Health, Karma, and Practice
Well-Being and Purification in Tibetan Buddhism

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My adventures in Buddhism began with a friend who told me about the healing powers of the Medicine Buddha meditation. He was himself a spiritual healer of sorts, an interfaith hospital chaplain. He piqued my interest with his description of the kindness and openness of Geshe Tsulga and the profound experience of taking the Medicine Buddha initiation from him. A geshe, he explained, is a monastic Buddhist teacher. Geshe Tsulga taught students at the Kurukulla Center for Mahayana Buddhist Studies, a Buddhist center in Medford. Seeking to learn more about this healing meditation, I researched the Kurukulla Center from the safety of my laptop and learned that it was a small part of a larger umbrella organization, the Foundation for the Preservation of Mahayana Tradition (FPMT), founded in India by Lama Yeshe in 1975, that has since established Buddhist centers on almost every continent of the world. Lama Yeshe died in the 1980s, but was reincarnated in Spain as Lama Osel. The Foundation is being led by Lama Zopa Rinpoche until Lama Osel is old enough to take on spiritual leadership of the FPMT. Reading this history, I was as confused by the fluidity of control in a religious organization as I was by the statement that Lama Yeshe was somehow already back. Nonetheless, armed with this background information, I went to Medford to learn more from the people themselves.

Despite my preparation, I arrived at the Kurukulla doorstep almost too scared to enter the building. However, a pretty woman bearing flowers pulled up in front, and walked me in, welcoming me as a new participant. On our walk in, she explained to me that the center gets its name from Red Tara, one of the many forms of Tara, a deity who protects those who seeks to learn the dharma, or Buddhist teachings. (D would later share with me her own journey to Buddhism.)

I became a regular at the Sunday morning practice, where Damchoe, a monk from India who both assisted in teaching and practice and translated Geshe Tsulga's Tibetan, introduced a new fundamental tradition of Buddhist practice each week, including prostrations, meditation, and water bowl offerings. As I began participating in practices, pujas, and teachings, I quickly realized that this community was nearly all white and American. In all the time I spent there, I met two Asian participants—one was himself Tibetan—and one African American woman. Most people appeared to be between the ages of thirty and fifty, with two or three college students and a handful of people perhaps in their sixties. In addition to Damchoe, there were two members of the sangha, the community of monks and nuns, and both of them were white Westerners. Roughly half the participants were local to the Boston area, but some came from as far as the Berkshires and Connecticut to learn from Geshe Tsulga. Given the history of this particular center, this is no surprise. As N, the founder of the Kurukulla Center and himself a former monk explained, the FPMT sponsored its first New England center in Vermont. When ten times the number of people appeared at the visiting teachings in Boston than attended the resident teachings in Vermont, Lama Zopa directed N to start a full-time center in Boston. The Kurukulla Center began as a series of teachings in the offices of Wisdom Publications, which is also connected with the FPMT and publishes Buddhist texts for Westerners, and slowly migrated to its own space. Ultimately, the organization bought a house in Medford and established there the Kurukulla Center for Mahayana Buddhist Studies and the permanent residence of Geshe Tsulga.

Hence, I pursued my exploration of the Buddhist concept of health with the Kurukulla Center as my axis mundi. It was through the openness and welcome of the participants, the sangha, and Geshe Tsulga that my mind was illuminated. The results of structured interviews and observations of certain rituals and practices revealed a lifestyle of religious practice framed in the vast concept of karma. Karma

dictates the health we experience and is the cause of all sickness. There is no mystical healing figure in Tibetan Buddhism—far from it. A journey that began as the search for the Medicine Buddha ended in the discovery of a community infused with faith in their individual ability to attain a higher level of existence.

