

## Interview with Dr. Phuntsog Wangmo

Buddhism is coming to the West in many forms of practice; Theravadan, Tibetan, Chan, and secular mindfulness to name a few. It is also arriving in the form of Tibetan medicine. Buddhist concepts inform Tibetan medicine in many ways and these concepts are deeply embedded in both the understanding and treatment of disease.

The root cause of all disease is believed to arise from *ma-rigpa* or ignorance and the proximate cause of disease is the three mental poisons of attachment, hatred and delusion. These manifest as the three basic energies in the body or *nyépa*, know as *rlüing*, *tripa*, and *béken*. Each of the *nyépa* has 5 types, with their own pathways or places in the body and are responsible for different bodily functions. All disease comes from the basic delusion and ignorance that we experience as humans, believing in a separate self and not realizing the truth of selflessness. Besides the original cause of disease being manifest in the three *nyépa* of our body, the physical world is understood in terms of the five elements, earth, water, fire, wind and space. Not only do these elements contribute to any disease process and imbalance that we may experience, these same elements also provide the way to treat and bring our bodies back to balance. Karma or the knowledge of cause and effect both of this life and previous lives are also part of how Tibetan medicine understands the arisal of disease. Another important concept from Buddhism is the emphasis of a good heart and compassion on the part of the healing practitioner.

The holistic understanding of how mind and body are connected allows an approach to treatment that is both pragmatic, subtle and nuanced using an array of remedies that target both body and mind. For instance all herbal formulations are based on the six tastes which are in turn based on the five elements. But Tibetan medicine does not only use herbs. A prescription for balanced health could involve different breathing or meditation practices, massage, hot baths, being with good friends who don't aggravate our minds, herbal formulas, engaging in light exercise or ritual practices to name a few.

Given that Tibetan medicine is becoming more and more available and that those of us who are interested in Buddhism are likely to be interested in it as a possible therapy it seems important to explore how Tibetan medicine practitioners are trained and how this healing practice might have relevance in the west today.

Why did you decide to become a Tibetan doctor?

A. Several things came together. When I was small my brother studied Tibetan medicine and became a doctor. When he would come home on his internship I saw him checking pulses and I was fascinated. I would try to check the pulse on animals. Later my family also decided that I had qualities to become a healer and then my uncle Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche sent a letter to my family asking them to send me to study medicine.

Q. What was your training like?

A. My family took me to one of the best teachers, Khenpo Sonam Rinpoche who passed away ten years ago. I was almost fourteen and I studied with him almost two years and then entered the Lhasa Men Tsee Khang for five years. Then another three years and then continued an internship with my teacher, altogether 1983 till 2000. I am still learning and still studying.

Q. What were the studies like in school?

A. The curriculum was similar to during Yuthog's time. Five years to get a Bachelor, we call it Kechupa, then 3 more years, we call this Ramjampa, then 3 years we call Bumrampa and then on top of that residency. That included the rGyu Zhi (four tantras) the first three of which we had to memorize by the end of the third year. If we didn't have it memorized for the oral exam then we couldn't take the final exam. We learned the root tantra and then anatomy and physiology, etiology, preventative systems, diagnostics, herbology, external therapies, methods of treatment, then the 92 chapters of pathology. Studying was pretty tough, only about 2 and half months break during the whole 5 years and the days were very long, 4 a.m. till past midnight. After classes and group study we had to walk back and forth on the street memorizing and to stay awake! Besides all the medicine we studied language, grammar, etc.

Q. Is this how doctors still train today?

A. In Tibet yes. The basic undergraduate degree is 5 years, 3 years for masters and 3 years for Ph.D. Doctors from the four parts of Tibet made a standardized curriculum that is used all over the country. The ShangShung School of Tibetan Medicine uses that same book here in the United States as well as in Russia. It doesn't matter where you study Tibetan medicine or which language you use, the knowledge of Tibetan medicine must match if you want to have the title of a Tibetan medicine doctor.

