

## “Sowa - Rigpa” : Himalayan art of healing

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*Sowa-Rigpa* commonly known as Tibetan or Amchi medicine is among the oldest surviving well-documented medical traditions of the world. With the living history of more than 2500 years it has been popularly practiced in Himalayan regions throughout central Asia. In India it has been popularly practiced in Ladakh, Himachal Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, Darjeeling and now in Tibetan settlements all over India. Originated from India *Sowa-Rigpa* is based on *Jung-wa-lna* (Panch Mahabhuha /five elements) and *Nespa gSum* (Tri-dosh/ three humours) theories. According to these all animate and inanimate phenomena of this universe are composed of *Jung-wa-lna* (five elements). It is on the theory of five basic elements that the science of physiology, pathology and pharmacology is established. This paper gives an introductory note on history, theory and practice of *Sowa-Rigpa* (Science of healing) in India.

**Keywords:** Sowa-Rigpa, Amchi, Tibetan medicine.

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### Historical background

*Sowa-Rigpa* commonly known as Amchi or Tibetan medicine is one of the oldest surviving and well-documented medical traditions of the world. It has been popularly practiced in Tibet, Mongolia, Bhutan, some parts of China, Nepal, Himalayan regions of India and few parts of former Soviet Union. There is a conflicting account about the origin of this medical tradition. Some scholars believe that it has originated from India; some say China and others consider it to be of Tibetan origin. However, before introduction of present medical system a kind of *Bon* (pre-Buddhism religion of Tibet)

folk medicine was prevalent in Tibet, but if we give a close look, the majority of theory and practice of *Sowa-Rigpa* are similar to Indian medical system Ayurveda, followed by few Chinese principals and then prevailing Tibetan folklore. The first Ayurvedic influence was observed in Tibet during 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD but it became popular only after 7<sup>th</sup> century with the advent of Buddhism in Tibet. Thereafter this trend of exportation of Indian medical literature, along with Buddhism and other Indian art and sciences was continued till early 19<sup>th</sup> century. India being the birthplace of Buddha and Buddhism has always been a favorite

place for learning Buddhist art and culture for Tibetan students, many Indian scholars were also invited to Tibet for propagation 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 about twenty-five texts related to medicine are also preserved in both canonical and non-canonical forms of Tibetan literature. Much of this knowledge was further enriched in Tibet with the knowledge and skills of neighboring countries and their own ethnic knowledge.

Present Tibetan medical system *Sowa-Rigpa* (Science of healing) is one of the classic examples of it. *Rgyud-bzi* the fundamental textbook of this medicine was first translated from India and enriched in Tibet with its own folklore and other medical traditions like Greek and Persian. After Tibet the impact of *Sowa-Rigpa* along with Buddhism and other Tibetan art and sciences was felt in neighboring Himalayan regions. In India this system is practiced in Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh, Darjeeling (West Bengal), Lahoul & Spiti (Himachal Pradesh) and Ladakh region of Jammu & Kashmir.

#### **Sowa-Rigpa : an important socio-cultural part of Himalayas**

*Sowa-Rigpa* is popularly known as Amchi medicine in most part of Indian Himalayas. Derived from the Mangolian word "Am-rjay" it means superior to all. The practitioners of this medicine are known as *Amchis*. Till early 1960s Amchi

medicine used to be the only health care facility for the people of these regions and even after the introduction of modern medicine with all government support, the latter could not replace Amchi system in many parts of Himalayn Buddhist society due to its strong socio-cultural background. *Amchis* have not only social respect but also spiritual respect as the representatives of *Sangyas-smanla* (Medicine Buddha) and their services for ailing beings are priceless. Every major village and hamlet has been having an *Amchi* of its own since ages. Besides treating the patients as doctor of the village *Amchis* are most learned and resourceful persons of the village. It was therefore being an *Amchi* has been a matter of great dignity in the Ladakhi society. It takes several years to become a skillful *Amchi*; which requires hard theoretical and practical training. In most of Himalayan regions *Amchis* are trained through *rgudpa* (lineage) system in families (Father to son). After finishing their training the new *Amchi* has to give an examination in front of entire community in presence of few expert *Amchis* in a ceremony to enroll himself as an *Amchi* of the village. But for further study many *Amchis* used to go to Tibet. The relation between *Amchi* and patients is always cordial due to strong religious background and social systems. *Amchis* never ask for cost of their medicine and services; whatever the patients wish or afford they can offer and most of the time the treatment is given free. The villagers offer crops during harvesting time and free labour every year to the *Amchi* family for their services. With time and

modernity things are rapidly changing and the ancient way of practicing Amchi medicine is replaced with modern formal clinics and professional training (Six year BTMS degree course).