These conclusions are based on interviews with ten center members, at various levels of experience with Buddhism; an interview with Geshe Tsulga; and participation in Sunday practice and Medicine Buddha and Tara pujas. The members ranged in age from twenty-two to the mid-sixties, with an average age of forty-two. All were U.S. citizens, although two were born in Australia. All were white. Three of the ten were male, which roughly reflects the gender proportions of attendance at pujas and teachings. Eight of the ten were or had been married. Five of these eight had spouses who practiced Buddhism. Two of the informants were new to the Kurukulla Center and had just taken refuge last year. Taking refuge is an initiation process of sorts, where the participant goes through a ritual of vows dedicating himself to the Buddha, dharma, and sangha. Dharma is Buddhist teachings, ethics, and practice. Some people use this word to refer to written teachings, some people use this word to refer to the way they live their lives, e.g., "in dharma." Dharma in any form cannot be thrown away or touch the ground.

All ten informants had been practicing Buddhism on some level, whether reading texts independently or attending teachings, for at least six years. The engagement of my informants with the Kurukulla Center ranged from four months to thirteen years.

As I came to understand through conversations and interviews with these various individuals, healing is only done through the self, because health is inextricably related to karma. Good health is a reflection of good karma, and a person achieves health or a healthy life through purification of negative karma. Karma was defined for me by Geshe Tsulga as action. He gave the example of giving someone a dirty look. It makes the person unhappy. Because of having done this, you will experience unhappiness in the future. On the other hand, if you smile and show a positive face to others, making them feel happy, you will become happy yourself. Further, every time a person you have smiled at sees you, they will remember your kindness and give you a smile, making you happy again. This is a very simple example of karma as action.

In an address he gave to Malaysian youth on medical controversies, N elaborated on the finer points of karma:

> Basically, there are two kinds of karma: throwing karma and completing karma. The former is so called because it is the force that throws us from one life, at death, into the next; it determines our realm of rebirth. Under the heading of completing karmas are three subdivisions of result: results similar to the cause in experience, results similar to the cause in reaction, and environmental results. An example will make this clearer. The act of killing will create the throwing karma of rebirth in the hells, the realm of greatest suffering, but will bring after-effects even when that being has later been born human, through the action of completing karma. One who has killed will have a short life and suffer from illness, and may even be killed, and will also have the tendency to kill other beings. The environmental result will be that the person has to live in a dangerous place, such as one where there are constant wars.

Many of the people I spoke to recognize the presence and function of karma as the root of disease in their experience of sickness. While many informants included, in their responses to my inquiry into the nature of sickness, the susceptibility of the human body, all pointed to karma as the fundamental cause of sickness. C gave an example of the connection between karma and illness that closely parallels the introductory one Geshe Tsulga offered me and reflects the dimensions N explained. She said, "Most sickness comes because you've created the causes to be sick. You've harmed other beings, so that harm is coming back to you. . . . And it's usually pretty close to how you harmed them. If you give somebody bad food, then you get a flu bug." Here, she gives an example of completing karma with results similar in experience.

But karma functions well beyond this life. The notion of samsara—the cyclic nature of existence, living one life after another, with rebirth based on our cumulative actions—is central to Buddhist philosophy. The frailty of the human existence and the inevitability of death is a basic quality of samsara; it ensures the continuation of the cycle. Nearly everyone I spoke to emphasized that the sickness we experience in life is a product of karma created in a previous life.

Many people used the metaphor of a seed to explain the mechanism of karma. W, active in the spiritual development of the Kurukulla Center and a professional yoga instructor, has a history of depression and bipolar disorder. She drew on this metaphor as she explained her illness in terms of karma and conditions:

> We all have karmic seeds. They meet the right conditions and they manifest in different sicknesses. In the past is a situation which caused other people to be degraded—like you were a dictator or a prison guard—in this life, you

have karma to have an organic disbalance, such as depression or bipolar disorder. Try to create good conditions that keep good health, such as sleep, nutrition, not being too obsessed taking care of needs, eating healthful foods, keep mind and body clear.

