

Brief history of Sowa-Rigpa in Ladakh

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Abstract

Sowa-Rigpa” commonly known as Tibetan system of medicine is one of the oldest, Living and well documented medical tradition of the world. It has been originated from Tibet and popularly practice in India, Nepal, Bhutan, Mongolia and Russia. The majority of theory and practice of Sowa-Rigpa is similar to “Ayurveda”. The first Ayurvedic influence came to Tibet during 3rd century AD but it became popular only after 7th centuries with the approach of Buddhism to Tibet. There after this trend of exportation of Indian medical literature, along with Buddhism and other Indian art and sciences were continued till early 19th century. India being the birth place of Buddha and Buddhism has always been favorite place for learning Buddhist art and culture for Tibetan students; lots of Indian scholars were also invited to Tibet for prorogation of Buddhism and other Indian art and sciences. This long association with India had resulted in translation and preservation of thousands of Indian literature on various subjects like religion, sciences, arts, culture and language etc. in Tibetan language. Out of these around twenty-five text related to medicine are also preserved in both canonical and non-canonical forms of Tibetan literatures. Many of these knowledge were further enriched in Tibet with the knowledge and skills of neighboring countries and their own ethnic knowledge. “Sowa-Rigpa” (Science of healing) is one of the classic examples of it. rGyud-bZhi (four tantra) the fundamental text book of this medicine was composed by Yuthog Yonten Gonpo who is believed to be the father of Sowa Rigpa. rGyud-bZhi which is based on indigenous medicine of Tibet enriched with Ayurveda, Chinese and Greek Medicine. The impact of Sowa-Rigpa along with Buddhism and other Tibetan art and sciences were spread in neighboring Himalayan regions. In India, this system is widely practice in Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh, Darjeeling (West Bengal), Dharamsala, Lahaul and Spiti(Himachal Pradesh) and Ladakh region of Jammu & Kashmir.

Introduction

Ladakh is among the richest cultural regions of the world which is located high in the Indian Himalayas. The majority of the populations live in remote areas where modern medical health facilities are not available due to heavy snowfalls, high mountain passes and a lack of reliable road infrastructure. There are also limited health resource personal willing to spend their lives in the remote villages and many deep seated planning and implementation problems relating to health care. For these reasons, the people of Ladakh face considerable health problem. Fortunately Sowa-Rigpa medicine locally named as Amchi medicine has been practiced throughout Ladakh for many centuries. This medical science is traditionally transmitted on a lineage basis and these hereditary Amchis are supposed to serve the public health without receiving a salary or any other contemporary facilities. Most of their remote areas have

their own Amchis and they study for many years under the guidance of their father grandfather or other faithful Amchi and take exams on pulse diagnosis, urine diagnosis and other important oral test from the four tantras in front of their own teacher, elder Amchis and villagers (Gurmet and Stobgais 2016⁹). If the student succeeds in the exam, he/she will be offered a traditional scarf (Khatak), butter tea and herbal wine. He /she then become an Amchi after that special exam day and are eligible to start treating patients.

In the Himalayans physicians who have studied the subject of medicine of this tradition have been active in providing treatment to the patients without any interruption. The Himalayan region of our country for ages have been developing and practicing the indigenous and local healing practicing developed by the communities and which is commonly known Sowa-Rigpa system of medicine. The ingredient used for the preparation of the medicine prescribed by this system of medicine is cent percent herbal plant. This system of medicine is today practiced widely in different parts of our country and in other countries also. It has given wonderful results and it is proved that this system of medicine has no side effects in long run. It has very strong influence of Buddhism on its method of practice and preparation of medicine. The specialty of treatment of this system of medicine is that the body and mind is treated as composite whole and not as consisting mere parts. This system is also developing new concepts of health, new drugs for diseases and various other ailments. Therefore this system of medicine is producing excellent results (Gurmet, *et al.*, 2004¹⁰).

The concept of Nyes pa sum (three humours, skt.Tridosha):

According to Sowa-Rigpa all our life processes are carried out by the three humours characterized rLung (wind/vata) mKhris-pa (bile/pitta) and Bad-kan (phlegm/kapha) (Drungtso, 2007³). These three humours carry various essences to all parts of our body, when they are in a state of dynamic harmony, but become the cause of disorder when they are disharmonies. Each of the three humours has five sub-divisions (rGyud-zhi/Four Tantra's. 2011¹).

