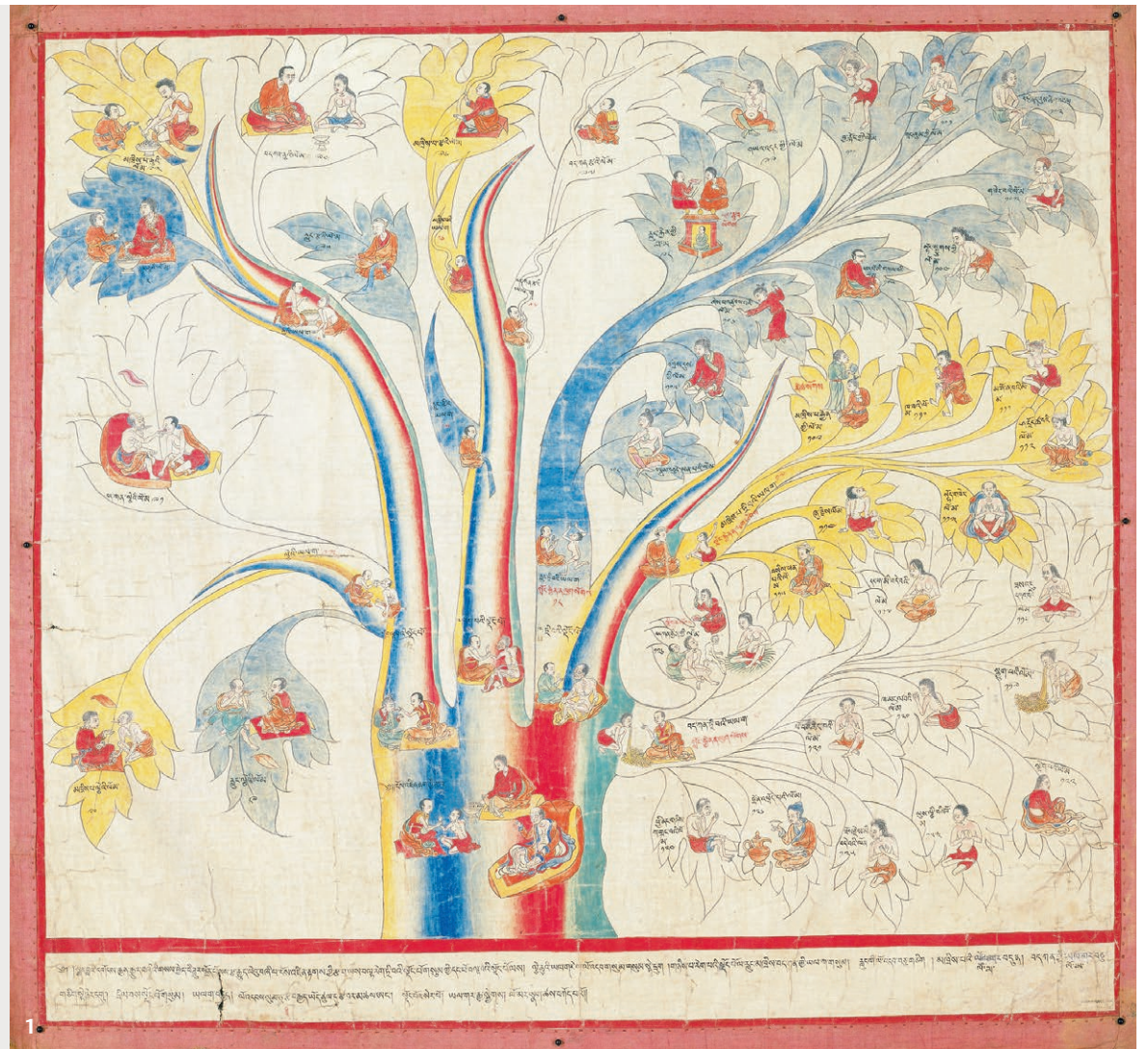


Bodies in Balance – The Art of Tibetan Medicine

‘Every physical substance on earth is a medicine’. This core Tibetan medical principle promises enormous potential as much as it raises profound questions: To what extent is food medicine? What about poisons – do Tibetan doctors use these in their medicines? How do they come up with a placebo when testing Tibetan drugs today? As in Hindu and Buddhist cosmology, Tibetan medicine holds that the entire universe is made up of five elements: earth, water, fire, air, and space. Within the body Tibetan doctors (*amchi*) recognise three *nyepas* – the ‘forces’ of wind, bile and phlegm – that are specific combinations of the five elements.

Theresia Hofer



EVERY INDIVIDUAL FROM BIRTH, and each disease, comes with a particular elemental composition. Within this broad and interconnected medical and philosophical context, doctors and pharmacists have sought to understand how body and mind relate and how they interact with the environment. A crucial means to do so has been through taste. Sweet, sour, salty and hot tasting substances counteract wind disorders and reduce the wind *nyepa*; bitter, sweet and astringent tasting materials cure bile related disorders; and hot, sour and salty tasting substances cure phlegm ailments.

