

Belief, Perspective and Practice of Mantra Healing in Traditional Bhutanese Medicine: A Qualitative exploratory Study

Namgay Lhamo. Sr. Lecturer, FoTM

Abstract

The word ‘mantra’ in the ancient Sanskrit means protection of mind. Hence mantra may be defined as a means to protect from all kinds of sufferings, ranging from small pains to serious physical, mental and emotional illnesses. This exploratory study was conducted at the Faculty of Traditional Medicine, Thimphu. The study intends to understand the underlying belief, perspectives and incorporation of mantra healing into daily clinical practice of *gSo-rig* practitioners at the National Traditional medicine Hospital in Thimphu. Data was collected using Focus Group Discussion with six participants, who were purposely selected owing to their work experience and expertise in *gSo-ba Rigpa*, the Traditional Bhutanese Medicine. Findings of the study indicate that mantra healing plays an important role in the life of *gSo-rig* practitioners, which to some extent has an influence on their daily clinical practice.

Introduction

In spite of the growth of scientific knowledge in medicine, spiritual healing has survived throughout the globe and continues to flourish. Spiritual healing is often associated with a holistic approach and with a general interest in complementary medicine. There are various explanations for how spiritual healing works, including metaphysical, magnetic, psychological and social processes. Most spiritual healers maintain that there are divine energies which are transformed from the spiritual level by the healer and which produce a beneficial effect on the energy field of the patient (Aldridge, 1991). While spiritual healing has often been dismissed as a placebo response, there has been extensive research investigating the effect of spiritual healing on cell, lower organisms, on animals

and human illnesses, which showed the evidence that spiritual healing has direct positive impact on them (Benor, 1990). The demand for holistic approach to care has been adopted by some nursing groups and some general practitioners have shown the willingness to entertain the idea of spiritual healing and incorporate it into their daily practice (Cohen, 1989). They remind us that in caring for patients there is a need to include spiritual needs and to allow for the expression of those needs.

Of the various kinds of spiritual healings, mantra healing is one which has been used extensively in the Himalayan region for thousands of years. The word 'mantra' from the ancient Sanskrit means protection of mind; the syllable 'man' means 'mind' and 'tra' means 'protection or rescue'. Hence the mantric tradition would define mantra as a means to protect from all kinds of suffering, ranging from small pains to serious illnesses, from physical needs to natural disasters and from emotional stress to psychiatric disorders (Pamela, 2014). As their Sanskrit etymology suggests, mantras are 'instruments of mind', holding firm awareness that they help to generate various effects and qualities in the one who recites them or on whom they are recited. Sometimes practitioner may simply chant the mantra themselves while at other times the patient may be encouraged to listen to the sound of the mantra being chanted. Further, mantras can also be made into amulets to be worn for protection from diseases, bad luck and evil spirits.

The origin of mantra healing dates back to the ancient sages from Dharma countries like Shangshung, Oddiyana, and India. During the ancient times when there was no culture of medicine, certain people who were afraid of the dangers of worldly sufferings took renunciation into the mountains and dense forests. Those sages, the so-called 'upright ones' or drang-srong obtained states of profound meditative absorption or 'samadhi' by isolating their minds and bodies. As a result, through their clairvoyance and meditative concentration received the

power of mantras and their power of healing. It was those sages who provided convenient methods for curing diseases and preventing infections to beings tormented by illness and negative spiritual forces. Therefore, mantras form the cornerstone of the history of medical treatment and its healing properties, as it all started in the beginning with mantras (IATTM, 2016).

Although mantra chanting is over 5000 years old, its effect on the health and wellbeing are still being assessed. For instance, a study by Bernardi, *et al.* (2001) showed that reciting mantra is good for cardiovascular health because it helps to produce a synchronized rhythm essential for maintaining good blood pressure and heart rate. Mantra chanting is also found to activate areas of the brain that help with language skills during memory loss (Khalsa, *et al.*, 2009). Such activation and deactivation of the brain has been found to be important in modern clinical approaches for treating mental health disorders and diseases. Moreover, a study by Bhatt and Gupta (2013) of the effects of mantra chanting on stress management indicated a feeling of wellbeing, inner peace, better concentration, good emotional balance, and deeper empathy for others.