Brief description of the Nyes-pa sum (three Humours, skt.Tridosha):

Firstly, what is rLung? What is mKhris-pa? What is Bad-kan? Before these terms can be explained it must be pointed out that there is no equivalent translation of them except in to Sanskrit; therefore the original names are used. The general description of rLung is that it is a subtle flow of energy and out of the five elements (air, fire, water, earth and space) it is most closely connected with air. However it is not simply the air which we breathe or the wind in our stomachs, it goes much deeper than that. rLung like a horse and tile mind is the rider, if there is something wrong with the horse the rider will not be able to ride properly. Its description is that it is rough, light, cool, thin, hard and movable (Gyatso, 1994²). The general function of rLung is to help growth, movement of the body, exhalation and inhalation and to aid the function of mind, speech and body. rLung helps to separate in our stomachs what we eat into nutrients and waste products. However, its most important function is to carry the movement of mind, speech and body. The nature of rLung is both hot and cold (rGyud-zhi/Four Tantra's. 2011¹).

There are five types of rLung:

1. The first is called Srog-dzin (life grasping rLung). Its location is in the brain and its functions are the swallowing of food, inhalation and spitting, eructation and sneezing, clearing the sense and intellect, and steadying of the mind.
2. The second type of rLung is Gyen-rgyu (upward moving rLung). Its location is in the chest and its functions are responsible for speech, the increase of bodily vigour and health, the giving of luster to the skin and the promotion of mental endeavor and diligence.
3. The third type of rLung is khyab-byed (all pervading rLung). Its location is in the heart and its functions are the responsible for lifting, walking, stretching, grasping of limbs, the opening and closing of the mouth, eyelids, anus etc.
4. The fourth type of rLung is Mai-Nyam (fire accompanying rLung). Its location is in the stomach and its function is to promote digestion and the metabolism, and ripen the seven bodily sustainers known as luszung-dhun.
5. The fifth type of rLung is Thur-sel (down ward cleansing rLung). Its location is in the rectum and its function is to expel faeces, urine, semen, menstruation and the fetus.

There are five types of mKhris-pa (bile/pitta):

It is the hot nature within our body and not simply the bile which comes from our gall bladder. From out of the five elements mKhris-pa is related to fire. The description of mKhris-pa is oily, hot, light, pungent and moist (Gyatso, D. S, 1994²). The most important function of mKhris-pa is to keep in balance the bodily temperature. It helps with the digestion of food and it is what makes us feel hungry and thirsty at the right times. It also gives luster to the skin and helps to keep the pores clear. The nature of mKhris-pa is hot like fire or the sun (rGyud-zhi/Four Tantra's. 2011¹).

1. The first type of mKhris-pa is called Ju-byed (digestive mKhris-pa). Its location is between the stomach and intestine. Its function is to promote digestion and to break down essential nutrients from foodstuffs and fluids and then to separate essence and waste. It promotes bodily heat and helps to provide energy to the other four types of mKhris-pa (Tsultim and Dakpa 2001⁵).
2. The second type of mKhris-pa is called sGrub-byed (accomplishing mKhris-pa). Its location is the heart. Its function is that it anger, aggression and hatred. It provides the initial driving force behind the minds of desire, achievement and ambition.
3. The third type of mKhris-pa is called mdangs-sgyur (colour changing mKhris-pa). Its location is in the liver. Its function is to maintain and promote the red colour of essential nutrients in the blood.
4. The fourth type of mKhris-pa is called mThong-byed (seeing mKhris-pa). Their locations are in the eyes and it promotes vision.
5. The fifth type of mKhris-pa is called mDog-sel (complexion clearing mKhris-pa). Its location is the skin and its function is to clear and promote skin luster by giving it a healthy and wholesome colour.

There are five type of Bad-kan (phlegm/skt.kapha):

Bad-Kan is not the phlegm which comes from the chest; it is all the diseases connected with the cold nature called Bad-Kan. From out of the five elements it is related to both water and earth. The description of Bad-Kanis oily, cool, heavy, blunt, smooth, steady and sticky (Gyatso1994²). The main function of Bad-Kan is to sustain the bodily liquids. It helps to mix food in the stomach, steady the mind

and it help to keep our joints flexible. The nature of Bad-Kan is cold, like water at the moon (rGyud-zhi/Four Tantra's. 2011¹).

