

*Media Report***Medical Wisdom in the Tibetan Buddhist Tradition**

Yusef Progler*

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A recent television documentary, 'The Blue Buddha: Lost Secrets of Tibetan Medicine,' introduces viewers to the Tibetan Buddhist medical tradition and the relationship between Buddhist teachings and medical knowledge, emphasizing that the founder of Buddhism considered himself as a healer, rather than as a god or a prophet, and that he presented his teachings not as doctrines but as remedies intended to heal the body and mind. These teachings form the basis of Buddhist medicine today.

The documentary begins by surveying the historical development of Tibetan medicine. At an 8th century conference held in Tibet, participants from India, Nepal, Greece, Persia and China met to share their wisdom. Tibetan medicine developed as an inquisitive fusion of these traditions, filtered through the Buddhist spiritual worldview. In the 17th century, the 5th Dalai Lama oversaw the compilation of this knowledge as a series of 79 detailed paintings, which are a blend of medical knowledge and Buddhist teachings, and which serve both as an aid to learning and as an art form. Doctors who mastered this tradition at monasteries in Lhasa traveled throughout Asia spreading their wisdom. In the 20th century, Cold War politics and the Chinese occupation drove many Tibetans into exile in India. In 1961, a medical institute was established in Dharam-

sala, including a school and a facility to manufacture medicines.

In the Tibetan tradition, virtually anything can be used as medicine and the healing process is usually understood as a collaboration between doctor and patient. Ailments are treated according to methods involving correct diet and behavior, and making use of natural medicine and accessory therapies such as massage and acupuncture. Medicinal compounds made from plants and minerals are stored in a visual encyclopedia along with other aspects of the tradition. A diagnostic painting, for example, depicts a tree with three branches, illustrating the diagnostic technique with its emphasis on touch and pulse taking, and the practice of gaining intimate knowledge of the patient through interviews and questioning.

Along with surveying Tibetan medicine, the documentary emphasizes dialog. Tibetan medicine is forward looking, as suggested by Dorje Dawa, a doctor at the Tibetan Medical and Astrological Institute in Dharamsala, who says that, 'We cannot be content just to say that Tibetan medicine is one of the most ancient systems of healing. We need to interact with modern medicine so we can authentic our results and cross reference our diagnoses and treatments to correct inaccuracies. That does not mean we should lose our identity in trying to imitate Western medicine. We need to create dialog with Western science.' Such a dialog

*Professor of Comparative Cultures at Asia Pacific University in Japan and co-creator of Multiversity in Malaysia and India.
e-mail: yjprogler@gmail.com.

would have to recognize the strengths of each tradition, as Dr. Dawa continues, 'Western medicine is good for acute ailments and for emergency cases, as when there are traumatic injuries, whereas Tibetan medicine is good for long standing conditions or chronic diseases. Its particular strength is getting at the root cause of diseases, rather than masking or just treating the symptoms.'

While Western medicine and science tend to have an uneasy, if not hostile, relationship with religion and spiritual knowledge, in the Tibetan tradition the two work hand in hand. Tibetan doctors have a detailed knowledge of plant habitat and medical uses, for anything ranging from tonics and sedatives to anti-viral compounds, and they learn to combine plants and minerals in myriad ways to treat various diseases. However, these compounds are activated by a series of ritual prayers, some taking months to complete, which energize the medical compounds to do their healing. Another important difference is that death is not seen as a failure of treatment. Instead, according to Buddhist eschatology, death is seen as an awakening from the dream of life, and so part of the role of the Tibetan doctor is to help a patient recognize that death is near and to assist in the preparation for the passage from life, rather than frantically clinging to life.

The 'Blue Buddha' also features a profile of Tuvan Dorzhi Radnayeovich, a Buddhist monk and doctor of Tibetan medicine who works in Ulan Ude, the capital city of Buryatia, a

Russian republic in southern Siberia. Known in the local community as Tuvan Lama, he is shown receiving visitors at his clinic, making house calls and providing various community services. Returning to the theme of dialog, Tuvan Lama suggests, 'It is not that we ignore modern Western medicine. They have their own excellent aspects, such as surgical treatments and computer analysis. They can be very effective and we can make use of them. In the future I hope we can combine the good points of Western medicine and traditional Buddhist medicine.'

By inserting several calls to dialog within a general overview of Tibetan medicine, the producers seem to be suggesting that the key to dialog between the Tibetan Buddhist and modern Western traditions of medicine is an independent and rigorous training in and acceptance of the Buddhist tradition on its own terms, rather than as a supplement to the Western training. While admirable, this overlooks another crucial aspect of dialog, which is to move the dialog beyond Western medicine, and to create many dialogs among medical traditions of the world, such as the Ayurvedic system of India or the Islamic tradition.

'The Blue Buddha - Lost Secrets of Tibetan Medicine' is a Canada/Japan co-production directed by Aerlyn Weissman and Tetsuya Itano, produced in 2006 in association with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and the Japan Broadcasting Corporation. It is currently available on Google Video.