

VENERABLE DR. TROGAWA RINPOCHE

**PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE LIFE IN  
TIBETAN MEDICINE**

## ENGLISH TRANSLITERATION OF TIBETAN

ñ as in 'onions'

ñ as in 'ring'

c as in 'church'

ts as in 'rats'

tsh as in 'cats' home'

ch as in 'church hall'

j as in 'jungle'

dz as in 'lads'

z as in 'rose' but often as in 'sun'

ʒ as in 'leisure' but often as in 'shade'

ś as in 'shade'

# PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE LIFE IN TIBETAN MEDICINE

Venerable Dr. Trogawa Rinpoche

On behalf of all members of the fraternity of Tibetan physicians I convey my greetings to the members and organisation of the Wellcome Institute who have been so kind to invite me here today, and to all of you who are taking such an interest in our science.

I live in India, I will greet you in the Indian way.

In our time, in our era, Tibetan medicine is intimately linked to the Tibetan spiritual tradition. The first influence of Buddhism on Tibet occurs in the fourth and fifth centuries. However, the Tibetan medical tradition precedes that time. A system of medicine indigenous to the regions of Tibet has been practised by Tibetans for certainly more than two thousand years, perhaps as long as three thousand years, according to oral tradition and Shangshung<sup>(1)</sup> Bonpo sources. You are all familiar with the general features of the geography of Tibet. It is an isolated country entirely surrounded by mountains, so that, in early times the Tibetans were isolated from the rest of the world. Starting from the fourth and fifth centuries, Tibet began to build a relationship with India. After establishing contact with India, Tibet gradually formed relationships with most parts of China, and this interrelationship served to help build and develop the culture and the sciences of Tibet. With regard to Buddhism, Indian influence on China precedes Indian influence on Tibet. Starting from about the seventh century Tibet had an increasing relationship with China. Certain texts were translated from Chinese into Tibetan, particularly, for example, *The Waterfall of Golden Light Sutra*.<sup>(2)</sup> However, the main corpus of literature translated from Chinese is of Indian origin. *The Waterfall of Golden Light Sutra* is, of course, the teaching of the Buddha and hence Indian in origin. Another text, *Soma Radza*<sup>(3)</sup> a title by which it is known in every language, is a commentary on medicine by *Ācārya Nāgārjuna*,

translated first from Indian languages into Chinese, and then into Tibetan. Now, we consider our science to be an interrelated combination of philosophy and practice.

Our medical philosophy is quite closely related to the philosophy of the teaching of the Buddha. Our practice of medicine, on the other hand, which is based on this philosophy, does not have one single origin. Rather, it has developed on that basis by bringing together elements of many different parts of Asia.

The whole basis of the philosophy and practice of Tibetan medicine, as we practise it now is the *Gyushi*<sup>(4)</sup>, The Four Tantras. This text, in the version we have today, dates from the eleventh or twelfth century, from a version co-ordinated by Yuto Yonten Gombo<sup>(5)</sup> the Younger, not to be confused with his ancestor Yuto Yonten Gombo the Elder.

The actual character of this text is of great importance. Did Yuto Yonten Gombo Create this text or did it exist before ? There was some sort of Four Tantras prior to Yuto Yonten Gombo. It is mentioned that his ancestor Yuto Yonten Gombo the Elder knew of it and that it was translated from an Indian language by the great translator Berozana.<sup>(6)</sup> However, this was a basic root text that existed before and not the entire Four Tantras we have now. The text was compiled and developed into its present form in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

So, now for what I wish to discuss today, the Four Tantras are evidently divided into four sections. The first section is the Root Tantra. The second Section is the Explanatory Tantra. I wish today to discuss the second and seventh chapters of the Second Tantra, which deal with birth and with death.

This is, of course, a subject which is closely linked to Dharma, a spirituality, so I will bring in points from other sources about the same subject.

All of our experiential world, the outer physical phenomena and our inner subjective being, are compounded events. Everybody has their own personal subjective experience, whether they are a person of very high quality, or a person of very low quality

or just an ordinary individual. In dealing with birth and with death, as I am going to do today, we have to consider the individual from his own subjective point of view chiefly. In our own ordinary state of mentation, alive as we are now, we have different types of mental impulse; virtuous mental impulses, unvirtuous mental impulses and ordinary uncharacterizable impulses. Now these are results in terms of Karma. So a virtuous impulse leads to a happy experience and similarly an unvirtuous impulse leads to suffering. Uncharacterized impulses which are neither virtuous nor unvirtuous have little results at all.

