of a Himalayan Healer

Tashi Chusang landed in Jomsom mid-morning. He had traveled—like most locals during tourist season—on the second flight from Pokhara, a town in Nepal’s middle hills. It was spring in Mustang, an ethnically Tibetan region of vast plains and irrigated oases in the rain shadow of the western Himalaya. Blooming apple trees seemed to boast Tashi Chusang’s arrival. Despite the mad shuffling of feet and arranging of carpets that preceded his entrance, he walked humbly into the Dancing Yak Lodge, my home in Jomsom, Mustang’s District Headquarters. Tashi Chusang was trailed by a few local boys whose arms were loaded with the old man’s satchels: plastic bags filled with bananas and tomatoes from the tepid lowlands, packets of loose incense, and several dozen small bags filled with roots, leaves, powders. An amchi (Tibetan for “doctor”), Tashi Chusang had gone to Kathmandu to fetch those plants found only in tropical and subtropical belts, but that remain essential components of Tibetan herbalism.

The old doctor looked tired, though his eyes sparked and his smile stretched the breadth of his narrow face. Lowland heat had gotten to him. Tashi Chusang’s silk shirt was drenched in sweat, and the 75-year-old amchi complained of thirst.

“Come in, come in,” said Tshampa Ngawang, the proprietor of the Dancing Yak and also an amchi. “Karma!” yelled Tshampa to his wife, “Grandfather is thirsty. Bring him tea.” Thirty years Tashi Chusang’s junior, Tshampa Ngawang was trained, in part, by this amchi from Monthang, a walled city in the northern, restricted reaches of Mustang. Lo, the Tibetan name for this region, is a monarchy dating to the fourteenth century. Since the unification of Nepal in the late 1700s, Mustang has existed within its political boundaries. The current king, Jigme Palbar Bista, makes his home in Monthang and is 25th in this lineage of Tibetan feudal lords. Though a mere figurehead according to the Nepali government, the King of Lo still retains much local authority. Tashi Chusang, like his forefathers, presides as royal physician, astrologer, and priest.

Amchi Tashi Chusang collapsed on the carpets laid out for him. Amchi Gyatsos, Tashi Chusang’s oldest son, sat beside his father and stroked his hand. Gyatsos arrived from Lo Monthang the night before and had spent the evening chattering away with Tshampa. They’d been trying for several months to create a “Mustang Amchi Association,” a local non-governmental organization intent on preserving the amchi tradition and the natural resources on which they rely for medicine, educating young amchi, and raising money to offset the rising costs of raw materials. The two bickered most of the night, each the
The most ancient types of Tibetan medicine are closely linked to their Ayurvedic and Chinese counterparts, all of which are based in the use of plant and animal products found in Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent.
other’s nemesis. Neither could agree on how to organize a group of, in Tshampa Ngawang’s words, “simple, old village doctors who don’t know the first thing about development.”

This morning, Tashi Chusang inquired about the Association and was greeted by a stream of responses. Gyatso and Tshampa vied for space in the conversation like two old women bickering over a parking spot.

“We have to educate the older amchi about how to organize themselves. No one knows what other people are doing. We need to share our knowledge,” said Tshampa.

“The problem is that young people don’t want to become amchi anymore because they can’t make a living. It is not like the old days when people could trade for most of what they needed. This generation needs cash. They want to go to New York, not be a poor amchi. Things have changed,” continued Gyatso. “People have to support their families. We should petition the government to help subsidize the costs of our medicine. We should be running the village health posts, not those rongba (lowland Hindus) health workers who don’t even speak our language.”

“That’s true,” said Tshampa, “but first we need to figure out which plants found here are becoming rare. We should build herbal plantations, propagate medicine, and sell our extra plants so we can afford to buy other herbs that don’t grow up here.”

“But we also need to record the older generation’s knowledge before they are all gone,” said Gyatso. His comment pierced this moment, gravid with meaning. Surely, Tashi Chusang did not have long to live. “And we need to set up an amchi school in Monthang so that we can train—”

“No. That’s stupid,” Tshampa interjected. “Monthang is too far away. The school should be in Jomsom.”

“Of course not. Jomsom is filled with rongba and televisions. Everyone here is obsessed with money. This is not a good study environment. The school should be in Monthang.”

“No, Jomsom. How do you plan to run a school in a place where there isn’t even electricity? Where there isn’t enough food, and everything has to be delivered by mule or helicopter? It is impractical.”

