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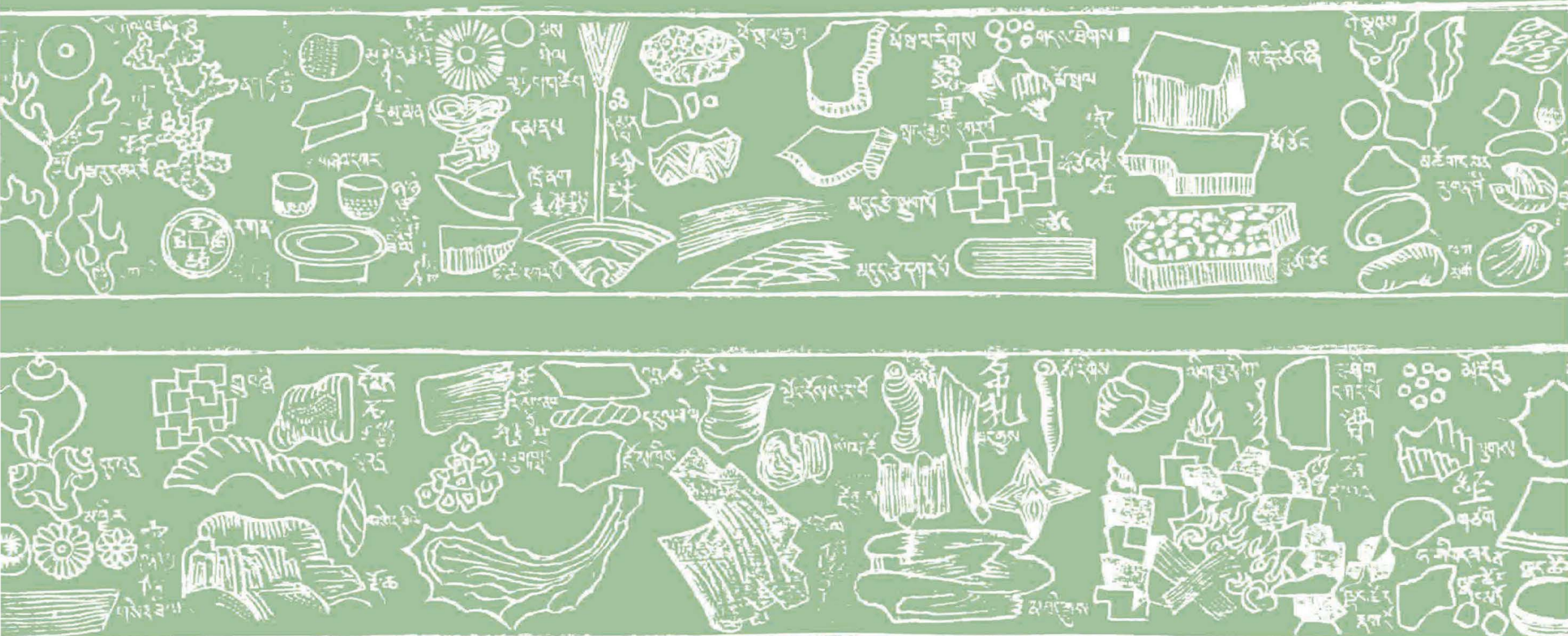
## Part I

# Theoretical Foundations and Practices of Tibetan Medicine

# Chapter 1

## The Art of Tibetan Medical Practice

Barbara Gerke



The *Gyushi* (*Rgyud bzhi*), or *Four Tantras*, is Tibetan medicine's most enduring foundational treatise, dating back to the twelfth century. It has remained the core text for Tibetan medical doctors to this day.<sup>1</sup> It describes the body in its interaction with the five elements (water, fire, earth, air, and space), the three *nyepa* (humors; discussed below), and the environment. The body is seen as in constant flux between the *nyepa* and the elements, demanding an approach to health that includes dietary and behavioral adjustments and an interconnected understanding of how medicinal substances and foods within one's climatic environment affect the body within this dynamic. This chapter explores the structure and content of the *Four Tantras* and describes how the theories found in the work play out in daily medical practice and for various reasons are important in a Tibetan medical consultation.<sup>2</sup> Elements of these Tibetan medical encounters also link to broader ideas of health and well-being, including dharma practice, rituals, divination, and longevity, which are considered important aspects of health.

### The Poetry of a Medical Dialogue:

#### Understanding the Structure of the *Four Tantras*

The four volumes of the *Four Tantras* are each unique in their content and length but share some features. They build on each other in certain respects, and medical students study them over four to five years. Each chapter is written in the form of a poetic dialogue between two sages, Rigpa Yeshe (Rig pa'i ye shes; literally, transcendental wisdom of awareness), the teacher, and Yilekye (Yid las skyed; literally, born from mind), his chief disciple, who are both considered manifestations of the Medicine Buddha (see chapter 7). Rigpa Yeshe is the manifestation of the Medicine Buddha's mind and Yilekye of his speech. Each chapter of the *Four Tantras* presents a conversation on a medical topic, with Yilekye requesting a teaching on a particular question, and Rigpa Yeshe answering in the form of a chapter. The dialogue between the two sages is embedded in a mythical story with Buddhist elements. The *Four Tantras* therefore is not only a medical but also a religious text. This involves certain religious transmissions that have been passed on — along with medical knowledge and experience — through many different lineages of teachers and disciples (see chapter 9).

The first tantra, which is known as the *Root Tantra*, relates the story of the original transmission of the *Four Tantras* in its first chapter and the beginning of the second. This event takes place in the royal palace of the mythical city of Tanadug (Lta na sdug; literally, lovely to behold), which is believed to exist in outer, inner, and secret dimensions. Tanadug is not only a geographical, outer place, one often linked to sacred

places in northern India, such as Bodh Gaya or Uddiyana in Pakistan, but also comprises inner and secret levels depending on the perception of the disciples and their ability to receive the teachings. The inner dimension of Tanadug is "the place where you are residing and you yourself are the Teacher of Medicine" and its secret level is understood to be the chakras in one's body.<sup>3</sup> The first plate of a set of seventy-nine medical paintings, prepared under the aegis of Desi Sangye Gyatso, the regent of the Fifth Dalai Lama, depicts the sacred city of Tanadug, with the palace of the Medicine Buddha Bhaiṣajyaguru at its center, where he is seen surrounded by four types of disciples. The city itself is surrounded by a medicinal forest and four mountains with plants, minerals, and waters of particular healing qualities (see FIG. 1.1).<sup>4</sup>

In the mythical story of the first *Gyushi* transmission, the city of Tanadug is situated inside a mandala with four mythical mountains expanding to each of the cardinal directions. Each mountain comprises the perfect environment for particular medicinal plants to grow and harbors springs with medicinal waters and various types of minerals and precious stones, each associated with particular healing qualities. The palace at the center is made from five types of precious substances — gold, silver, white and red pearls, and aquamarine. The palace is adorned with a variety of precious gems that are able to heal the "404 diseases" of the three *nyepa*. They also pacify the "1080 types of obstacles" of desire, anger, and ignorance, cool/hot disorders and hot/cold disorders, and fulfill all needs and desires. At an auspicious time, the Medicine Buddha is surrounded inside the palace by four types of disciples — Devas, Rishis, Buddhists, and non-Buddhists. The Medicine Buddha begins to meditate. Before any of the disciples is able to ask a question, the sage Rigpa Yeshe manifests from the Buddha's heart and begins to address the disciples. Then, Yilekye, who manifests from the tongue of the Medicine Buddha, bows down before the Medicine Buddha and Rigpa Yeshe and requests the medical teachings. Through the manifestation of Rigpa Yeshe the Medicine Buddha delivers the teachings of medicine to all of the surrounding disciples, and each understands what is said according to his own system of belief. The medical teachings in the form of the *Four Tantras* are heard only by the sage Yilekye (see FIG. 1.2).

