



Philosophical Issues in Tibetan Folk Medicine

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Abstract: *The article examines the main concepts of Buddhist philosophy and their connection with the theory of Tibetan medicine. The philosophy of Buddhism served as the ideological basis for the medical tradition of Tibet, having formed its ideas about the nature of man, diseases and specific approaches and methods of treatment, as well as having determined its ultimate supreme goal.*

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Any medical system is formed on the basis of philosophical ideas and concepts that serve as the foundations of this medical system.

The same is true of the Tibetan medical tradition, which is widely known in the world today. Its philosophical and theoretical origins are rooted in the traditional ideological and conceptual patterns of the Tibetans themselves and neighboring civilizations with which the Tibetan civilization historically had contacts and interaction - Central Asia, India, China.

The most significant influence on the formation of the theoretical basis of Tibetan medicine was Buddhist philosophy, which serves as an ideological and conceptual basis and provides explanations of all aspects of this ancient medical tradition, starting with detailed ideas about the nature of man, consciousness, body, disease and its causes, ending with effective methods treatment. Moreover, it can be said that Buddhist philosophy does not simply serve as the initial ideological basis for constructing a medical theory in Tibetan medicine. The latter is closely intertwined with Buddhist teachings.

Their connection can be established by comparing and contrasting many medical concepts with the main categories of Buddhist teaching.

We can argue that it is the philosophical core that makes Tibetan medicine a unique phenomenon of medical science, which has been developing since ancient times in the bosom of eastern civilizations; it is this core that ensures its high effectiveness, since it provides an ideological and theoretical approach to understanding the phenomena of man, life, health, illness, death, in many ways favorably different from the Western medical tradition established in the modern world.

First of all, Tibetan medicine is characterized by a special holistic approach to understanding the world and man. Generally speaking, the concept of man is at the center of most theories, and not only philosophical ones.

Of course, for medical science the concept of man is crucial. It is in this area that the radical difference between Eastern medical traditions, including Tibetan, and Western medical science and practice is rooted. What is characteristic of the theory of Tibetan medicine is that the concept of man is inscribed in the soteriological philosophy of life characteristic of Buddhism.

In other words, the theory of man here is part of the general concept liberation – liberation from the “four streams” of suffering (birth, illness, old age, death). Therefore, in order to understand what lies in the specificity of the concept of man, which is characteristic of Tibetan medicine, it is necessary to have knowledge of the basic ideas of Buddhist philosophy, expressed in the teaching of the four noble truths.

The First Noble Truth indicates that the entire life of beings like us, who are not free from mental obscurations and karma, is permeated suffering, which has different forms and manifests itself at different levels.

This truth, preached by the Buddha, teaches that all types of pleasure and joy, which people usually consider happiness, are actually a form of suffering, because our very way of existence, called samsara, consists of endless cycles beyond our control birth and death, permeated with suffering - all-pervasive suffering.

However, it and all other forms of suffering have a cause and a source, as stated in the second noble truth. The third is called the truth of suppression or nirvana. It is argued that a life made of suffering can be ended and freedom can be achieved

Nirvana is peace from factors that darken consciousness and serve as the cause and source of suffering. The truth of the path leading to the suppression of suffering is the fourth noble truth.

From the perspective of the four noble truths suffering has a cause - that chronic disease of ignorance (Tib. *ma rig pa*) with which we have been afflicted since beginningless time, but it can be put to an end. As His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama says, no one wants to get sick, but in order to make an attempt to heal, it is necessary to acknowledge the presence of the disease. Then, having realized this, you need to find the cause of the disease. Having identified it, it is possible to stop suffering and recover from the disease by taking various medications.

Buddha Dharma is like medicine that cures the most severe chronic disease of ignorance, the main healing medicine of which is wisdom, which dispels ignorance and other obscurations that give rise to all types of suffering in the wheel of samsara - the “wheel of life”, an existence where there is no end to conflict and pain throughout life, as well as the processes of aging and death.

Buddhist philosophy, in its central doctrine of dependent origination, explains the nature of samsara as unfree cyclical existence and the mechanism of its reproduction, as well as the nature of nirvana as the suppression of suffering and its causes and the mechanism for achieving free existence.

The evolution of samsara and nirvana is represented by the twelve-member chain of dependent origination. The beginning of each cycle of samsara is the ignorance of living beings.

