

## Healing methods

Tibetan Buddhist medicine employs four main types of treatment, each progressively stronger in effect. This becomes five if one includes the invaluable course of avoiding medicalised treatments and letting the ailment resolve itself naturally, when the body is capable of defending itself. The four recourses of the healing art are:

1. Diet
2. Behaviour
3. Medication
4. "External" treatments, such as massage, moxibustion, minor surgery etc.

### Diet

The most important interactions between the elements forming the human body and those of the surrounding world occur through eating, drinking and breathing. At the very heart of good health lies the ability to find appropriate nourishment in food. Diet directly influences the three main biodynamics and the balance of the elements. Grains, for instance, are generally considered to maintain sexual potency, to combat excesses of *loong* biodynamic and to fortify the body but to slightly increase the *payken* biodynamic. More specifically, each type of grain has its specific character, rice being defined as 'oily, cool and light' and being excellent for treating excesses of any of the three biodynamics. Millet (heavy and cool) helps mend fractured bones. Likewise, each variety of pulse, vegetable, dairy product, meat or fish is described in terms of its taste, potency and specific properties. The qualities of these raw ingredients can be enhanced, mixed or counterbalanced by various modes of preparation.

Tibetan medicine recognises seven successive stages of nutrition, from the simple regeneration of the blood (via the small intestine and the liver) through to maintaining a proper balance of what it calls 'vital fluids' and what today we would probably consider to be 'hormones' and vital trace elements, although much research needs to be done to confirm this. It is to the correct presence of these vital

fluids that the glow of good health, longevity and vitality are attributed.

### **Behaviour**

Absorbing foodstuffs is only one aspect of a human being's dialogue with life. If diet cannot remedy a specific ailment or if the required foods are unavailable, the doctor needs to investigate the patient's other interactions with the world: those with family, work and environment, all of which, like the patient, are composed of the five elements and inevitably exerting some influence on another. This complex interaction between the inner and outer elements takes place through personal hygiene, the way one sleeps, travels, works, has sex, takes exercise, thinks, feels, fosters emotions, relates to society and, most importantly, the way one acts either in harmony or disharmony with the seasons. An individual's behaviour can either be debilitating or invigorating and is, in reality, usually a patchwork of the harmful and the helpful. A person may sleep well, get on well with friends and family and so forth but dress too lightly in the first sunny days of spring and catch a cold.

People with persistent *loong* biodynamic disorders are made worse, and can even be thrown into crisis, by stress, worry, strong winds, noisy machinery, excessive tea drinking, late wild nights and so forth. Thus, besides understanding the elements at play everywhere, the doctor sometimes needs a lot of common sense and deductive power to work out just what behavioural factors may be causing harm in a patient's life. Then the physician has to come up with useful, practicable suggestions of modifications of lifestyle which will help the patient's mind-body system help itself to recovery.

### **Medication**

Where changes in diet or behaviour would be insufficient or too slow, the doctor uses medication. The Tibetan *materia medica* includes altogether some five thousand substances, of which about two thousand are well-documented, some eight hundred used sometimes and about two hundred commonly used. About fifty products compounded from these raw ingredients may be carried around in the doctor's medicine pouch. The *materia medica* is predominantly from the plant world, but also includes mineral rocks, mineral earths, salts, metals and precious gems, particularly potent aromatics such as saffron, musk, camphor, cardamom and so forth; also animal products. Although the therapeutic properties of all these substances are known, some—such as certain animal

products—are no longer used these days.

## **Medicines and Medical Treatments**

The raw ingredients of Tibetan medicine are fall into a ninefold pharmaceutical code, some examples of which follow.

*Precious substances:* coral, pearl, mother-of-pearl, gold, silver, copper ... (the metals undergo alchemical detoxification, probably an amalgam- forming process)

*Minerals:* haematite, anhydrite, goethite, magnetite, chalcedony, copper pyrites, limonite, cinnabar, Cassiterite ... (many alchemically detoxified)

*Mineral Earths:* Nitrum, sulphur, chalcantite, fibroferritum, natron ...

*Aromatics:* camphor, crystallised bamboo pith, cardamom, nutmeg, musk, bear bile ...

*Woods:* sandalwood, eaglewood, barberry wood, cinnamon bark, various tree exudates ...

*Salts:* various types of naturally-occurring lake salt, rock salt, Glauber's salt ...

*Trees and perennial plants:* the most famous of which is myrobalan (*a ru ra*), the India plum. In this category are hundreds of plants, of which either the fruit, seeds, leaves, root or flowers are used. A few examples are pomegranate, black pepper, ginger, asafoetida ...

*Annual and biennial plants:* these are plants which tend to appear and disappear each year with the seasons, such as grasses, ferns, annual flowers. A few examples would be saxifrage, nodding dragonhead, gentian, spleenwort, fritillary, asters ...

*Animal products:* the flesh, feathers, dung, urine, horns and other parts of animals are denoted as having specific medical properties. Many plant products have been substituted for these in modern times, in order to preserve rare species and observe modern criteria of hygiene.

The therapeutic properties of any of these *materia medica* is considered theoretically in terms of its *taste, post-digestive nature, potency* and *specific benefits*. The six *tastes* — sweet, sour, salty, bitter, hot and astringent — are considered indicative of the elemental constitution of each substance and hence its general healing potential. The post-digestive nature indicates what elements will be effective once it has been ingested. The *potency* gives further information, showing which products cool down fevers, restore heat and so forth. Whereas these first qualities show the general usefulness of a plant or

mineral in treating whole classes of disorder, the *specific benefits* explain which particular disorders the product is used for, such as the use of chrysanthemum in healing skull fractures.

Although these theoretical tastes, potencies and qualities of a medicinal substance caused it to be first used, many centuries ago, present-day use is primarily based upon centuries of practical experience. Over the past millennium, the original pharmacopoeia has been enlarged and refined through the most natural of processes—first-hand observation of therapeutic effects. The finest Tibetan doctors insist that great care should be taken in the gathering of plants for the making of medicines, as well as in their processing. The doctor needs to know the location of the most potent plants, how to pick them, exactly when to pick them and then how to preserve them. The processing of these plants and their mixing into medicines can be a very complex process - some of the more complicated ones may involve many people in weeks of work. The two keys to good processing are purity and precision, the purity being a matter of both physical hygiene and spiritual purity. Traditionally, the whole chain of events, from plant-gathering to prescription, was considered a sacred task and carried out lovingly and with prayer and meditation.

It is not uncommon for plants and minerals to be compounded in formulae which contain twenty, thirty or even a hundred ingredients. The idea of such complex formulae is to treat not only the main condition but also to help the rest of the system back into balance. Extra ingredients also avoid harm being done to any other part of the body. Tibetan medicine is specifically designed to have little or no harmful side-effects and is based on the idea of treating the person, over the long term, rather than treating the illness, in the short term.

### **External Treatments**

Even medication can take time to work. Sometimes more rapid intervention is needed through what Tibetan medicine calls 'external treatments'. The external treatments include:

- < bloodletting,
- < moxibustion, using hot irons, glowing herb brands or small herb pads warmed in butter to treat a series of points that have much in common with those found on the acupuncture meridians.

- < local application of larger warm or cold packs, made from herbal, mineral or animal products,
- < baths in natural springs or in waters enriched by herbal, mineral or animal products and medicated steam baths,
- < the application of ointments,
- < minor surgery and
- < the administration of enemas, emetics, purgatives and medicines which induce sweating and so forth.