



MEDICAL CARE IN THE TIBETAN TRADITION - A SHORT INTRODUCTION

by

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In the Tibetan medical tradition every sickness and disease is first investigated in the light of Buddhist philosophy, in which case primary and secondary causes that bring on a sickness are taken into consideration when hoping to treat patients reliably. The first thing a doctor needs to recollect is that life is the unseparated reciprocity of outer and inner conditions, the co-existence of body and mind that sets in the very moment a being is conceived. Understanding the unity of body and mind presupposes knowledge of causality, *karma* in Sanskrit, the infallible law that each and every subjective and objective process occurs in dependence upon a former event. Karma is the fact that every external object and inner experience arises and evolves in dependence upon the law of causality. We can exemplify this process by looking at a plant: A sprout grows from a seed, roots grow from a sprout, a stem grows from roots, leaves grow from a stem, buds grow from leaves and give rise to fruits, out of which new seeds emerge. A former phase determines and leads to the later in reliance upon its respective pattern and way.

Subjective experiences also consume and renew life by the laws of causality, and – just as each organism – individuals pass through unique phases in the process of being-becoming and living-dying. Tibetan Buddhism lists



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the stages of a personal continuum as the twelve links of interdependent origination which describe who and how we are. Let us take a fast glance at the first eleven links.

1. Ignorance

Ignorance is the cause for life as we see it daily. It is the state in which one lacks the ability to know the true nature of existence and consequently of being bound to experience oneself and others and react positively, negatively, or indifferently as a result. In turn, actions bring results that cause us to experience life the way we do. We can say that not-knowing the workings of karma and its effects is the ground upon which we walk.

2. Karmic creation

What are positive and negative actions? Positive actions are those performed with a clear understanding and that bring beneficial results. Negative actions are those performed impulsively or under the influence of disturbing emotions, e.g. greed, hatred, stupidity. Killing is an example of a negative action carried out with the wish to gain what has not been freely given, e.g. meat or furs by hunting or fishing, land or resources by fighting wars.

The disturbing emotions that give rise to negative actions are aggression, pride, stupidity, jealousy, and miserliness. Aggression is the unfortunate state of mind that arises from personal disturbances projected on others. Pride is a major contributory factor for aggression and hurts both oneself and others needlessly. Stupidity is the general state of not understanding what is happening in the world; such individuals naturally react to experiences in a deluded way. Jealousy is the disturbing emotion that causes one to assume that others are undeservingly in a higher position, better off, wealthier, or more fortunate than oneself. Indifference also influences actions and non-actions. What is the origin of the three types of actions that many people even deny or vehemently refute? Ignorance, link one.

3. Consciousness

When recollecting how others see themselves, it is necessary for a doctor to recognize the unseparated mind that is the ground or the subtle consciousness, *alaya* in Sanskrit, that everyone has. The multifarious patterns of personal feelings, perceptions, and thoughts abide in the subtle ground consciousness as habits that ignite every move one makes. Even the slightest positive or negative thought leaves an imprint in the *alaya* consciousness; these habits are the energy, called “karmic winds,” that fan every action or deed. Karmic winds do not exist out of the blue

but are part and parcel of each and every subjective experience; they function incessantly and are never separated from the other consciousnesses. A living being unifies both mind and matter through the presence of the subtle, enduring consciousness.¹

4. Name and form

At the moment of conception the body and mind of an individual co-exist in what is explained as “the five aggregates,” which are form, feelings, cognition, mental events, and consciousness, the last four summarizing what is called “name” in this link.

5. The six perceptual entrances

Name and form evolve continuously after body and mind have united and an individual sets out on the tedious journey to identify himself. The physical form grows and develops by means of the perceptual consciousnesses, the reason why the fifth link is often referred to as “development,” in reliance upon sensual perceptions of objects. Therefore, the ongoing results of development are sensual experiences, because of the perceptual entrances or gates.

6. Contact

Once the perceptual entrances of the five sensory organs have been established, contact with physical objects perceived as outside oneself takes place and the discovery of a relationship between a perceiving subject and perceived objects is born. The first five perceptual entrances and their respective objects are: forms seen with our eyes; sounds heard with the help of our ears; tastes perceived with our tongue; smells perceived with our nose; tactile objects felt with our skin. It is important to remember the order of this presentation in order to understand experiences of being. Our five sensory organs enable us to make friends with the world. They lead to the first perception of mind, the seventh link in the gradual and incessant process of being.

7. Feeling

We could define a feeling as a pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral irritation felt with any of the sensory organs discussed in link six.