This story is beautiful in many aspects, acknowledging the different ways of perception in different religions and cultures. The Buddha is surrounded by divinities as well as people from various religious backgrounds and beliefs, all keen to study the science of healing. Nevertheless, the story takes a Buddhist turn through the ways in which the teachings are requested and received by Yilekye. This points

Stone Medicines from Jampal Dorje's *Beautiful Marvelous Eye Ornament*. Mongolia; 19th century. Part II, folio 7 recto & 8 verso. Reprinted in *Śatapitaka Series* (Vol. 82), New Delhi, International Academy of Indian Culture, 1971. Courtesy Tibetan Buddhist Resource Center. W30452



to a particular lineage originating from the Medicine Buddha himself, to which some Tibetan doctors still refer today when talking about the spiritual origins of the *Four Tantras*.<sup>5</sup>

The end of the first chapter advises those who wish to practice the science of healing according to the *Four Tantras* to first purify their body, speech, and mind of the “three mental poisons” (desire, hatred, delusion) in order to qualify as sages. This is a substantial ethical prerequisite for a medical student that cannot be achieved through textual study alone. Oral and secret instructions on medicine and related spiritual practices are traditionally part of a Tibetan medical education.<sup>6</sup> The *Four Tantras*’ formal title, which translates as *The Nectar Essence of the Eight Branches of Healing: A Tantra of Secret Oral Instruction*, in itself reveals the importance given to oral and secret instructions. In the title, “oral” suggests the need for explanations by a teacher in order to understand the content of the *Four Tantras*, and “secret” refers to the secretive and selective ways of transmitting the knowledge only to chosen and qualified disciples who are expected to embody the ethics of what is considered good medical practice.<sup>7</sup> Here, the motivation of a physician is considered to be most important. True to Mahāyāna Buddhist principles, the physician is encouraged to be motivated by the wish to benefit all living beings and to treat one’s patients as one’s parents. This view is based on the theory of reincarnation, where each being is said to have been one’s mother or father during a previous lifetime. Moreover, Vajrayāna meditation practices include the visualization of the Medicine Buddha. This meditation ultimately aims at achieving liberation; the practitioners identify with the Medicine Buddha and visualize merging their minds with the enlightened mind of the Medicine Buddha.

The *Four Tantras* thus cannot be read like a medical textbook by just anyone who wants to study Tibetan medicine. Its poetic text — 5,900 verses in 156 chapters — is partly encrypted and cannot be understood without explanation by qualified teachers, who ideally have received the secret oral instructions and have embodied to a certain extent the medical-religious dimensions that are described in the text.

It is a common belief in Tibetan Buddhism that knowledge, realization, and understanding can occur on various levels. This includes the idea that all knowledge can be condensed into a seed, and as such can then be extracted from the seed, depending on the realization of the individual. Not only is the sacred city of Tanadug attributed existence in several dimensions, but the medical teachings themselves can be accessed in various ways. This is also evident from the ways in which the chapters of the *Four Tantras* are structured. The entirety of medical teachings is said to be

condensed as a seed within the *Root Tantra*.<sup>8</sup> This first tantra summarizes the *Four Tantras* in just six chapters, introducing the basic principles of physiology, health, and illness, as well as the main diagnostic and treatment methods. Sangye Gyatso’s commentary states that to an outstanding disciple understanding the *Root Tantra* would be enough to grasp the entire knowledge of Tibetan medicine.<sup>9</sup>

The structure of the *Four Tantras* aligns with a characteristic way of learning in Tibet — memorization and recitation of a root text, the meaning of which is then elaborated through instructions as well as written commentaries. In addition to the four volumes, there are five other main organizational frameworks along which the text is structured and that aid memorization: Eight Branches, Eleven Sections, Fifteen Divisions, Four Volumes, and 156 Chapters (see TABLE 1.1). Typically, Tibetan medical students spend several years memorizing at least three of the *Four Tantras*, reciting them during oral exams and writing them down from memory along with explanations during written exams.<sup>10</sup> Often, when students are quite young, they spend several years memorizing the text before they receive teachings that impart understanding. Having the *Four Tantras* well memorized helps Tibetan physicians later in their medical practice to refer to particular illness categories and subcategories along with their possible variations more easily.

The importance of the six organizational frameworks of the *Four Tantras* is underlined by their being part of the first teaching that Rigpa Yeshe offers to Yilekye. This is in accordance with Buddhist teachings in general, which often consist of lists, suggestive of the initially oral nature of knowledge transmission in Buddhism.<sup>11</sup> The frameworks are like the basement and columns of a new house, to which walls, rooms, and furniture are added in subsequent chapters.

The Eight Branches are the most famous of these six organizational frameworks. They focus on the objects that need to be healed and also appear in the full title of the *Four Tantras* as well as in several Indian Ayurvedic texts, where they are called *aṣṭāṅgaḥṛdaya* in Sanskrit. This has made many scholars think that the *Four Tantras* is largely based on the *Aṣṭāṅgaḥṛdayasaṃhitā* (*The Heart of Medicine*), an important Ayurvedic work, but this is only partially the case.<sup>12</sup> In the *Four Tantras* the Eight Branches reappear as part of the Fifteen Divisions, along which the ninety-two chapters of the third tantra, known as the *Instructional Tantra*, are structured. The first eight of the Fifteen Divisions deal with the body in general, thus covering the content of the first of the Eight Branches. Divisions nine to fifteen each relate to one of the remaining seven of the Eight Branches, thus covering the most common areas of medical ailments: diseases specific

**1.1** The Medicine Buddha Palace in the Sacred City of Tanadug. Plate 1 of the Tibetan medical paintings (Ulan Ude set). Lhasa, central Tibet; early 20th century. Pigments on cloth; 86 × 68 cm. National Museum of the Republic of Buryatia, Ulan Ude. Photograph courtesy of Serindia



1.2 Decorative Edition of the *Four Tantras*. Lhasa, central Tibet; late 19th or early 20th century. Gold ink on blue paper; illustrations on the first page of each volume. Mentsikhang Library, Lhasa, central Tibet

to children or to women; diseases caused by spirits, toxic substances, or old age; diseases causing infertility; and injuries caused by weapons.

The Eleven Sections are covered in the thirty-one chapters of the second tantra, called the *Explanatory Tantra*. They mainly give an outline on the overall topics of Tibetan medicine, which includes not only the diagnosis and treatment of disease but also the prevention of illness, dietary and behavioral regimens to restore the balance between the elements and the *nyepa*, as well as a chapter on the qualities of a physician.

The Fifteen Divisions are covered in the ninety-two chapters of the *Instructional Tantra*. They detail each disease, its various cold and hot forms, and its classifications according to the three *nyepa*. Diseases are not only classified according to the Eight Branches, which are covered in the later chapters of this tantra, but have additional classification focusing on various areas of the body, different types of organs, and fevers.

Finally, the Four Volumes cover the twenty-five chapters of the *Last Tantra*, as the fourth tantra is titled. They give a practical guide to examination and therapy, which consists of pulse and urine diagnosis, medication, and various eliminative therapies such as enema, purgation, as well as other external treatment methods. The basic structure is supported by visual images known as *dongdrem* (*sdong 'grems*, unfolded trees). These trees are a popular visual aid used as a mnemonic device for Tibetan medical students. Each tree trunk represents a medical topic, which then matures into detail through its branches, leaves, flowers, and fruits, each of which is carefully painted and links to one of the subjects of the *Four Tantras*.

