

Transformation and Balance: The Principles of Tibetan Medicine in the Context of American Healthcare

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In a recent Letter to the Editor published in the New York Times I wrote that “the redefining of medicine in America as a healthcare industry, where economics and consumerism are the central issue rather than health, undermines our attempts to find real solutions to the continual growth of degenerative illness.” I further asserted that, “if medicine can reclaim its traditional role in society, and the medical pluralism fostered by the alternative medicine movement is realized, then we will be better able to begin to change our focus away from the commerce of disease and towards an understanding of how to achieve health.”¹

In fact, most patients are handicapped in achieving such understanding because biomedicine provides a very limited definition of health. By defining health largely as the absence of disease,^{2,3} biomedicine -- and the cultural view that it perpetuates -- leaves people stranded with a simplistic view of a complex and primary component of their existence. Being ill is defined as experiencing, and/or having medical test data confirming the existence of, acute and/or chronic significant, debilitating and/or life threatening symptoms, which may or may not be diagnosable within existing biomedical disease categories. Health is understood to simply be the absence of such pathology. Attempts to define health more broadly fall short because “a complete state of physical, mental and social well-being”, such as described by the World Health Organization⁴, is not



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clearly quantifiable in biomedical terms. In order for any of the vast and varied fields of natural medicine practiced in the U.S. to make a significant contribution to solving the American healthcare crisis, we must first be able to inculcate clear, detailed and practical definitions of 'health' into our culture.

Tibetan Medical Wisdom

The process of introducing new ideas regarding health and medicine, and creating a genuinely integrative paradigm, is clearly present in the history of Tibetan medicine. In the 4th century Tibetans began encouraging the introduction of new ideas regarding medicine into their country. Over the centuries that followed they gained influences from India, Persia, China and Greece, freely allowing medical knowledge from these cultures to mix with their own indigenous medicine.

In the 8th century the Tibetan government sponsored conferences at which doctors skilled in foreign medical systems presented and debated their ideas regarding health and the treatment of illness. Those with superior understanding of medicine and abilities in the diagnosis and treatment of illness were invited to stay and thereby promote medical pluralism in Tibet. Through a process that took centuries this knowledge was integrated with indigenous Tibetan ideas creating a unique medical discipline imbued with a [Buddhist] spiritual perspective. In the 13th century all the seminal Tibetan medical texts were collected, and the current version of the central text of Tibetan medicine, the *rGyud Zhi*, was composed.^{5,6,7} In following centuries, famous Tibetan doctors would supplement these texts by publishing detailed commentaries on medicine documenting their own scholarship, botanical research and clinical experience.^{8,9}

The medical system presented in these texts was singular, yet also a synthesis of the major medical systems of the ancient world. These medical traditions developed an ecological and qualitative approach to researching and classifying the phenomena that comprise the natural world. This type of scientific method provides us with a set of information about our world that is different from that which is observed by Western science's own profound materialist, quantitative and reductionist approaches.

Ancient scientific theories explain how the forces of nature are directly correlated with, and thereby influence, the functioning of the human organism. The 'physics' of Tibetan medicine utilizes a qualitatively-based system of analysis and categorization in order to define those basic forces of nature in the Tibetan theory of the five elements. Once defined, these elements are named for their most easily identifiable manifestations: earth, water, fire, wind and space. The characteristics, and therefore the nature of all matter and energy, then result from the specifically delineated qualities of these elements as they manifest individually or in combination.

A central aspect of Tibetan medical theory are the *Nyes-pa* (pron. *Nyae pa*), the three principles of function



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of the body and mind; *rLüŋ* (pron. Loong), *mKhris-pa* (pron. Tree-pa), and *Bad-kan* (pron. Pay-gen). The three *Nyes-pa* are expressions of the elements that occur within our organism and determine the proper functioning of our body and mind. Each of the three principles has a distinct role in physical and mental function, as well as a specific set of relationships to our body's organs, constituents (e.g., blood, tissue, etc.) and to the processes of our physiological systems (e.g. the nervous and circulatory systems) and our mind.

