

Brief Overview of Tibetan Medicine by Dr. Trogawa, Rinpoche

The following transcript is a portion of a talk delivered by Dr. Trogawa on June 9, 1989. The translator was Shakya Dorje.

Dr. Trogawa Rinpoche Overview of Tibetan Medicine

Translator: Good evening everyone. This evening I've been asked to begin an overview of Tibetan medicine. Elements of the Tibetan system of medicine as it is practiced today date from more than 3000 years ago to an early system of medicine from amongst the Tibetan peoples-Tibet was initially an isolated country and so developed its ideas in general, and its medical ideas in particular, under its own inspiration. In the 3rd and 4th centuries, Tibet began more seriously to contact other cultures, particularly India, and Indian medicine began to influence Tibet. Three systems of medicine from India have influenced Tibet, two of these were the general wide-spread systems found in India, and the third was a lesser-known system. And as the diffusion of Indian medical ideas began in Tibet, there also began the diffusion of Dharma ideas. This was during the reign of King Lha-mtho-ri gnyan-brtsan. So from the 4th century, there begins a fusion of the traditional system of medicine found in Tibet, and Indian systems of medicine, in Tibet.

One might investigate more precisely the particular influence of India on Tibet, and the interrelation of the two, but that is not our topic tonight and we do not have the time for such a sideline.

In the 7th century, a large conference of medicine was held in Lhasa and at this time physicians came from all over Asia, from China and Nepal and from all over Tibet, from Mongolia, from Kashrnir, and from Tajikestan, and elsewhere. This served to bring together medical ideas of that time. In the 8th century a second great conference was held at Samye Monastery. This was the great period of transmission of Dharma in Tibet when Padmasarnbhava, Vimilarnitra, and other great Indian Masters were in Tibet at this time. When the second conference was held, it was headed by a very great Tibetan Master of medicine, gYu-thong Yon-tan mGon-po, the Elder. At this time, it is said that from a place called Trong a physician whom we call Galenos came to Tibet. This would seem to be a practitioner of the ancient European system of medicine, as epitomized by Galenos (or Galen).

It is an interesting point as to where Trong might have been, there is quite some speculation about it, but it is unsure now where it might have been, where Galenos might have come from. Some people think that it is a reference to Rome and, in fact, Galen of the 2nd century was from Rome, so it might be a reference to the text and system. There are other ideas that it might be somewhere in Persia. It is important to understand the sources of what we do so these historical questions have some importance.

At this time in the 8th century and further on, there occurred a number of other developments, but I'm going to keep this part fairly short. What is important to note is that there was a text written down at this time, which [?] some coordinate ideas on medicine, called The Fearless Weapon (Tib. l'ihjigs-pa'i mTs'on-chha). In the 11th century the family descendent of gYu-thong Yon-tan mGon-po, the Elder became the overwhelmingly predominate influence on Tibetan medicine. He had the same name, so he is called gYu-thong Yon-tan rnGon-po, the Younger. He composed a text which is still the basis of the

science of Tibetan medicine. This text is commonly called the Four Tantras (Tib. rGyud-bzhi) and it consists of 1-56 chapters.

gYu-thong Yon-tan mGon-po, the Younger was a very great Master and had a very great influence on his time and on future generations. He had a very large number of disciples, not only in the field of medicine but also in the field-of spiritual practice. And at the end of his life he flew away to the Buddha-fields of the Dakinis in front of a great crowd. He had been invited to Tsong to a place near Shigatse, by a local official. There he was to give a teaching, and at the end of his teaching to a great assembly of people, he flew away in the sky.

This family had a paternal origin in India. They had perpetuated in their family a tradition of Buddhist practice centering around the Medicine Buddha, with many special instructions, and so in their family through whom the teaching was transmitted, a number of practitioners had vanished in the rainbow at the end of their life, leaving behind no mortal remains. He had many disciples in the field of medicine, and a good number of them who were capable of transmitting the (?) of his understanding of medicine. So because of him, Tibetan medicine became a more wide spread science.

In the (?) century, the Fifth Dalai Lama became quite concerned that the tradition of Tibetan medicine might at some point decline if its teaching were not regularly supported. So he built the Medical Monastery of Chakpori (Tib. lChags-po-ri) adjacent to Lhasa. Here the teaching of medicine was given with a very definite spiritual emphasis, so that medicine and Dharma became a single integral practice. So the physicians of Chakpori were practitioners of Dharma and developed their healing powers through the practice of mantra and special sadhanas. And when they did so, then each one according to his own particular capacities would utilize not only the more scientific and external systems of treating illness, but also use his personal development and personal powers according to his development to cure his patients.

What were the spiritual aspects of the practice of medicine, as a Chakpori physician would learn? First of all, he would be a person who developed himself. And part of his own development would be to learn healing practice and develop his own healing energies so that these would also be utilizable for curing his patients. Then another aspect of the spirituality of medicine at Chakpori was the consecration of the medicines. This happened regularly, but most especially at a great annual ritual which took about ten days if you count also the time it took to prepare, in which a great mandala was drawn and the medicines for the year were placed in the mandala and then consecrated in a large ritual. We would say that in Chakpori the medicines had two powers: they had the powers of the substances themselves, and then the powers of the mantras with which they were consecrated.

The practice of Tibetan medicine diffused throughout Tibet, from Chakpori it diffused as far as the eastern reaches of the Tibetan people, and it was found all through the Himalayas as well. In Mongolia, Tibetan medicine was taught and practiced, and in China some things about it were learned from Mongolia, and some texts were translated into Chinese. Through the Mongols, Tibetan medicine was practiced in Tsarist Russia also. we find some texts in Tibetan which were translated between the 7th and 8th centuries into Tibetan from Chinese. But the matter in these texts is basically Indian. For instance, the Sonaraza, which is a commentary of Nagarjuna, a great Indian Master, still has its Indian title and was brought to China in an early period and then translated into Tibetan from Chinese. The studies by Nagarjuna of the head and of the body, with regard

to their points and strategic places was also translated into Chinese at one point from an Indian language.

In ancient times traditions ran together quite a bit, rather like different streams flowing into a large river. And the old sources of these different influences tended to get lost. So in the different systems one finds in Asia -even in early times there were influences that weren't exactly entirely indigenous. There were influences from other different sources as well. Indian influence on Chinese medicine, for instance, It goes back to very early times. The earlier you go in research, evidently the harder it is to find exactly where the influence might have been.

So because of the different historical changes that have taken place, especially in our century, the ancient sciences have declined in the modern period. Especially since 1959, Tibet has gone through a severe cultural decline. Chakpori no longer exists. At the beginning of this century, the thirteenth Dalai Lama began another school of medicine in Lhasa, the Lhasa School of Medicine and Astrology (Tib. sMan-rtis-dkan) and this was then closed by the Chinese administration at one time. It has now been reopened (in Tibet), and so this school again functions. In Dharamsala, there is also a school which is a derivative of the former School of Medicine and Astrology in Lhasa. Chakpori has been destroyed. There has been no attempt to rebuild this very valuable school, so this is why it is my aim to work to rebuild the school which will replace the teachings of Chakpori.

This is more or less by way of introduction.