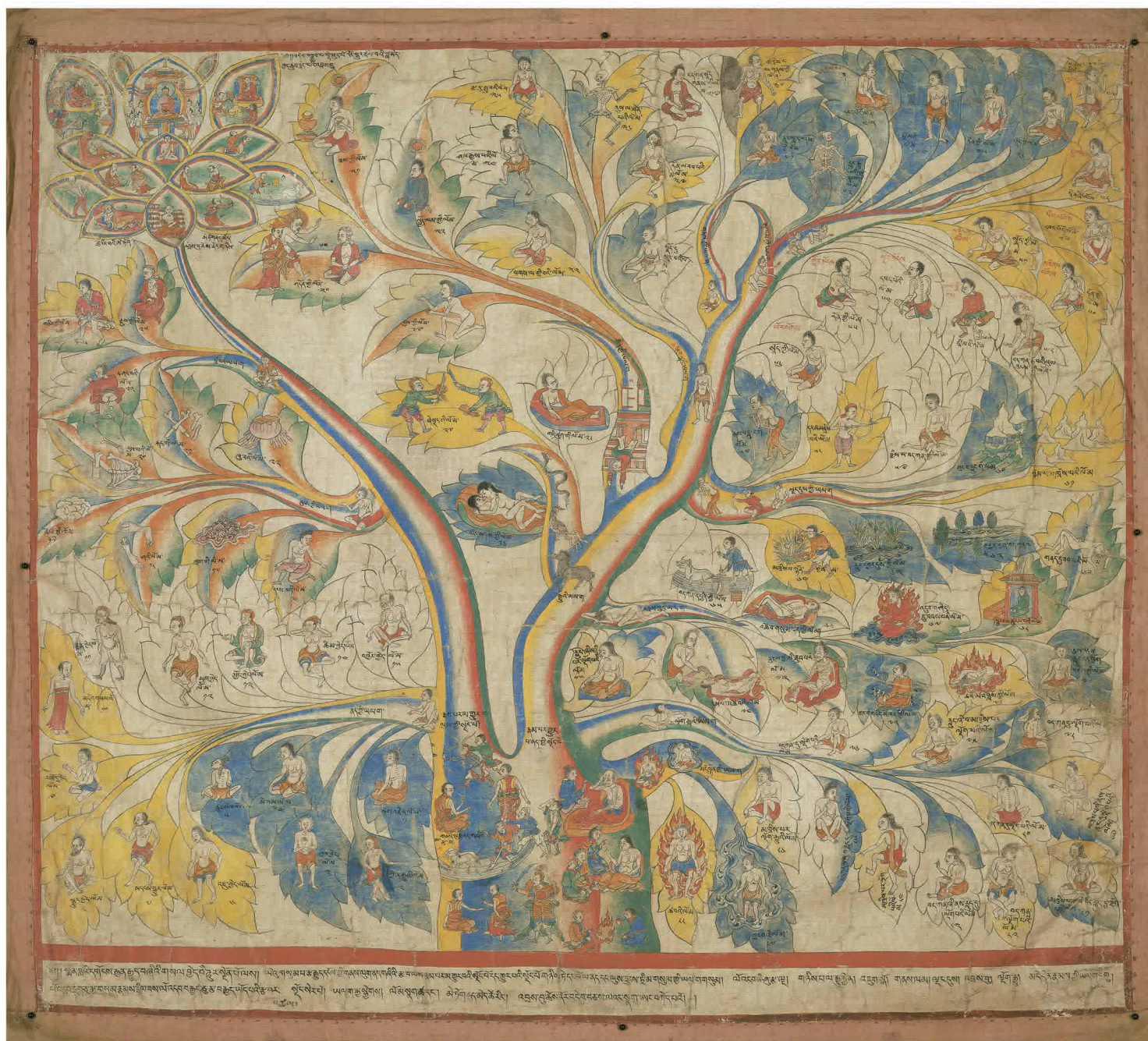
These trees demonstrate ways in which aspects of Tibetan visual arts have been applied to Tibetan medical education (see vignette 2). Briefly, the three main trees are the Tree of the Body in Health and Illness, the Tree of Diagnosis, and the Tree of Treatment, which summarize topics that are introduced in the *Root Tantra* (see FIGS. 1.3

TABLE 1.1

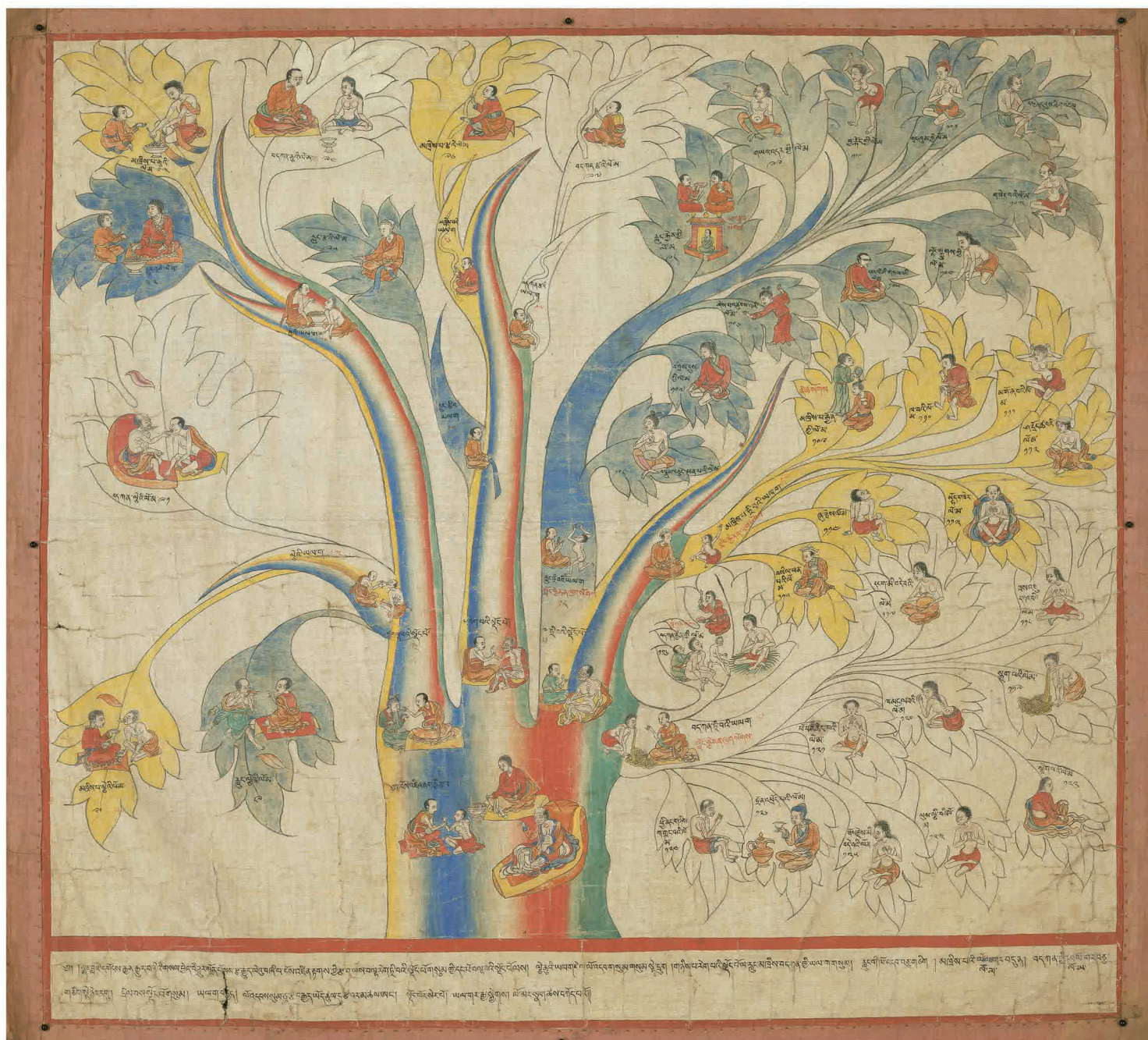
The six organizational frameworks of the *Four Tantras*. The lists should be read vertically along the columns. Note that the 8 Branches are specifically covered in the 92 chapters of the *Oral Instruction Tantra*