So, these are types of events we experience during our lifetime, and then, at one point, the individual dies. The moment when we die is always a question of uncertainty for an individual. Individuals die in two different ways. They die naturally by the exhaustion of their life or they die suddenly, for instance, with accidents. I want to deal here with natural death.

So, prior to the person's death, a variety of particular events occur to an individual, which presage his on-coming death. Now, in accordance with our medical tradition there are three levels of sign or presaging of death which occur. The first is a level of sign which occurs some distance from the death. There are further signs which indicate that death is approaching, is coming close. And there are the immediate signs.

There are three types of signs at a distance. First omens, dreams second, and the aspect of the person which is a kind of transformation. Now I am going to explain a little about these.

I will explain briefly the signs at some distance. The first sign is that of the omen. In omens we use the message received from the patient if a messenger comes. Bringing a message from the patient, we see how the messenger arrives. These are considered omens of whether the patient is in a condition from which he will recover, or whether he is in a condition which is leading him to his death.

The dreams are particular dreams which occur to the patient, which indicate that he is in the process of dying. These may

normally occur during the disease, but in some cases may occur before he falls i'. There are six types or categories of dream in this context.

The third presage of dying is the change in the aspect. This is actually a change in his character, and one sees a sudden rather pronounced change in the person's habitual character. These are the types of signs which occur indicating on-coming death at some remove.

Then, the second level of sign are signs which indicate that death is fairly close. The first of these is the examination of the shadow and what we say are the effects of the sun, the water, the mirror and so forth. These are therefore seen in the reflections of the person, either in shadows or in a mirror or even in a photograph, which appear in the world. They are things, such as a photograph of the casting of a shadow, which are incomplete, so there is no arm, for instance. This is a very detailed topic. There are a large number of sub-divisions of this kind of sign. Another sign can be examined by the individual himself, by placing his middle finger on the crown of his head and looking up as high as he can see. Normally you should see your arm in an unbroken line in front of you. However, a person who is close to death will see a break as if there was a space in his arm. This is explained by saying that as one is approaching death the faculty of vision is declining. This subject can be further pursued by examining chapter seven of the Explanatory Tantra.

Then there are the immediate signs of death. This has to do with the absorption or reabsorption of the elements. Our body is composed of elements, and so at death the elements are reabsorbed into each other again. First earth dissolves into water. The individual's vision declines, he can no longer see clearly. This the person will experience himself. Then they will have a particular feeling as if they were sinking. This is easier for nurses or doctors to observe. The patient will have a continuous impulse to pull himself up because he keeps feeling as if he was sinking. Then water dissolves into fire. The mouth and the nose become dry as do all of the pores. Then fire dissolves into wind. The

heat normally diffused throughout the body begins to concentrate in the centre progressively receding from the extremities. The wind dissolves into space. There is more to know about this than would seem at first glance, because space in the context does not mean the ordinary sense of physical space, rather there is a sort of equation here between space and consciousness, which is to be understood. These are the elements, and there follows the absorption of the senses. The power of the eye dissolves into the ear. First the power of the eye declines, then the power of hearing. The power of the ear dissolves into the nose. The power of the nose, the power of the sense of smell thus dissolves into the tongue and the sense of taste. The power of taste dissolves into the sense of touch. As the dissolutions go on, starting with the elements and then following through the senses, the sense perception declines and then disappears. Now, concerning this there are three stages which are of great importance : they are called appearance or phenomena, the break and the attainment.

So, when one has the dissolution of the elements, the decline of the sense perception and the disappearance of the sense objects altogether, after that one has three stages. Physically the person is just at the point of ceasing to breathe and has lost the will to live. So the first stage is appearance or apperception. Now this is actually an internal faculty. Normally we perceive as if things were outside. At this stage, of course, on the first level, you can see that external perception as such has disappeared but there is still a kind of clarity as if there were an apperception which is, however, entirely internal. It seems like moonlight.

