



Wellbeing Holistic Guide II

CANCER: A TIBETAN PERSPECTIVE

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Published by: Friends of Tibet Foundation

Cancer: A Brief History

There may be no place in the world that cancer has not touched. It is not a new disease of modern civilization. The cases of cancer and its dreadful results have been reported since the Greek civilization. Even though the first case of cancer was recorded in Egypt in 1600 BC, it was Hippocrates (410-360 BC), the father of medicine, who identified and gave the name “cancer” to the illness that blights humanity to this day¹. When its cells invade the human body, they break down the body’s machinery processes, spreading through tissues, blood, and lymphatic systems. It is no wonder that the effects of this cellular invasion seep into the lives of families, caregivers and communities as a whole. While the fact of cancer may be a cross-cultural reality, the way that healers respond to it varies widely. It is in this context that *Sowa Rigpa* or Tibetan Medicine has emerged as an important global resource;

looking back upon ancient textual sources, its healers are able to herald a future where cancer may no longer be an encumbering medical enigma.

Textual descriptions of cancer have been traced as far back as 1600 BC, to the Edwin Smith Papyrus of Ancient Egypt. There, healers defined cancer as incurable, though it still rare and understudied (Hajdu 2011). It only started to develop into a coherent medical category as rates gradually increased. Hippocrates (460 BC-370 BC) precipitated the entry of the term cancer when he used the Greek word *karkinos* (crab or crayfish) to describe the enduring cut surface of a solid malignant tumour. Building on this, Celsus (25 BC-50 AD) translated *Karakinos* into the Latin term, cancer (Hajdu 2011). Despite Celsus’ suggestion to use surgery, purgatives remained the normative treatment for this life-altering disease for centuries—until allopathy became a dominant global force. Yet, what these early European researchers did not explicitly define — and what Tibetan practitioners have long considered — is that there are as many kinds of cancer as there are organs, cells, and tissues in the body.

Cancer has not only changed the world; it has itself become a symptom of sedentary lifestyles, urbanization, and capitalist modes of consumption. In India, cancer mortality rates have doubled from 1990 to 2016 (Smith and Mallath 2019). Although cancer-like illnesses have been recognized since at least the ancient Ayurvedic period, this disease sharply rose alongside the 20th century increase in life expectancy. Still, cancer rates differ across regions, highlighting how it is directly shaped by local environments, foods and life style factors.

In India, public facilities are often unable to accommodate rising cancer numbers, resulting in the growing popularity of private care facilities. Yet, many of these modern spaces prioritize allopathic or biomedical frameworks of care, which are unable to fully treat cancer and its interrelated impacts on immune systems. As will be shown in this interview, Tibetan Medicine offers holistic and comprehensive care and remedial measures that are relevant to all sections of the people and health-seekers across the globe.

Since the United States' National Cancer Act of 1971, many nations have aligned together to declare a global "war on cancer." Through advancements in the Human Genome Project, researchers hope to develop a more robust understanding of the diseases' origins and risk factors. Yet, despite their progress in producing new diagnostics and preventative measures, cancer still unevenly burdens communities, leading to further global inequities. However, there is hope. Research have started to plan collaborative studies between India and the United States, where traditional medicines and biomedical strategies are together evaluated in terms of cancer care efficacy (White et al. 2018). Looking to the future, the enduring wisdom of Tibetan Medicine may continue to serve as a critical resource for ending the global health crisis of cancer.

Sources:

Hajdu, Steven I. 2011. "A Note from History: Landmarks in History of Cancer, Part 1." *Cancer* 117(5): 1097-1102.

Smith, Robert D and Mohandas K. Mallath. 2019. "History of the Growing Burden of Cancer in India: From Antiquity to the 21st Century." *Journal of Global Oncology* 5: 1-15.

White, JD; BR O'Keefe; J Sharma; et al. 2018. "India-United States Dialogue on Traditional Medicine: Toward Collaborative Research and Generation of an Evidence Base." *Journal of Global Oncology* 4: 1-10.

Question: According to *Sowa Rigpa*, commonly known as Tibetan Medicine, what is the definition of cancer? How is it textually defined? More generally, is there a word for cancer in the Tibetan language?