### **Philosophical background**

The fundamental textbook *rgyud-bzi* of *Sowa-Rigpa* is believed to be taught by Buddha; therefore it is closely linked with Buddhist philosophy. The followers believe that whether they are physically healthy or not, all of us are sick till we attain Nirvana. Even though disease might not be manifested, it is always present in dormant form until we give up root cause of sickness i.e. ignorance. Ignorance gives rise to three basic root of sickness *Nespa-gsum* (*Tri-dosha*) i.e. *Dod-chags* (desire/lust) root cause of *rlung* (Air, Vata), *Zes sdang* (anger) root cause of *mkris-pa* (Bile, Pitta) and *Ti-mug* (mental darkness) root cause of *pad-kan* (Phlegm, Kapha). Due to presence of 84000 afflictive emotions in mind it gives rise to the same number of diseases. Thus Bhagwan Buddha preached 84000 kinds of teachings. The animate and inanimate phenomena of the universe are composed of same material basis of *Jung-wa-lna* (five elements) due to the Karma of all the living beings. The behavior and conduct of physician and patient are also largely based on Buddhist principles. A Buddhist tantra and mantra ritual plays a very important role in the treatment of patients.

It is mentioned in *rgyud-bzi* that when Buddha taught this text as manifestation of *Tang srong-rigpai-yeshes*, physicians of four different medical systems were present;

i.e. Gods, Rishis, Buddhist and non-Buddhist and all of them understood his teachings as their own system. Another text mentions that when Brahma remembered medical science for the first time, he recalled the medical teachings of Buddha Kashyapa in an earlier aeon, thus it seems that Buddha Kashyapa is the medical teacher of Brahma.

### **The basic theory**

*Sowa-Rigpa* is based on the principles of *Jung-wa-lna* (English — five elements, Sanskrit — Panch-mahabhuta) and *Nespa gsum* (English — three humours, Sanskrit — Tridosh). All animate and inanimate phenomena of this universe are composed of *Jung-wa-lna*; namely sa, Chu, Mai, rlung and Nam mkha (Roughly translated as earth, water, fire, air and space, Sanskrit — Dharti, Jal, Agni, Vayu and Akash). The science of physiology, pathology and pharmacology of this system is established on these theories. Which means our body is composed of these five cosmo-physical elements of *Jung-wa-lna*; when the ratio of these elements becomes imbalanced in our body, disorders result. The medicine and diet used for the treatment of disorders are also composed of the same five basic elements. In the body these elements are present in the form of *Nespa gsum* (Three humours) Luszung-Ldun (English — seven physical constituents, Sanskrit — Sapt Dhatu) and *Tema gsum* (English — three excretion, Sanskrit — Tri mala). In drugs, diet and drinks they exist in the form of Ro-tug (Six tastes), Nuspa (potencies), Yontan (quality) and Zujres (post digestive taste). It is in 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**

A healthy body is typified as a state of balance of three humours (Nespa-gsum), seven physical constituents (Luszung-lidun) and three excretions (Tema-gsum) in the body with complete harmony of five aggregates (five senses). The three humours are air (rlung), bile (mkris-pa) and phlegm (pad-kan), which are further divided into fifteen types of humours. 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. Healthy and unhealthy state of body is largely dependent on the balance and imbalance of these twenty-five elements due to proper diet and behavioral patterns. The subject of human body is finely explained in *Sowa-Rigpa* with different chapters on embryology, anatomy, physiology and neurology in an appropriate manner with functions of each and every part of the body.

### **Outline of disease**

It has already been mentioned that the science of *Sowa-Rigpa* is closely linked with Buddhist philosophy, where it is believed that all the breathing creatures on the earth are sick till they don't give up the root cause i.e. ignorance. Due to ignorance

three mental poisons namely anger, desire and mental darkness are born within us, which act as basic origin of illness and give birth to three humours. When the ratio of three humours i.e. air, bile and phlegm is out of balance due to circumstantial conditions such as diet, lifestyle, seasonal and mental conditions gives rise to different kinds of disorders. Diseases can be classified in terms of different methods such as location in the body, type, etc. Due to presence of 84000 different types of afflictive emotions in the mind the number of disorder also goes up to 84000. These can be condensed into 1016 types, further 404 types, 101 types, three humours and finally into two types i.e. hot and cold disorders. The outline of disorder is explained in detail with complete note on initiation of disease, location, pathways, time of arising, fatal effect, side effects, etc.

