

THE AMCHI SYSTEM OF MEDICINE THE ART AND SCIENCE OF A HEALTHY WAY OF LIFE

Padma Gurmet

Introduction and historical background

Amchi is derived from the Mongolian word *Am-rjai*, which means 'superior of all': the practitioners of medicine also are known as 'Amchi' and the Tibetan system of medicine is named after the same word as well. Amchi is one of the oldest surviving well-documented medical traditions of the world. It has been popular throughout the central Asian regions of Tibet, Mongolia, Bhutan, some parts of China, Nepal, the Himalayan regions of India, and a few parts of the former Soviet Union. Commonly known as *Sowa-Rigpa* (the science of healing) there are various conflicting accounts about its origins: some scholars believe that it originated from India; some say China and others consider it to have originated in Tibet itself.

The majority of the theories, principles and practices of Amchi medicine are similar to Indian *Ayurveda*, combined with a few Chinese principles and Tibetan folklore. The first Ayurvedic influence came to Tibet during the 3rd century AD, but it became popular only after the 7th century with the arrival of Buddhism in Tibet. Thereafter, the trend of exporting Indian medical literature, along with Buddhism and other Indian art and sciences, continued until the early 19th century. Since India was the birthplace of Buddha and Buddhism, it has always been a favourite place for Tibetan students to learn Buddhist art and culture, and many Indian scholars were invited to Tibet to propagate Buddhism and other Indian art and sciences. Medicine used to be one of the students' favourite subjects because of its high social and religious status.

This long association with India resulted in the translation into Tibetan of thousands of Indian literary works on subjects such as

religion, sciences, arts, culture and language. *Rgyud bzi*, the fundamental text book of Tibetan medicine, was first taught by Buddha Sakyamuni in India, and translated from Sanskrit into Tibetan in the 7th century. Some 25 other translated Indian texts related to medicine are preserved in both canonical and non-canonical forms of Tibetan literature.

The role of Amchis in Ladakhi society

The services of Amchis have always been significant for the people of Ladakh for public health and social activities. Before the 1960s, Sowa-Rigpa used to be the only health care facility for the ordinary people in most parts of Ladakh and the other Trans-Himalayan regions of India. After Indian independence in 1947, Ladakh became part of Jammu & Kashmir state in the Indian union. Allopathic medicine was then introduced as the only officially recognized health care system, but it has not replaced the Amchi system in many parts of Ladakh to this day. Amchis have a high social and spiritual status as the representatives of *San-gyas-smanla* (the Medicine Buddha), and their services for ailing beings are priceless. Every major village and hamlet has had its own Amchi since time immemorial. Besides treating the patients as the doctor of the village, Amchis are the most learned and resourceful persons of the village. Being an Amchi has been a matter of great prestige in Ladakhi society.

It takes several years to become a skilled Amchi, and this requires hard theoretical and practical training. In Ladakh Amchis are generally trained through the *rgyud pa* (lineage) system, learning from members of their own families. After finishing their training, the new Amchi has to give an exam in front of the entire community, and in the presence of some expert Amchis, in a ceremony called *rtsa mkrid*. Many Amchis used to go to Tibet for further studies, and some Tibet-trained Amchis are still practising in Ladakh. The relationship between Amchis and their patients is always cordial. According to Ladakhi tradition, Amchis never ask for fees for their medicine and services: the patients offer whatever they wish or can afford, and much of the time the Amchi's services are given without payment. In return for their services, the villagers used to offer the Amchi's family crops during harvest-time as well as free labour.

THE AMCHI SYSTEM OF MEDICINE

Until now the role of an Amchi has been very active in Ladakh, but with time and modernity things are rapidly changing, with both positive and negative effects. Traditional Amchi practice is being replaced with formal Amchi clinics and institutional training. Many renowned village Amchis now prefer to practise in urban areas with formal clinics, and therefore the personal relation between the Amchi and his patient is also changing.

The biggest obstacle to the survival of these traditions in the coming generations is the lack of interest from young educated people in the absence of good government job opportunities. Most of the ancient Amchi families have already lost their family traditions and are only left with their family names. However, Amchi leaders have made some efforts, and a few Amchis have been given government support. Unfortunately, this will not be enough to ensure the survival of this tradition unless it gets proper recognition and support from the national government and international organizations.