1. The first Bad-Kan is called rTren-byed (supporting Bad-Kan). Its location is the chest, and its function is to support the remaining four Bad-Kans.
2. The second Bad-Kan is called Myag-byed (mixing Bad-Kan). Its location is the upper region and its function is the mixing of liquid and solid foodstuff in to a semi-liquid state.
3. The third Bad-Kan is called Myong-byed (experiencing Bad-Kan). Its location is the tongue, and its function is to sense and experience the six primary tastes.
4. The fourth Bad-Kan is called Tsim-byed (satisfying Bad-Kan). Its location is the head, and its function is to increase and satisfy the power of the five senses.
5. The fifth Bad-Kan is Called Byor-byed (joining Bad-Kan). Its location is the joints and its function is responsibility for the flexibility of the joints.

This is a brief description of the type, location and function of the Nyes-pa sum. When the Nyes-pa sums are balanced, then what are called the seven bodily sustainers is also balanced. The seven bodily sustainers are:

1. Essential nutrients
2. Blood
3. Muscle tissues
4. Fat
5. Bone
6. Marrow
7. Regenerative fluid

To show how this process works, when we eat or drink something, it goes to the stomach, where the Bad-Kan will help to mix it, the mKhris-pa will help to digest it and the rLung will help to separate the essential nutrients from the waste products (Gyatso, 1994²). The essence of the essential nutrients will then form blood; the essence of blood forms muscle tissue, the essence of muscle tissue forms fat, the essence of fat forms bones, the essence of bones forms marrow and the essence of bone marrow forms the regenerative fluid. With the waste products there are three eliminating function of the wastes:

1. Elimination of faeces
2. Elimination of urine
3. Elimination of perspiration

This process shows how important it is for rLung, mKhris-pa and Bad-Kan to be kept in balance.

Imbalance of Nyes-pa sum

The long term causes of the imbalance of Nyes-pa sum are the three poisons. The short term causes of imbalance are the time and season the influence of spirits, improper diet and improper behavior. With regard to the time and season, rLung asses at dawn and in the evening in summer. mKhis-pa arises during the autumn at midday and at midnight. Bad-Kan arises in the spring, in the morning and at dusk. For the influence of spirits there are innumerable disorders brought about by certain contributory factors or conditions relating to harmful influences or spirits.

The 360 female spirits influences are connected with desire and attachment and give rise to rLung. The 360 male spirit influences are connected with anger and hatred and give rise to disorders from mKhris-pa. The 360 Lhu (skt.Nagas or water dwelling spirits) and Sa-bdang (specific spirits that

govern or haunt particular places are connected with ignorance and give rise to Bad-kandisorders (rGyud-zhi/Four Tantra's. 2011¹). If they happen to be disturbed, all these spirits can cause harm, and people would have to consult a lama or tantric practitioner for a divination. Through their help the spirits would be expelled through religious ritual and ceremony (Drungtso, 2007³).

As for improper diet, if someone eats lots of high foods such as pork, goat's meat, milk and yogurt, strong tea, strong coffee, soya, vegetables, pulses, (Gyal 2006⁶) skimmed milk continuously, eating only these kinds of foods every day, they will suffer from rLung problem. If someone drinks lots of milk and alcohol, and eats lots of meat, full-fat cheese, nuts, sugar, ice cream, butter, chocolate, and cooks with lots of oil, these cause mKhris-pa problems. When someone eats lots of raw food such as uncooked meat, salad, raw fish, cold drinks, raw milk they will suffer from problems related to Bad-Kan (rGyud-zhi/Four Tantra's. 2011¹).

With regard to improper behavior for rLung, if a person does a lot of fasting and meditation, does not sleep much, takes meats at improper time has too much sex, strains or over controls his bowel and urinary functions, has lots of mental pressure and tension and talks too much, then rLung will arise. mKhris-pa arises through straining the body such as by crying heavy loads, digging hard dry soil, running in the middle of the day in the peak of summer, falling through sudden jerks to the body, such as falling off a horse or a roof and accidents. Bad-Kan is caused by behavior such as doing no physical exercise, sleeping for most of the day after eating a heavy meal, taking cold showers every day, exposing your body through inadequate clothing, and working in damp and cold places (Dummer, 2001⁴).

