

The Medicinal Accomplishment (*sman sgrub*) practice in the Dudjom Meteoric Iron Razor (*gnam lcags spu gri*) tradition: Reflections on the ritual and meditative practice at a monastery in Southern Bhutan.¹

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“Medicinal Accomplishment” (*sman sgrub*) practices for compounding and empowering medicinal pills have received some attention in studies of Tibetan medical traditions, although it is clear that in the contemporary medical context, their religious significance has been toned down. This paper examines an elaborate “Medicinal Accomplishment” ritual and its Buddhist meditative framing, as performed in a religious monastic context in Bhutan. It explores aspects of the practice, especially the transformations of the substances considered to be enacted through the meditative ritual and tantric accomplishment, raising the question of whether an important aspect of Tibetan medicine in the past may have been neglected in the contemporary focus on the active natural ingredients in Tibetan pills.

Medicinal Accomplishment (*sman sgrub*) practices in Tibetan Buddhism have received some scholarly attention in the past few years. Put simply, the practice concerns the preparation and consecration of medicinal pills, in the context of a

¹I acknowledge the support of the Arts and Humanities Research Council of the UK, who funded the research project on which this paper is based. I also thank Lopon P. Ogyan Tanzin Rinpoche, who has acted as the research project’s lama consultant, and with whom I have discussed the Tibetan texts discussed in this paper at length. Thanks are also due to the lamas and monks of Pema Yoedling Dratsang, Gelegphu, Bhutan, especially Lama Kunzang Dorjee Rinpoche and Lopon Lhundrup Namgyal. Further, I must acknowledge Nicolas Chong, who attended the rituals with me in Bhutan, who took videos which have been most helpful to the study, and who also took photographs, some of which I am including here. Geoffrey Samuel, and also an anonymous peer reviewer, provided useful feedback in the final revision stages, for which I am grateful.

meditative tantric ritual. In this paper, I look at a particular example, with reference to its textual tradition and ethnographic observation of its performance, in particular focusing on the Buddhist meditative framing of the practice. In doing so, I wish to consider some issues relating to the boundaries between Tibetan medicine and Tibetan Buddhism. It is well known that Buddhism has had a considerable impact on the development of Tibetan traditions of medicine and healing, while at the same time Tibetan medicine developed its own relatively autonomous or specialised spheres of practice. This was even the case in the pre-modern period, when there was considerable overlap, including the dominance of lamas and monks in the performance of healing rites. Yet some aspects of medical theory and practice diverged or contrasted with Buddhism, for example, matters of sexuality or diet;² and training in medicine and healing was often vested in hereditary lineages of doctors who learnt medicine in the family home, relatively independently from formal training in Buddhism. With the processes of modernisation and professionalisation in Tibetan medicine, perhaps beginning roughly from the seventeenth century founding of a state supported medical college,³ Tibetan medicine has increasingly developed its own niche of Tibetan learning and specialised practice. The tendency to separate medicine from religion in Tibet has grown considerably since the second half of the twentieth century, both in Tibet, where secularisation of traditional medicine has been encouraged by the state, and in exile, with the development of a modernised curriculum of training at the Men-Tsee-Khang Institute in Dharamsala. Much academic work has been looking at these and related developments, but here I am concerned with the other side of the picture, that is, aspects of the joint heritage of Tibetan medicine and Buddhism which may have lost their centrality or even disappeared in Tibetan medicine, yet remain vibrant within Buddhist practice.

Medicinal Accomplishment practices are still used in Tibetan medical practice. Frances Garrett (2009: 224-225) has discussed the interesting interconnection in this case between medical and religious domains, in which a practice rooted in rNying ma tantric circles has persisted within the dGe lugs pa orien-

²In medical practice, the gratification of sexual impulses or the consumption of meat might form part of a health-promoting or treatment regime. In Buddhist teachings, even when sex and meat-eating are not actively discouraged, they are rarely condoned or considered as beneficial; they are perhaps only enjoined in certain advanced tantric practice for virtuosi who could offset their negative effects through the power of meditation.