Philosophical core

The close spiritual and philosophical link is one of the unique features of Sowa-Rigpa. The Buddha taught *rgyud bzi*, the fundamental text book of Sowa-Rigpa, and it therefore obviously has a close association with Buddhist philosophy. It is believed that whether we are physically healthy or not, all living beings are sick until we attain Nirvana. Even though the disease might not be manifest, it is always present in a dormant form until we give up the root cause of sickness, which is ignorance. Ignorance gives rise to three basic roots of sickness: *nespa gsum (tri dosha)*. So *dod chags* (desire/lust) is the root cause of *rlung (vata)*; *zes sdang* (anger) is the root cause of *mkris-pa (pitta)*; and *Ti-mug* (mental darkness) is the root cause of *pad-kan (kapha)*. The presence of 84,000 afflictive emotions in the mind gives rise to same number of diseases. Thus Buddha Sakyamuni preached 84,000 kinds of teachings arising from these emotions. The animate and inanimate phenomena of the universe provide the material basis of *jung wa lna* (five elements) due to the Karma of all the living beings. The influences of Karma in disease and deaths of living beings are also systemically explained in medical literature. The behaviour and conduct of physician and patient are also largely set on the basis of

Buddhist conduct and principles. Buddhist tantra, mantra and ritual play a very important role in the treatment of patients. The *wang*, *lhung* and *thid* tradition of Buddhist teaching are maintained while teaching *rgyud bzi*.

It is mentioned in *rgyud bzi* that when Buddha taught this text in manifestation of *Tang srong rig pai ye shes*, physicians of four different medical systems were present—Gods, Rishis, Buddhists and non-Buddhists—and all of them understood his teaching as their own system. Another text mentions that when Brahma remembered medical science for the first time, he recalled the medical teaching of Buddha Kashyapa in an earlier aeon, and it therefore seems that Buddha Kayashapa is the medical teacher of Brahma.

The basic theory

The basic theory of Amchi medicine is explained under the principles of *jung wa lna* (five elements, *panch mhabhuta*) and *nes pa sum* (three humours, *tri dosh*) within a complete and logical framework. All animate and inanimate phenomena of this universe are composed of *jung wa lna*, namely *sa*, *chu*, *mai*, *rlung* and *rnam mkha*—roughly translated as earth, water, fire, air and space (*dharti*, *jal*, *agni*, *vayu* and *akash*). The sciences of physiology, pathology and pharmacology are established on these theories, which means our body is also composed of the same five elements of *jung wa lna*. Disorders result when the ratio of these elements becomes imbalanced in our body. The medicine and diet used to treat disorders is also composed of the same five basic elements. In the body these elements are present in the form of *nes pa sum* (three humours), *lus zung ldun* (seven physical constituents, *sapt dhatu*), and *te ma gsum* (three excretions, *tri mala*). They exist in drugs, diet and drinks in the form of *ro tug* (six tastes), *nu spa* (potencies), *yon tan* (quality), and *zu rjes* (post-digestive taste). It is in the context of this theory that a physician would use his knowledge, skills and experience in treating a patient, using the theory of similarity and dissimilarity of five elements.

Healthy and unhealthy body

The healthy and unhealthy state of the body is differentiated by the balance and imbalance of *jung wa lna* in general and particularly constituencies of body. A healthy body is defined as a state of balance

THE AMCHI SYSTEM OF MEDICINE

of three humours (*nes pa sum*), seven physical constituents (*lus zungs ldun*) and three excretions (*tri ma gsum*) in the body with complete harmony of five aggregates (*rnam per ses pa lna*). The three humours are air (*rlung*), bile (*mkris pa*), and phlegm (*padkan*). The seven physical constituents are nutritional essence, blood, muscle tissue, fat tissue, bone tissue, bone marrow and regenerative fluid. The three excretions are stool, urine and sweat. Humours are the biological representative of five elements; physical constituents are the basic tissue elements of the body; and excretions are the waste product of the body whose proper elimination is essential for good health. The healthy and unhealthy state of the body is largely dependent on the balance and imbalance of these elements due to proper diet and behavioural patterns.