Karma is a seed of potential that ripens under the right condition. Everybody I spoke to made some reference to this metaphor of the seed—cultivation, ripening, and so forth. The founder of the Kurukulla Center, himself a former physician, explained this metaphor in his address to Buddhist youth:

We can understand how karma, the principle cause, brings its effects by the analogy of the seed. A seed is certainly the principal cause of the plant it grows into, but the seed unplanted will never germinate. To do so it requires a supportive environment—soil, water, minerals, sun and so forth. These conditions are secondary causes; the cooperative interaction of primary and secondary causes is necessary to bring forth the result—a plant, or a karmic consequence.

This metaphor of the seed dominated my informants' descriptions of karma. However, N's words beautifully illustrate how this metaphorical system illuminates the dimensions of cause, condition, and competition in karmic potential. In one of our conversations, he elaborated on this metaphor, describing the garden of consciousness:

If you want to plant a field of flowers, you may find that people have been throwing garbage in it for years, it's all hilly and rocky and there's no way you can grow flowers there. But what you have to do is clear out all the garbage, then clear the weeds, and rocks, and flatten it out, smooth it out, put in fertilizer, then water it, then you need sunshine, and then you can plant your seeds, and then you can have your flowers.

In this more developed analogy, a lay person like me could start to sense the importance of replacing negative karma with positive karma. Trained in biomedicine before ordination, N went on to describe the seeds we carry that pertain specifically to health:

We all have karma to contract every illness there is. There's not one negative karma seed we don't have. We have billions of seeds to get AIDS, billions of seeds to get cancer. If you get cancer once, that's one seed ripened, you still have billions more. Everybody is carrying these seeds to have it over and over again. But, these seeds don't have to ripen, there are purification practices you can do. These seeds have to ripen in a certain field of delusion, so if we can get rid of the field of delusion, these seeds have nothing to ripen in.

Hence, purification of negative karma goes hand in hand with cultivation of positive karma. The analogy of clearing out the garbage to plant flowers exemplifies this well. Sickness is the ripening of negative karma.

However, according to many I spoke with, the process of purification can make karma ripen differently—later, when we can deal with it better, or in a form that is more manageable. As C put it, "if you're careful about what you do . . . you may stub your toe instead of getting sick." She also commented, as many people did, that purification practices—retreats in particular—often triggered sickness.

[Purification] can ripen a whole lot of things, it can also get rid of a whole lot of things. It can speed up the process. So that something that was going to ripen at another time may ripen while you do the practice, or during the retreat—especially during the retreat. Everybody went through this one week of being so sick, they just couldn't get out of bed. And then everybody got better, and we all settled in, and felt better because all the things we had screwed up in our lives had gotten done. And we could get on to business.

W, too, reported experiencing intense headaches during purification retreats, and explained them in this way: "The headache might be purifying karma that would have been rebirth in a crushing hell realm." This quote points to the other end of samsara, and the throwing karma N alluded to. The karma you purify might not have to do with an experience you would otherwise have had in this life—it could affect a rebirth.

But it is important to emphasize that purification does not mean eradication, in the context of karma. J, a former director of the Kurukulla Center and a Harvard Divinity School graduate, explained this to me, incorporating a new metaphor:

Let's say active karma is a lit match. Purifying karma is like throwing water on that match. It's not making the match disappear. There are still traces. Whereas that lit match might have manifested into a brain tumor, maybe you'll now get a headache.

This new metaphor is particularly helpful in understanding the "minimization" of disease that purification can affect. Karma is always present in all those billions of seeds, but dharma practice—Buddhist philosophy, ethics, and practice—can purify and curtail it. Hence, while sickness is always the ripening of negative karma, it can actually simultaneously be a symptom of a deeper level of healing: the healing, or purification, of karma.

The purification practice referred to most frequently is the practice of Tong-Lin, giving and taking. I learned the meditation technique associated with the philosophy from Damchoe in a Sunday morning process. In this meditation, you imagine you are surrounded by people, your enemies in

front of you and your friends behind you. Trying to focus on keeping the image of each individual face in your mind, you imagine all of everyone's suffering taking the form of black smoke. As you inhale, visualize all of this smoke entering your body through your nostrils, filling your lungs, and pouring into a black spot on your heart where all of your own ideas of self-importance and egoism fester. Then imagine your exhalation consisting of white cloud or white nectar, taking all of your merit, purification, and virtue and distributing it among all the people that surround you. This guided imagery is gone through three times, each time the suffering embodying a different root cause of suffering: aversion, ignorance, and delusion.