³The medical college of *lCags po ri* in Lhasa was founded through the patronage of the Fifth Dalai Lama's Regent, Sangye Gyamtso, in the late seventeenth century.

tated medical institutions in Central Tibet. She rightly underlines the importance of the contemplative and yogic curriculum of which it is part, the purification and accomplishment of the doctor practitioner as much as the medicine, and the central place of the practice within the *bdud rtsi yon tan* (“Elixir Qualities”) class of Mahāyoga texts in the rNying ma tantric corpus.⁴ At the same time, she notes that the *smān sgrub* practice is often presented in Tibetan medical contexts today as though it were a component added simply to enhance the efficacy of the medicinal pills.⁵

In contrast, in rNying ma pa Buddhist monasteries, the production of medicinal pills is an addition to the principal tantric ritual, which is the Major Practice session or Drupchen (*sgrub chen*) focused on attaining realisation. A Medicinal Accomplishment text does not constitute a self-sufficient rite, but rather a practice to be integrated within the ritual sequences of intensive practice of the main Ritual Manual. It need not be done each time a Major Practice session takes place, and how many medicinal pills are made will depend on the expertise of the team of lamas and the level of sponsorship received.

Major Practice sessions are the most elaborate and important periodic rituals performed in rNying ma pa monasteries of any size.⁶ They consist of intensive communal ritual and meditation, led by a group of lamas of advanced spiritual stature, together with a supporting team of expert ritualists. Participation in such a session is considered to produce considerable spiritual benefits, in the best case even to equal a three year retreat. This is not simply hyperbole: Buddhist tantric theory bases itself on the principle of a community of practitioners bound by the tantra commitments or *samaya*, all destined to attain Enlightenment in a single maṇḍala, and the fruits of spiritual practice are considered to depend more on the maintenance of this tantric bond than on the meditative practice as such. Thus in a Major Practice session a participant who acts correctly in the practice and plays their communal part will reap benefits accordingly. The boy blowing the horn in the right place is supporting the practice of the seasoned meditators, so he will

⁴Garrett (2009: 214-220) discusses the historical background of *smān sgrub* texts, their importance both within the transmitted tantric scriptures, and within the revelation cycles of the foremost early masters whose works were seminal for the later rNying ma tradition. The medical tradition relies on the *g.yu thog snying thig* cycle, which is one branch among many.

⁵See Craig 2011 for an example of such a simplified *smān sgrub* ritual performed in contemporary Lhasa.

⁶Small monasteries may manage only Ceremonial Practice (*sgrub mchod*) sessions, similar to but rather less elaborate than Major Practice sessions.

share in their spiritual attainments. Moreover, since Major Practice sessions are the key events in the annual ritual calendar, they may take on a significance in binding together scattered members of the religious community. Ex-monks and other lay practitioners may be enjoined to attend.⁷ Furthermore, Major Practice sessions provide the occasion for renewing the relationship between the specialist practitioners and the wider lay community. Dedicated lay people may attend the practice on a daily basis. The final day may attract huge numbers of people from the local community and beyond, since this is when the consecrations are publicly bestowed with the sacred statues and other items: the spiritually charged pills, liquids and foods.

