

# Healing Forces

Traditional Tibetan medicine is in need of more research and protection

By Pan Xiaoqiao

**E**very summer, Tso-Ngon Tibetan Medicine Hospital in Xining, capital of northwest China's Qinghai Province, arranges for experienced doctors to conduct checkups in and outside the province. They usually open temporary medical camps at places used for religious ceremonies and gatherings by the area's ethnic Tibetan people. Local residents form long queues as they wait for their medical diagnosis and treatment. In remote or poor areas, the doctors' services are free of charge.

As one of China's leading Tibetan medicine hospitals, Tso-Ngon Hospital always tries to make full use of the traditional Tibetan medication at its disposal. Currently, 80 percent of its clinical treatments use Tibetan herbs and medicine, while in external therapy Tibetan medicine is used in every sector.

A central reason for the hospital's popularity is that its medicines are effective and much cheaper than those sold in ordinary drugstores.

"The hospital is now able to process medical materials by itself. The herbs are mostly locally produced and quite cheap," said Otsang Tsokchen, the hospital's director.

## Jewel of tradition

Tibetan medicine has been around for more than 2,000 years. It first began to prosper in the seventh century on the Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau. With the great healing effects it has over many serious diseases, it's winning over more and more people across the country.

Tibetan medicine is rich in medical classics. The *Somaratsha*, dating back to the early eighth century, is the earliest Tibetan medicine masterpiece that has been discovered to date, recording 440 kinds of medicine, of which over 300 can only be found on the Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau. Most of them are still used today.

The most well-known masterpiece of Tibetan medicine is *Four Classic Medical Books of Traditional Tibetan Medicine*, authored by



**RESOURCE RICH:** A doctor at a Tibetan medicine hospital in Gannan Prefecture in northwest China's Gansu Province prepare medicine in the hospital's pharmacy

Yuan Dan Kampo (708-835), the founder of Tibetan medicine's theoretical system. The book covers 1,002 kinds of medicine and 400 prescriptions. Its existence shows that the system of Tibetan medicine had begun to take shape around that time.

In Tibetan medicine, it is believed that the relationship between a disease and symptoms is like that between fire and smoke. This understanding means that, while dealing with diseases, Tibetan medicine tends to regard the patient as a whole and tries to eradicate the roots of the disease instead of just removing symptoms. As an ancient medical system, Tibetan medicine has many unique features. For example, it pays a lot more attention to urine diagnosis compared to other medical systems.

Under Tibetan medicine, treatment is divided into oral medication and external therapy.

In terms of oral medication, the principle is "to warm the cold and to chill the heat," so as to reach a balance within a person's body. External therapy includes treatments such as pricking blood and steaming therapy.

A Tibetan medicine is commonly a mixture of 50 or even more medicinal herbs. More than 1,400 kinds of medicinal herbs are regularly used as ingredients, with a number of them found only on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau.

The uniqueness of Tibetan medicine is best shown in its effectiveness at coping with nervous and immune system diseases. For example, rheumatic diseases are diagnosed by Tibetan medicine as problems in the immune system. When it comes to Western medicine,



the only available treatment is painkillers and anti-inflammatories, while traditional Chinese medicine also finds rheumatic diseases difficult to deal with. "However, Tibetan medicine does a good job of treating this disease," Otsang Tsokchen commented.

According to Wan Matai, Director of the Cardiovascular Department at Tso-Ngon Hospital, in 2011 the hospital received a patient from southwest China's Sichuan Province. The patient, who was in his 50s, was diagnosed with Guillain-Barré syndrome, which occurs when the immune system attacks the peripheral nervous system, leading to a weakness or tingling in the legs that moves up toward the torso. Before coming to the hospital, he had visited doctors at many prestigious hospitals in Sichuan, Beijing and Shanghai. However, Western medicine had ultimately failed him.

"Upon his arrival, he could not move his limbs. Eating and drinking was very difficult for him. After two weeks' treatment in our department, during which he was fed with traditional Tibetan medicine such as pearl pills, coupled with acupuncture, grease ointments and pricking blood therapy, the patient was able to move. Two months later, when he left the hospital, he was able to walk by himself," said Wan.