However, any practice done "for the benefit of all sentient beings" accrues merit in the spirit of altruism. This very intention is the meaning behind the term "Mahayana" in the phrase "Mahayana Buddhism." It refers to the highest path. Every teaching is dedicated in this way, as is every puja. Puja, a term meaning offering, refers to a ceremony usually focused on one figure that pays homage to and celebrates that figure. N explained:

> Most pujas are based around the seven-limb practice, which contains the essence of purification and creating merit, preparing the mind. Just as you have to prepare the field before you can prepare the crop of flowers by removing all the bad stuff and putting in the good stuff, so should we do with the mind, purify our wrong way of thinking, our bad habits, our bad tendencies. . . . So a puja contains the essence of purification: prostration, making offerings, confession, rejoicing, requesting the gurus not to pass away but to live a long time, requesting to teach the dharma, and dedicating merit.

The Kurukulla Center does a Tara puja once a month and a guru puja twice a month. They celebrated Losar, the new year, with a Medicine Buddha puja. I attended and was thrilled to have found what I thought was a healing ceremony.

In his introduction to the puja, translated by Damchoe, Geshe Tsulga explained the benefits to be gained by doing this particular puja on this particular day:

> The Medicine Buddha puja is done to cure the diseases. And we're not just talking about the regular diseases, like headache and so forth, but the root causes of the diseases, the delusions, like attachment, and negative karmas we have incurred.

The Losar Medicine Buddha puja had the largest attendance of any event, in my experience. There were about thirty people there, which fills the *gompa* (meditation room) to capacity. The puja itself consisted of the group recitation of prayers and vows, and a series of prayers dedicated to each of the eight Medicine Buddhas. The Medicine Buddha, also called the Medicine Guru, is a figure always represented in lapis lazuli. He, with seven other beings who had attained enlightenment, all made vows to be resources for healing. As each has a slightly different power—alleviating poisons, depression, confusions, pain, breathing, fear—each is represented by and associated with a different color. Each prayer began with a recognition of the special color ascribed to that Medicine Buddha and a list of their accomplishments and special qualities and emanations. This was followed by a dedication of virtues to enlightenment such as theirs, noting the specific virtues of that Buddha. Then followed an appeal for perfect faith, attainment of *bodhicitta* (infinite compassion), and contentment, and then the request that when we pass from this life, "may we be born from a lotus in that buddhafield, qualities complete, become a vessel for the transmission of the teachings of the dharma, such a glorious ocean of proclaimed dharma, the cause of delight."

After two hours of chanting, when the recitation of prayers was complete, Damchoe and another monk passed out milk tea and sweet rice to everyone present. We dedicated these foods to the puja, ate, and chatted quietly until everyone was done. The ceremony concluded with a few short verses of dedication. Personally, the best part of the puja came at that point. I was overwhelmed by the sense of community that settled into the room. Perhaps this came from having spoken in unison for so long. Perhaps this was a product of the communion of food, a ritual I felt connected to from my own Christian background. Regardless of the reason, I left the puja feeling positively buoyant.

Curious whether anyone else actually saw the puja as a healing ceremony, I included in my structured questionnaire an inquiry as to people's opinion of the Medicine Buddha puja. While many informants acknowledged the element of healing in the Medicine Buddha, no one viewed this puja as possessing healing qualities. J sat in silence for a few moments after I asked, and then responded, "I guess I don't think that it necessarily had any negligible effect on anybody." W acknowledged that "when you go to pujas, good seeds ripen much more strongly." However, she also shared with me an experience she had had when suffering with a debilitating repetitive strain injury in her arms. Preparing to go on a purification retreat, she mentioned to Lama Zopa Rinpoche that "maybe this will make my arms better." And Rinpoche said, "having that motivation is like having the motivation of an atom. The benefits

for the self are a by-product. The more you expect them to happen, the less likely they are to do so." Hence, it is self-defeating to enter a ceremony, even a Medicine Buddha puja which has abundant documentation of healing effects, with the expectation of being healed. Health comes from the merit accrued by dedicating action to the benefit of all sentient beings.