Theories regarding such principles are common to many systems of traditional natural medicine (e.g., *Qi, Jing, and Shen* in Chinese medicine or the three *Doshas* in Ayurvedic medicine). Traditional natural medicine places great emphasis upon understanding the role of these principles in the creation and maintenance of the functions of the body's organs, systems and substances. The recognition of the existence of these principles, and their central importance as the underlying basis for all of the functions of our body and mind, clearly distinguishes the perspective of traditional natural medical systems from that of biomedicine.

Understanding the function of the three *Nyes-pa* also allows us to comprehend the physical principles that are the basis of the interdependence that exists between our body and mind and is depicted in Tibetan medicine. In fact, our *Nyes-pa* are created as a direct result of an interaction between our mind's developmental process and the five physical elements at the various stages of development in the womb. Tibetan medicine's detailed

description of that genesis provides a model that explains how consciousness begins to play a direct role in physical function from the very early stages of embryologic development.

The recognition of these principles and their primary role in physiology allows for the detailed definition of health described by traditional natural medical systems, which is largely missing in biomedicine. A disequilibrium occurring in the natural ecology of the *Nyes-pa* is understood to lead to dysfunction and, if not treated, to illness and disease. Herein lies the basis upon which the discovery of the causes of illness becomes the central consideration in the diagnosis and treatment of disease in Tibetan medicine. In studying Tibetan medicine one first learns the nature of the properly functioning human organism - that is, the definition of health - prior to studying about the cause and treatment of disease. In Tibetan medicine it would be illogical to attempt to understand illness without first clearly understanding the natural, or healthy, state of the body and mind.

From this theory of the three principles of function, Tibetan medicine is able to deduce the ways in which health is directly affected by all aspects of behavior in its various physical, psychological and spiritual forms. The direct relationship of the five elements to the three *Nyes-pa* also gives rise to Tibetan medicine's ability to evaluate the specific effects of diet on health. It provides a means to analyze the qualities of foods relative to their elemental characteristics, such as their tastes, and to correlate them with the functioning of the three *Nyes-pa*. The same is true regarding Tibetan medicine's ability to comprehend and evaluate the medical significance of regional and seasonal climates.

Tibetan medical pathology also describes certain super-physical environmental influences that Tibetans believe can become pathogenic to humans when the

places in which they reside become polluted or are not treated with a proper respect for nature.¹⁰ People in the West do not need to believe in the types of super-physical influences depicted in this aspect of Tibetan medical theory in order to benefit from the ideas presented therein. Developing an appreciation for traditional beliefs regarding the sensitivity of our environment and our interdependence with nature could aid us in lessening the public health threat posed by pollution, as well as the unbridled manipulation of nature by the biotechnology industry.

Public health could benefit greatly if Western people understood the detailed view of both health and the etiology of disease that is depicted in Tibetan medicine's theory regarding the role of the *Nyes-pa*. Preventative medicine would gain a deeper meaning if there were a greater appreciation of how imbalances, occurring in the homeostasis of these principles of function, lead to dysfunction within the body's physical and mental processes. When these processes break down (e.g., when waste and nutrition are not being properly separated during stages of metabolism and assimilation), the function of the body's organs, systems and substances are directly impacted. When such imbalances occur they are unfortunately often not readily diagnosable by biomedicine, whether or not they are immediately manifested symptomatically. If left unchecked, however, they are the cause of the development of disease.

If the public was educated regarding these principles [or, for that matter, regarding similar concepts existing in other forms of traditional natural medicine] they could begin to prevent many diseases at their earliest stages of development. Education regarding preventative medicine and natural health should, therefore, begin at the elementary school level. In this way our modern society could begin to replicate the benefits of that natural medical knowledge that was traditionally perpetuated



through folk culture.

In the midst of our overly specialized culture, we should understand that the first line of medical care among traditional people was often not a physician but, for example, one's mother or grandmother. The physician had a distinct role, but much important primary medical care and health knowledge was delivered through the family and community. Re-empowering laypeople regarding their health through natural and preventative medical education was, in fact, one of the central goals of our own grassroots alternative medicine movement.

