

An Insight into Traditional Bhutanese Medicine

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Abstract

The Traditional Bhutanese Medicine is called *gSo.ba Rig.pa*. Originally expounded by the Medicine Buddha himself and flawlessly articulated by great saints and masters of the past, *gSo.ba Rig.pa* literally refers to the 'knowledge of healing'. This system of healing came into universal existence when extraordinary pre-destined Indian healer practiced it widely following the valuable teachings of the Medicine Buddha. He then passed onto his principle disciples followed by a succession of numerous learned healers who were responsible for spreading the healing practice in Tibet and other Himalayan countries including Nepal and Bhutan. It is the most sacred and vital of all sciences as it comprises a holistic and inclusive knowledge of science, arts and philosophy. The profound knowledge embedded in *gSo.ba Rig.pa* convinces us with the basic cause of human suffering and the ways to reduce or escape from it.

Introduction

gSo.ba Rig.pa, the knowledge of healing is the most sacred orally transmitted secret precept of the medicine Buddha himself which was expounded by sage Yidlay Kye as his speech emanation and sage Rigpai Yeshey as his heart emanation. These were later articulated in detail by eminent scholars and masters of the time. *gSo.ba Rig.pa* is believed to be a precept, treatise and concealed treasure but most probably with a vast content and profound meaning of the four medical tantras, which clearly depicts some credentials revealing the direct precept of the medicine Buddha himself (*gSo.rig Gyud.zhi*, n.d.) As clearly described in the origin of *gSo.ba Rig.pa* by Wangdi and Wangdi (2008), it is depicted that *gSo.ba Rig.pa* flourished through the beings of the higher realms during the age of perfection, during which beings of higher realm could emit their own rays for vision and survive on the meditative diet (*ting-nye-zin gi zey*).

However, at one instant after having consumed a smooth soil amrita, supernatural powers of being able to emit rays and survive on meditative diet disappeared, followed by appearance of diseases and sufferings. This began with the appearance of the first obscure day followed by the appearance of sun and moon depicting the beginning of the existence of the god realm. Similarly, human existence during the age of perfection also enjoyed the same fortune of being able to emit their own rays and survive on meditative diet. Unfortunately, a human being named Shaedbu ate a soft earthed soil and suffered a severe indigestion. He uttered the sound of suffering which was heard by the supreme god, Lha Tsangpa who compassionately prepared and offered some boiled water which instantly alleviated the pain that Shaedbu was going through. Eventually, it had been believed that the first ever disease that inflicted man was indigestion, Shaedbu the first patient and boiled water the first medicine, and Lha Tsangpa the first physician to practice medicine after the Medicine Buddha bestowed the oral precepts (Wangdi & Wangdi, 2008). However, the knowledge of healing came into universal existence only when extraordinary pre-destined Indian healer called Tshojey Zhoenu widely practiced *gSo.ba Rig.pa* following the valuable medicine guidance of the Buddha synchronized with His four noble truths. He then passed onto his principle disciples

followed by a succession of numerous learned healers who are responsible for spreading the healing practice in Tibet.

***gSo.ba Rig.pa* in Bhutan**

Historically, every aspect of Dharma flourished in Bhutan through Tibet and the same is the case with *gSo.ba Rig.pa* popularly known as traditional medicine in Bhutan. *gSo.ba Rig.pa* as introduced by several traditional healers (Drungtshos) who had the fortune of studying in Tibet. However, the most recognized figure who established the very basis of *gSo.ba Rig.pa* in Bhutan was a Tibetan native healer called Ladakh Amji. He was recognized as the most professional and prominent healer of his generation, followed by other Bhutanese pioneer healers namely Drungtsho Sherab Jordan, Drungtsho Pem Dorji, Drungtsho Singye Namgyal etc. (Wangchuck, 2008). The credit goes to His Majesty the third Druk Gyalpo Jigme Dorji Wangchuck who commanded to establish a Bhutanese indigenous hospital in 1967. Subsequently, a small traditional dispensary was officially established at Dechencholing in 1968. However, it did not flourish much as was expected to be. Fortunately, the Dharma king, the fourth Druk Gyalpo, His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck with a great concern for the indigenous medicine commanded the introduction of the first ever Bachelor degree course in *gSo.ba Rig.pa* for Drungtsho in 1978. Ladakh Amji was appointed as the first Principal in a small indigenous medicine dispensary and training centre at Dechencholing. Later in 1979, it was shifted to the current place in Kawangjangsa and the service of traditional medicine has been perfectly executed thereafter. So, on the 60th birth anniversary of the fourth Druk Gyalpo, we the family of indigenous medicine come together to express our heartfelt respect and deepest gratitude to His Majesty for being the indispensable component of the existence of the *gSo-ba Rig-pa* system of medicine and its prominence in the country today. We wish His Majesty a very long life and may happiness continue to prevail in the country.