## Buddhist connections

Kunchok Gyaltsen is a professor and Ph.D supervisor at Qinghai University's Tibetan Medicine College. Different from most teachers at the college, he is a lama, and is now honorary president of Kumbum Tibetan Medicine Hospital, which was set up in 1980 in the Tar Monastery in Xining. The Tar Monastery has its own medical institute that trains monk doctors.

The philosophy behind Tibetan medicine largely comes from Buddhism, stressing that man is an integral part of nature and emphasizing harmony between human beings and nature. When they have reached a certain level of Buddhist knowledge, monks may have to take medical lessons. A lot of dignitary monks are also excellent Tibetan medicine doctors.

Tibetan medicine is especially unique in its approach to psychiatric therapy. A patient's mentality is analyzed in accordance with Tibetan medical theory, which is able to offer its own explanation of all kinds of mental and psy-



**TREATMENT IN COMFORT:** The traditional therapy shown is used to improve blood supply to the head

chological problems. By introducing in Buddhist concepts like meditation and visualization, it provides a means to help patients with mental illnesses recover through self-treatment.

Before he was a teacher at Qinghai University, Kunchok Gyaltsen had already received a doctorate in public health from the University of California, Los Angeles. During his 14 years' of academic experience abroad, he retained his identity as a lama.

"When talking about science, many professors in the West suggest that religion is opposed to science, but I don't think so. The religion I believe in, Tibetan Buddhism, is quite different from what they understand as religion. Tibetan Buddhism is extremely logical, and you'll find in the process of learning Tibetan medicine how perfectly it combines the body and the soul. This combination is not just imagined as some might argue, but is the result of logical and reasonable deduction," Kunchok Gyaltsen said.

According to Kunchok Gyaltsen, Buddhism exists to improve people's mentality or their soul, while medicine mainly targets people's physical health. He said that Tibetan Buddhism has its own philosophy, and that it goes deep into human beings' sentiments and mentality. Under this philosophy, people's sentiments and mentality can also be anatomized, just as the human body can.

Western psychology only touches on people's sentiments, but Tibetan Buddhism suggests that sentiments are not equal to a person's soul or their mentality itself, Kunchok Gyaltsen argued.

## Challenges and prospects

Tibetan medicine is quite popular in Qinghai, and around 180 Tibetan medicines have been covered by the province's basic medical insurance scheme. But it's difficult to apply such a policy nationwide. Currently, there are only a very limited number of Tibetan medicines listed in China's *Pharmacopoeia*, the highest criterion of the country's pharmaceutical management standard. As a result, many Tibetan medicines are unavailable in drugstores in most areas of China.

There is another great challenge facing Tibetan medicine as well as traditional Chinese medicine. For thousands of years, Tibetan medicine has been an integrated subject. Students learn everything from one teacher, who has a deep knowledge of every single part of Tibetan medicine, which is in sharp contrast to the Western medical system where a student of rhinology may know nothing about cardiovascular diseases. However, nowadays, the trend in Chinese medical colleges is to divide integral and comprehensive traditional medical system into different parts in the way Western medicine does.

"Tibetan medicine is both cultural and scientific in its nature. If this integration is broken and only the scientific content is preserved while the cultural part is omitted, then Tibetan medicine is no longer what it is now, as it will have lost its soul. It will not be as effective", Kunchok Gyaltsen said.

Local people, who understand the significance of Tibetan medicine, tend to choose to go to Tso-Ngon Hospital when they are ill. In recent years, the hospital has also received more and more patients from China's neighboring countries including Russia, Japan and South Korea.

"Throughout history, Tibetan medicine has already developed into a comprehensive and complete medical system. Even without any external factors or help, this system is totally able to support itself," Kunchok Gyaltsen said. "In many cases where science fails human beings, I think maybe there should be kind of alternatives or supplements to science, so as to fulfill people's medical or even spiritual demands. I think Tibetan medicine is able to do so." ■