The Buddhist Context: Consecration Practices

The tantric rituals considered here may be seen as a sub-type of Buddhist consecration practices. The repeated charging of the medicinal pills and other items with spiritual efficacy is not dissimilar from pan-Asian Buddhist practices, such as those for consecrating Buddha images.⁸ Essentially, the material articles are transformed through the ceremony into the tangible presence of the Buddha's enlightened qualities, and this nature persists beyond the ceremony itself. Key to the efficacy are the transmission of virtues and powers from a previous generation of articles, the various chants recited throughout the practice, and the transference of psychic energies of practitioners adept in the meditation practices (Tambiah 1984: 254). In the case here described, the rituals have much in common with the tantric consecration rites described by Bentor, although there are minor differences because her examples are taken from New Transmission (*gsar ma*) sources, whereas the monastic tradition here is of the Old Transmissions (*rnying ma*). Thus, here the keynote throughout is the inner tantric view that buddhahood is not somewhere else, nor does it need to be developed. Here the Mahāyāna doctrine that in its true nature, conditioned existence is no different from unconditioned existence – that is, *nirvāṇa* or liberation – is taken to its logical conclusion. If they are no different, then conditioned existence actually *is nirvāṇa*, and all the different aspects or phenomena of conditioned existence are really the display of buddha qualities, if only we could realise this. The point of the spiritual path is not to get rid of conditioned phenomena and to produce

⁷ In fact, Lama Kunzang Dorjee insists on the attendance of those who trained at his monasteries and graduated as local lamas serving their home communities.

⁸ See, in particular, Swearer 2004, and 1995, Tambiah 1984: 243-257, Bentor 1996 and 1997.

enlightened phenomena, but simply a gnosis: to realise the buddha nature of all phenomena, which is already fully developed. Thus, an important technique in the rNying ma system is known as “mindfulness of total purity” (*rnam dag dran pa*) or simply “total purity” (*rnam par dag pa*),⁹ in which the practitioner comes to experience all phenomena as pure enlightened qualities. But it is anticipated that such results are only at all likely in the special context of an introduction supported by accomplished meditators, themselves supported by the transmissions received from their spiritual mentors and their connection to the spiritual masters of the past. In these circumstances, it may be possible to wake up to realisation simply through an introduction to the powerful tantric methods for directly experiencing the enlightened view. Thus the repeated consecrations of the pills and other ritual items are not designed to transform anything, but rather to focus the mind on their inherent nature – which is present all along – so that this should be actualised and made fully accessible to all.

Tantric Transformations and Bestowal of the Pills

It will be readily seen that not only the medicinal pills, but the entire *maṇḍala* construction erected within the temple for the event, becomes the outer “support” (*rten*) on which the meditative transformations are focused: the palace supporting the enlightened tantric deities and their symbolic receptacles. A series of protective circles are created around the temple, and within it around the *maṇḍala*, so that no interference with the progress of the consecrations is possible. It then becomes the “medicinal mansion” (*sman khang*), and the medicinal substances are repeatedly charged through the mantra recitations led by the Head Lama, from whose heart the mantra cord is stretched around the items in the *maṇḍala*.

We shall see that sexual imagery is a prominent feature of the ritual and meditations of the Medicinal Accomplishment practice. It is not only that the repeated variations on that theme in the meditations of the male and female deities in union produce fluids which become or transform the elixir to be consumed. The imagery is also expressed in the outer ritual performance, such as in the ritual grinding, which is performed ideally by the Spiritual Master and his consort – in this case by the Head Lama, with the ritual specialist taking the part of the consort. This sexual component to the rites may not seem surprising consider-

⁹See *gnam lcags spu gri bsnyen yig*, Dudjom Collected Works Volume Da: 115-119; and the *Phur pa bcu gnyis* root tantra (various editions) Chapter 16.