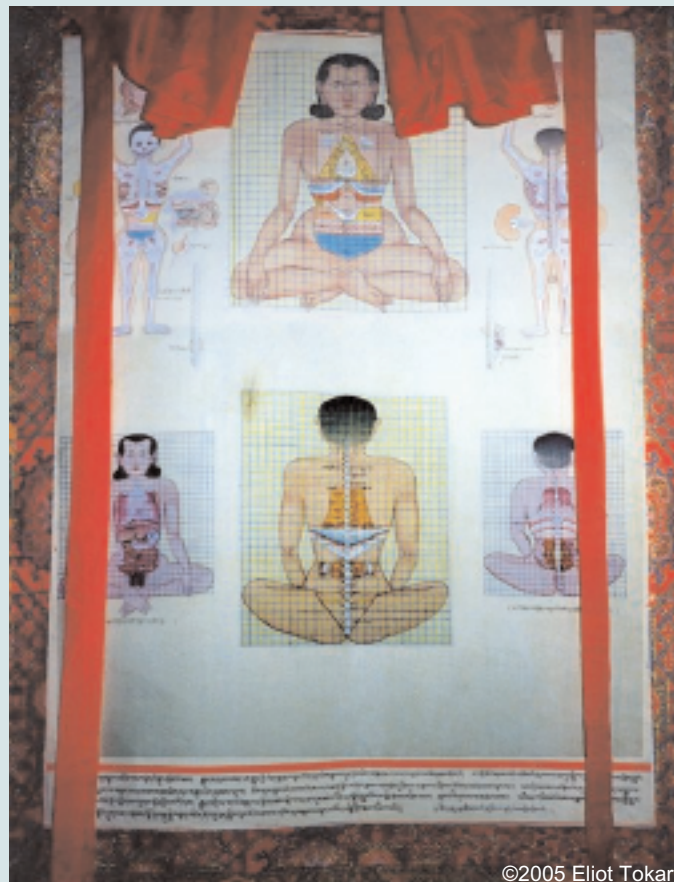
By disseminating information about traditional natural medicine's detailed ecological and qualitative view of health, we would be offering people tools with which they could create individualized approaches to their behavior, diet and environment, and that could help them prevent and/or remedy disease. There would be a greater set of options for treating illness, and patients would be able to avoid exacerbating existing diseases. We would not be so dependent on generalized studies of disease factors, which, while having an important role, can appear confusing and contradictory as biomedical pathology, nosology and epidemiology are regularly revised and updated.

Language and Culture – A Path to New Understanding

In order for natural medicine to make a contribution to public health, however, there are two conditions that need to be satisfied. First, we must have a language with which to explain our concepts, and we must have a culture that is opened to them. Those practicing in fields of natural medicine must be able to express their ideas in a coherent manner. Much greater work needs to be done to create language that allows for a clear and constructive dialogue with laypeople and between practitioners of different medical systems. When natural medicine practitioners speak about their disciplines, they are too often limited by their own jargon or to a misapplication of biomedical terminology.

For example, the generalized use of the term 'energy' in natural medicine can often be confusing. If we are speaking about energy in the literal Western scientific sense, then the phenomena must be measurable. The research that I have seen that attempts to measure manifestations of Qi, the results of a Therapeutic Touch, etc., as energy appears to obscure understanding and create skepticism. We need to ask ourselves if 'energy' is, in fact, what we are speaking about, or are we speaking about mind/body principles that are more complex in nature and might only include energetics? If we want to see an improvement in the quality of scientific research being done on natural medicine, we must begin to ponder this key question.