Curating an exhibition on Tibetan medicine was never going to be easy; just consider the fact that its practitioners study the mere basics over a period of at least four years. What helped in making this complex medical system accessible to visitors, and introducing them to some of Tibetan medicine's core ideas, were the existing Tibetan medical illustrations used to instruct students and doctors: the so-called ‘medical trees’ (Fig. 1). These ‘trees’, through their trunks, branches, leaves, flowers and fruits, detail the first few chapters of the core medical text, the *Four Tantras*, and aid students in memorizing and recalling the contents during exams and practical work. In the exhibition we present different iterations of these trees and utilise their colour scheme to guide visitors throughout: pale blue for wind, yellow for bile and white for phlegm.

Simultaneously, this exhibition also aims to present a range of truly outstanding works of art, medical instruments and texts – 140 in total – that have been, and still are being used and produced in connection with this learned tradition, which has spread alongside Tibetan Buddhism across the Tibetan plateau, the Himalayas and to Mongolia and Buryatia, on its way adapting to vastly different ‘social ecologies’ (*Healing Elements*, by Sienna Craig, University of California Press, 2012) and artistic conventions.

The exhibition begins on floor five of the museum with a section on the Medicine Buddha, a pivotal figure in the Mahayana Buddhist world who many Tibetan doctors still see as the divine source of the *Four Tantras* text. We present for the very first time an exquisite Sino-Tibetan silk painting of the Medicine Buddha and Bodhisattvas from Dunhuang, dated to 836 CE. It has a named artist, whose purpose in creating the painting is clearly stated in a central caption: “to improve health and transfer merit to all living beings”. This piece from the British Museum is shown in the context of other paintings and statues of this Buddha in different materials and conventions, and from diverse origins (Fig. 2), now held in private and institutional collections worldwide.

The next section on this floor focuses on the foundational *Four Tantras* work, and its diverse cultural and medical influences from India, China, Persia and the Tibetan plateau. Yuthog Yontan Gonpo, a Tibetan from the 12th century, is presented as its author although the work itself states the Medicine Buddha as the source, a means of lending it authority. Another key figure in the history of this tradition was Sangye Gyatso, the Regent to the Fifth Dalai Lama in 17th century Tibet. He embarked on the unparalleled endeavour of

illustrating the entire medical system on 79 large paintings, each corresponding to one or more chapters of his commentary on the *Four Tantras*. They were used in the Chagpori Medical College he established. His work is presented here alongside other scholars and their contributions.

The 4th floor of the museum is entirely devoted to the theoretical foundations and practical application of medical procedures. The first section on this floor explores different representations of Tibetan medical and Buddhist understanding of how body and mind work – including the ‘tree of the body in health and illness’, a copy of Sangye Gyatso’s painting on embryological development and a range of anatomical charts. There follows a section on diagnosis, focusing on the pulse, and then three sections on Tibetan medical therapies, its general principles, pharmacology and external treatments. Last is a section that explores links between medicine and astrology, where amulets and a finely detailed and colourfully illustrated manuscript of Sangye Gyatso’s *White Beryl* (a text on astrology and divination) are displayed. In an interactive area of this floor, we feature a multi-media installation with videos and photographs from 17 places around the globe exploring how Tibetan medical practitioners adapt their work to new places and people (It can also be accessed online <http://balance.rubmuseum.org/take-the-tour>).

Throughout both floors we present several key Tibetan medical compounds, displaying their delightfully diverse ingredients in glass jars (Fig. 3). To start with the most basic Tibetan medical compound, ‘Three Fruits’, with 3 constituents; increasing in complexity to medicines with 5, 8, 11, 15 ingredients. It ends with a turquoise coloured silk-wrapped ‘precious pill’, which contains herbs and minerals, as well as precious substances, some of which have undergone complex chemical procedures to qualify as medicine. Present-day Tibetan doctors contributed directly to this part of the exhibition, bringing these medicines as well as 35 kinds of ready-made pills and powders, labelling each in Tibetan and English.

The exhibition is presented in such a way that visitors are free to choose their own path through the floors and sections. Visitors can also take a quiz that helps them determine their constitution and then follow a colour-coded path relating to their dominant *nyepa* force, thus personalising their exhibition experience.

Bodies in Balance is open until 8 September 2014 at the Rubin Museum of Art in New York, 150 West 17th Street, Chelsea. (www.rubmuseum.org) The exhibition is curated by Theresia Hofer (University of Oslo) with the assistance of Elena Pakhoutova (Rubin Museum of Art).

The exhibition catalogue, *Bodies in Balance – The Art of Tibetan Medicine*, edited by Theresia Hofer, features essays by leading historians, anthropologists, and practitioners of Tibetan medicine. It is a richly-illustrated volume, co-published by the Rubin Museum of Art and the University of Washington Press.

Fig 1. (above): ‘Tree of Diagnosis’, Tibet or Mongolia; date unknown. Pritzker Collection, Chicago.

Fig. 2 (right): Medicine Buddha Bhaisajyaguru with an entourage of eight Bodhisattvas. Tibet; 12th century. Private Collection.

Fig. 3 (below): Jars with ingredients and medicines in the galleries.