Mantra healing had become an important part of *gSo-ba Rig-pa* in the eighth century during which the great spiritual master Guru Padmasambhava established Vajrayana Buddhism in Tibet and founded the lineage of Tantric mantras. (SKI, n.d). There are several examples of instructions on mantra healing in *Gyud-Zhi*, the four medical tantras of *gSo-ba Rig-pa*. The text makes numerous references to various mantra healings to apply on specific health disorders. Most of these references to mantra healing are made in the Third Tantra (*Me-ngag Gyud*) or Oral Transmission.

gSo-ba Rig-pa is a medical science, which focuses on maintaining the balance of the three humours-wind, bile and phlegm. These three humours are the subtle energies which are responsible for the maintenance of good health. When they

are in balance, our body enjoys good health; while illness occurs when they become imbalanced. When this happens, physicians apply the remedy of the four traditional approaches: diet, lifestyle, medicine and external therapies. Mantra healing can be synchronized with these approaches. For example, preparation of mantra water and mantra butter corresponds to general diet based therapies. Reciting and wearing mantra amulets accord with lifestyle therapies. Most importantly, reciting mantras during the application of external therapies such as, moxibustion, cupping, and bloodletting, etc. can not only increase the healing power of these treatments but also prevent procedures from going wrong and cause adverse effects. Therefore, this study seeks to explore the belief, perspective and practice of mantra healing in gSo-ba Rigpa, the Traditional Bhutanese Medicine (TBM). Specifically, the study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What role does mantra healing play in TBM?
2. How do the gSo-rig practitioners (Drungtshos) perceive the effect of mantra (*Ngag*) on health and healing?
3. Is mantra healing incorporated with the daily clinical practice by the gSo-rig practitioners?
4. Is mantra healing included in the *gSo-ba Rig-pa* training curriculum?

Methods

This was a descriptive exploratory study conducted at the Faculty of Traditional Medicine (FoTM), Thimphu. Participants were selected using purposeful sampling to include the lecturers from FoTM, gSo-rig practitioners from National Traditional Medicine Hospital (NTMH) and officials from sMen-jong gSo-rig Pharmaceuticals (MSP). To collect the information, a “Focus Group Discussion” (FGD) was conducted making use of semi-structured interviews in an informal way so as to allow participants to speak freely and spontaneously.

Qualitative methods such as, FGDs are included to provide researchers with means of collecting data that can be used to construct a descriptive account of the phenomenon being investigated (Dollar & Merrigan, 2002). They are particularly useful because they allow a researcher to uncover people's subjective attitudes and expressions that are typically inaccessible through other means (Kruger & Casey). The study was designed to make it possible to be carried out independently by a single investigator within a short period of time, while assuring quality. All FGDs were tape recorded with permission of the participants. Word data were also collected by using field notes. Data recorded were transcribed immediately after the FGD was over.

The anonymity of the participants was protected in this report and the word "participants", "they" or "their" have been chosen to further protect the identity of participants and to illustrate how their statements are representative of all the focus group participants.

Data Analysis

The transcribed data from the audiotapes and field notes were analyzed using the qualitative method of data analysis for FGD, which involves processes like coding, categorizing and making sense of the essential meanings of the words, phrases and statements made during the discussion to create common essences or themes. The typed transcripts and field notes were reviewed thoroughly by the investigator to ensure accuracy. All these required total immersion into the organization and interpretation of information in order to discover the important underlying patterns and trends.

Findings and Discussion

The analysis of key findings from interview transcripts and field notes revealed five qualitatively different conceptions or themes related to the belief,

perspective and practices of mantra healing in *gSo-ba Rig-pa*. These themes include: 1. Mantra healing as an indispensable part of *gSo-ba Rigpa*, 2. Mantra healing as a clinical energizer, 3. Inclusion of mantra healing in the training curriculum and 4. The gap between theory and practice, and 5. The way forward and their challenges. The themes or findings are elaborated below and some excerpts from the FGDs are included into the discussion to provide the reader with better understanding and appreciation of the ways in which mantra healing is viewed by the gSo-rig practitioners.

1. Mantra healing as an indispensable part of *gSo-ba Rigpa*

The focus group members expressed that in theory, a gSo-rig practitioner should have accomplished reciting mantra of a particular deity (*Yidam*) for 10 million times or more, which then becomes his/her root mantra (*Sawai ngag*). Having done this, any mantra that he/she chants later on becomes very powerful, regardless of the number of times recited. As a result, many gSo-rig practitioners in the past went for retreat in secluded places for as long as three years (*Lo-sum Cho-sum*) or even more in order to attain the accomplishment of chanting mantra multiple times, so that they can apply it to their clinical practice. For the same reason, in the past, most practitioners were either monks or gurus (*Lamas*) unlike the present days where we have practitioners of all traits. Data also revealed that mantra recitation and prayers are an important part of their lives:

We senior Drungtshos have the habit to recite mantra and prayers every day, mornings and evenings, not sure about the younger generation Drungtshos. Don't know what will happen from now onwards.

The younger group also shared the same view and added that they do have faith and know the healing values associated with mantra but putting it into practice regularly has been a battle yet to be fought.

2. Mantra healing as a clinical energizer

All participants strongly believed that application of mantra during clinical intervention has added advantage in healing. The power of mantras can be incredibly strong as remarked by a senior gSo-rig practitioner:

I've seen and experienced the power of mantra myself. At one time a lama in Tibet blew a mantra on water, which boiled instantly. He also blew it on my body and I could feel its effect strongly. My body was reacting to it with signs of shiver and all.