|                                             |                                            |                                                                                                             |                     |
|---------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------|
| <b>The Four Tantras (<i>Rgyud bzhi</i>)</b> |                                            | <b>The 8 Branches (<i>yan lag brgyad</i>) discussed mainly in the <i>Instructional Tantra</i></b>           |                     |
|                                             | <i>Root Tantra</i><br>6 chapters           | Diseases of the Body                                                                                        | 70 chapters         |
|                                             | <i>Explanatory Tantra</i><br>31 chapters   | Children's Diseases                                                                                         | 3 chapters          |
|                                             | <i>Instructional Tantra</i><br>92 chapters | Women's Diseases                                                                                            | 3 chapters          |
|                                             | <i>Last Tantra</i><br>25 + 2 chapters      | Spirit Diseases                                                                                             | 5 chapters          |
|                                             |                                            | Injuries Caused by Weapons                                                                                  | 5 chapters          |
|                                             |                                            | Disorders Caused by Toxic Substances                                                                        | 3 chapters          |
|                                             |                                            | Healing the Aged with Elixirs and Rejuvenation                                                              | 1 chapter           |
|                                             |                                            | Restoring Virility and Healing Infertility                                                                  | 2 chapters          |
|                                             |                                            | <b>The 11 Sections (<i>gnas bcu gcig</i>) discussed in 31 chapters of the <i>Explanatory Tantra</i></b>     |                     |
|                                             |                                            | Basic Summary                                                                                               | 1 chapter (1)       |
|                                             |                                            | Formation of the Body                                                                                       | 6 chapters (2–7)    |
|                                             |                                            | Diseases                                                                                                    | 5 chapters (8–12)   |
|                                             |                                            | Behavioral Regimens                                                                                         | 3 chapters (13–15)  |
|                                             |                                            | Diet                                                                                                        | 3 chapters (16–18)  |
|                                             |                                            | Pharmacology                                                                                                | 3 chapters (19–21)  |
|                                             |                                            | Surgical Instruments                                                                                        | 1 chapter (22)      |
|                                             |                                            | Maintenance of Health                                                                                       | 1 chapter (23)      |
|                                             |                                            | Diagnostic Approaches                                                                                       | 3 chapters (24–26)  |
|                                             |                                            | Methods of Healing                                                                                          | 4 chapters (27–30)  |
|                                             |                                            | Qualities of the Physician                                                                                  | 1 chapter (31)      |
|                                             |                                            | <b>The 15 Divisions (<i>skabs bco lnga</i>) discussed in 92 chapters of the <i>Instructional Tantra</i></b> |                     |
|                                             |                                            | Requesting the Teachings                                                                                    | 1 chapter (1)       |
|                                             |                                            | Healing the Three <i>nyepa</i>                                                                              | 4 chapters (2–5)    |
|                                             |                                            | Healing Abdominal Disorders                                                                                 | 6 chapters (6–11)   |
|                                             |                                            | Healing Fevers                                                                                              | 16 chapters (12–27) |
|                                             |                                            | Healing Diseases of the Upper Part of the Body                                                              | 6 chapters (28–33)  |
|                                             |                                            | Healing Diseases in Vital and Vessel Organs                                                                 | 8 chapters (34–41)  |
|                                             |                                            | Healing Disorders of the Genitals                                                                           | 2 chapters (42–43)  |
|                                             |                                            | Healing Miscellaneous Disorders                                                                             | 19 chapters (44–62) |
|                                             |                                            | Healing Sores and Ulcerations                                                                               | 8 chapters (63–70)  |
|                                             |                                            | Healing Children's Diseases                                                                                 | 3 chapters (71–73)  |
|                                             |                                            | Healing Women's Diseases                                                                                    | 3 chapters (74–76)  |
|                                             |                                            | Healing Spirit Diseases                                                                                     | 5 chapters (77–81)  |
|                                             |                                            | Healing Injuries Caused by Weapons                                                                          | 5 chapters (82–86)  |
|                                             |                                            | Healing Disorders Caused by Toxic Substances                                                                | 3 chapters (87–89)  |
|                                             |                                            | Healing the Aged with Elixirs and Rejuvenation                                                              | 1 chapter (90)      |
|                                             |                                            | Restoring Virility and Healing Infertility                                                                  | 2 chapters (91–92)  |
|                                             |                                            | <b>The 4 Volumes (<i>mdo bzhi</i>) discussed in 25 chapters<sup>1</sup> of the <i>Last Tantra</i></b>       |                     |
|                                             |                                            | Examination of Pulse and Urine                                                                              | 2 chapters (1–2)    |
|                                             |                                            | Pacifying Medications                                                                                       | 10 chapters (3–12)  |
|                                             |                                            | Eliminative Therapy                                                                                         | 7 chapters (13–19)  |
|                                             |                                            | External Therapies                                                                                          | 6 chapters (20–25)  |
|                                             |                                            | Concluding Chapter                                                                                          | 1 chapter (26)      |
|                                             |                                            | Chapter on the Student to Whom Teachings May Be Entrusted                                                   | 1 chapter (27)      |
|                                             |                                            | <b>The 156 Chapters (<i>le'u</i>)</b>                                                                       |                     |
|                                             |                                            | Covering the Principles of the <i>Root Tantra</i>                                                           | 6 chapters          |
|                                             |                                            | Covering the 11 Sections                                                                                    | 31 chapters         |
|                                             |                                            | Covering the 15 Divisions                                                                                   | 92 chapters         |
|                                             |                                            | Covering the 4 Volumes                                                                                      | 25+2 chapters       |

1. Note that the *Last Tantra* has an additional two chapters (26–27) that are not covered by the 4 volumes but are included in the 156 chapters.



1.3 Tree of the Body in Health and Illness. Corresponding to Plate 2 of the Tibetan medical paintings (Lhasa set). Tibet or Mongolia; 17th century. Pigments on cloth and brocade; 68.5 x 78.5 cm. Pritzker Collection, Chicago



1.4 Tree of Diagnosis. Corresponding to Plate 3 of the Tibetan medical paintings (Lhasa set). Tibet or Mongolia; 17th century. Pigments on cloth and brocade; 68.5 x 78.5 cm. Pritzker Collection, Chicago

and 1.4). The first visual illustration of these trees dates to the late seventeenth century, when the trees became a part of the set of seventy-nine medical paintings commissioned by Sangye Gyatso. Later adaptations are found throughout the Tibetan medical world in paintings, drawings, murals, and woodblock prints.

The Tree of the Body in Health and Illness has two trunks (FIG. 1.3). The first trunk summarizes the topics of healthy physiology with the various sub-types of the three *nyepa* as well as the seven bodily constituents and the three bodily waste products. The second trunk deals with all aspects of illness, beginning with the three mental poisons, the secondary causes of illness, pathways of diseases, unwholesome foods and environments, and the hot and cold nature of diseases. The first trunk, symbolizing the body in health, is the only one among this set of medical trees that gives rise to flowers and fruits. The two flowers represent the result of a healthy life: freedom from illness and long life. The three resulting fruits are spiritual accomplishment, wealth, and happiness. The Tree of Diagnosis has three trunks (FIG. 1.4), their leaves covering the topics of observing the tongue and urine; feeling the various pulses; and asking patients about symptoms and location of pain, as well as the foods that either harm or benefit them. The Tree of Treatment (FIG. 0.1) summarizes the topics of the fifth chapter of the *Root Tantra*. The four trunks of this tree refer to diet, behavior, internal medications, and external treatment. The diet and behavior trunks branch into depictions of foods, beverages, and behaviors that are beneficial for treating the three *nyepa*. The other two trunks relate to pharmacopoeia and external treatments (see chapters 3 and 4).

The leaves of these three trees with their illustrative details help students to memorize the respective chapters in the *Four Tantras*. For this reason, in various schools of Tibetan medicine, these three trees are often found drawn on classroom walls (FIG. 1.5), sketched into student notebooks, or hanging in dormitory rooms.

