The product of the elements and of the parents is called body and it is like earth from which all grows and lives on it. If the system remains in order it means a good health. An impaired system is diagnosed by diagnostic methods and will be restored by elemental medicine such as herbs, minerals and plants etc. There are over two thousand ingredients described in Tibetan pharmacognosy. All are products of elements. Plus and minus concept rules the effect. Since the mind is the guidance or is ruling the body and life, it influences the emotions, organs, tissues and body particles. The harmony of mind body and the sustaining of the system by a harmonious function of the three humors can probably be called here the immune system of the body mind.

Sonja Marić: What do you consider the strength and benefit of Tibetan medicine? What are the main indications you use to determine if Tibetan medicine or another medical paradigm will best suit a particular patient?

Pasang Y. Arya: In my experience, the majority of patients who come to Tibetan medicine have a particular nature. They either did not find help from conventional medicine or are frustrated by treatment, while others seek a natural way of healing the body mind. In other words, a lot of so called chronic psychosomatic cases and last resort patients come here. There is also great psychological influence and basic interest of patients too. Tibetan medicine is helpful in many aspects of pathology treatment such as chronic digestive disorders, chronic inflammation diseases, migraine, headache, arthrosis, arthritis, certain gynecological disorders, atopic eczema, bronchitis etc.

Sonja Marić: Tibetan medicine has an extraordinary concept about mind and the interaction of MindBody. What about psychological problems? How does TM handle problems of the mind?

Pasang Y. Arya: So far my understanding of mind in Tibetan Buddhism and in Tibetan medicine comparing to Western understanding of mind, probably there is a big difference in identification of mind. To summarize, generally the Western mind is understood as a 'product of body' and especially the brain function. It starts from body then goes to the mind or emotions. Tibetan is contrary. Mind is first and then the body develops as it is. However, there are some commonalities but basically it is like looking at two different worlds.

Tibetan Buddhism and Tantra based mind concept is complex and it is hanging in sky. Tibetan mind until now has not much space in Western medical psychology context. May be in next generation it may develop some integration on mind until then I would say it is better to keep the two separate, each in its own place without mixing up.

Regarding psychological problems, in Tibetan medicine and culture we do not have psychology or psychotherapy terms. Even we do not use psychological problem or emotional disturbances. Simply say it is a "Rlung gi ned", a wind disorder. There are 63 wind disorders described which cover autoimmune disorders, neuromuscular diseases, psychosomatic disorders, mental diseases, major psychological disorders. They are treated by specific wind medicines and therapies.

Sonja Marić: What are the diagnostic methods, which you are mainly practicing and teaching? Do you think that specific methods of TM like the pulse diagnosis, can be understood and learned by everybody?

Pasang Y. Arya: I use traditional Tibetan diagnostic method of anamneses, pulse reading, listening symptoms and so on. Basically my six fingers are basic diagnostic machine tools and listening the language of humor symptoms is communication. Generally diagnosis needs a background of well understanding of the pathology nature and good experience in the practice.

Sonja Marić: What are the modalities you are using?

Pasang Y. Arya: I use traditional concepts of human being, nature, pathology and diagnosis and imply the remedy too. All what I have is Tibetan. Definitely there is no question that body sustain by nutrition advice and behavioral or life style modification, various external therapies such as moxibustion, fomentation, Hor-me therapy, Ku-nye massage etc. Despite of it, caring for the patient's mind, emotion and moral support are given. I think a patient needs much help from different sides because body and mind house is constructed by many components. Small or bigger part need some help to restore the body mind network. In Buddhism and Tibetan medicine, doctor's should learn and abide to become a 'saint physician' is core teaching and discipline of ethical code of conduct of Tibetan medicine.

Sonja Marić: What do you believe to be the major difference between Tibetan and Chinese medicine and what do they have in common?

Pasang Y. Arya: The difference between the two systems is depending which level or aspects you are looking at. On one side



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there can be seen a fundamental difference and on the other side there is much in common. It's in the same way you can say that e. g. 'Daoism and Buddhism' are different in their fundamental concepts but they have also something in common. Like that Tibetan medicine and TCM have the same situation. Lets take one example of being different and one of having something in common.