Answer: The medical term for Cancer in Tibetan Medicine is known as *Bras-nad*¹ meaning fruit like disease and is defined as an abnormal solidification of the disease that is characterized by its hard and

solid nature, much like the coconut fruit. The definition and cause of cancer was very clearly mentioned as early as 7th Century, in one of the popularly known ancient classical Tibetan medical texts: *Dawai Gyalpo*². Little later in the 8th Century, the most popular and authoritative Tibetan Medical text called *rGud-bZhi*³, carries a separate chapter on the description and systematic treatment of this disease. It was clearly mentioned that improper foods and lifestyles causes abnormal absorption and assimilation of the food leading to stagnation and impurities in the blood vessels which then gets solidified due to the strong influence of the *rLun*⁴ (translated as wind energy) leading to an abnormal growth in the cellular level. The text explains that the nature of such growth is very hard and solid that it is very difficult to shrink the growth with the common application of hot fomentation and medicated baths. When fully matured, the necrotic changes may open up with deeply formed pus and blood and hence, early treatment has been strongly recommended.

Question: In contrast to allopathic Western medicine, Tibetan Medicine puts forth a specific definition of health in its texts. Tibetan medical theory states that it is necessary to maintain balance in the three principles energetical function of the body system. How does cancer relate to these Tibetan notions of balance?

Answer: Yes, these three principle energetical functions known as *Nespa-sum*⁵ (*rLun*, *mKrispa* and *Bad-kan*) have universal application. Every innate bodily function, the natural body constitution, the disease and its treatments are all composed of *Nespa-sum*. When these *Nes-pas*⁶ are in the state of dynamic balance, it ensures good health. Imbalance of these energetical functions gives rise to various disorders. There are no diseases including any kind of cancer that do not come under the purview of *Nespa-sum*. Your cancer of any kind or origin may have strong predominance of either one, two or all the three combined *Nes-pas*. Based on the involvement of these *Nes-pas* in any form of cancer, your treatment protocol is established. Therefore, it is easy to understand that when your *Nespa-sum* is perfectly in sync with your body system, you are also said to be 'immunologically fool proof' from getting any kind of disease. Therefore, the balance is called health and health is balance.

Question: Allopathy classifies various types of cancer. How does *Sowa Rigpa* classify different experiences of cancer faced by patients?

Answer: Firstly, every sufferings or disorders in Tibetan Medical System are grouped broadly under

four major categories, in which cancer is placed under the category of 'Previous Karmic Factors.' As part of the healing process, one needs to address their negative karmic influences through various charitable and merit-accumulating activities. For instance, one may save the lives of any sentient beings from imminent death; sincerely help others in need, and perform many spiritual activities, including visiting sacred pilgrimage places and offering special prayers and rituals. In terms of the nature of disease, Tibetan Medicine broadly classifies cancer under two major divisions: Location and involvement of *Nes-pa*.

The Location is further divided into two: External and Internal. External is again divided into three types as follows:

- Skin/Flesh/Muscles
- Skeletal/Bone
- Nerves/blood and lymphatic vessels.

Internal is mainly associated with the inner body organs such as Five visceral organs and 8 hollow organs. In addition, the cancer is also typed according to their association with the *Nes-pas*.

Question: According to Tibetan Medicine, what are the main internal and external factors that cause cancer to originate or develop? Considering its features and the pace in which cancer develops and spreads, to what extent can it be termed "an enemy within?"

Answer: With respect to cancer, its causative external factors are mainly environmental issues, including air pollution and various bio-chemical toxic build-up, plastic hazards and radiological exposures. Tibetan Medicine believes strongly in keeping our atmosphere and environmental conditions clean and pure because we are the direct product of nature. So naturally, with the man-made destructions and degradation of our external environments, our internal body system follows suit.

As for the internal issues, our mental emotions and our immunological defence system play very important roles not only in terms of avoiding cancer, but in the treatment process as well. Both emotional and immunological factors depend mainly on our life style and food habits. Our modern lifestyles are enveloped totally with heavy mental stress and tension, with all sorts of negative mental afflictions. Our food habits have also moved away from naturally healthy and organic products to more polluted, adulterated, and fats and fast foods. The fast and competitive modern live style brings heavy stress and emotional distress which in turn, brings down our immune system. In addition, most of the

aforementioned unhealthy food intake invariably leads to the accumulation of toxic and carcinogenic level in our body system. Hence, both the immunological and food factors work together to tore down our cellular machinery thus favouring the abnormal cell activity to flourish unabated. Therefore, it is no wonder why and how cancer, despite all the state-of-the-art modern health facilities, is growing in epidemic proportions.

Question: According to Tibetan Medicine, what is the role of the immune system in cancer treatment, and following this, what are the unique treatment modalities for its cure and prevention?

Answer: The immune system plays a crucial role not only in treatment, but also in preventing cancer. Our immunological parameter becomes stronger when we eat healthy food, engage in proper lifestyles, and maintain one's emotional balance in a very positive manner. Building up our immune system during the treatment process also helps in quicker recovery and in avoiding any unforeseen secondary infections.

