

The Roots of Tibetan Medicine

[Presenter]: It is my great honor and privilege to present Chogyal Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche. I remember Rinpoche was born in Derge, Eastern Tibet, and was recognized as a Tulku, a reincarnation, at an early age. He is among the last generation of Tibetans to have been fully educated in Tibet. His monastic college education included an in-depth study of Buddhist scriptures, including logic, philosophy, and medicine. He also received many tantric and Dzogchen transmissions and teachings from many of the leading masters of the day. In 1960, Chogyal Namkhai Norbu was invited to do research in Italy by Professor Giuseppe Tucci. From 1962 until 1992, as Professor of Tibetan and Mongolian Studies, Rinpoche taught and carried out research at the University of Naples "L'Orientale". He focused his research on the early history of Tibet and on the origins of Tibetan culture. He has written innumerable works on Dzogchen. Rinpoche founded the Shang Shung Institute, which is an international organization dedicated to the continuity and preservation of Tibetan culture. The Shang Shung Institute has international representation in multiple countries. As part of that organization, the Shang Shung Institute in America has the Tibetan School of Medicine, which is the only school of Tibetan medicine in the United States. We have a four-year program, and we have discussed this at this conference. Rinpoche was also the founder of the ASIA Humanitarian Organization, dedicated to serving the Tibetan people. Rinpoche founded and is the head of the International Dzogchen Community. He is one of the world's preeminent teachers of Dzogchen and has led over 500 retreats. He has written many profound and influential works on Dzogchen, Tibetan history, and culture. He has written and taught extensively on Tibetan astrology, Yantra Yoga, and Ku Nye massage. Again, it is my great pleasure to present to you Chogyal Namkhai Norbu. Thank you very much, Rinpoche.

[Chogyal Namkhai Norbu]: Thank you. Good morning. I am very happy to be here with you. And I want to say, first of all, that I want to thank the ATMA organization very much; you successfully organized this meeting on Tibetan medicine, which is something very important. And I also wanted to thank all the doctors from different places who came and are participating. That is also very important. Also the people who are participating in this meeting. It is important because Tibetan culture, not only medicine, but in general Tibetan culture, knowledge, and history—everything is really very ancient. And it has an important value for the whole world. For all people, not only for Tibetans. So it is important that people know the value of Tibetan knowledge and culture. And particularly, medicine is very important for all human beings. This is not only for Tibetans, but for all conditions. In Tibet we say,

for example, that this science of the knowledge of medicine is called Sowa Rigpa. It means "healing" or "nourishing awareness". Why? Because we are living in a physical body. There is always a problem for everybody. Not only for Tibetans. And also Tibetan medicine is called in Tibetan "Men". "Men-pa" refers to the doctors who are taking care of that, applying it. It means it brings benefit. It is a verb in Tibetan: we say we perform a benefit. This means that we all share the human condition particularly. And as long as we are alive, medicine is indispensable. Why? Because our condition is composed of the five elements. When the five elements are not balanced, there are problems. We lack health. So there are always problems, also in medicine. For example, the three humors: Lung (Wind), Tripa (Bile), and Pekkan (Phlegm). When everything is in balance, there is no problem. We are living in time, and time is change, it is impermanent. Today is not tomorrow, tomorrow is not the day after tomorrow. We always observe change. And when we observe change, it becomes a secondary cause. Our condition changes. For this reason, medicine is indispensable. Particularly Tibetan medicine, as you can learn, has such very ancient knowledge. For example, in the history of Tibet, when we speak of it, we go back to the history of Zhang Zhung. When I did many years of research at the university, I started by researching Zhang Zhung. Most people did not consider it something important. But in my experience, when I was doing research with Professor Tucci and other Western scholars, I understood that it is very important for the knowledge of Tibetan culture that we discover the source. It is not sufficient only to look at what developed later. So when I did a little research, I discovered that the source is Zhang Zhung. Why? Because in the Tibetan tradition, whether Buddhist or Bön, when we explain the source of Tibetan cultural knowledge, we say "Mi'u Dung Drug". This is the origin. The Buddhist tradition explains it in a slightly different way, the Bön tradition in another way, it doesn't matter. But "Mi'u Dung Drug" is the source of Tibetan culture and knowledge. Among the six brothers—representing the six original tribes—there was the generation that is the origin of Zhang Zhung. They have their writings, for example. In ancient times there were writings from the Bön tradition of Zhang Zhung. So when I started to develop this, I discovered in Tibetan history that everything is more or less very similar to the origins in India and China. When I was studying at the beginning in the university, we did not study Tibetan language and literature for many years. For Chinese and Indian, they had four years. For Tibetan, only two years. Then I asked: "Why?". They said it was because Tibetan culture and history came from China and India. I said: "No, I don't believe that". For that reason, I thought it was necessary to research the origin. Then I went to research the Bön tradition, because in the Zhang Zhung period there was no Buddhist tradition yet. Later, some Tibetan lamas said: "Oh, Namkhai Norbu has become a Bönpo". That is not true. I am not a Bönpo, but for Tibetan culture it is very important to study the Bön tradition, otherwise there is nothing. So I studied and researched, and I wrote it down in Tibetan. This ancient history consists of three volumes. Two volumes are already available in English and will be published. The

