

THE ART OF DIAGNOSIS: A PRACTICE IN PERCEPTION AND COMPASSION

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Working with diagnosis in the Tibetan Medicine model is an art form based on a combination of education, intimacy with the elements, and pure direct perception. Cultivating a deeper level of interaction, employing psychology between doctor and patient creates the best possible outcome in determining the actual disease and circumstances creating imbalance. More profound accuracy of diagnostics requires faith and trust between doctor and patient. This opens a gateway for a pure vision of symptoms and the bodily, mental and/or spiritual aspects involved. The spiritual interchange between doctor and patient plays a much more significant role than immediately considered in the typical western biomedicine model. Those studying methods of diagnostics according to the Tibetan system must learn to apply perception of diagnosis based upon not only the pathology, but also upon unbiased compassion, which serves to aid any healing dynamic.

Skill in observation, dialogue within the questioning, and investigation of the natural constituents and three *nyes pa* (humors/defaults) in the Tibetan system are the most important to master as a physician. Confidence in the complexity of the system is a certainty which comes with experience. Yet without unbiased love and healing intentions radiating towards patients during the diagnostic process, a vital part of the diagnostic and healing process is lost. The more compassion is developed, the more it is practiced, then the more preceptive on subtle energy levels one becomes as a physician. This type of compassion comes without expectation, without the ego of being right or “good” at diagnosis. Instead it arrives from knowing the interdependent nature of phenomena at play in the human form.

The thirty-eight methods of diagnosis in Tibetan medicine are executed with both precision and subtle means. The art of employing methods of diagnosis while embodied as a spiritual guide is performed by weaving between multitude layers of the patients’ experiences and pathology, as taught in the Root Tantra. The importance of this cannot be underestimated as each person has a unique inner microcosm, expressed in a particular body-mind-spirit elemental combination. The outer microcosm is influenced by choices in diet, behaviour, external seasons, climate, one’s genetics, and life history. All such aspects inform the

relationship an individual has developed to their inner microcosm and what homeostasis means for them.

It is entirely inadequate to only apply the skill of diagnostic theory by just ticking off boxes regarding the thirty-eight methods of urine, pulse, questioning and investigating physical symptoms. A physician must fully engage with the patient’s mind stream and listen to their stories, their experience of embodiment, and discomforts they may or may not even be fully aware of. This is not only critical to the diagnosis process, but must be performed without bias, free of judgment and assumptions that symptom A makes B happen. The diagnosis process as a physician is in actuality, a spiritual experience and thus should be treated as such.

Frequently, patients arrive with a myriad of feelings and assumptions about consulting a Tibetan Doctor. Some patients want to reveal everything. Others require information to be drawn out of them helping them understand their individual treatment plans, connect related theories, and be shown proven evidence to generate faith in the system. Usually, people arrive at Tibetan Medicine having exhausted all other western and alternative options. Weary and sometimes defeated, left with complex histories or unresolved symptoms, they can become closed off, not knowing they are withdrawn. Some may hold doubts and mistrusts after a long medical journey with little help. Such persons will, therefore, naturally hold back, wondering if they should invest in the system, and even test the physician. Others give too many details and long stories, making getting to the root issues a challenge. In both cases, the presence of the doctor and their conduct as laid out in the chapter on doctors’ conduct is the most important factor for the generation of faith required to establish an excellent karmic connection with patients.

A great physician, the Fifth Pora Tulku, Paltul Rinpoche time and time again demonstrated to me diagnostic abilities which went far beyond those of an ordinary doctor. When learning diagnosis he told me, “You cannot make a proper diagnosis without embodying the Medicine Buddha.” I explained to him initially that I was only an ordinary, flawed human, not capable of the embodiment of the great healer Menla. He replied very simply and firmly, “Then you can never be a doctor, do the practice and help, or stop



studying and forget it.” He insisted that it was a matter of generating proper motivation and compassion. It took many years of practice to understand what he was pointing to. I learned over time the critical connection of the spiritual diagnosis and relationship. In particular, I would watch him ask patients about very detailed specifics in their childhood or family, which then explained their illness, or blocks to treatment which were karmic. These amazing diagnostics were often based upon the seven wondrous pulses. He told me over and over that creating an excellent karmic connection with a person and acting in a spiritual manner with patients begins with diagnosis, continuing when the patient has left the clinic. Likewise, another teacher of mine emphasized that to be able to really read pulses well, a full Yuthok Nyingthik retreat was required to develop direct perception and intuition. This connection to retreat and more subtle discernment in diagnosis is well explained in many commentaries of Tibetan Medicine.

While I am not of Tibetan descent and have a western background and mindset, I have experience working with Tibetan Medicine in both America and in Asia. Over decades of practice, I found the art of questioning and perception is somewhat a lost art in modern medicine. Yet I feel strongly that primarily due to spiritual cultivation that questioning and direct perception remains more intact within the Tibetan system.

Doctors in my home country are increasingly limited with time constraints, charting demands, and the revolving door of too many patients in one day. Time to develop a relationship between doctor and patient may, in such circumstances, get lost. Without a spirit-

ual connection, it is hard to reach the realms of subtle diagnosis. Yet even in Asia where I saw my teachers treating many more patients in one day than a modern family practice doctor might in the USA, presence and precision of diagnosis remained an exceptional experience to behold.