The second level should be called 'expanding' rather than 'break'. It is also a kind of experience like sunlight which is radiant and seems to be going out and radiating. The third level is attainment. This word is difficult to define exactly. It is called 'attainment' because this feeling of luminosity reaches a limit and then exhaustion. The individual has attained to the luminosity that is going to express itself and so it exhausts itself and the person falls into a feeling of complete blankness, darkness. What happens then is that as the spreading light radiates and then begins to decline it leaves the individual with a feeling of space,

of just clear space, and then this space becomes duller as there is no more light until the person falls into a complete darkness. And then the person falls unconscious.

Now, in the Tibetan spiritual tradition we practise a practice called '*Powa*'<sup>(7)</sup> or 'the great transference'. This practice is designed to lead one to a good future life. There is a particular moment when this practice is most efficacious. After the dissolution of the elements and the senses and the sense objects, there is a space of time, just as the three last stages are about to begin. This space is the most efficacious moment to practise the practice of '*Powa*' or transference. The individual goes into the post-death stage which we call '*Bardo*'. The understanding of *Bardo* is itself a very large topic. Basically there is a threefold division. The *Bardo* of dying, the *Bardo* of the being of the *Bardo Choenyid*<sup>(8)</sup> and the *Bardo* of finding a place of rebirth. When an individual dies he falls unconscious, but he is not totally extinguished as a fire is extinguished so that it completely disappears, rather his basic propensities are still a potential in the essence of mind or basic consciousness. Though there is a potential the individual is totally unconscious. Now, the duration of time it will take for each of these stages can vary widely from one individual to another, and particularly the exact duration of each stage during the meditative or spiritual development of an individual may change significantly. The general rule is that after about a day of total unconsciousness the individual will wake up. That is, there will occur to his consciousness new experience.

Perhaps we should not really call this new because for an ordinary individual what he experiences will be nothing new at all. It will be the re-iteration of his own habit patterns and thought patterns and basic impulses which he has become used to throughout his life. So whatever ordinary actions, virtuous actions and unvirtuous actions this person was accustomed to, he will see himself going through again as a mental experience. The person is in a kind of delusory state and as in any delusory state the person experiences subjectively like in other states. So they have pain and pleasure in this state. Now that is for an ordinary person.



For an ordinary person and even for a person of some meditative and spiritual development which is only perhaps of a minor or ordinary level but not of a very high level, they will begin to experience these hallucinations, these delusory experiences and they will begin to go through a more experiential event. Now for an ordinary person of no spiritual development this will go on for about forty-nine days, through a variety of stages. A person of some meditative development may begin to understand this state as it goes on and thus escape from this delusory experience in the first two weeks. For persons who are basically ordinary without real spiritual development but who perhaps have a degree of faith in relationship to spirituality, who have a little spiritual sense nonetheless, should a ritual be performed for them, then by relating to this ritual which is being performed for them they may begin to understand this state in which they find themselves and thus be better able to deal with it. Hence the reason for our custom of performing important rituals for the dead. Here we are not concerned with a real physical object. We consider there are two types of wind which control beings. For an enlightened being such as a Buddha, he is brought into an event by the power of his own wisdom, which is called the wind of wisdom. For an ordinary being, such as ourselves, we are brought into the event by the force of our *Karma*. This we call the wind of our *Karma*.

Consciousness is supported by the wind of our *Karma*. We have mentioned so far two distinct types of wind. One is the elemental wind which is part of the series of elements. Another is the wind of *Karma* and, although the word is the same, different things are meant by each. So, this wind of *Karma* pushes us on, as it does in life, in the state of *Bardo* into new circumstances, and these new circumstances are coloured by the character of the *Karma* that has created that wind, unvirtuous or virtuous, the character of actions having created that wind, the character of actions having resulted in a wind that produces suffering or produces pleasure. In the case of the *Bardo* it produces the continuum of delusory experience for a period of about seven weeks at the end of which the individual is propelled towards a new conception in physicality. This process of moving into a new

conception of physicality is called the *Bardo* of the birth place. The end of the period of the *Bardo* at the end of the seven weeks of hallucination we consider to be the boundary between one life and the next. Sentient beings are born in one of four ways, the four birth places. These are, miraculous birth without physical condition, birth through humidity, birth through eggs and birth through the womb. This is meant to be a medical discourse and we are all here humans, so let us confine our remarks to womb birth. And let us stick to the human condition, otherwise we might try to deal with other types of womb birth.