“Monthang is a better place,” said Gyatso, timid though firm.

“Jomsom!” insisted Tshampa, fist clenched, brow furrowed.

Tashi Chusang broke up the banter, “You sound like children, arguing like this. We don’t even have any money to start building a school and already you are fighting about where it will be! There is much to be done,” continued Gyatso’s father. “Everything you mentioned is important. And you are the ones who will have to do it. I am old. So are many of the other amchi. It is your responsibility to
figure out how to perform your duties as healers. I can’t do that for you. I have trained you. That is enough.” The doctor spoke quietly. Had I not understood his soft Tibetan, I might have thought he was speaking to a sick patient.

But, in a sense, that is exactly what Tashi Chusang was doing.

I sat in the corner, taking notes and watching. Tashi Chusang and I had not formally met. Remembering his manners, the still-smoldering Tshampa introduced us. When the old doctor heard I was studying horses and animal medicine, he smiled. I had come to Mustang as a Fulbright student of anthropology to explore the region’s veterinary and medical traditions, and to learn about local “horse culture.”

“Animals are surely important. Almost more important than people!” he laughed. “Without yak, with no horses, or no sheep and goat to sell, where would we be? We couldn’t live in this place.” Tashi Chusang then asked Gyatso if their horses were ready. The old doctor wanted to head home. Gyatso nodded and the two stood up to leave. Tashi Chusang’s aging bones creaked as he rose.

“Won’t you eat something?” said Karma.

“No, I don’t have an appetite. Eating makes me ache these days,” Tashi Chusang responded. The doctor was clearly withering. This was to be his final trip through Mustang on horseback, the last time he moved through this landscape with ease.

Tibetan medicine has been in existence, in some form, across the Tibetan plateau and the Himalaya for about 8,000 years. The most ancient types of this practice were closely linked to their Ayurvedic and Chinese counterparts, all of which are based in the use of plant and animal products found in Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent. These archaic renditions of Tibetan medicine are also connected to Bön, the pre-Buddhist religious traditions of Tibet.

Tibetan medicine is a unique system that seeks to unify the body’s struggle with illness and disease with the mind and spirit’s quest for liberation—a connection that is severed in medical traditions that view mind and body as discordant entities. According to Tibetan philosophy, disease is ultimately rooted in attachment and illusion. Restoring health is as much a product of physiological balance as it is about “restoring wholeness to our normally selective awareness, using the very desires and aversions that define our contracted lives,” as Tibetan scholar Ian Baker writes, to encourage spiritual transformation.

Tibetan religious tradition believes the Buddha took the form of Sangye Menla, the “Master of Remedies.” Teachings were recorded in a series of texts called the Gyud-shi, or the Four Medical Tantras. The regent for the Fifth Dalai Lama wrote a commentary on these Tantras called the Blue Beryl, which he then had illustrated with a series of extraordinary scroll paintings (thangka). “These works offer insights,” writes Baker in The Tibetan Art of Healing, “into the Tibetan Buddhist approach to health, healing, and spirituality.”

From a historical perspective, Tibetan medicine emerged as a sophisticated system in the seventh century, during the reign of Songtsen Gampo, central Tibet’s first king. This ruler married both a Chinese princess and a young Nepali woman of noble heritage. His Chinese queen is said to have brought medical texts with her when she traveled to Tibet as his bride. These texts were later translated into Tibetan. In fact, the ability to translate medical texts, as well as Buddhist teachings, was a primary motivation for the establishment of Tibetan as a written language. Over the centuries, Tibetan medicine was refined. The Fifth Dalai Lama helped found Chakpori, the first medical college and hospital in Tibet. During the reign of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama (1895–1933) a new medical college in Lhasa called the Mensikhang (literally “house of medicine and astrology”), was established.

Until the Chinese “liberation” of Tibet in the 1950s, Tibetan medicine flourished. The educational vision of the country’s large monastic institutions dovetailed with the need to train doctors. Many monks, and some laypeople, received medical training at Lhasa’s prestigious colleges and were then sent to more remote areas of Tibet to establish clinics and help the sick. In addition, several renowned amchi founded lineages based on patrilineal descent—transmission of medical knowledge by father to son. Such lineage-holders were also ngakpa (householder priests). These latter practices dominated small communities throughout the Tibetan plateau and the Himalayan hinterland, including Mustang.