Q. There are more and more westerners learning about Tibetan medicine. How can people know if they are properly trained?

A. I think individual knowledge is challenging but the first thing we need to check is how they are trained. Training is very important. For instance if someone says this is organic food we need to know how it is cultivated. If the field is organic, the method is organic, no chemicals, etc. then it's organic food. Similarly we need to check how someone is trained, the length of training, the methods of training, and also the information they are given. Sometimes yes we can do workshops to consolidate knowledge in a more intensive way yes we can do that but altogether there are 154 chapters of the rGyu Zhi so there is no way to finish in short periods of time. So for that reason proper training is very important and then not only the training in the ancient method in the Tibetan system but also reading other books and studying more but mainly we need to check the training system.

Q. So for someone who is looking for a qualified Tibetan physician how would you suggest they go about finding someone?

A. Yes sometimes that is a little hard, but we have now in the United States and in many other countries Tibetan medicine doctors who are really fully trained who have graduated either from Tibet, the Lhasa Tibetan Medical College or the TsoNgon Tibetan Medicine College or also Kham and Ghansu or who graduated from the Dharamsala Mentsee Khang, Chakpori, and Sarnath or here at the ShangShung Institute. They are trained very well. So those are names that I know and perhaps there are some others I don't know. These kind of graduate students would be well qualified. Also in India there are Associations who check the standards of Tibetan medicine doctors and also here in the U.S. we founded the American Tibetan Medicine Association (ATMA) because it is very important no matter what kind of medicine to have well trained doctors. Any medicine can be beneficial or harmful. We are directly working with people's lives, and people are coming to us asking for help. For that reason anyone who is

going to help needs to be qualified. A certificate that says "Doctor of Tibetan Medicine" tells us now you are a servant, ready to serve all of humanity. So we at ATMA check those qualities and guarantee to have a good practitioners that can serve the people. I understand that in Western countries we don't have too many Tibetan medicine doctors, we call them Menpa. Some people think all Menpa are the same. When Western medicine first came to Tibet everyone thought any little white pill was good for anything. But that's not true. In the same way Westerners are a little naive about Tibetan Medicine. So to protect people and at the same time protect the reputation of Tibetan medicine at ATMA we are trying to work on these issues and we are developing a list of qualified Tibetan doctors that can be found on our website. These will be graduates from Tibetan medicine schools in India, Tibet, Bhutan, United States, Europe, with certificates.

Q. Tibetan medicine formulas are thought to be very balanced and have very few side effects and these days it's possible to buy some of these formulas on the internet without consulting a trained doctor. What do you think about that? Is that ok to do?

A. Yes, I saw that also. In Tibet when we are working with a patient, until you confirm what exactly is the problem you are not allowed to give more than a week's worth of medicine. At first when I studied with my teachers, until we understood exactly what was going on we could only give three days worth of herbs. After three days they'd come back and we'd give another three days, come back, because sometimes when we check the pulse, the urine, ask questions etc. sometimes the diagnostics don't match the symptoms etc. Once we have identified the condition then we can give a week, then two weeks then a month. We never say there are no side effects so we can give 6 months and go away. Side effects from Tibetan medicine compared with western medicine for sure are less because our formulations are so complicated and strict. First we need to detoxify the herbs. The detoxification process is very important, first we need to wash the herbs with water that comes from the same region they are found, then they need to be beaten and then depending on the particular part of the plant, for instance we need to remove sepals from any flowers we use, if the leaf is the medicinal part then the veins on the leaf need to be removed. Each medicine has a complicated way to detoxify. This is not because these herbs will poison us but slowly over time they are bad for the body. So in ways like this they are made very carefully plus the formulations themselves are very balanced. The goal is to make peace in the body. So for these reasons there are less side effects but that doesn't mean there aren't any side effects otherwise the medicine wouldn't work. So the best for Tibetan medicine is to follow the advice of a Tibetan doctor. In Tibet this medicine can't be bought without a doctor's prescription. It is important to know what you are doing. Nowadays since the internet selling herbs online is problematic. Tibetan medicine doesn't just belong to one person or group of people it belongs to all humanity as His Holiness says. So all humanity has responsibility to take good care of Tibetan medicine, particularly those who have studied Tibetan medicine or who sell it.