We are born to a particular set of parents in particular physical and environmental circumstances. We are born into such circumstances because of the general force of our *Karma*, insofar as our *Karma* is either virtuous or unvirtuous or will have one particular character or another. So we find ourselves in a particular parental or environmental circumstance. For an ordinary person it is very difficult to have any control over this situation, over exactly where one is going to take rebirth. The *Karma* which we have created is very powerful and it governs us basically. Let us give an example. Let us say, there are two countries, the country of the south and the country of the north. The people or person of the country of the south attacks and causes damage to the country of the north. But in the future the person dies, and it is not certain where he will be re-borne. He may be born into the bad circumstances in the country of the north which he himself has created. This brings in the condition of conception. In the *Bardo* the individual exists as consciousness driven on by the force of *Karma*, that is, driven on by the wind of *Karma*. Thus the conception concerns the union of the father and the mother and its being met by the consciousness driven by the wind of *Karma*. Phenomena occur due to preceding conditions, and this happens with everything in our personal experience. The character of events is determined by preceding circumstances. So, for instance, when you have a seed you plant the seed and it gradually grows into a particular plant, with particular leaves and flowers and fruit. Just as with a plant the preceding circumstances determining the character of the following event, so with the

subjective experience for an individual is the life process following a particular mode of development, which is what we call the twelve links of dependent arising. The prime cause of dependent arising and hence ordinary circumstance is ignorance. Because of ignorance we have acted in response to the basic impulse, virtuous impulses, unvirtuous impulses, impulses of different types. Because of them we have created a force of *Karma*. This is compounding creation. This brings us, because of the aspect of creation, to a moment of consciousness, and in this context what is meant is the entering into physicality of the individual, of the consciousness driven by the wind of *Karma*, meeting, uniting with the union of the semen and ovum of the male and female. Then the individual exists, both subjectively and physically, and from the moment of entering the womb we speak of the fourth stage of dependent arising, the stage of name and form. The nourishment consumed by the mother serves to feed the foetus and develop it through precise stages.

The next stage is called 'development'. This is the fifth stage of dependent arising, so, in the second month, the channel centre in the navel develops. There then develops the long channel. This channel passes from the head or what is developing into the crown of the head. This is the basis of earth and water in the body. The crown of the head, in terms of diseases, is the ground of phlegm. And the long channel is the basic passage from which phlegm develops.

The second channel develops upwards towards the liver. This is the basis of fire in the body. In terms of diseases, this is the basis from which bile develops and grows.

The third channel grows downwards towards the genitals, and this is the ground of wind in the body.

Now, from the moment of conception, the individual has some physical sense of pleasure and pain, but it is pretty subtle. As the process of the development of the foetus goes on, it becomes more and more physically precise. The Buddha has taught the development and experience of the foetus in the *Sutra of entering the womb*<sup>(9)</sup> and there are also a good number of commentaries

in Tibet on the experience in the womb, and they are found in every tradition, the Sakya, Kaju, Nyingma, and Gelug<sup>(10)</sup>, of Tibetan spirituality.

When there is development, there is contact with the world. This is what leads to feeling. Feeling can basically be classified as either pleasure or pain, and because we have this basic division of feeling, we have a relationship to this feeling which we call craving. There are two fundamental kinds of craving : the craving of desire or attachment, and the craving of fear. The first, the craving of desire, is our reaction to pleasure. An experience of pleasure leads to a reaction of wishing to perpetuate it, to hold on to it, to not allow it to disappear. The other kind of craving is a craving of fear. This is standard reaction to pain, to suffering. We wish to avoid it even when it does not occur. At its occurrence we wish to escape from it. There is not much real pleasure felt in the experience of the womb. Most of it is painful. So, in the womb, experience is mostly the craving of fear, the craving to escape which is predominant. Craving leads to grasping, to grasp at a circumstance. Because the craving is a craving to escape, we grasp at the idea of escape. Hence, the foetus has the impulse to leave the womb. The grasping leads to becoming or existence and then to birth. The impulse leads us to birth in the world. This connection between grasping and birth is sometimes called becoming and sometimes existence. The world (*srid-pa*) actually means a continuum, a continuous unceasing flow of events.

The individual has been going through a process where his experiences are becoming more solid and physical, more gross. And after the birth this process goes on and his experiences become more solid and gross. And as they do, so his mentation reflects that and becomes more and more disturbed and hence the standard event which happens to all children, they become more and more active and disturbed. In Tibetan medicine, we feel that the active principles of the body which, if you like, are using the physical circumstance of the body, are of three types, the three humours, wind, bile and phlegm.