It is the root cause of suffering and the first link in the 12-member chain of dependent origination. In other words, the main reason for living beings to remain in the wheel of samsara is ignorance regarding the true nature of existence (one’s own personality and other phenomena), which, in turn, gives rise to disciplinarity of the mind, as a result of which various afflictive effects manifest themselves emotions and all kinds of suffering.

Fundamental ignorance is directly related to the incorrect perception by a living being of its own “I” - as existing truly, objectively, regardless of the name given by thought. In Buddhist philosophy it is said that the individual self does not exist. But we are not talking about denying existence in general; it is believed that there is no independent, substantial, objective, self-existent “I” and other phenomena. From the point of view of the highest philosophical theory of Buddhism, all phenomena, including personalities, exist merely nominally¹.

¹ The 14th Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatso. Harvard Lectures - Mu 2003

Nominally existing phenomena do not have essence in the sense that they exist not by virtue of their own properties, but only depending on a mental designation.

The position of selflessness not only occupies one of the central places in Buddhist teachings, defining the concept of man, but also forms the fundamental etiology of diseases in the theory of Tibetan medicine.

Thus, in the main treatise “Zhudshi” “ignorance about the absence of the individual “I” is named as the most common cause of suffering². Therefore, it is very important to understand what the individual – “I” – actually is from the point of view of Buddhist philosophy.

In Buddhist philosophy, there are four schools of thought that are distinguished by their depth of understanding of the nature of all things and the individual self, as well as the interpretation of selflessness and emptiness as the absolute nature of all phenomena. But they all recognize that the essence and mode of existence of the individual “I” and other phenomena is determined by five psychophysical components - skandhas: form (Tib. gzugsnyi phungpo), feelings or sensations (Tib. tshorba'i phungpo), discrimination (Tib. 'du shes kyi phungpo), composite factors or acts of will (Tib. 'du byed kyi phungpo) and consciousness (Tib. rnampar shes pa'i phungpo).

At the same time, Madhyamika Prasangika, the highest of the philosophical schools of Buddhism, insists that none of the skandhas, which are the basis for designating a person, as well as their totality, can be defined as a person. The set of skandhas serves only as the basis for the designation of “I”, but neither the basis itself - the set of skandhas, nor each skandha has an intrinsic existence; they, in turn, like “I”, exist only nominally.

Prasangikas explain that the “I” does not exist separately from five skandhas, not in five skandhas. The skandha of form is formed by combining the four elements: earth, water, fire and wind. Through combinations and permutations of these elements, all material objects arise, including the body and its sense organs.

Sensations can be physical and mental and are divided into three types: pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. The skandha of discrimination includes six types of perception: the perception of color, shape, smell, taste, bodily sensations and ideas.

Composite factors refer to almost all types of mental activity, such as opinions, thoughts, decisions and etc. Skandha of consciousness is defined as that which is aware and capable of distinguishing objects and phenomena³

“Only the dynamic interaction of these five gives a sense of self”, while the skandhas themselves are of a changeable nature and are empty of the permanent self, not subject to birth and destruction.

“Since our self has no factual basis of its own separate from the five skandhas, when they arise and collapse, the self must also arise and collapse along with them. Consequently, this gives reason to believe that “I” does not exist”⁴. But the point is not that “I” does not exist at all. It does not exist in the absolute sense - from the point of view of absolute analysis aimed at discovering the final mode of existence.

This ultimate mode of existence of all things, including our own self, is emptiness. But from the point of view of relative analysis, the “I” exists, beyond any doubt, as something that has arisen in an interdependent manner - depending on the five skandhas and the name given to this basis by consciousness.

²The 14th Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatso. Harvard Lectures - Mu 2003

³The 14th Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatso. Harvard Lectures - Mu 2003 .

⁴There too

The flow of skandhas, psychophysical aggregates, which is continuous from life to life, is influenced by polluted actions and kleshas committed due to clouded consciousness and is the basis of suffering. In this sense, we must inevitably - since we are born due to impure reasons - suffer while we are born in the wheel of samsara.

The root cause of cyclic rebirths under the power of kleshas (obscurations) and karma is the deluded consciousness, which incorrectly perceives the nature of all phenomena, whose ultimate reality is emptiness from self-existence.

The origin of the kleshas that give rise to suffering and the further evolution of unfree existence is explained by the 12-fold chain of dependent origination. Ignorance, lack of wise insight into the true nature of phenomena and clinging to false mental projections give rise to mental formations that make possible actions, or karmas, that bear fruit in future lives. And some, the most serious, karmas “ripe” and lead to consequences in this life. This occurs due to the law of cause and effect discovered by the Buddha, according to which any action, be it good, unwholesome or neutral, has corresponding consequences.