third volume will be finished in September. Then there will be a presentation of this. So people who want to understand how Tibetan culture and history were in ancient times should read a bit of this book. It is the result of many years of research. It is very useful for really knowing the value of Tibetan culture and history. In medicine it is the same. We say: "Oh, Tibetan medicine comes from India, from Ayurveda". Many books were translated in that period, Tibetan medical books that are in the Tengyur, for example. But that is not the original source. Here you have Dr. Thubten Phuntsog; he worked with this origin of the medicine of the Bön tradition. He knows it very well. It is very important. In ancient times, Tibetan medicine came from Zhang Zhung. But then it developed. Also from India, from the Ayurvedic tradition, and also from China. And then there were many meetings and efforts that are learned in history. There are all the explanations. Tibetan medicine developed very perfectly, combining many traditions, not only that of Zhang Zhung. So it is very important that we are really learning and continually developing that knowledge of Tibetan medicine, particularly in the Western world. Because some people think that Tibetan medicine is not a traditional medicine in the Western world. But we must think of the function of medicine: it is for curing a person. If someone has a serious problem and is almost dying, that person's desire is to be cured and to overcome the problem. It doesn't matter whether it's Western medicine, Eastern, Tibetan, or Indian, etc. No one chooses based on that. For that reason, if there is something beneficial and knowledgeable in Tibetan medicine, we must integrate it with Western medicine as well. Integrate it. This is, I think, something very important that we must develop in that way. So I am very happy to be here with you because many doctors are experts and already have experience in the Western world. For example, many of our doctors are working and living in the Western world. How is the situation? This is very important. In medicine, history, or knowledge of any kind, we should work with the current stage. How does it correspond? What is the current situation? This is very important for living and developing. Otherwise, if we remain only with the ancient traditional way and are limited to that, we could end up losing everything. Even meditation is the same. For example, today there are many illnesses explained in Tibetan medicine as "Nyen" (external provocations) or diseases caused by imbalances. Sometimes there is a negative provocation combined with that illness. When we study, we say that if it is a "Nyen" type illness, then the doctor also needs something special. Someone expert in performing a practice, a mantra, or something for controlling that negativity. Otherwise, common medicine couldn't cure that illness. For example, I have my personal experience when I had cancer and spent a long time in New York during that period. In that case, I first thought: "Oh, I have cancer. This is the end of my life". I thought my life was finished. Why? Because when I was with my teacher Changchub Dorje, my Dzogchen master... one day, some local people asked my teacher for advice and at the end asked how long they would live. My teacher gave them a very precise reply. I never had the courage to ask my teacher that. Also, I did not have that kind of attitude. But then I thought I wanted to ask as