Amchi Tashi Chusang was born at the beginning of
this century, into a Mustang radically different from the one that exists today. At the time, his home was purely medieval, a walled city among many in the world. Located along a major trade route from the Indian plains to the Tibetan plateau, Lo often was filled with nomads and traders who converged in Morthang to sell Tibetan salt for lowland grains. Others came to Morthang to receive religious teachings, or simply to visit the many pilgrimage sites in this land blessed by Guru Rimpochhe, the eighth-century saint who brought Buddhist teachings from India to Tibet.

Tashi Chusang was trained in part by his father, the usual primary teacher in ngakpa tradition. When his father died young, Tashi Chusang's training continued under the tutelage of an "uncle" who enjoyed a reputation as a skilled Himalayan healer. Life as a boy in Mustang was passed gathering plants in the summertime, and drying and preparing them in the fall. Frigid winter fingers were kept warm by grinding herbs into powders and, by spring, these powders had been rolled into pills.

At 15, Tashi Chusang began his tsham, a three-year retreat. During this time, the young amchi-in-training studied the Gyud-shi—texts which inculcate the disciplines of physiology, pathology, diagnosis, and cure into the minds of young doctors. In the silence of retreat, inside the family's shrine room, Tashi Chusang learned to decipher disease by taking a person's pulse, to examine urine samples with his naked eyes, and to heal with the use of moxibustion, catherization, and acupuncture. He also studied the medical thangka. Tashi Chusang then began to paint his own versions of these masterpieces.

During his retreat, Tashi Chusang also studied the complexities of our bodily energy as they manifest in the humors of wind, bile, and phlegm. This threefold division is based on the Five Elements (water, earth, fire, air, and space) and "is central to all aspects of Tibetan medicine," says Baker.Like his predecessors, Tashi Chusang learned to tease balance out of unhealthy individuals through a holistic approach that considers personality, age, diet, behavior, and physical environment as much as it is rooted in Buddhist philosophy and concepts of spiritual realization.

"My father taught me in the same way that the older generation taught him," said Gyatso. "I was seven when I started picking herbs with my father, and 17 when I completed my retreat and began to see patients.

"But he studied at the Mensikhang. He traveled to Lhasa when he was young and received instruction there. When the Khampas came to Lo," Gyatso continued, "they brought many, many texts. Some of them were medicine books. One of the old Khampas was a very good amchi and he also taught my father." The Khampas were guerrilla warriors, primarily from eastern Tibet, who waged attacks against the Red Army in protest against Chinese "occupation" of their previously autonomous country. From 1960 until 1974, their base of operations was Mustang. For the first decade of this struggle, the Khampas received funding from the CIA—a permutation of the Cold War and a part of Mustang's history that has left deep scars.

As royal astrologer and physician, as well as village priest, farmer, and trader, Tashi Chusang grew into his own with a sense of purpose and profession much more broadly defined than that of a Western doctor. In Lo, an amchi doubles as "chemist, botanist, alchemist, and, to some extent, a magician," wrote Michel Peissel in his 1967 travelog Mustang: A Lost Tibetan Kingdom.

"When someone in Mustang is ill, he first calls the doctor; then later, if necessary, the monks, according to whether the doctor has diagnosed a demon or a worm—a du or a bu. In the West, we have come to scorn the primitive medicine of strange lands, and to most of us the remedies and practices of these medicine men appear foolish and inefficient. But this is not really fair, for these doctors have a knowledge of medicinal herbs which is often staggering, and even borders on scientific exactitude."

Today, the "scorn" to which Peissel refers has changed into an increasing—sometimes blind—reverence for "alternative" medicine in the West. Yet there is a continuing decline in the number of "traditional" doctors practicing in "traditional" settings.

"If I want to get the same training my father once
received in Lhasa, I have to go to India or America," said Gyatso, waxing ironic. His point was well-taken. Chakpori was destroyed by the Chinese four decades ago; a radio tower stands in its stead. Though the Mentsikhang still exists in Lhasa, overtly "religious" elements have been stripped from this site of Tibetan medical practice—a tradition linked to Buddhism at its core. A new Mentsikhang thrives in Dharamsala, India, the location of the Tibetan government-in-exile. Medical clinics, along with dharma centers, have popped up throughout the west as a result of the Tibetan Diaspora; this year, the First International Congress on Tibetan Medicine will be held in Washington, D.C.