Psychic formations give rise to consciousness, which serves as the basis for karmic imprints and the birth of living beings. Through these three factors - ignorance, action caused by it and consciousness (the period of cause) - name and form or the above mentioned skandhas are created. As a result of their occurrence, six internal supports of feelings or abilities to perceive attractive, unattractive and neutral objects are formed.

As a result, sensations arise, followed by attraction and then attachment to the object. It leads to actions that cause the next rebirth. The last link in the chain of dependent origination, a new birth full of suffering, predetermines subsequent aging and death. Thus, each subsequent link is generated by the previous one. Knowing the mechanism of the evolution of samsara in accordance with the 12-member chain of dependent origination, we can, by eliminating the first link - ignorance, eliminate all subsequent links, due to which birth in samsara ceases, which is the general goal of Buddhist teachings.

The teaching about the path leading to liberation from suffering is explained on the basis of the philosophical doctrine of dependent origination. Considering that the theory of Tibetan medicine is built in the context of the philosophical soteriology of Buddhism, we should pay special attention to the universal law of cause and effect – the law of karma, especially since on the basis of this law of the functioning of all phenomena in Tibetan medicine a large class of diseases is distinguished – karmic diseases⁵.

Theorists of Tibetan medicine believe that the causes of this class of diseases are unwholesome actions committed at the level of body, speech and mind in past lives. The results of particularly negative actions can manifest in the present and future reincarnations in the form of difficult-to-cure diseases such as cancer, AIDS, etc.

In Tibetan medicine, karmic diseases cannot be treated on a physical level, with the help of drugs and external procedures. A completely different method of healing is used, which consists of working with consciousness. Thus, emchi doctors of Tibetan medicine advise performing meditations aimed at cleansing the consciousness of obscurations and negative emotions and at realizing the true nature of all phenomena and one's own mind.

“Zhu-shi” states that “the basis of medical activity is the mind, a good “white” soul, fidelity to vows, skill, diligence and wisdom in secular affairs”, where the mind is designated as a mind possessing high qualities, and “a white soul implies a doctor with a bodhi soul”, who does not

⁵ Zhud-shi (canon of Tibetan medicine) / trans. from Tib. D.B. Dashieva. - Book 1. – Ulan-Ude, 2003.

distinguish between good or bad patients; does not feel love or disgust for anyone, but shows only mercy, compassion, joy and balance⁶.

When speaking about the philosophy of Tibetan medicine, it is necessary to mention its soteriological aspect. Already at the early stages, the Buddhist tradition came into contact with medical knowledge and its practical form as an auxiliary system of Buddhist knowledge and religious practice and served to solve the soteriological problems of Buddhism. In Tantric Buddhism, the preservation of health and the impeccable functioning of the human body were given special importance, since without this it was impossible to achieve liberation.

According to Tibetan medical concepts based on the Buddhist theory of the three bodies of Buddha, the three levels of human nature in their originally pure state, purified from obscurations, correspond to the “three bodies of Buddha” – three levels of expression of Buddha nature. It is believed that the absolute nature of the purified subtlest consciousness is realized as dharmakaya; the purified “subtle body” is realized as sambhogakaya; and the “gross body” purified from obscurations is realized as nirmanakaya⁷.

Each individual, in the Buddhist view, initially possesses the Buddha nature and all essential components - body, energy and consciousness, thanks to which it is possible to acquire perfect "Buddha bodies", i.e. to achieve enlightenment. That is why Tibetan medicine, designed to restore physical, energetic and mental health, has a soteriological significance. It can be said that the relative goal of Tibetan medicine is the prevention and treatment of diseases, and the ultimate goal is the achievement of enlightenment.

Thus, when considering the philosophy of Tibetan medicine, one can come to the conclusion that in general it is based on the fundamental ideas of Buddhist philosophy, such as all-pervading suffering and liberation from it, the law of karma, emptiness from self-existence, the principle of interdependent origination, the universal system of five elements

These, in turn, define a unique concept of man. Based on this, Tibetan medicine explains the structure of man, illness and health in terms of three levels formed by different manifestations of the five primary elements: the subtlest, associated with consciousness; subtle, associated with energy, and gross, which corresponds to the physical body. Based on this idea, it offers a developed theoretical model of healing that provides not only a highly effective holistic approach, but also serves as an intermediate stage for achieving higher goals - liberation and enlightenment.

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