***gSo.ba Rig.pa* services**

Except for the emergency cases, delivery and surgical operations, *gSo-ba Rig-pa* provides a wide range of services through its unique healing techniques such as, golden needle therapy and moxibustion which mainly cures cold related diseases and venesection which is the therapeutic way of extracting diseased blood from the body commonly used to cure the heat related diseases. The cold and heat related diseases are thought to be the two ultimate diseases amongst a thousand diseases according to the principles of *gSo.ba Rig.pa*. In addition, there are many other therapeutic services like hot oil compression, herbal steaming, herbal bath, local steaming, massage etc. which are used to treat several diseases like migraine, gout, arthritis, piles, insomnia, sinusitis and so on.

***gSo.ba Rig.pa* as an art, science and philosophy**

The philosophy of *gSo.ba Rig.pa* states that the root cause of disorders in our body is the ignorance (*marig.pa*), which is the state of not knowing the intrinsic reality of the lack of mind. It is due to this defect of ignorance that every sentient being suffer due to constant affliction by various kinds of illnesses. The specific cause of illnesses is ascribed to the three mental poisons (*Dug.sum*) of desire, hatred and delusion or close-mindedness that are rooted from the fundamental ignorance. This in turn causes the development of wind disorder (*rLung*), Bile (*Khriis.pa*) and Phlegm (*Bad.kan*) disorders respectively. In their balanced state, they function in harmony maintaining good health, while in an imbalanced state, they manifest as various health disorders causing pain and suffering to human life.

gSo.ba Rig.pa is a science as it not only depicts stages of the formation of the body from conception, foetal development and birth processes but also explains the anatomical structure of the human body revealed through the harmonious functions of the bodily constituents, the condition of the interconnecting nerves and the varieties of the bodily passages. *gSo.ba Rig.pa* is also an art as it uses three of the most skillful diagnostic methods to identify all aspects of diseases, which are examination through observation, pulse reading and interrogation. Observation includes examining the color of the eye, tongue, urine, face etc., while palpation serves as a messenger between the physician and the patient's body through pulse movement. The final and most common method is the interrogation practice in which the physician digs out the patient's diet and lifestyle history and tries to understand the nature and cause of disorders to make accurate diagnosis. Therefore, *gSo-ba Rig-pa* can be described as the perfection of life because of the profound content it provides, which enables us to tame the fundamental ignorance which is the root cause of all disorders and sufferings. It is the very essence of Dharma with indispensable qualities that guides one to attain nirvana.

Conclusion

The knowledge of healing through *gSo.ba Rig.pa* is as old as human civilization itself as there is a famous saying that every basis of learning is oriented from the ordinary custom ways of humanity. Medical remedies of the ancient civilization, for instance, used to combat any physical pain by compressing warm stone on the affected area, which to these days may have been modified and well executed as acupuncture. Similarly, spider waves and white fern extracts were used to stop bleeding. Such ancient remedies, one way or the other had contributed to the development of *gSo-ba Rig-pa* providing validity to its existence way before the advancement of the modern allopathic medicine.

References

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བ་གྲ་ཀླ (*Corydalis crispa*)