### **Diagnosis**

A physician of *Sowa-Rigpa* employs three main tools for diagnosing a patient i.e. visual diagnosis, diagnosis by touch and diagnosis by questioning. Visual diagnosis comprises of two main methods of tongue examination and Urine analysis. Various diseases can be diagnosed by checking the nature, color and smoothness etc. of the tongue; urine can be analyzed on three different stages of fresh urine, while it is cooling down and when it is cold by looking at its color, speed of discoloring, vapor, odor, bubbles, sediments, etc.

Diagnosis by touch is represented by the advanced technique of pulse examination followed by touching the body for temperature and smoothness, etc. Pulse is the most important and major diagnostic tool in

*Sowa-Rigpa*, which is explained under thirteen general topics like preparatory conduct, proper time for examination, place, pressure of physician's finger, technique, constitutional pulse, astonishing pulse, general and specific pulse, death pulse, etc. Questioning is another mode of diagnosing a patient; history of case, present condition, family background and changes in body, etc. are main questions asked.

### Treatment

The treatment has four major sections — diet, behaviour, medicine and accessory/external therapies. Right administration of these four sections is very important for treating a patient in an appropriate manner. Minor ailments can be treated with proper regulation of diet and behavior only; a patient with medium state of condition can be treated with medicine like decoction, powder, pills, purgatives, emetics, etc. and in advanced stages disease can be cured by application of accessory/external therapies like moxabustion, venesection, fomentation, massage, surgery, etc. As mentioned above in the outline of disease all disorders can be condensed into three humours, accordingly the treatment of disease is also possible under three-humour basis. Buddhist rituals and mantra also play a very important role in the treatment of disease and in pharmaceutical process, etc.

It is a known fact that role of a physician is very important in treatment of a patient; therefore special emphasis is given on this aspect in this system of medicine.

### Pharmacology

Based on the theory of *Jung-wa-lna*, *Sowa-Rigpa* believes that every substance

on the earth has medicinal value and therapeutic efficacy. Medicinal substances are classified into eight major categories i.e. *Rinpoche sman* (prized metal and stone), *sa sman* (drugs from mud and earth), *rdo sman* (stones), *shing sman* (drugs from trees), *rtsi sman* (essence and exudates medicines), *thang sman* (plant ingredient for decoction/shrub), *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 permutation and combination that is *ro* (taste) based combination and *nus pa* (potencies)-based combination. There are about seventeen different categories of medicinal preparation out of which some important preparations are decoction, powder, pills, linctus, medicated ghee, Bhasmas, medicated wine, paste, medicated bath.

The elemental composition of a drug is determined on the basis of the six major tastes i.e. sweet, sour, saline, pungent, astringent and bitter. Elemental composition of sweet taste is predominated by *sa* (earth) and *chu* (water) elements; sour taste is predominated by *mai* (fire) and *sa* (earth); saline is predominated 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 taste alleviates *rlung nespa* (Air humour), which is dominated by *rlung* (air) element. Bitter, sweet and astringent taste alleviates *nespa*

*mkris-pa* (bile humour), which is dominated by *mai* (fire) elements. Pungent sour and saline taste alleviates *nespa pad kan* (phlegm humour) which is dominated by *sa* (earth) and *chu* (water) elements. Other important factors for understanding drugs composition and action are *Zu zes sum* (three post digestive taste) *nuspa-rgyad* (eight potency) and *no bo* (specific action) of particular drugs. The therapeutic efficacy of drugs is also dependent on the above factors.

### Conclusion

*Sowa-Rigpa* is a rich accumulation of science, art and philosophy with history of more than 2500 years. It is based on holistic approach of body and mind for leading a healthy way of life with complete harmony with nature. It 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-walna*. It is an art because its diagnostic techniques and composition of medicine, etc. are based on the creativity and compassion of the medical practitioner. And it is a philosophy because it follows the key Buddhist principles of self-sacrifice, karma and ethics. Therefore *Sowa-Rigpa* is a complete guide for leading a healthy way of life with balanced body and mind.

Till now the practice of this ancient art of healing has been sustained due to its efficacy and strong socio-cultural basis in most part of Indian Himalayas. But since last two three decades the system is on

decline in these regions due to lack of support from Government, national and international organizations. Although little development can be seen in shape of few formal *Amchi* clinics and Institutional training facilities, etc, but the biggest set back for the survival of this tradition in the coming generations is the lack of interest among young educated people in absence of good Government job opportunities. Most of the ancient *Amchi* families have already lost their family tradition and are only left with their family names. Therefore an appropriate action from Government, national and international organizations is required to save this age-old healing system for the next generation.

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