Others in the group nodded with signs of acceptance to his statements. The group expressed that mantra recitation can have an energizing effect if applied during the treatment processes, especially for coarse external therapies such as blood letting, golden needle therapy, moxabustion, etc.

I had a bad experience with blood letting some years ago. As I made an incision on the patient's forehead, blood gushed out like water from a pipe smearing over my face. I had to run to my lama for help, who then blew mantra on a cotton and put it on the cut to stop the bleeding instantly.

At the NTMH, practitioners generally put mantra healing into practice, especially during the coarse external therapies, although applying it to all types of treatments would be more ideal. Mantras, as revealed by the focus group data, can also have an energizing effect on all kinds of medicines, if applied on them. This is because blessed medicines will have the double potency of its medicinal components (*zey*) and the mantra (*ngag*). This is called “*zey dang ngag gi nue-pa*” in Dzongkha, meaning the coupled power of substance and mantra.

3. Inclusion of mantra healing in the training curriculum

Data from the FGDs explain that there are different types of mantras, which are meant to be applied for specific type of diseases. For example, a mantra applied

for an eye disease may differ from those applied for headache and so on. However, it is generally accepted that if one has mastered the root mantra of a deity, the practitioner can apply it on any kind of disease. The use of various kinds of mantras can be found in a book called “Me-pham Ka-bum”. Trainees are recommended to use it as an important reference. In the training curriculum, only Medicine Buddha Mantra (MBM) has been included as the medical text *Gyud-zhi* focuses on it as an elixir of healing. This MBM is believed to be universal and can be very effective to heal any kind of disease. Students are required to learn and practice them extensively during their training period. In addition, the use of mantra during the collection of raw materials and manufacture of herbal medicines are taught in detail.

4. The gap between theory and practice

Information from the FGDs indicates that there exists some gap between what the practitioners learn in theory during their training period and their actual practice in the field after the training, especially with regard to application of mantra. First, for the collection of medicinal plant raw materials, theory requires strict adherence to the procedures explained in the *Gyud-zhi*, such as having to look for a special person with auspicious name, auspicious birth year and so on. This has to synchronize with specific chanting of mantras or prayers. Second, during the manufacture of the medicines too, it needs to be blessed with mantra and prayers to maximize its potency. Third, all gSo-rig practitioners are required to adopt mantra recitation and prayers as an important part of their daily lives and accordingly apply it in their clinical practice. Unfortunately, not all of such requirements are being met today due to practical problems with change of time. For example, one participant offered a statement that was representative of the comments of the whole group:

In the past the whole process had been a one man's show. A single Drungtsho collected the raw materials, dried them, processed them into medicine and administered them to the patients. So it was possible for him to follow the procedures strictly as described in the text. Now many people are involved as the demand for gSo-rig medicine have increased drastically.

The participant further remarked:

Even the scientists are experimentally proving the power of mantra healing these days. So we need to preserve our age old culture. But I don't see our drungthsos, especially the younger ones reciting anything. May be they are not comfortable.

The group indicated their concern over such gaps between theory and practice, which may ultimately weaken the effectiveness and efficiency of medicines and treatments offered by TBM.

5. The way forward and associated challenges

Data from the transcript implies that attempts are constantly being made to close the existing gap between theory and practice. The gaps arise not because of negligence or incompetency but due to certain hindering factors that have changed with time - the increased demand for gSo-rig medicines, requirement to comply with GMP and GCP guidelines, use of modern technologies, are few of them. Nevertheless, plans are on the way to do what they could for the betterment of our traditional medicine. For example, since it is not possible to bless the medicines every time they are being manufactured, they have plans to develop “sMendrup”, a specific medicine which is thoroughly blessed through rituals and mantras by highly accomplished spiritual masters. The “sMendrup” can then be used to add in minute quantities during the manufacture of gSo-rig medicines.

Attempts are also being made to encourage the gSo-rig practitioners to practice mantra recitation at home and during their clinical practice to make healings more effective. At one point of time proposals were submitted to develop training programmes which require extensive spiritual practices such as “*Lo-sum Cho-sum*” but such proposals failed to get validated due to lack of concrete support for expected outcomes. Despite all these challenges, TBM has not only survived but also continues to gain its popularity year after year both nationally and internationally.

Conclusion

The findings of the study indicate that mantra healing is an indispensable part of *gSo-ba Rig-pa*. gSo-rig practitioners express their strong belief and faith in the healing power of mantra recitation and its added advantage in clinical practice. Hence, students at FoTM are required to master the content of Medicine Buddha Mantra during their training period so as to enable them to put into use when they become full-fledged gSo-rig practitioners. However, some gaps between the theory and practice have been observed as the practitioners often fail to live up to expectation regarding the incorporation of mantra into their clinical intervention. Nevertheless, efforts are being made constantly to keep alive the rich and unique spiritual values associated with mantra healing and its indispensable connection with *gSo-ba Rig-pa*, the Traditional Bhutanese Medicine.

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