### The Medical Body in the *Four Tantras*

In the Tibetan medical view of the body, the five elements (earth, water, fire, air, and space), three *nyepa*, seven bodily constituents, and the digestive heat are the fundamental principles of physiology. As in Ayurveda, the classical medicine of India, Tibetan medicine is not primarily based on organ-related ideas — even though five vital and six vessel organs are mentioned in the texts and shown on one of the Tibetan medical paintings. Instead emphasis is placed on a network of comprehensive balances and imbalances of physiological principles that govern not only the body but

also the external world as a whole and the specific environment of the individual.

**THE THREE *NYEPA* THEORY** In Asian medical traditions, the terms used for “medicine” or “medical science” principally encompass more than what is commonly meant by the same terms in the present-day West. Ayurveda, for example, literally means “knowledge of long life.” Ayurvedic practice is not limited to curing disease but includes prevention of illness and enhancement of stamina through daily behavioral and dietetic schemes. In Tibetan Sowa Rigpa, a way of healthy living consists of a mental, physical, nutritional, behavioral, spiritual, and environmental balance between the five elements and the three *nyepa*. (For a discussion of the mind and body concepts that influenced Tibetan perceptions of the body, see chapter 2).

The three *nyepa*, which have often been translated as “humors,” are very similar to the three *doṣa* of Indian physiology and cosmology, *vata*, *pitta*, and *kapha*. They have been rendered in Tibetan as *lung* (wind), *tripa* (bile), and *beken* (phlegm), respectively associated with the colors blue, yellow, and white. These broad concepts and principles cannot be pinned down by any single word in a European language, however, and the English translations, while apt, cannot be taken literally. The term “humor” literally means fluid or moisture, derives from the Latin *humor*, and is linked to Greek Galenic humoral concepts of blood, phlegm, black bile, and yellow bile and their respective sanguine, phlegmatic,

1.5 Medical trees on a classroom wall at the Men-Tsee-Khang, Dharamsala, Himachal Pradesh, India



**TABLE 1.2**  
Brief summary of some  
of the main features of  
the three *nyepa*

|                                                 | <i>Lung</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | <i>Tripa</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | <i>Beken</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|-------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Predominant element                             | wind                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | fire                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | earth and water                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| Nature                                          | cold or hot                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | hot                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | cold                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| Main location in the body                       | lower part                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | middle part                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | upper part                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| Periods in life                                 | old age                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | adulthood                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | childhood                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| Characteristics                                 | coarse, light, cold, subtle, firm, mobile                                                                                                                                                                                                                | oily, sharp, hot, light, malodorous, aperient, moist                                                                                                                                                                          | oily, cool, heavy, blunt, smooth, firm, adhesive                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| Main functions                                  | organizes all functions of movement: the blood circulation, muscular activities, digestive movements, speech, thoughts                                                                                                                                   | responsible for the digestive process, for regulating body temperature, eyesight, memory, color of the blood, and skin luster                                                                                                 | moisturizes food, lubricates joints, makes tissues soft, gives stability to the whole body, responsible for taste and sense perceptions                                                                                                                     |
| Characteristics of a person with a predominance | very active, talkative, likes to laugh a lot, sleeplessness                                                                                                                                                                                              | hot tempered, sharp intelligence, ambitious                                                                                                                                                                                   | gentle natured, at times lazy and dull, likes to sleep                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| Conditions that contribute to imbalances        | bitter, light, and coarse foods; coffee and strong tea, sugar, cold drinks, fasting or missing meals; inadequate sleep, sexual and mental exhaustion, excessive talking and thinking; exposure to cold wind, staying up late at night, exposure to noise | spicy and sour foods, too much salt and oil, drinking too much alcohol, carrying heavy loads, walking and working in midday sun, long sun-baths, excessive anger, being over-ambitious and competitive, lifting heavy weights | bitter and sweet foods, eating stale food, drinking cold water, excess of raw and cold refrigerated foods and dairy products, overeating, eating before the previous meal is digested, lying on damp ground, sleeping during daytime, drinking after eating |
| Foods that balance excess                       | heavy, greasy, soft, and warm foods, mutton, meat soups, mild medicinal wines, rock salt, garlic, onion, milk                                                                                                                                            | meat, curd and buttermilk products from goats and cows, cooled boiled water                                                                                                                                                   | warm foods, mutton, ginger, fish, honey, grains grown on dry land, flour and cooked porridge made from aged grains, hot boiled water                                                                                                                        |
| Emotional state of mind                         | desire, attachment                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | hatred, anger                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | delusion, ignorance                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |

melancholic, and choleric temperaments. There might have been some early Greek influences on Tibetan medicine,<sup>13</sup> but literal translations of the *nyepa* miss the polysemous nature of the original Tibetan terms. “Wind” as a translation of *lung*, for example, serves to denote processes in the organism that manifest themselves physically with a characteristic of wind. However, *lung*, while including the more overt sensations of wind, such as gas in the intestines or breath in the lungs, cannot be confined to these processes. All movements in the organism — including the flow of blood, thoughts, all nerve activity, and the movement of the muscles and bowels — are governed by this *nyepa*. Since using the English terms predisposes one to a narrowing of the full meaning of this *nyepa*, the Tibetan terms are preferable in this discussion.

Western patients might be puzzled at hearing that they suffer from a *lung* problem, or have too much *lung* in the heart, “hot” *tripa* in the head, or “cold” *beken* in the stomach. Most Tibetan patients have an understanding of these *nyepa*

since they are an integral part of their culture and common day-to-day expressions are often used to describe a typical *nyepa* symptom, so that a detailed explanation by a Tibetan doctor during a consultation is usually not necessary.

Each *nyepa* has five subdivisions (see the first three branches on the trunk of the body in health in FIG. 1.3), is connected with a specific location in the body and has its own function. Some of the general features of the three *nyepa* are summarized in TABLE 1.2. The three-fold divisions are often not as clearly demarcated in practice as in theory since *nyepa* imbalances can occur singly or in combination. Accordingly, signs and symptoms can vary and appear “mixed up.” From birth and when healthy, each individual also has a particular constitution that might combine two or all three *nyepa* to varying degrees. Single *nyepa* constitutions are rare.

Knowing one’s constitution and living in accord with it is conveyed by the Tibetan term for health, *troten* (*’phrod bsten*, literally, to rely on what suits you). The individual is



1.6 A Tibetan doctor reading the pulse of a female patient. Ngamring County, Tibet Autonomous Region, China



1.7 A Tibetan physician feeling the pulse of a male patient. Bir, Himachal Pradesh, India

responsible for keeping a diet and daily regimen that corresponds to and suits one's elemental and *nyepa* nature. From a Western point of view, such an individualized understanding of health is usually termed "holistic," which has attracted many Western patients to Tibetan medicine in response to their increasing dissatisfaction with the symptom-oriented medical care that they perceive as characteristic of biomedicine. Unfortunately, this focus on balance in Tibetan medicine as a "holistic" art often tends to be overemphasized.

**DISTILLING AND DIGESTING** The three *nyepa* are aligned with the digestive process. Chapter five of the *Explanatory Tantra* describes the physiology of the digestive process of the seven bodily constituents<sup>14</sup> as a continuous process of refining essences from the five elements and six tastes (sweet, sour, salty, bitter, hot, astringent) taken in the form of food. According to the *Four Tantras* this digestive process takes six days and follows a sequence: the essence of food is refined through six stages from the organic food sap, or chyle, into blood, flesh, fat, bone, and bone marrow, finally becoming the male and female regenerative fluids, or *kuwa* (*khu ba*).<sup>15</sup> The refined essence of the regenerative fluids shows in a person's radiance and is known as supreme radiance, or *dangchog* (*mdangs mchog*). The *Blue Beryl*, or *Baidūrya Ngonpo* (*Bai dū rya sngon po*), a seventeenth-century commentary to the *Four Tantras*, describes the essence of one stage in this process as being transformed entirely into the constituent of the next stage, expelling all impurities, or *nyig* (*snyigs*, such as bile, nasal discharge, ear wax, saliva, sweat,

teeth, nails, and body hairs), which are created during this distilling process.<sup>16</sup> The driving force behind this process is the digestive heat, or *medro* (*me drod*). Therefore, digestive heat, its restoration, and promotion are given a special place in the treatment of diseases in Tibetan medicine. If the digestive heat is weak, the process of creating good bodily constituents is disturbed, and over time impurities will be accumulated that can lead to disease. Consequently, many Tibetan drugs are geared toward strengthening the digestive heat. The radiance of a person has to be understood not as an organ-related idea but as an expression of healthy bodily constituents. It becomes visible in the glowing complexion of a person and influences the quality of health, vitality, and long life.