well. When those people left, I told my teacher: "Oh, they asked you about the length of their lives and you gave it to them. Please tell me also how long I can live". Then he gave me a precise date, the year until which I could live. I wrote it down. I remembered that. When I had this illness and the cancer, it corresponded very precisely to that year. Then I thought that my teacher had said the length of my life was that, and that now my life was finished. I only had the idea of dying, that was all. I went into the hospital. I didn't have much idea that I could live again. But then, after two or three days in the hospital, I thought about it. Sometimes when I travel and give teachings, I talk about the practice of the Red Garuda, from the terma of Adzom Drugpa. It is said particularly that this teaching is good for curing cancer. In ancient times we did not have a specific explanation of cancer in medicine. But in this teaching it is said very precisely that for curing cancer one should do this visualization and chant this mantra. I received this transmission from Adzom Drugpa. I remembered that and then I started giving this transmission to people who had cancer. Some people said the doctors gave them only six months of life, and when I gave them this teaching and they practiced intensively, they overcame the problem. At least two or three people told me they overcame it. Then I remembered: "Maybe I want to do this practice as well. If they overcame it, I can also overcome it". And I started practicing a little. But then I thought maybe it wasn't sufficient, because my life was already finished according to the prediction, and I couldn't concentrate much. But after a few days, I had another idea. Many years ago, I went to Nepal, to Maratika, the place of Guru Padmasambhava. At that time I received a teaching of the Mandarava practice, a long-life practice, in my dream. I wrote it down. And then later when I arrived in Italy, I did this practice. I also gave some of my students this practice. And in this practice what I wrote down says that even if someone has consumed their life, they can prolong it at least seven years. Then I thought maybe my time was up, but there was still a possibility if I did this practice for seven years or more. I concentrated on the essence of this practice. And after twenty days of doing this practice, the doctors said that my illness had completely disappeared. The doctors were very satisfied because they thought their research and their medicine were fantastic. In the New York Times there were articles two or three times about my case; I became an example for them. So then I had much confidence later. I thought it is very important in Tibetan medicine to distinguish well if there is a provocation or not. If there is a "Danchen" (provocation), it is very important to perform some kind of practice, because in medicine there are also many Garuda practices for controlling negativities. Then, combining this with the medicine and the therapy one takes, everything becomes active when the energy is controlled. If we do not control the energy in "Danchen" cases, medicine could not be successful. For that reason, I had this idea and applied it. I think this is very important for doctors: to distinguish and to know what to use. The time is finished. Thank you very much. I am very happy to be with you, really.

[Moderador]: Rinpoche, is it possible that we can take a few questions from the audience?

[Chogyal Namkhai Norbu]: What?

[Moderador]: Questions? Yes.

[Chogyal Namkhai Norbu]: If you want.

[Audiencia]: Does anyone have a question from the audience? Rinpoche, can you mention one moment of your relationship with Professor Tucci that was most meaningful or important to you? One example.

[Chogyal Namkhai Norbu]: I didn't quite understand. What did he say? I didn't hear well. Ah. Professor Tucci, when he invited me... Professor Tucci went seven times to Tibet. He had the largest collection of Tibetan books. For that reason, he was doing research about the 12th century, etc. When I heard these things, I was convinced to go to Italy. Before that, I almost went to Japan. There was a professor who had invited me and it seemed interesting. But I had not yet decided, and then I came to Italy. Being with Professor Tucci, I was very interested in how research should be done. Because I had studied many things, but I didn't have much idea of how one should do research, or why it is important. So when I worked with Professor Tucci, automatically I learned how to research and what it means to do research, what is important. Later, when I was in the university, I tried to develop that.

[Audiencia]: Good morning, Rinpoche. Thank you for coming. This is a big question, but any which way you would like to answer it would be wonderful. Could you talk a little bit about Dzogchen and medical practice?