Q. Are there potential problems from taking medicine without a prescription from a Tibetan doctor?

A. Yes, sometimes it is the wrong dosage. This is a big problem or if it is contraindicated then it can be a big problem, or it is given for the wrong purpose there can be strong side effects and we can have very unexpected result. So I really hope people who buy herbs online check to see where the seller studied and if they are able to give proper directions to take them. If not then the seller should suggest a doctor that they can consult with, otherwise it can be very dangerous.

Q. Why do you think Tibetan medicine is important in the United States where we already have wonderful medical care with Western allopathic medicine. What do you think the place of Tibetan medicine is here?

A. In general Tibetan medicine is good globally not just in the United States. This is because wherever sentient beings live and as long as we have the three poisons or we have a body, mind and energy there is a certain degree of suffering. Any kind of medicine, not just Tibetan but Ayurvedic, Western, Homeopathy, or Chinese is helpful. Western medicine was developed in the West but is just as good for those in the East. Eastern medicine was developed in the East but helps people in the West. But particularly with Tibetan medicine it has a very integrated theory and the approach is very holistic. When we look at diet for instance it is not a rigid approach that bans one food or another such as meat. Whether we should or should not depends on the person's age, personality, region, season, their basic condition, their job, metabolic system etc. All that put together will give us information to say whether they should eat something or not. Tibetan medicine is individualized for each person and I think it's good for everyone and it has a very good understanding of the root cause of the disease. We say there are two main causes of disease. One is the direct cause and the other is the indirect cause. The indirect cause is the three poisons, hatred, attachment, ignorance, and the root of all disease is ignorance. This is a very big difference. Today I hear Western medicine is saying stress is not good for health, stress can cause high blood pressure or it can be connected to breast cancer or to this or that cancer, but in Tibetan medicine we have been saying this for a long, long time. Managing the three poisons is so important and has been talked about both in Tibetan medicine and Tibetan Buddhism. For that reason to study Tibetan medicine inner knowledge is very important. That doesn't mean you have to become Buddhist but need to have some understanding of inner knowledge. Ignorance is the root of disease, ignorance of our own hatred, attachment, jealous or own diet or what we are saying etc., then this can lead to all those problems. So we need to be aware of these. How? From a Buddhist viewpoint we need to be aware of our three poisons or from a medicine viewpoint to be aware of our diet, behavior and lifestyle. So this is one way that Tibetan medicine is different and is starting to grow in the Western countries. I came here in 2001 and there was very little awareness of Tibetan medicine and very few Tibetan medicine Menpas. But over the years many Tibetan Menpas have come to the West and His Holiness has talked about Tibetan medicine and so have Western scientists, scholars, psychologists. There are open minded people doing research because they see there is such a big gap in medical knowledge and even though Western medicine is such a great system there are still so many things that we don't have answers to. I just attended a conference in Virginia where they said there are many cases where they don't have answers. It is not that Tibetan medicine has all the answers but it is a very grounded comprehensive system that includes meditation, music, diet, behavior, checking hatred and attachment as the cause of disease. So we have a more grounded way to diagnose and observing symptoms. Also we have 98 methods of treatment. This is very fitting for modern society. Sometimes I am so amazed with this ancient medicine. I have practiced Tibetan medicine since I was 13 and now I am 50. During this period of time I have been practicing and am more and more in love with this knowledge. As I go deeper into this knowledge it makes more and more sense. My teacher Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche said many times that "when someone is suffering they don't care what method of treatment is used as long as it overcomes their suffering." Tibetan medicine not only overcomes suffering but with few side effects, gentle treatment, inexpensive care and easy to access. So that's what we're looking for. Tibetan medicine will serve well in any country. Also, I really hope people understand that even though Tibetan medicine is herbal and not

chemical but to use it we still need a qualified consultation with a qualified Menpa who can follow and continue to give proper care over time. In this way Tibetan medicine will serve humanity well.