### Causation of Illness

Mental factors are given a key role in Tibetan medical tradition as the cause of disease. In the *Four Tantras*, chapter eight of the *Explanatory Tantra* describes the origins of illness. While recognizing that it is impossible to detect each and every cause for each and every disorder, the *Four Tantras* acknowledges that in the basic human condition

the general cause of all disorders is the one and only *marigpa* (*ma rig pa*) or ignorance, which does not understand the intrinsic reality of the lack of self. For instance, no matter how high the bird may soar the sky, it is never separated from its own shadow. Similarly, even though all sentient beings [might] live in health and harmony, as they

TABLE 1.3

The twelve organ pulses felt under the physician's index, middle, and ring fingers. The male patient is examined first on his right wrist, the female patient first on her left wrist. The organ pulses felt under the index finger are interchanged in male and female patients.

|                        | Index finger of physician                                                              | Middle finger of physician | Ring finger of physician                    |
|------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------------------------|
| Left wrist of patient  | male patient: heart and small intestine;<br>female patient: lungs and large intestines | spleen and stomach         | left kidney and seminal<br>vesicle/ ovaries |
| Right wrist of patient | male patient: lungs and large intestines;<br>female patient: heart and small intestine | liver and gall bladder     | right kidney and urinary bladder            |

are associated with *marigpa* it is impossible for them to be separated from disease.<sup>17</sup>

In this medical context, ignorance — not knowing the true nature of mind — eventually also leads to the disturbance of the three *nyepa* through the emotions of desire, hatred, and delusion. Feelings of desire and attachment are related to the element of air and aggravate *lung*; hatred and anger are linked to the fire element and lead to an increase of *tripa*; delusion and dullness increase the water and earth elements and therefore might cause imbalances of *beken*. Not knowing how to keep the three *nyepa* and the five elements in balance is considered a form of ignorance and is directly linked to causing illness.

The primary imbalance that leads to ill health is seen to take place in one's mind. The secondary causes are due to imbalances of one's food and behavior and climatic, spiritual, and planetary surroundings and influences. The classification of illness follows a four-fold scheme. In Tibetan medical texts, 404 diseases are mentioned: 101 are karmic diseases, which are fatal without medical and spiritual treatment; 101 are diseases caused in this lifetime and need medical treatment; 101 are caused by spirits (these diseases include many neurological diseases) and need spiritual treatment, such as rituals; and 101 are caused by inadequate diet and behavior and can be remedied without medicine, by changing food habits and lifestyle. (The numbers 101 and 404 should not be taken literally here.)

Ideally, physicians focus not only on their patients' symptoms but also on their diet, behavior, climatic exposure, emotional patterns, as well as on detecting illness in the rhythm of their pulses. This complex approach to a doctor-patient encounter could easily be considered an art, and the physicians as artists. Tibetan physicians seek to develop unusual sensitivities in their fingertips to feel and analyze the various rhythms of the pulse. They also cultivate a sensitive tongue to taste the various tastes and potencies of raw medicinal ingredients. Touch and taste are at the basis of their medical art. Mastering the perceptibility of the senses, the techniques involved, as well as their medical analysis entails training and individual perfection.

### Diagnosis and Therapy

The diagnosis of illness in Tibetan medicine is approached through three methods: questioning (asking the patient), feeling (pulse diagnosis), and seeing (observing urine, tongue, eyes, and skin). These three sensory faculties require specific training and refinement in order to become tools of diagnosis.

In classical Tibetan medical texts, the pulse and urine diagnoses use the five elements identified in the Chinese tradition (water, earth, fire, wood, and iron) while the physiology of the body, the six tastes, and the foundations of pharmacology are based on the Indian tradition of the five elements (water, fire, earth, air, space). The divinatory aspects of Tibetan pulse diagnosis are not necessarily of Chinese origin, and the development of Tibetan urine analysis — which also includes divinations — has Arabic influences.<sup>18</sup>

The main diagnostic method is the feeling of the pulse (FIG. 1.6), which is described in the first chapter of the *Last Tantra*. The Tibetan term *tsa tawa* (*rtsa lta ba*), literally “feeling the pulse,” has a deeper meaning. *Tsa* is the general term for all types of channels. Some of these channels do not correspond to Western-derived anatomical ideas of veins or nerves but, for instance, also include wind channels or *tsalung* (*rtsa rlung*), which are subtle in nature and the carriers of consciousness. The verb *tawa* (*lta ba*) literally means to see, to look, or to investigate in a broad sense, yet it also describes a process of intuitive comprehension. Complex Tibetan sphygmology is mastered only through many years of practical application and experience.

The pulse is felt at the radial artery on both wrists with the physician's right index, middle, and ring fingers being placed on the left wrist and vice versa. The pulse is considered a “messenger between the physician and the disorder,” and its twelve organ pulses “beat separately without being mingled.”<sup>19</sup> A Tibetan physician feels two different organ pulses under each finger (TABLE 1.3) and based on the pulse speed determines whether the disorder is of cold or hot nature. The *Four Tantras* carefully outlines the ideal circumstances under which the pulse should be felt for diagnosis. This is not applicable today, since patients cannot be examined “early in the morning, when the sun has risen in the sky, and the sunbeam has not fallen on the plain; when

|                         | <i>Lung</i>                                                                                                       | <i>Tripa</i>                                                                                        | <i>Beken</i>                                                                                                                     |
|-------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Pulse                   | floating, empty, and halting                                                                                      | rapid, prominent, and taut                                                                          | sunken, weak, and ponderous                                                                                                      |
| Urine                   | looking like water with large bubbles                                                                             | yellowish-reddish in color, tiny yellowish bubbles that disappear instantly, malodorous, much steam | whitish in color, mucous-like bubbles, little odor or steam                                                                      |
| Tongue                  | red, dry, rough                                                                                                   | yellow coating                                                                                      | dull, smooth, moist, with a thick coating of phlegm                                                                              |
| Eyes                    | reddish sclera, dry, frequent blinking                                                                            | yellowish sclera, protrusion of blood vessels in the eyes, light sensitivity                        | pale sclera, moist, poor eyesight                                                                                                |
| Questioning of symptoms | yawning, trembling, shifting and uncertain pains in hips and joints, mental instability, dullness of sense organs | bitter taste in the mouth, headaches, fever, post-digestive pain                                    | indigestion, vomiting, loss of sense of taste, belching, distention of the stomach, and heaviness of body and mind, feeling cold |

**TABLE 1.4**  
Key diagnostic characteristics of pulse, urine, tongue, eyes, and other symptoms

the internal breath is not exhaled and the external cold air not inhaled; when one has not moved from one's bed, and when one has not eaten anything."<sup>20</sup>

While not all aspects of Tibetan pulse diagnosis mentioned in the *Four Tantras* are practiced these days, it still forms the main diagnostic element of a consultation with a Tibetan physician. In addition to the organ pulses, there are seasonal, constitutional, and life-span pulses. These allow for the diagnosis of seasonal changes of *nyepa* imbalances, healthy constitutions, indications of the lifespan and difficult years in the patient's life, as well as other divinatory and prognostic information.