[Chogyal Namkhai Norbu]: Yes. Dzogchen really means our real condition. The purpose of Dzogchen teaching is for discovering our real condition. This is not only in Dzogchen, but in all teachings. Also in Sutra and in Tantra, the final goal is for discovering our real nature. Being in our real nature. But the characteristic of Dzogchen teaching is going directly into that. So how is the aspect of our body, speech, and mind related to what are called the three Vajras? The nature of body, speech, and mind is related to what in Sutra and Vajrayana teaching is called the final condition: Dharmakaya, Sambhogakaya, and Nirmanakaya. All are related to that. And then, discovering that state and being in it. Definitely, this is called in the Dzogchen teaching "realization". There are many aspects: the base, the path, and the fruit. Slowly it can develop. When we say medicine, medicine is also very important in the teachings. The real sense of medicine can be understood, for

example, when we say that one of the names of the Buddha Shakyamuni is the Great Physician. It doesn't mean Buddha is checking illness and giving medicine physically. But because the medicine treats the problems we have. What is called in Tibetan "Nyeju" means the cause; the original cause is the three emotions. Desequilibriums of Lung, Tripa, and Pekkan happen because they are related to those three emotions: attachment, ignorance, and anger. These are the base of illness originally. For that reason, Buddha's teaching is for overcoming that. "Menpa Chenpo" (Great Physician) means really having that total knowledge. Even our doctors are not Buddhas, but they follow that tradition and perform benefits for others. We know how illness is related to Lung, Tripa, and Pekkan, and this is related to body, speech, and mind in a relative condition. This is the principle of medicine, and we do it that way. Sometimes we say: "Oh, we do medicine and also practice something". Then there are the mantras, like the mantra of the Medicine Buddha, etc. But the principle, the most important thing, is the knowledge of the root, the origin. How to coordinate the relative condition when there is a disorder. For example, in Tibetan medicine there are many important things about what does not correspond to our condition, or what is in excess, or what contributes to the disorders of Lung, Tripa, and Pekkan. When you study medicine, you can understand these things better.

[Audiencia]: Rinpoche, thank you for being here with us today. I wanted to ask... you mentioned Ayurvedic, Indian, Chinese, and Bön influences. I was wondering what unique Bön influences there are in the practice of Tibetan medicine as distinct from the other traditions.

[Chogyal Namkhai Norbu]: I think the characteristics of Tibetan medicine are more related to its own origin. For example, you can ask Dr. Thubten Phuntsog about this, because he read the original books on the origin of Tibetan medicine, something concrete. But then, the second most influential is, of course, the Ayurvedic tradition; Tibetan medicine developed very much including also the Chinese tradition and the Tajikistan tradition. Many traditions were combined together. When you read the history of medicine, there are all these explanations in different generations of the Tibetan kings.

[Moderador]: Rinpoche, I would like to introduce you to Tim McHenry, the director of the Rubin Museum; he would like to present you with a gift and we have a few more presentations for you.

[Presentador (Tim McHenry)]: Rinpoche, welcome back to the Rubin. It's wonderful to have you here again, sir. I asked the question about Giuseppe Tucci because you'll be pleased to know that next autumn we're exhibiting a major two-floor show of Tucci's findings. He was one of the great scholars and explorers of the

Trans-Himalayan region from the 1930s right through to the 50s. It will be a really fascinating exposition of his findings and an exploration of all these cultures. But Rinpoche, in acknowledgement of your great transmissions and your teachings and your perpetuation of the understanding of Tibetan medicine, we wanted, on the occasion of this conference and also of the exhibition upstairs, "Bodies in Balance", to present you with a copy of the catalog for the exhibition, which you'll also be happy to know has plentiful references to the Bön tradition and to Zhang Zhung. So, thank you so much.

[Chogyal Namkhai Norbu]: Thank you very much. Thank you to everyone.

[Moderador]: And we'd like to present you this on behalf of ATMA and the Shang Shung Institute for your time and your great contribution to Tibetan medicine.

[Chogyal Namkhai Norbu]: Thank you.