A addressed this same issue, but also tried to explore different levels of puja participation in her answer:

> If people believe that their health is going to be better because they went to Medicine Buddha Puja, then maybe they believe [sic] they're calmer, maybe they slow down and don't get so angry. Maybe they watch what they eat, or better—are aware of what their bodies need and listen when the body tells them it doesn't want more of this or that, but is full—or maybe they start to sit more and so slowly change bad habits. This is beneficial to health. But just attending the puja is useless if the people there do not also make a commitment to practice hard in their everyday life. Going to a puja plants seeds, suggestions in their consciousness, but the puja can't make the causes and conditions right for them to practice, and the puja can't make them decide to practice when the opportunity is there. So I think the puja helps, but indirectly. It's mostly what people make of the puja that helps their health.

While her answer may be somewhat circuitous, her ideas closely resembled the response of N, a man trained in Buddhist philosophy and pedagogy. He highlighted two different factors that play into the effect of any practice or ritual: "There's the power of the individual's practice, which is the main thing, and what's called the power of the object. The power of the object, these holy objects that you see . . . leave imprints on our consciousness." He also alluded to the power of sound: "the prayer the Medicine Buddhas made was to help those who became sick, so because of the power of truth and the power of their bodhicitta, the sound of their name has power, their puja has power, and the practice has power on the passive person." These external factors combined with the power of the practice, which he described as the level of the practitioner's awareness and the karma they already possess, determine the impact of the practice on the individual. However, in the end, the outcome still ultimately depends on the person's karma.

Rather than leading to a sense of fatalism in illness, these strong beliefs in the karmic root of health and sickness seem to have directed these American Buddhists to Western medicine. Every informant, from the college student to the nun, comfortably stated that they go to a doctor when they are sick. This is in line with the notion of the inevitability of sickness in human existence. In combination with Western medicine, many reported using Buddhist philosophy or meditation techniques to regulate their mental health. Many also included the purification practices mentioned above as Buddhist activities that they engage in specifically to address health concerns. D, the spiritual director of the Kurukulla Center, added to this list of practices, mentioning that if she were to suffer a serious illness, she would consider liberating animals.

Thus, the direct response to my questions regarding the source and nature of sickness and health was always karma, be it the karma that brought us to these human bodies that are naturally susceptible, or the karma we have generated to be sick or healthy during this cycle of existence. While we have no control over what karmic seeds we carry, they can be managed with diligent personal practice. However, there was also a more subtle response to my questions regarding the management of sickness. A number of people alluded to the impact of their practice and beliefs on how they *perceived* suffering. In her response to the question of whether Buddhism was good for one's health, J responded:

> I don't think necessarily [Buddhism] would cure some physical ailment that you have the karma to have. But the greatest benefit for me with my practice and my study has been the way that I've been able to take a different perspective on things that have happened to me, suffering that has happened to me, whether they be physical or mental or anything—a different way to manage the suffering in your life.

W also alluded to this benefit of the Buddhist worldview. She takes medication to help manage her organic imbalance, but she also asserts that when her symptoms, including body obsession and depression, emerged after a period of respite following her discovery of Buddhism, she found she "had many more ways to deal with it this time":

> I would not believe that this depression defined me, and did not identify so strongly with it. I realized instead impermanence and how things change.