Diagnosis of Nyes-pa sum when imbalanced:

We will now briefly look at the methods of diagnosis in Sowa-Rigpa medicine. When we see the patient there are three methods of diagnosis through:

1. Observation
2. Palpation
3. Questioning

Observation is done by urine analysis and looking at the tongue. A sample of urine must be the first early morning urine of the patient, and the night before they should refrain from eating spicy foods, drinking alcohol and having sexual intercourse (Dummer, 2001⁴). In Sowa-Rigpa system of medicine urine analysis is divided into eight sections; the physicians examine the colour, vapour, odour, bubbles, sediments and albumins of the urine. The colour of the urine is determined by the intake of food and drink, seasons and diseases (rGyud-zhi/Four Tantra's. 2011¹).

For the rLung patient the urine is very clear like water and it has big bubbles. For the mKhris-pa patient the urine is a reddish yellow colour, there is much vapour and a very strong odour. For the Bad-Kan patient the urine is white in colour and there is little odour and vapour. Generally a reddish colour indicates a hot disorder while transparency indicates a cold disorder.

When observing the tongue, the rLung patient has a very red, dry and rough tongue. For the mKhris-pa patient the tongue is yellow with a thick coating. The tongue of Bad-Kan patient is white, smooth and wet (Drungtso, 2007³).

The second method of diagnosis is by reading the pulse. In Sowa-Rigpa system the pulse reading is divided into thirteen sections. For the physician the arts of pulse reading provide an invaluable source of information because the pulse is like a messenger between the doctor and the patient. To read the pulse it is very important for the patient to be as rested as possible. The physician places the index,

middle and third fingers on the radial arteries. The space between each of the three fingers is the width of a grain of rice, and the fingers are placed half an inch from the creases of the wrist. The physician will use both hands to examine the pulse the left wrist of a male patient is read first, whilst for female patient it is the right wrist which is read first (rGyud-zhi/Four Tantra's. 2011¹).

The Third and final method of diagnosis is by questioning asking the patient how and when the problem started, its location and which sort of food harms or helps them.

Treatment

The final category is about the treatment of the patient. There are four methods of treatment as follows:

1. Advice regarding diet
2. Advice regarding behavior
3. Prescribing medicine
4. Performing surgery

If the illness is not so serious we need only give advice to the diet and behavior. Generally the rLung patient must try to eat food which has got heavy and nutritional potency, such as lamb, butter, molasses, alcohol, milk, soups, chicken, garlic, ginger and onions. The mKhris-pa patient should eat beef, vegetables, fresh butter, fresh low fat cheese, cow's yogurt and butter milk, drink weak tea, spring water and have less greasy food. The Bad-Kan patient should have honey, mutton, fish, barley, wine, ginger decoction (rGyud-zhi/Four Tantra's. 2011¹).

For behavior the rLung patient should stay in dark and warm places, the surrounding should be very quiet, and there should be beautiful scenery. They should have good company such as lovers and close friends. The patient should also rest both physically and mentally without any worries. For the mKhris-pa patient's behavior they should have cold baths and showers, sit in shaded places and walk by the sea and use a cool perfume such as sandalwood. For the behavior of the Bad-Kan patient, they should have lots of sun, warm fires in home, they should do lots of exercise such as prostrations, walking and running (Drungtso, 2007³).

The third method of treatment is the prescribing of medicine. It can be administered in various forms like in the form decoction, powder, pills etc.

The final method of treatment is surgery divided into mild and rough. Mild surgery for the rLung patient includes massage with year old butter and oily compresses. Rough surgery for the rLung patient is placing moxa on the selected points of rLung; these are on the crown of the head, the first, fifth and sixth vertebrae of the spinal cord, the sternum, etc. For the mKhris-pa patient mild surgery is sitting beneath waterfall and mild purgatives. Rough surgery for the mKhris-pa patient is bloodletting and cupping. For the Bad-Kan patient mild surgery is hot fermentations, saunas and mild emetics. Rough surgery for the Bad-Kan is golden needle therapy and the application of heated surgical stylist.

Conclusion

We can say in conclusion that there are many different types of disease and illness, but they can all be categorized within the Nyes-pa sum; rLung; mKhris-pa and Bad-Kan. Similarly with all these different types of disease and illness there is no other location for them than the seven bodily sustainers and the three eliminating functions. For example just as a bird has the freedom of the skies, it cannot fly above the sky.

So this is a brief introduction to Sowa-Rigpa and that has been said is based on the Sowa-Rigpa medical texts (Gyud-Zhi). Hopefully the reader will gain some understanding of Sowa-Rigpa medicine, and it will help to relieve the suffering of all sentient beings.

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