

TIBETAN MEDICAL DIETARY BOOK (Vol: 1): Potency and Preparation of Vegetables

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A Book Review by Bhuchung D. Sonam

Everyone these days - in one-way or another - seems to embrace the 'green is in...red is out' mantra. Let me explain my catch-phrase before you assume that this is some kind of subversive political slogan. Green refers to vegetables and red to meats. Due to constant advice during the teachings by His Holiness the Dalai Lama about the importance of being a vegetarian - followed by well-planned campaigns by Tibetan Volunteers for Animals - the queues in front of the meat shops along Dharamshala's Temple Road have reduced. The shops slowly disappeared except for one where the owner still discreetly peddles 'reds'.

This phenomenon is true in many other places where Tibetans live in exile. A global surge of going-veggie has also contributed to us towards a less sinful and healthier vegetarian diet. Under such favourable circumstances the Clinical Research Department of the Tibetan Medical and Astrological Institute has come out with volume one of the Tibetan Medical Dietary Book, which specifically deals with benefits and preparation of vegetables. This is one part of a chapter, which explains the nature of diets in rGyud-bZhi or The Four Tantras. The Four Tantras is the principal text of Sowa Rigpa.

Sowa Rigpa is one of the five major traditional Tibetan sciences or fields of study. Sowa means to heal, to care, to nourish, to foster, and Rigpa means science or knowledge. Thus Sowa Rigpa is a broad term referring to the science of Tibetan healing which must necessarily encompass and explain the moral conduct of patients and physicians, causes of diseases, methods of treatment and other aspects. However, in much of the literature available on the Tibetan science of healing Sowa Rigpa is simply translated as 'Tibetan Medicine,' which is rather bland and diminishes its deeper and wider meaning.

The development of Sowa Rigpa has run parallel with Tibetan civilization. It is clear from the various ancient records that Tibetans practiced rudimentary healing methods over millennia, commonly using available materials such as the residue of chang (barley beer) as fomentation and applying melted butter against hemorrhoids.

The first recorded texts on medicine can probably be credited to Shenrab Mibo, founder of the Bon religion of Tibet. He revealed teachings on medicine known as sMan-'bum dKar-Nag Tra-Sum (The Tri-Coloured Medical Treatise) and other texts to his oldest son, Chedbu Treshe. It is believed that Chedbu Treshe was responsible for the initial introduction and propagation of Tibetan healing science. Nevertheless, rGyud-bZhi or The Four Tantras came into being only after the introduction of Buddhism into Tibet. The first international conference on medicine was held during the reign of King Trisong Deutsen in the 8th century. Yuthok Yonten Gonpo Sr. (708-833 AD) participated in the conference which was attended by scholars from India, Persia, China, Greece, Nepal, East Turkestan and other neighboring countries and earned respect for his profound knowledge.

It is believed that by incorporating the existing medical practices of Tibet, he synthesized the essence of various medical traditions throughout Asia and wrote the first version of rGyud-bZhi. Tibetan physicians and scholars have studied, practised, elaborated on and contributed their knowledge to the canons of Tibetan healing science throughout the centuries. As a result it has developed into a full-fledged field of study whose depth and systematic approach to physical and mental disorders are a distillation of the careful study of the symbiotic relationship between the human body and the external five elements.

Since Tibet's unique healing science takes a holistic approach to health, diet forms an important part not only in maintaining a disease-free life but also in the prevention and treatment of diseases. It is universally known that diets and culinary preparations are region specific. The staple ingredients for Tibetans in Tibet generally consist of four items; tsampa, meat, butter and cheese. In the translator's note, Dr. Tenzin Namdul mentions that Tibetans " especially the older generation " still relish a rich and heavy diet like meat, butter and fats, even as the geographical and climatic factors in exile demand a change of diet. As a result" ...a descriptive study, which was done in Tibetan monastery in south India in 1999, shows a high rate of diabetes, high blood pressure and stroke. The occurrence of such chronic degenerative disorder is rampant especially among the older monks. " The Tibetan Medical Dietary Book: Potency & Preparation of Vegetables seeks to help people understand the need and importance of adjusting and changing their diets according to time and location.

The first part of the book contains several chapters explaining the human body, the nature of each individual, the relationship between diet and disease etc., and the second section explains the qualities of vegetables. A beautiful illustration of each vegetable is followed by information such as Structure and Habitat, Usage, Taste and Nature, Potency and Contraindications.

The second section is what a reader should skip straight to. The benefits of vegetables are listed under the subhead Potency, and contraindications are listed likewise. For example, if you are thinking of cooking the famous Tibetan dish aloo-phingsha for dinner, open page 125 and see the benefits of potato" the most universal of all vegetables " which includes a positive effect on gastritis, stomach cramp, constipation and nausea. Immediately following this is the Contraindications: bad for obesity, asthma, impotency and disorders associated with genital organs, and diabetes.

Similarly, page 61 lists the benefits of peanuts, especially when winter is here. They increase the body temperature, act as an aphrodisiac, pacify disorders associated with Loong or wind, which is one of the three humors, and is also good for skin and neurological problems. As you would have guessed, peanuts are not user friendly for those who have high cholesterol, high blood pressure and heart ailments.

Tibetan Medical Dietary Book: Potency & Preparation of Vegetables is a wonderful work for which both Dr. Yangbum Gyal, who authored and compiled text, and Dr. Tenzin Namdul, who translated and edited it, must be complimented for their efforts in meticulously researching and putting together benefits, preparation and contraindications for 81 commonly consumed vegetables. The most impressive thing about this book is the clear photograph of each vegetable and texts following them" no confusion, just read, know and practice.

However, Tibetan names (phonetics) written in English could certainly be improved: e.g. my favourite flower the dandelion, is written as kur-mang when it should be khur-mang, similarly sunflower should be nyima-metok and not nyima-methok.

The essence of this book lies in its relevance in everyday life, making the ancient wisdom available to the modern world. Every house-wife and house-husband should have this book on their kitchen shelf so that they know exactly what balanced vegetable dishes to prepare for their loved ones. Each globetrotting person living out of a suitcase must carry a copy of this book so that they can at least find out which vegetable is suitable and beneficial for them according to season and place they find themselves in.