Most important, however, Tibetan physicians must identify a disease according to hot and cold categories in order to determine the appropriate treatment, which is allopathic in nature — hot diseases, for example, are treated with cooling foods, medicines, and therapies, and vice versa. Tibetan physicians use the duration of their own breath while feeling the pulse to determine whether an illness is hot or cold. The *Blue Beryl* commentary explains that "the normal pulse rate is five beats during one respiratory cycle of the physician.... A pulse rate of six beats and more per respiratory cycle indicates a disease of hot nature.... a pulse rate of four and lower indicates a disease of cold nature."<sup>21</sup>

Tibetan urine diagnosis is described in chapter 2 of the *Last Tantra*. The first urine of the morning is said to give indications of the hot or cold nature of a disease and *nyepa* imbalances. Urine is analyzed for its smell, steam, bubbles, color, and a sediment known as *kuya* (*ku ya*). *Kuya* is formed in the production of bile and appears in the healthy urine as sediment; it increases in hot disorders and is found to be less in cold disorders.

Medical observation also includes looking at the coating of the tongue, the coloring of the sclera, and the protrusion of blood vessels in the eyes. Questioning the patient on symptoms, diet, and behavioral patterns offers further clues on *nyepa* imbalances. Key characteristics of the three diagnostic methods are summarized in Table 1.4.

### A Medical Consultation

Based on this theory, people might look at Tibetan medicine as a medical system that focuses on the individual constitution and *nyepa* imbalances rather than on a disease category. This might lead to the assumption that the medical encounter itself is also an expression of individualized patient care, something many patients find missing in today's overcrowded health-care systems. Viewing elements of Tibetan medical encounters in several contexts, however, reveals the practical relevance of the *Four Tantras* theory in contemporary medical practice.

In pre-1959 Tibet, medicine was practiced both in small-scale family traditions and in institutions that were mainly monastic, with the exception of the Lhasa Mentsikhang, which was founded in 1916 and also offered training for lay people (see vignette 3). Tibetan medicine looks quite different today, whether it is practiced in the Tibet Autonomous Region's capital Lhasa, in Indian exile, in a Chinese town in Amdo, in eastern Tibet, or in the clinic of a Tibetan physician in New York. Global demands for Tibetan pharmaceuticals have led to mass production of Tibetan pills and powders by some of the large institutions, while small-scale pharmacies across the Himalayan belt continue to supply medicine to rural populations, Tibetan exile communities, and Tibetan doctors who are unable to manufacture their own medicines for their patients.

The Men-Tsee-Khang (Medicine and Astrology Institute) in Dharamsala is the largest manufacturer of Tibetan medicines in India. The institute itself operates through fifty branch clinics across India and Nepal, catering mainly to Indian patients, all of whom are prescribed medicines produced at the Men-Tsee-Khang and distributed at the dispensaries of the branch clinics. Depending on a clinic's location, Tibetan doctors see between fifteen and two hundred patients a day, which naturally determines the duration of each consultation, lasting from two to thirty minutes.

During a typical consultation (FIG. 1.7), the physician will feel the patient's pulses at both wrists, look at the tongue, ask key questions about symptoms and complaints, and write a prescription for various medications. Prescriptions are periodically adjusted and changed depending on pulse diagnosis and fluctuation of the *nyepa*. Most doctors keep a file or booklet for each patient to record symptoms, diagnosis, and therapies. Often the patients keep their own records since they may visit various doctors.

Pulse diagnosis remains the main diagnostic method of each medical encounter. Urine diagnosis is rarely practiced. While some doctors insist on relying entirely on their traditional diagnostic methods, many also take the patients' blood pressure and look at biomedical records. Some doctors even send their patients for blood tests to monitor, for example, the hemoglobin level, which indicates whether the Tibetan medication was successful in restoring certain blood levels.<sup>22</sup>

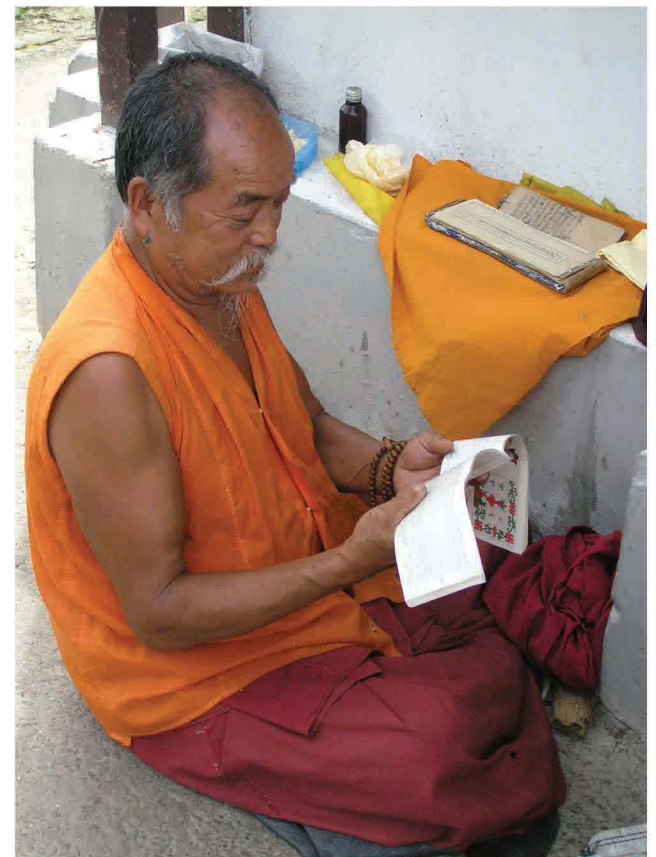
The depth of discussion during doctor-patient encounters depends on such factors as patients' interest in asking questions and whether they insist on dietary advice. Also contributory are the doctor's training and skills in Indian languages or English as well as the ability to communicate specific instructions on behavior and diet. The physician's time at hand and the cultural and medical background of patients are other factors. Whereas Asian patients often refrain from asking questions and simply accept whatever the doctor prescribes, Western patients coming to Tibetan doctors are usually keen to understand the different disease etiologies offered to them and ask for and follow dietary and at times also Buddhist religious advice. In India, patients often expect to go home with medicines rather than dietary prescriptions alone, which is probably one reason why the focus of treatment has shifted toward medication rather than balancing *nyepa* through dietary and behavioral advice. The focus varies according to country. In Western countries, where nutritional and mental counseling may be the only legal way of practicing Tibetan medicine and medications can often only be given as nutritional supplements, diet and behavioral advice naturally takes prominence in a consultation.

For severe cases, including chronic arthritis, external treatments such as moxibustion or golden needle therapy are performed — burning moxa (cones of dried artemesia leaves) on specific points on or near the skin or through a golden needle that is shallowly inserted at the top of the cranium. Cupping is also practiced widely in Asia. It is easy to perform and used to treat chronic rheumatic and arthritic disorders (see chapter 4 and FIG. 4.19). In the West, Tibetan massage, or *kunye* (*bsku mnye*) — especially beneficial for *lung* disorders — has become popular, perhaps in response to legal restraints on the import and sale of Tibetan pharmaceuticals (see chapters 4 and 6).