8. Grasping or involvement

Due to the sensual irritations felt at stage seven, grasping takes place. It is natural to cling to what feels pleasant and to reject what feels unpleasant, which is grasping or involvement in both cases. Avoiding what feels

1. For a detailed discussion of the eight consciousnesses, see Ven. Thragu Rinpoche, *Transcending Ego*, Namu Buddha Publ., Boulder, Co., 2001, pages 31-46.



THE WHEEL OF LIFE SHOWING THE TWELVE LINKS OF INTERDEPENDENT ORIGINATION

unpleasant is also said to be an involvement, namely with what is painful by wishing and trying to become free.

9. Taking or adoption

Grasping at what seems pleasant denotes trying to acquire what seems beneficial and to avoid what seems harmful. This leads to the next link, which is

10. Becoming.

I want to tell you a story from Tibet that demonstrates in which way individual perceptions and conceptions determine our world.

A man was on his way to a cemetery and found an old bone. Before contemplating the entire process of being, he asked himself, “How did this bone get here? Someone must have died. That person must have existed and been subject to the suffering of birth, ageing, and death.” He continued wondering, “Why is someone born into such a process?” He reflected the ten links we just looked at backwards and arrived at link one, ignorance that is responsible for the emotions and consciousness. Having reflected this process for a long time and meditated again and again, he reached the conclusion that ignorance gives

rise to being and all it entails. He attained freedom from the chains of the links that bind and reached the stage of self-realization, the first stage of Buddhahood.²

In order to understand ourselves and others, we need to know how life develops and becomes what we experience every day. Then we need to contemplate and meditate the process backwards, like the man in our story, until we recognize the source of an inadequate existence, which is ignorance. By practicing what is translated as “realizing the infallible law of causality forwards and backwards” from Tibetan, we can attain the first nirvana of freedom from the emotions. I have tried to present a short introduction to the incessant process of being-becoming as a setting to understand the totality of body and mind.

We have lived many lives and each has led to the next, the present most significant due to the energy that is the wind of karma accumulated through positive, negative, and neutral thoughts and deeds. An enlightened being has no karma but can manifest in the world through the power of wisdom, called “the wind of wisdom,” which caringly responds to the karma of ordinary beings in order to help them become better than before. What is the link between the past and present life?

2. For a detailed discussion of the three types of nirvana referred to as Buddhahood here, see Ven. Traleg Kyabgon Rinpoche, *What is Nirvana? An Overview of Nirvana in the Various Buddhist Traditions*, in: Thar Lam, August, 2004, pages 10-31.



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11. Rebirth

The link between the past and present life, called *bardo* in Tibetan, is simply the karmic wind and is not a physical form. But what is karmic wind? Habits that are based upon the undifferentiated *alaya* consciousness and that were sustained and developed during life. Even though a being in the *bardo* has no physical form, habits persist. A being in the *bardo* feels that it has the body it once had; it experiences self and others and grasps at pleasant and unpleasant feelings. It responds to its feelings and thinks, “I want this and do not want that.” A being in the *bardo* continues to long for things and is driven by sensual impulses that cannot be satisfied in a realm without forms. The bardo-being is said to have a mental body, which only exists as a feeling of actually possessing the physical body it left behind. The mental body is merely a projection of former habits. Other than the mental image, there is no body that can be found to exist for such a mind. Whatever is experienced during the state between one life and the next is nothing but a reflection of what that individual perpetuated and did during life.

There are two main types of experiences that determine the bardo-state: grasping and identification. Grasping refers to whatever passions an individual had during life. Identification can be likened to pride and intense

aggression. Both types determine the experiences a being in the *bardo* is forced to endure. For example, let us assume that someone was very attached to certain people, things, deceased loved ones, or circumstances during life. Such a reflection can become so intense that someone alive is able to perceive it. We often hear about people in the East who say that they have met deceased people at specific places and that things happened there. This is a reflection of very strong attachment to what once did take place.

Every deceased individual will abide in a non-physical state in the *bardo* for a while, the length of time depending upon various factors. *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* tells us that the *bardo* lasts forty-nine days; this is a general statement though. Satisfactorily discussing this topic would lead us into deep spirituality and away from the topic of medical care in the Tibetan tradition. Let me just say before closing that the continuous wind of karma from a past life functions and determines this life and that living beings can take birth in different ways: through a miraculous birth, through heat and moisture, from an egg, and from a womb, as in our case.

Thank you very much

Translated from German and interpreted for Thar Lam by Gaby Hollmann.