How then can current fast diagnosis be transformed and returned to the slow, detailed understanding of peering deep into a patient’s heart, mind, and experiences? How can the body-mind-spirit be viewed as more than a set of visible and traceable pathology? This sorting out of a person’s needs is what every good doctor does, regardless of their background. The key to this is the foundation of developing presence and compassion.

In the Tibetan Medicine tradition, Sowa Rigpa practitioners start the day in the clinic with prayers to be of the most benefit. Whenever possible, they take time to listen to long histories and stories as a foundation. This is not to say that highly developed masters of medicine cannot employ methods of diagnosis at lightning speed, they can. This gift of accuracy with an elementary pulse, urine, a few questions, and checking body points in diagnosis by extraordinary physicians is, in part due to the power that the physicians have a personal relationship with Medicine Buddha. This opens the doors to refined, precise, and pure perception.

The more wisdom practices, generation and completion stage practices of Medicine Buddha and other healing mantras are performed, the more intuition, perception, and guidance from healing realms and deities will develop. Skills in putting uneasy patients at



The Root of Diagnosis from the Medical Thangkas of Four Medical Tantras

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ease and leading skeptical ones to faith and developing high compliance of diet and behavior comes from the roots of a robust and accurate diagnostic skill set.

When a patient feels seen, heard, and understood, they develop compliance to the system and self-responsibility. I often tell my patients, “You are an active participant in your own healing process.” Of extreme importance is knowing that doctors foster faith through accuracy in diagnostic and thereby sharing the information one-pointedly. Faith is a part of the karmic bond between a patient and physician, not blind faith of the physician as the “healer” but in the actual system, possessing infallible truths based on the five elements and three humors/defaults. When a doctor accurately diagnoses and explains the patients’ own role in the process of health and disease, faith naturally grows. This also means a physician’s open heart and pure perception can potentially tell the patient truths which may have previously been hidden, or even challenging to face on a spiritual, emotional, or mental level.

Open-hearted presence can be cultivated by various Buddhist practices. Compassion is not only a healing power, but a facilitator to the development of perceptive ability. Superior physicians do more than open eyes and ears, they open their hearts. Then as the patients are relaying the story of their illness, they maintain subtle awareness of both the elements at play, as well as the spiritual aspects on emotional levels that the patients may have yet to express or understand.

Stories abound of the famous and amazing Menpa, who listen to the pulse with a full presence that the patient feels as if they entered their very soul and saw them in a way no one else could. The depth of diagnostic skill with such doctor-patient relationships is rooted firmly in the doctor merging their wisdom perception with the elements and organ systems felt in the fingertips. When that level of presence is supported, allowing adequate time for observation of the person’s fundamental nature and combined with skillful questioning, this enables patients time and space to relax and show themselves openly. For many, being seen so completely comes with a level of vulnerability they perhaps have stoically guarded. Yet when met with genuine love and care as if one is the Medicine Buddha, comes genuine compassion. This sets patients at ease. The depth of compassion in ac-

tion is cultivated by practicing Medicine Buddha and other compassion and wisdom practices.

To cultivate pure diagnostic perception, it first requires a solid foundation in the Root and Explanatory Tantras. Once base diagnosis according to the elements, signs, and symptoms becomes second nature in ordinary observation of patients, the next step is to develop spiritual aspects of diagnostics. Motivation to benefit all beings without exception is without question the foundation of good karmic relationships with those we care for. Next, one must accumulate retreats, generation of Menpa, reciting healing mantras and practices known for bestowing wisdom and increasing one’s healing abilities. The spiritual cultivation grows one’s perception to make connections and insights both within the thirty-eight basic methods of diagnostics and of a more spiritual nature. It is only by merging such wisdom and action which is established in unbiased compassion and presence that full diagnostic abilities can genuinely begin to develop.

These insights, wisdom, and guidance came entirely from my teachers, and their teachers before them. It is with devotion to their precious gifts and teachings to me that I share this for the development of pure perception in diagnosis. This is not based on any accomplishment, as I am still in process with my cultivation of this advice. I do so in the hope that it will benefit all who study the unbroken lineage and pure vision of Tibetan Medicine. ■

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Menpa, TMD, began the study of Tibetan Medicine in 1999 and treating patients with permission in 2004. She was encouraged by her root teacher, VV Thangu Rinpoche, to complete her medical studies in Darjeeling, India.

Nashalla then earned her Menpa degree (Doctor of Tibetan Medicine) from Qinghai Tibetan Medical College, Tibet and The Shang Shung Institute of Tibetan Medicine USA in 2009. She has a BA in Interdisciplinary Studies from Naropa University, with a focus on Asian Medicines and Buddhist Psychology. Nashalla has taught Tibetan Medicine and meditation techniques worldwide to Tibetan and western students, practitioners and doctors. She is currently an adjunct faculty at Naropa University and the director of the Tibetan Medicine & Holistic Healing Clinic in Boulder, Colorado USA.