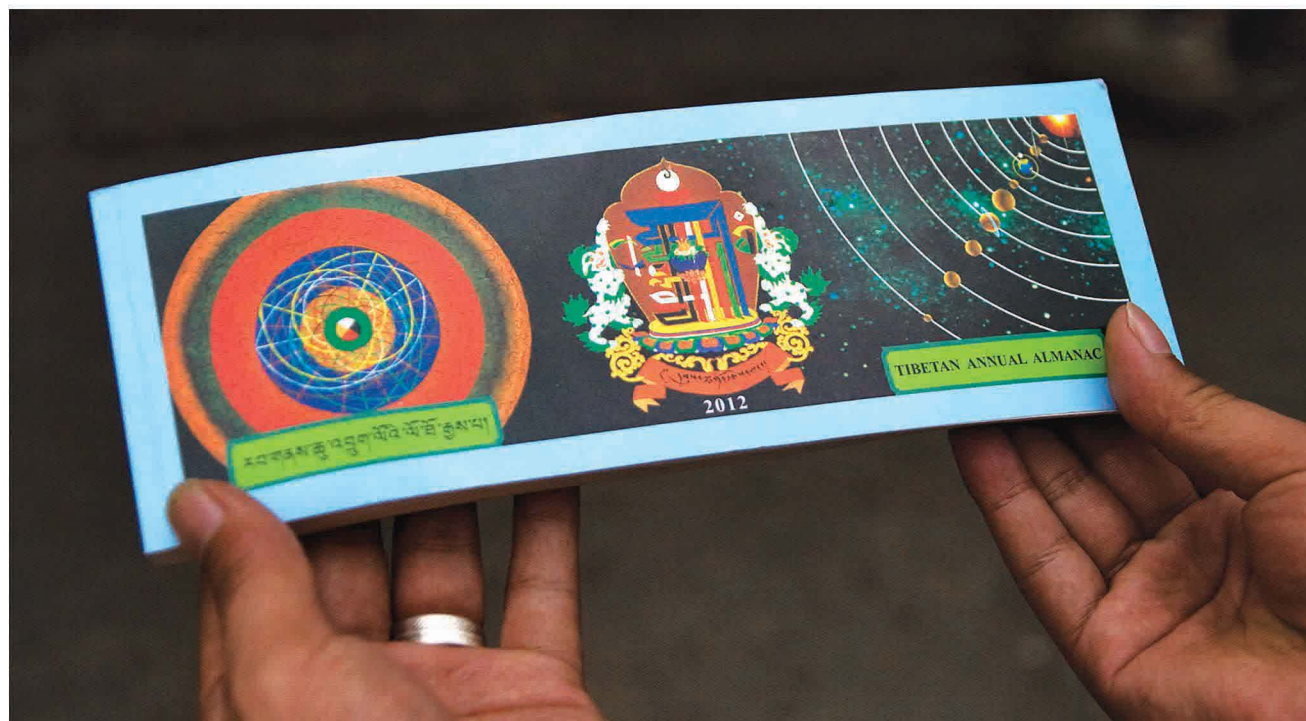
The *Last Tantra*, the fourth tantra, focuses on various therapies, many of which are no longer practiced today, although some, such as medicinal baths, herbal compresses, or medicinal steams, have recently been revived in modern hospital spa treatments and even in specialized therapeutic departments at the Lhasa Mentsikhang and the Dharamsala Men-Tsee-Khang. More invasive treatments include enemas, bloodletting, and surgical therapies, most of which are rarely practiced today (see chapter 4).

Tibetan medicine uses hundreds of different medicinal compounds that derive from plants, minerals, purified metals,

1.8 A Tibetan diviner checks astrological dates for clients in his almanac in front of a Tibetan Buddhist monastery. Kalimpong, West Bengal, India



1.9 A Tibetan almanac.  
Dharamsala Men-Tsee-  
Khang, Himachal Pradesh,  
India



and animal products. Medicinal substances are manufactured in the form of liquids, powders, pills, pastes, medicinal butter, wine, ash, oil, and so-called precious pills. Tibetan pills are known for their bitter taste and strong fragrance. Substances are never ingested as a single-ingredient drug; rather they are compounds of at least three and up to a hundred or more ingredients. Each ingredient is selected according to its taste, hot or cold properties, and effects on the three *nyepa* and five elements.

The art of Tibetan pharmacology involves the development of the sense of taste by pharmacologists and physicians. The tongue is considered a kind of laboratory, detecting the finest nuances of six tastes (sweet, sour, salty, hot, bitter, astringent) and analyzing medicinal qualities through them. Tibetan pharmacology is so complicated that at the Dharamsala Men-Tsee-Khang, three years of additional training after medical school and many years of experience are required to become a full-fledged pharmacologist. Some of the purification methods for certain ingredients take several months and involve complicated alchemical processes (see chapter 3). The greatest hurdle when starting an independent career as a Tibetan doctor is being able to establish one's own pharmacy.

Despite being a complete medical system with its detailed diagnostic and therapeutic methods, contemporary Tibetan medical practice is embedded within a medically pluralistic and multicultural framework. Patients often use

several medical systems at the same time, combining antibiotics or other biomedical and naturopathic pharmaceuticals with Tibetan medicine, along with divinations and Tibetan Buddhist ritual healing practices to subdue spirit influences and negative karma. People also take Tibetan medicine regularly as tonics on astrologically calculated auspicious days. Many patients come to Tibetan medicine only as a last resort with chronic long-term illnesses, bringing unsuccessful medical histories including x-rays and test results that many Tibetan doctors are not trained to read. In some rural areas of ethnically Tibetan regions of China, Tibetan medicine is part of the official public health-care system, but a majority of treatment is of biomedical nature. It is difficult to describe a typical doctor-patient encounter related to Sowa Rigpa, as there is no homogenous practice of it across the diverse areas and communities in the Himalayas, on the Tibetan Plateau, and among Tibetan exile communities worldwide.

### Endeavors for Health and Long Life

Tibetan concepts of the body, health, and illness do not relate exclusively to Tibetan textual knowledge of the *Four Tantras*, which is a specialized knowledge. Lay and folk ideas and practices have also influenced how Tibetan communities perceive, experience, and negotiate health and illness. Lay Tibetans rely on biomedical and Tibetan medical specialists, at the same time reckoning with the forces of karma, ideas of auspiciousness, blessing, pollution, and concerns over spirits

and demons. Disease-causing spirits, demons, and pollution, or *drib* (*grib*), have largely non-Buddhist origins but still affect the ways in which Tibetan societies conceive of health and illness. They are expressed in Buddhist terms by contemporary Tibetans. Their diagnosis and treatment often lie outside the contemporary *Four Tantras*-based medicine, even though Tibetan medical texts also mention magical spells, divinatory pulse and urine diagnoses, as well as religious means to treat illness. The diagnosis and treatment of such illnesses is carried out by diviners, astrologers, and high lamas, often involving ritual means and the intake of blessed substances. Tibetan medicine, biomedicine, religious practice, ritual healing, and divinations are deeply interrelated in this process and, despite their epistemological contradictions, do not oppose or compete with each other in practice.<sup>23</sup>

Choosing parallel treatment schemes is often based on plural etiologies. One example describes a Tibetan civil servant in Dharamsala who chose a comprehensive treatment that would cover the three layers of what he perceived were the causes for his illness: biomedical treatment to get rid of the parasites, or *sinbu* (*srin bu*), which had affected him because of an imbalance in the three *nyepa*; the *nyepa* imbalance had to be treated with Tibetan medicine; and moreover, rituals and recitations had to be performed to annul the bad karma that had caused the *nyepa* imbalance in the first place.<sup>24</sup>

The notion of the karmic origin of disease is very common in Buddhist and Hindu cultures. Karma is understood as

being the outcome of all actions of body, speech, and mind. In this view the individual is responsible for personal health as well as suffering, and therefore has the possibility to overcome suffering. Accepting the four noble truths in Buddhist teachings means accepting suffering as a basic human tenet and as the outcome of previous karma. Therefore, when it comes to healing a disease, Tibetans often make use of a variety of options. Health decisions are often made through divinations that would clarify very practical questions, such as whether to go to a biomedical or Tibetan medical doctor, and whether to undergo surgery. To determine the auspicious days for treatment, astrological calendars are used (FIGS. 1.8 and 1.9; see also chapter 5 and vignette 1). Tibetans know of their favorable “life-force days” and “life-essence days” and even mention them to the Tibetan physician to schedule the most auspicious day for external treatments.<sup>25</sup>

When Rigpa Yeshe addressed the group of sages with the medical teachings, he said that the aim was not only to cure diseases. The medical teachings are meant for those who wish to remain healthy, live a long life, practice the dharma, free themselves from suffering, accumulate wealth, and achieve happiness.<sup>26</sup> The medical teachings of the *Four Tantras* therefore speak not only to doctors of Tibetan medicine but resonate with the needs of many people. The fascinating art of feeling the pulse and of combining many ingredients into potent medicines involve great sensitivity and experience. This is one reason for the enduring popularity of Tibetan medical traditions.