The terminology of Western science and biomedicine is specifically and narrowly defined and should be respected. However, if we allow our discussion of natural medicine to be constrained by the hegemony of that language we will limit rather than expand the possibility of cross-disciplinary dialogue. Instead of joining HMO's and the Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM)



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industry in their embrace of evidence based medicine's brand of randomized controlled trials,^{11,12,13} we need to insist on new research protocols that are appropriate for the study of the holism that defines traditional natural medicine. Practitioners of natural medicine should become more sophisticated in the language of biomedicine and research, rather than using it inaccurately as a way to pass muster in our healthcare and medical insurance system. Laypeople, biomedical physicians and researchers need to better appreciate the integrity of natural medical systems, rather than incorrectly seeing them as a collection of therapies that can be cut and pasted into the biomedical paradigm.

We must also create an environment where new ideas about health can be integrated into American sensibilities. There is a traditional view about the prerequisites required to successfully integrate new ideas into a given environment. A Tibetan proverb states that a student is like a vessel, and that knowledge is a kind of pure substance that is to be placed inside of it. If the vessel is upside down, the substance will not be able to be placed within. That is, if people are close-minded due to ignorance, they will be unable to successfully accept new ideas. If the vessel is broken, its loss of integrity will render it unable to serve the purpose at hand. Lastly, if the vessel is polluted the pure substance will become corrupted and lose its true nature.

We need to ask ourselves what kind of 'vessel' our country has become regarding accepting new ideas concerning health and medicine. To help us integrate a new

perspective of health into American culture we require a progressive path, such as existed in the populist alternative medicine movement that existed from 1960's through the 1980's. We veered from that path in the 1990's on the heels of Dr. David Eisenberg's article, published in the New England Journal of Medicine, documenting the great extent to which people were paying out of pocket for "unconventional" medical care.¹⁴

The article's impact was widespread and the government, the biomedical and pharmaceutical industries and university-based researchers were soon vying for a piece of the pie that Dr. Eisenberg uncovered. The CAM industry was born in this new environment, and was characterized by its prioritization of the integration of natural medicine into the biomedical and health insurance industries. CAM's "integrative medicine" product exemplifies this goal and is mostly at odds with the values of the earlier grassroots efforts for medical pluralism. A new nutraceutical industry also grew, supplanting the former, more responsible, herbal products industry.¹⁵

This new industrial formulation has resulted in an explosion of the commoditization of natural medicine that encourages biopiracy worldwide and poses a threat to fragile indigenous medical systems.^{16,17,18,19,20} CAM activity has generated revenues²¹ and it has redistributed funds from the practice of alternative medicine back towards the medical industrial complex²², but it has not had a significant effect on public health. The CAM industry has expanded the availability of certain natural therapies with, for example, some hospitals giving their patients access to treatments including certain massage, meditation and Chinese acupuncture techniques.^{23,24} However, these procedures usually do not represent the full value of the traditional natural medical systems from which they are appropriated.

Coda

If we desire an expansion of healthcare availability, and a more healthy population, a more appropriate path is required. Economics has a role, but it should not be the central driver for progress in medicine and science.^{25,26} An inappropriate emphasis on econometrics in medicine is, after all, what has created our healthcare crisis. We can gain inspiration from the history of Tibetan medicine, an integrative system that was created organically by expansion of medical pluralism. We can also prioritize educating our fellow Americans about the highly detailed, traditional understandings of health, and the cause of illness, that exist in systems of traditional natural medicine such as Tibetan medicine.

To regain the best path for natural medicine, practitioners need to realign with their grassroots support. Rather than investing in licensure struggles and divisive fights to define scopes of practice,²⁷ natural medicine practitioners need to emphasize broad-based collegiality within our field. Such steps would allow us to forge progressive alliances with biomedicine without having to compromise the integrity of our own unique medical

systems. Promoting the values of medical pluralism will help protect ancient systems like Tibetan medicine from the negative effects of integration, co-optation and biopiracy. Furthermore, it will allow us to fulfill our potential to contribute to changing our national focus away from the commerce of disease and toward the advancement of health awareness. In doing so, we can rejuvenate in medicine that which His Holiness the Dalai Lama reminds us it requires, a "good heart...that shows a genuine sense of care compassion and concern" for all.²⁸

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