As for the treatment modalities, Tibetan Medicine follows mainly four modalities as follows:

- Medicine
- External therapy
- Proper administration of Food
- Proper lifestyle.

The administration of Medicine normally follows four fundamental approaches:

- To arrest and control the infection and pathogenesis
- Dissolution of the growth and pacification of the *Nes-pas*
- To rejuvenate the body system and building up the defence system
- Addressing the mental and emotional factors.

External Therapies includes moxibustion to control and shrink the tumour, venesection to reduce the inflammatory process, cupping and medicated fomentation to reduce the pain.

Proper diet includes eating healthy and balanced food. Healthy choice of foods includes light brown cereals including brown rice, millets; jowar (sorghum) made breads and roti, and more of green leafy and fibrous vegetables.

Regular intake of fresh seasonal fruits and blend of dried fruits are also recommended. Mixed vegetables and crushed bone soup are advised as part of the dinner regimens.

- 1) Avoiding heavy non-vegetarian foods, fatty and fried foods, sour and acidic, hot and spicy, preserved and refrigerated type of foods helps in controlling the progression of the disease.
- 2) Avoid smoking, alcohol, and tobacco chewing too.

Lifestyle Factors: Patients should always be encouraged to do Yoga practices; deep breathing exercises like *Asanas* and *Pranayama*, and going to a gymnasium regularly is also a good form of exercises. Always look for the brighter side of the life; try to be happy and positively motivated all the time. When positivity and motivation is lost, then the body simply gives up. Mindfulness meditation helps to relax and motivate the mind in bringing joy and harmony within.

Question: During a consultation with a Tibetan doctor, what are the methods for diagnosing and assessing the nature of cancer within a patient's body?

Answer: There are no specific diagnostic procedures for cancer patients. It is mainly through interrogation, pulse diagnosis and urine analysis. It may be very difficult for the physician to diagnose everything through pulse and urine analysis alone. Thorough interrogation of the patient's medical case history and assessment of the signs and symptoms are very important. In today's world, with the help of highly sophisticated modern diagnostic facilities, it has become much easier to diagnose the cancer in its various forms and stages.

Question: In undertaking research and analysis, have *Sowa Rigpa* doctors come across any specific drugs for the cure and management of cancer? What is the effect of Tibetan Precious Pills, popularly known for treating and controlling cancer?

Answer: Men-Tsee-Khang has manufactured and released several new drugs to be used against certain forms of cancer based on the formulations of the ancient pharmacopeia and their potential effects on the studied case. However, more clinical study is required to fully establish their safety and efficacy record. However, our clinical research documentation department has collected many positive feedback and experiential benefit observed by the patients which are very encouraging and promising. Though there are many herbal formulations that are used in cancer treatment in Tibetan Medicine, there is still no magic bullets against cancer cure and management. Tibetan Medicine believes in the composite synergistic effects of the medications that are given as part of

the whole prescription. It is not important for the drugs to be very powerful or highly anti-cancerous in nature; the secret of cure lies in the selection of correct medications that are able to hit the right target to ensure optimum result.

Precious pills are considered very sacred and sophisticated herbo-mineral-gem formulations. They are the Elixir of Life and its positive effects cannot be simply measured and numbered. Traditionally, they are prepared in a very controlled and spiritual atmosphere; its herbo-mineral raw materials undergo many lengthy and strict treatment procedures before it is thoroughly detoxified, refined and potentiated to become highly powerful medicine and lifesaving. Hence, based on the condition of the cancer patients in its various stages, Tibetan physician prescribe different forms of precious pills in addition to the regular medicaments.

Question: If a patient has cancer and chooses to take Tibetan Medicine, how often should they visit their Tibetan Medical doctors for consultations? Is it recommended that they still receive blood tests and other forms of non-Tibetan medical measurements?

Answer: It is always better to visit their doctors on a regular basis within a fortnight to one month's time period. The time period of the visit may also depend upon the severity of the disease.

But of course, when it comes to cancer, you always need periodical haematological check-ups to make sure that your immune and vital blood parameters are okay. Occasional radiological scans like MRI, CT-scans and Ultrasonography should be taken to measure and make sure to identify any secondary infections and metastasis.

Question: Often, those with cancer will undertake chemotherapy or radiation. If they are undertaking these allopathic treatment methods, can they still safely take Tibetan medicine?

Answer: When patients are undergoing chemotherapy, radiation or any other invasive conventional therapies (immunotherapy, target therapies, stems cells etc.), we prefer not to give our main medications against the cancer. Instead, we give only supporting or complementary medications which can be taken along with the modern standard therapies. The role of the supporting medications are as follows:

- 1) To strengthen the immune system of the body
- 2) To reduce the strong side-effects of the conventional therapies

- 3) To protect the vital parameters of the blood and, to be able to maintain some measure of wellbeing of the body system.