There are five humours of each type, five winds, five biles and five phlegms. Wind has certain particular characteristics, wind is basically light and rough — cold, fine, solid or hard and mobile.

Bile is sharp, oily, light and odorous. It leads to diarrhoea and it goes down, it is descending. It is humid. Now, lightness is not something that is easy to understand. The lightness of bile works like magnetism. It will pick up other influences. In the case of bile, that is what is meant by lightness. If you rub a piece of amber against a cloth and pass it over a table you will find it will pick up smaller pieces of dust quite easily. That is the classical example of what bile is like. It picks up other light influences from around us.

Phlegm is oily, heavy and blunt, soft and sticky.

There are fifteen humours — five winds, five biles, five phlegms. Each of these are particular functions or sets of functions within the body. What is to be understood is that these basic characteristics of each category of humour which I have described are the force which is making these particular humours carry out their functions. The fifteen particular humours carry out those functions because they belong to the particular categories, have the particular characteristics. So, the characteristics of each humour are the ground force of that humour. What perpetuates the life of the individual is the three types of humour and the seven stages of the body and the three types of waste product, this latter category being very easy to understand. All this is clear in the Domtrim<sup>(11)</sup> or tree diagrams which have been explained by Dr. Finckh. So, with regard to the diagrams, the first trunk is considered to be the basic condition, that is, what the body should be like in a condition of health. A body in health must still be cared for by appropriate food and behaviour. And when we say 'behaviour' in our tradition, we mean behaviour in the three categories of being — physical behaviour, verbal behaviour, and mental behaviour. Of these, dealing with our own mind, our mental behaviour is very important. I feel that for every individual a capacity to deal with his own mind is something of

prime importance. In every religious tradition, the importance of tranquillity of mind is considered very great. So, it is very important for us to be able to perpetuate a basic tranquillity of mind. It is important for us to develop a sense of acceptance and non-aggressiveness and what is called in Tibetan *shoshe*, contentment, concerning our wealth, circumstance and quality.

So, the first thing we need is a capacity to accept and live with the circumstances and abilities we find ourselves with. And the second thing we need is to perpetuate a sense of peace and mental tranquillity — a freedom from anger, a capacity not to become quickly aggressive with unpleasant circumstances. If we can maintain a tranquillity of mind, then we benefit ourselves, we benefit other people around us, we benefit both ourselves and others in this lifetime and we create benefit for future lifetimes. When we find ourselves in a teaching position, in a position of communicating something of value to other people, we ought to remember the basic purpose — doing this is for other people, to try to benefit other people. Now, it is not just enough in communicating knowledge to concentrate on the aspect of communication and transmitting what one understands. One also has to deal with the aspect of utilization of knowledge and understanding of the capacity to deal with what one knows and what one can do for the benefit of others and for the general benefit. And to deal with it in a way which is not harmful to others. The more we can increase our tranquillity and calm in general, the more we can create benefit for everyone. The situation is very similar to farming. The communication of knowledge from the teacher to the student is like sowing seeds. There are many different kinds of seeds. If one sows seeds which are only beneficial and have no harmful qualities, that is the best. This development of peace is a very important aim in our lives.

So, this is my talk to you today. Once one has been born, then the more one can feel the impulse to benefit others, the better one can develop one's relationship with the world, and the more one will create benefit and peace for everyone. All religions teach the importance of mental peace. So Dharma is a medicine for the mind.

I have been very happy to have been invited here today by the Wellcome Institute, to be able to talk to you all, and I am very happy especially to see the great interest that all of you are taking in our culture and in our science.

Thank you very much.

## REFERENCES

1. spelled Zan-zun.
2. mDo-sde gser-'od chu-'beb
3. Sanskrit somarāja
4. spelled rGyud-bži
5. spelled gYu-thog Yon-tan mGon-po
6. spelled Vairocana
7. spelled 'pho-ba
8. spelled chos-ñid
9. dGa'-bo mñal-'jug-gi mdo 'Sutra on how to obtain a good rebirth'
10. spelled Sa-skya, bKa'-rgyud, rÑin-ma, dGe-lugs
11. spelled sdon-'grim
12. spelled chog-śes