Gyatso's eldest son is being educated in Dharamsala and will learn the art of medicine at the Mentsikhang, not in Mustang from his father. This year, Gyatso himself spent three months in Russia, the doctor-in-residence at a Tibetan medical clinic in Tartarstan. Tshampa Ngawang flew off to Japan and Thailand for conferences on Indigenous Knowledge and Holistic Approaches to Health, and enjoys a consultancy for the World Wildlife Fund's Nepal Program. His next goal is to tour the USA. Tshampa Ngawang's eldest son, however, lives in Jomsom. Now 16, he has received sparse instruction from his father, and has shown little interest in becoming an amchi. Like many boys his age, he dreams of "A-mee-ri-ka" and of fleeing his harsh familiar.

The urgent need for a functioning and visionary Mustang Amchi Association, as well as a local amchi school, is as clear as Mustang air. When I met Tashi Chusang in early 1996, he juggled his varied duties with sprightly benevolence. His sense of awe for his homeland seemed rare, even among his generation—those folks from Lo who know nothing of cyber cafés, subways, or satellite televisions. The changes facing Mustang are products of a time that reaches beyond the scope of Tashi Chusang's experience—socio-economic shifts more subtle than the Cultural Revolution. Yet Mustang remains a place that begs to be treated by amchi hands.

I arrived in Monthang the day before Tempa Chirim was scheduled to begin. Commonly called "Tiji," this three-day ceremony is an elaborate exorcism in which the deity Dorje Jono is summoned. His triumph over a demon, who threatened to destroy Lo through drought and famine, is dramatized in ritual dances (cham).

Even though Tashi Chusang's social position rendered him central to Tiji's ceremony, the old doctor was absent from all pre-festival activities. "My father is not well," said Gyatso. When I visited the doctor, I was shocked at his deterioration. Cough and chills had afflicted him for weeks. To eat a handful of tsampa (barley flour) required no less effort than swallowing a stone, to use his metaphor. Rarely had I seen the mask of death in so translucent a form.

A slightly bewildered Gyatso took his father's place that year at Tiji. "I have never done this before," Gyatso whispered to me.

I spent the next morning in the musty sitting room of Tashi Chusang's home. When I arrived at seven-thirty, Gyatso and his father were already sculpting torma, elaborate ritual cakes made of barley flour and decorated with discs of dyed butter. Tenzin, Gyatso's younger brother and a monk, was supposed to be preparing for the dances, but he flitted in and out of the house all morning. Also an amchi, he was not used to seeing his father so still.

Though Gyatso had made many torma before, he had never formed the special offerings required at Tiji. This had always been his father's job. Now, father and son sat beside each other. Their fingers worked steadily, almost in unison.

As they made torma with diligence, I wandered into the family chokhang. On the walls of this shrine space hung a half-dozen thanka worn thin with age and blackened by smoke. One depicted Chenresig, the Buddha of Compassion of whom the Dalai Lama is said to be an incarnation. The thousand arms of this deity bulged with a painterly fullness that reminded me of Modigliani's women. The face of this radiant image was askew, distinguishing this thanka from the more uniform renderings on other walls—treasures which had most likely come from Tibet or Kathmandu. Though not as fine as the others, this thanka belonged in Mustang. Its rough lines illustrated the difficult necessity of creating art in a place where subsistence remains a struggle. When I asked Gyatso about the work, he said that Tashi Chusang painted it several decades ago.

My question sparked a thought in Tashi Chusang and he mumbled directions to Gyatso, who jumped up to fetch something from the chokhang. He returned with a thanka in hand, unraveled it gently, and hung it on the wall opposite where he and his father sat working. Incantations filled the near-dark room and the teaching of this morning grew deeper. Thangka are made as visualization tools for meditation—part of the vast tradition of vajrayana, the "lightning bolt" path to enlightenment. This painting was a vehicle to help Gyatso understand the method and tantric madness behind Tiji.
Privy to an intimate initiation, I sat quietly and didn’t say much. Here, near the cluttered hearth of a disease-ridden home, lived lineage. I could imagine Tashi Chusang as a young man, directing his adolescent son to grind medicines, identify plants, or, later in his education, to bless each concoction with proper mantra (prayers) so that his medicine might be as efficacious as possible. Son collaged onto father in my mind. They shared the same face, the same thin lips.