I asked everyone if they were doing anything in their practice for the well-being of the Dalai Lama. Regarding group practice, each informant pointed out to me that every teaching was dedicated to Tenzin Gyatso, the Tibetan name of the Dalai Lama. Seven of my ten informants reported doing something more in their personal practice, and every one of them included in these acts reciting the Praises to Tara. The Dalai Lama put out a request for people to do the Tara praises when he cancelled his tour. C

pointed out that this request was yet another way for a lama to use his illness to affect his students in a positive way:

> But also by doing that he got a whole lot of people all over the planet doing Tara practice and creating all kinds of merit for themselves. And that is an amazing thing, Geshe-la brought that up too—to be able to use your illness to create and help other beings create the causes for their own enlightenment. Because everybody across the planet has been through such nasty stuff in the month before that, it's very cool that he did that.

This observation also points to the effects of praying for someone else, the impact of *bodhicitta* mentioned before: by praying for and dedicating to others, one ultimately benefits oneself the most. Geshe Tsulga emphasized this very point to me:

> [The Dalai Lama] manifested the aspect of falling sick, and then he asked people to pray to Tara for his health. But actually, by their praying and by their engaging in virtuous activities, they created good karma, merit. So to stimulate people to engage in virtuous activities and create good karma, he might have shown that aspect. Whoever does that practice, with the intention for His Holiness to have good health, because he or she is doing it, he or she creates good karma. So when His Holiness asks for practice, he is not really concerned with his own health, but he is wishing that others engage in virtuous activities.

So, rather than requesting the Medicine Buddha practice, a ritual imbued with healing powers, the Dalai Lama ask people to recite Tara praises for his health. A couple of other informants also mentioned using the Tara praises in their own practice of wellness. A discussed using Tara praises to "help me understand the root of my illness." G uses Tara praises as an essential part of managing the pain of multiple sclerosis:

> Geshe-la advised me to say 300 mantras daily to Tara, or 3 malas. I had just become acquainted with the Venerable Green Tara and with what a mala is, but I immediately felt sure about this and still follow this practice today. It is a most effective medicine. This was 3 years ago. I am now doing much better and continue to practice.

I chose to ask G more about this when I met with her. She explained that she finds power in Green Tara because G relates to Tara's choice to work for enlightenment in the "lesser form" of a woman, just as G serves her community in the form of a woman supposedly handicapped with multiple sclerosis:

> Green Tara in her life was a princess, and also reached a place where she did so much practice, and she was such an auspicious practitioner, that everyone around her said, however they said it, if you pray, or if you ask as a blessing, you will be reborn as a male practitioner, you will surely reach this place of enlightenment. And she just made the decision that, may she always for the sake of all sentient beings, may she become enlightened, and may she always keep this form.

But I still did not know why Tara was so present in healing. I posed this question to Geshe Tsulga, and his response was humbling to me: "Nowadays, people feel very close to Tara. The Tara is the enlightened activity, so whatever you do if you pray to Tara you become more successful. You accomplish your task." Therefore, if what you seek is health, Tara can augment the success of your practice. But, as mentioned above, for the practice to be successful, it must be mahayana, dedicated to the benefit of all sentient beings.

At the end of my interview with Geshe Tsulga, the last step in my investigation, I began to understand a concept I had not even considered in my assumption of the centrality of the Medicine Buddha. There exists in Tibetan Buddhist tradition a fine, but crucial, distinction between the healer and the physician. To this end, the founder explained to me, the Buddha is, indeed, the supreme physician. "The three jewels of Buddhism are Buddha, dharma, and sangha. The Buddha is the doctor. The dharma is the actual medicine that you take and get better. And the sangha, the monks, and nuns, realized practitioners, are like the nurses and helpers who help you take the medicine." A doctor provides medicine but, as so many informants stressed, a person must be receptive to dharma to have a positive result from this elemental medicine. Hence, having a doctor present, offering medicine, is not a functional model of healing in this system. Because sickness is a product of one's own karma, only oneself can be the healer. My model of an axial healing figure that the sick turned to for a healing intervention was inverted. This realization has certainly opened my mind but, as I express my findings between sneezes and coughs, perhaps this discovery has purified something in me, as well.