Unlike many other traditional medical systems, the different parts of the human body are finely explained in Sowa-Rigpa. The sciences of embryology, anatomy, physiology and neurology are explained in an appropriate manner, along with the functions of each and every part of the body.

The concept of disease

It has been already mentioned that the science of Sowa-Rigpa is closely linked with Buddhist philosophy, whereby it is believed that all breathing creatures on the earth are sick until we give up the root cause, which is ignorance. Due to ignorance three mental poisons—anger, desire and mental darkness—are born with us. These serve as the basic origins of illness and give birth to three humours. When the ratio of three humours—air, bile and phlegm—becomes unbalanced due to circumstantial conditions such as poor diet, lifestyle, seasonal and mental conditions, this gives rise to different kinds of disorders. Diseases can be classified in different ways according to the location in the body, type, etc. The presence of 84,000 different types of afflictive emotions in the mind means that the number of disorders also goes up to 84,000. The role of the physician is very important in the treatment of a patient and therefore special emphasis is given on this aspect according to the six sections of primary condition, nature, definition, kinds, action and result.

Outline of pharmacology

Based on the theory of *jung wa lna* pharmacology of Sowa-Rigpa believes that every substance on the earth has medicinal value and therapeutic efficacy. Medicinal substances are classified into eight major categories: *rin po che sman* (precious metal and stone), *sa sman* (drugs from mud and earth), *rdo sman* (stones), *shing sman* (drugs from trees), *rtsi sman* (medicinal ingredients derived from exudates), *thang sman* (plant ingredient used for decoction), *sno sman* (herb), and *srog chags sman* (animal parts). The ingredients of medicine are used in both single and compound forms. Compound medicine is based on two major permutations and combinations: the combination based on taste *ro* (taste), and the combination based on *nus pa* (potencies). There are about 17 different categories of medicinal preparation which are used in Tibetan medicine and out of which some important preparations are decoction, powder, pills, linctus, medicated ghee, Bhasmas, medicated wine, paste, medicinal baths.

The composition of a drug is determined on the basis of the six major tastes: sweet, sour, saline, pungent, astringent and bitter. The composition of the sweet taste is predominate by *sa* (earth) and *chu* (water) elements; sour taste is predominate by *mai* (fire) and *sa* (earth); saline is predominate by *chu* (water) and *mai* (fire); bitter is predominated by *chu* (water) and *rlung* (air); pungent taste is predominated by *mai* (fire) and *rlung* (air); astringent taste is dominated by *sa* (earth) and *rlung* (air) element. Sweet, sour, saline and pungent tastes alleviate *rlung nespa* (wind humour), which is dominated by the *rlung* (air) element. Bitter, sweet and astringent tastes alleviate *nespa mkris pa* (bile humour), which is dominated by *mai* (fire) elements. Pungent sour and saline tastes alleviate *nes pa pad kan* (phlegm humour) which is dominated by *sa* (earth) and *chu* (water) elements. Other important factors for understanding drugs composition and action are the *zu zes sum* (three post-digestive tastes), *nus pa rgyad* (eight potencies) and *no bo* (specific actions) of particular drugs. The therapeutic efficacy of drugs is also dependent on the above factors.

THE AMCHI SYSTEM OF MEDICINE

Conclusion

Based on the holistic approach of balancing body, mind and nature to lead a healthy way of life, Sowa-Rigpa is one of the most complete and advanced traditional medicine systems of the world. It is known for its rich accumulation of science, art and philosophy with history. Amchi medicine is a science because it is based on a systematic and logical framework of understanding the body, disease and its relationship to the environment. The correlations between body, disease and its treatments are well explained under the theory of *jung wa lna*. It is an art because its diagnostic techniques and composition of medicine are based on the creativity, immensity, delicacy and compassion of the medical practitioner. It is philosophy because it follows the key Buddhist principles of self-sacrifice, karma and ethics etc. In brief, Amchi medicine is not only a medical system based on particular pharmacopoeia but it is a complete guide to a healthy way of life with a balance between body, mind and environment.