Tenzin came in, his hands filled with butter and blocks of tea, and completed the picture. Middle son, shy monk, Tenzin is the student of both his father and his uncle, the abbot of Monthang’s Chödgy Monastery. Tenzin filled the monkly niche of the lay-monastic interplay so essential to Tibetan Buddhism—as well as to life in a place like Mustang. One son exuded merit through celibate religious devotion; the other guarded the medical and spiritual lineage Tashi Chusang had inherited from his father, and his father before him. On this morning, the house seemed possessed by the timeless spirits of Mustang’s forefathers. Later that day, in the garish, golden sunshine and dust, among royalty and commoners and handfuls of tourists, Gyatso wore his father’s elaborate silken hat and his maroon ngakpa shawls with grace. And Tenzin twirled, incandescent.

Tashi Chusang hacked all morning, I wrote in my journal several days later. David Shlim, an American ex-pat from Kathmandu, examined Tashi Chusang this morning. Without “proper tests” nothing could be determined, but the doctor said the amchi’s room “smelled like cancer.”

What, I ask, does cancer smell like? Is it death not yet fully ripened or some strange concoction of herbs and illness, butter tea and paint? Where does this smell of death come from? Does it seep through cracks of skin and strands of loosened hair towards some greater chaos and another incarnation? Or does it find itself born among the happenings of place and time—the cells of disease mere impostors in a vessel meant to hold life?

The walls are caving in around this old doctor with an artist’s soul. Dust to dust. He is as fragile as the glass, still moist with spilled tea, that lay unnoticed on the floor of his house. I might not see Tashi Chusang again.

Now that we have left Monthang, Gyatso tries not to worry and yet kicks himself for not putting his father on the helicopter that carried Shlim back to Kathmandu. Gyatso struggled with this decision and eventually opted to let his father rest in his home. The path of least resistance.

It is difficult to watch the struggle of power—subtle though it is—between traditional medicine and allopathy. Much more discerning than a clash, these medical traditions are twisted up in a precarious dance of mind and body, or, the need to operate versus the need to cure sickness through ceremony. I am firmly convinced that one is not better than the other. They serve different purposes.

Prayer flags kiss the wind in butterfly laps. I imagine tongues and eyelashes. Such soft images for a land of weather-beaten skin, lungs corroded by smoke, stomachs worn thin by stones, and flanks of earth delivered by the resilient force of oceans and glaciers. We live in such delicate balance with our physical environment. And the pendulum shifts of time that compose a life are nothing if not beautifully volatile.

Back in Kathmandu five days later, Prince Jigmé told me he received a radio message from Monthang. “Tashi Chusang is wasting away,” it said. “He’s as thin as a stalk of barley.” The prince, like the amchi’s son, was torn between bringing Tashi Chusang to Kathmandu or leaving him in peace and pain in Monthang. Tashi Chusang did not want to go anywhere. As it transpired, the sick amchi was carried by helicopter to Kathmandu within a week. Medical tests confirmed Dr. Shlim’s inclinations. Tashi Chusang had four bleeding ulcers and stomach cancer. I was not surprised at this diagnosis. Ulcers, like diabetes and even AIDS, are one of many diseases that are on the rise within ethnically Tibetan communities—the result of changing environments, diets, habits, and migration patterns.

To Tashi Chusang, these stomach problems were not simply temporal pains. Nor could they be “solved” by operations or ingesting strong drugs. A change in diet, at this stage, would no longer stave off death, whether one viewed Tashi Chusang’s situation from a western or Tibetan medical perspective. At this juncture in his long and practiced life, Tashi Chusang’s suffering was connected to larger dukkha, that of all sentient beings. It arose on a spiritual level, as a teaching about the nature of mind.

“These doctors say I am dying,” Tashi Chusang told me when I saw him in Kathmandu. “Unnecessary words. Of course I am. They try to stop this from happening. Why? Do they not see that I am old, that I am preparing for this?”

The amchi’s words recalled a teaching from the Bardo Thödol, the Tibetan Book of the Dead:

Now that the bardo of dying dawns upon me,
I will abandon all grasping, yearning,
and attachment,
Enter undistracted into clear awareness
of the teaching,
As I leave this compound of body
and flesh and blood
I will know it to be a transitory illusion.

Some Tibetans I know say mantras between sentences, as if to bind lay concerns with the thread of religion. Tashi Chusang spoke between mantras—quiet mantras, not the ostentatious, bellowing chants of ritual. He hadn’t the voice for that. Truly valuable speech, to him, was no longer prose—the placebo of sentences strung out to explain the inexplicable—but rather the timeless repetition of prayer. I am moved by the sparseness of these mantras—mind songs sung on a death-bed.

Tashi Chusang lived through one more cycle of the moon.

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