Once the patient stops or after the completion of all the standard therapies deemed necessary under modern system of medicines, we can then start with the full-fledged combination of the Tibetan Medicine.

Question: Would you be able to describe one of the most successful or memorable cancer treatment case you oversaw?

Answer: There are many memorable or extraordinary cures from Tibetan Medicine which we find it difficult to narrate in length. For instance, there are several patients I vividly remember who were taken up for surgery only to find the case as inoperable as the cancer has fully spread. They were sent back home to die. Yet, these patients have fully recovered under the wonderful healing effects of Tibetan Medicine, and have been living quite healthily for many years. Also, we have come across significant number of terminally ill patients with barely two to three months life ahead doing extremely well and back to their business post Tibetan Medicine. Furthermore, we have seen some patients who are totally immobile, and some barely able to walk, back to their feet after a month's treatment.

Question: It is observed that some Cancer patients, unfortunately, arrive at a late-advanced stage and after other medical systems have failed. Through Tibetan Medicine, many receive considerable relief or more extended life span than predicted. What is the likelihood that early-stage cancer patients taking Tibetan Holistic Treatment will prolong the lifespan and eventually leading a normal life?

Answer: It is true that the large majority of the cancer patients visiting Tibetan Medical Clinics are already in an advanced stage of cancer having gone

through all other standard conventional therapies. Even under such circumstances, it is quite true that many of these people have benefited a lot in a manner that may baffle the scientific community. We believe that healing is not a matter alone; it involves many supra-mundane, spiritual and karmic factors that when they enter into some favourable situation, can result into many miracle healings.

Needless to say, when we are able to meet the patient in early stages of cancer, there is always a greater chance of total recovery not to mention of extending the life expectancy alone. Let me narrate one of my favorite lines from the *rGyud-bzhi*. "It states, "Because of the interplay of our fortune, karma and life-span, it is simply not possible to decide fully whether the patient will die or live. Hence, even if it is highly advanced, we should not forsake them and on the other hand, if the disease is seen in its early stage and seemingly easy, one should be advised to be cautious."

Question: can you share some of the secrets of the success in cancer cure and management?

Answer: Yes, given below are some of the secrets of the surest means of success in the treatment of cancer.

- Try to understand and know the nature of the cancer and its sufferings.
- Respect and follow the treatment regimens strictly as per the physician's advice.
- Do not change the doctors and medications very frequently.
- Avoid taking so many different types of medicines and food supplements without the knowledge of your doctor.
- Follow the diet and life styles given by the doctors.
- Be tolerant, determined and expect for the best possible result during the difficult times.
- Try to be positively motivated all the time.

Footnotes:

1 Bras-nad; *Bras* means fruit, and *nad* means disease in Tibetan. This is an analogy used to suggest the similarity in the shape of the tumour and the cancer growth.

2 Dawai Gyalpo: One of the popular ancient classical medical text dating back to 7th century.

3 rGyud-bzhi: Translated as Four Great Tantra or Four Treatises. This medical text composed by Yuthog Yonten Gonpo in early 12th century forms the most authoritative medical text of the *Sowa Rigpa*.

4 rLun: Commonly translated as wind energy, like *vata* in Ayurveda. *rLun* is involved in all the diseases related to mind and emotions, nervous systems, life, breath and movements etc.

5 Nespa-sum: *Nespa* is grossly translated as defects or disorder, *sum* means numeral three in Tibetan. *Nespa-sum* literally means three main disorders namely *rLun*, *mKrispa* and *Bad-kan*. Ayurveda call this as 'Tri-Doshas'.

6 Nes-pas: This word comes as a plural form of the *Nes-pa*. It means any one, two or all of them in combined forms.



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Sowa-Rigpa (Science of Healing), commonly known as the Tibetan System of Medicine is one of the oldest, living and well-documented medical traditions in the world. It has been originated from Tibet and popularly practiced in India, Nepal, Bhutan, Mongolia and Russia. The majority of theory and practice of *Sowa-Rigpa* is similar to *Ayurveda*. The first *Ayurvedic* influence came to Tibet during 3rd century AD but it became popular only after the 7th century with the arrival of Buddhism in Tibet. Thereafter this trend of exportation of Indian medical literature, along with Buddhism and other Indian art and sciences were continued till the early 19th century. India being the birthplace of Buddha and Buddhism has always been a favourite place for Tibetan researchers and scholars for learning Buddhist art, culture and history. **(Ministry of AYUSH, Govt of India)**



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