TCM's Yin and Yang and TM's three humors theory are entirely different as energy systems which underlie as the basis of their medical systems. But if you try to interpret them in a common way you might explain that Yin and Yang are corresponding to Badken/Phlegm and Tripa/Bile and both are in the Lung/Wind humor with a neutral function. Superficially seen there is similarity in the diagnostic of pulse reading, in detail there are differences in practice. For example, there is a famous medical treatise 'Soma raza – King of moon crystal (Sman dpyd zla ba'i rgyal po)' which contains a mixed concept of the three humors and the two principle theory of Yin and Yang. It is still popular in history of medicine but little in practice because of the mixed theories.

However, broadly speaking, Tibetan medicine is much more close to Ayurveda than to TCM, in many aspects such as materia medica and the three humors theory.

Sonja Marić: After teaching and practicing Sowa Rigpa for so many years of your life, what is still fascinating to you about this particular science of healing? Are there any contents/aspects of TM you discovered or recently rediscovered?

Pasang Y. Arya: Frankly speaking, I am deeply devoted to the Tibetan traditional medicine and every day of my life I'm searching for better understanding of it. There are so many fascinating subjects in mind on gross and subtle physiology, mind and emotions, pathology and remedies too. Especially my personal interest is coming closer to the "top secret of disease".

Nevertheless, the last twenty years, I made strong research on major aspects of Tibetan medicine like comparative study of traditional diagnosis and name identification of Tibetan medicine with Western scientific medicine diagnosis, interpretation with 'contemporary understanding and treatment'. I also made new chapters on physical diseases in Tibetan medicine in comparing them with modern scientific medicine.

Sonja Marić: For the past 20 Years you have been teaching Sowa Rigpa in the West. What is the principal message you want to pass on to your Western students?

Pasang Y. Arya: I do not have particular message to any one. I am a simple Tibetan doctor bearing the knowledge of Tibetan medicine box in my heart, which is much inspired by the people. I would like to express two things and suggest one. First is I feel

deeply sad because until now I could not teach the complete Tantras of Gyud-shi in the West. Secondly, I am great joyful because I am able to teach and produce over hundred Western doctors from the teaching in many European countries. Thirdly, I would say that I sow TM seed in this land and may grow up beautiful flower in next coming years. I shall be happy if my students and friends can take care of it.

Sonja Marić: In your experience, what are Western expectations with regard to TM? How did your interaction with Western doctors and specialists in various CAM methods change your perspective about TM? Do you recall a point of transition or a change or evolution of your perspective over the last 20 years?

Pasang Y. Arya: A lot of changes took place in my personal life and knowledge. Western medicine and friends who are doctors such as Dr. W. Marić-Oehler made a big contribution to my knowledge in modern disease and experience. Such occasions I made great advantage for me to develop my inter journey of Tibetan medicine understanding. Through different occasions, I would express here my deep sincere and thanks to them who collaborate with me.

Tibetan medicine statue in Europe and CAM, it remains much behind than any other complementary medicine. I understood that we need several solid factors.

- Strong Western doctors interest and support
- Strong training of Western doctors on TM
- Good medicine products (registered)
- Strong support from Tibetan medicine society
- Strong relation with CAM

Sonja Marić: Do you think that transcultural transformations of Tibetan medicine in the West, including its teaching and integration into Western medical practice, will create a syncretism, a merger of different healing methods? Could such a merger be the major result and perspective for TM and other Asian medical traditions?

Pasang Y. Arya: I think this is delicate and difficult to predict on the TM future integration and development. Somehow nature's movement never stops and it will change its shape by any means. Therefore transcultural transformation in Tibetan medicine in the West could take place like European acupuncture practice. I think TM needs a better organization and structural preparation by scholars. There is no question that Tibetan medicine will assimilate with other practice and remain part and partial or other word essence and some practical aspects. In the other hand, there will be Individual and scattered development. Transformation of its unique structure into a Western Tibetan medicine has the general risk of transformation by modifying the basic concept and practice in the name of development. I dream to have a unique medicine, which collects best part of practice from all systems, but it is more ideology and dream but difficult to come.

Sonja Marić: Dr. Arya, thank you very much for your time, perspective and insights.

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