ing that this is a tantric Buddhist tradition, but contrary to popular representations about “tantra”, sexual symbolism is not central to many Tibetan Buddhist practices. Most rNying ma pa tantric rituals, including the deity practices discussed here, are essentially rooted in Mahāyoga, which works on transforming vision and experience, so that all forms are realised as *buddha* body, all sounds are heard as *buddha* speech, and all thoughts arise as *buddha* mind. All or any of the emotional afflictions may be enlisted in the development of this pure vision of the world as the deity’s celestial *maṇḍala*, and of all beings as the deity’s enlightened entourage. In fact, the specifically sexual yogas are mostly associated with the *anuyoga* practices performed intensively in retreat, often as additional or branch practices. The main Vajrakīlaya deity practice is considered to work with and transform all five emotional poisons, but as a fierce wrathful deity, Vajrakīlaya is especially associated with the transformation of hatred and violence, and the imagery of killing pervades the Vajrakīlaya symbolism of “liberating” or releasing negative spirits into the *buddha* fields. But Tibetan tantric rites focused on longevity are rooted in sexual symbolism, and it is clear that these rites for Medicinal Accomplishment, connected with bodily healing as well as the gaining of spiritual enlightenment, are using visualisations of sexuality in the same way as do longevity practices. As with the use or transformation of the other emotional afflictions, the bliss of the deities is visualised as transcending ordinary passion and clinging, yet fully engaging with the creativity or pure energy of enlightened passion which is evoked through the recitations.

It may appear to be stating the obvious, but much of the intended psychological impact of the practice is connected to the *physical* nature of the ritual meditations, and the linkage of the spiritual inspiration with the bodily experience. Components and adornments of the three-dimensional *maṇḍala* are painstakingly assembled as perfectly as possible in the days before the Major Practice session. This *maṇḍala* is then considered actually to embody the celestial palace and its divine inhabitants, and it becomes the “support” (*rten*) for the meditations. It is physically present, and the practitioners come into direct physical contact with it, for instance by bowing and touching their heads to it when they enter at the start of each day. Three times in the course of the practice session, the meditation on oneself as the deity is reinforced by everyone symbolically dressing up as the *heruka* or male tantric deity, and this entails the *heruka* marks being painted on the face and neck and touching all the items of clothing. On the final consecrations day, the bestowal of consecrations is above all a physical experience. The

sacred items are put on top of the head, some are put on the neck, the heart, or the hands, and the edible and drinkable items are consumed. The bestowals also create a physical encounter between the Head Lama and the students, and this kind of ritualised contact and directed experience of receiving consecration is part of the milieu of the tantric *samaya* or bond which links the great spiritual masters of the past, the lama of the present, and the students. The efficacy of the medicinal pills is not only seen in terms of the proficiency of the lama and his team in producing an effective product, but more in terms of effectively transmitting the blessings of the practice and its lineage of masters. Thus not only is it crucial to include the Dharma medicinal pills of the great teachers of the tradition, but it is equally important not to sully this special embodiment of their blessings with those with which one does *not* have the same personal connection. So the medicinal substances should not include Dharma medicines of lamas from lineages which are not closely connected. Many practitioners avoid altogether medicinal pills from uncertain sources, or from lamas who represent lineages with which they are not personally connected.

The Major Practice session in Gelegphu in Southern Bhutan

The case discussed here is a Major Practice session connected with the popular tantric deity Vajrakīlaya [Image 01]. The specific tradition of the Dudjom “Meteoric Iron Razor” (*gnam lcags spu gri*) is based on a famous nineteenth century revelation, the texts for which were brought to completion by a towering twentieth century master, Dudjom Jigdral Yeshe Dorje Rinpoche (*bdud ’joms ’jigs bral ye shes rdo rje*, 1904-1987). The practice is now widespread, perhaps especially in Bhutan, where Dudjom Rinpoche had many students. Indeed, when I attended the Major Practice session in Gelegphu in Southern Bhutan in November 2013, another “Meteoric Iron Razor” Major Practice session was taking place not far away with a different team of lamas.¹⁰

[Image 02] The temple in Gelegphu,¹¹ where the practice was established on an annual basis some years ago, is still in the process of construction. In the early years, the practice was performed in a marquee. Now the main building is complete, but work is continuing on the statues and decoration, and was interrupted

¹⁰Namkhai Nyingpo Rinpoche was leading a group of 300 practitioners at a football ground in Gyalpoizhing in Mongar, organised by Mongar Threma tshogpa, with more than 5,000 expected for the consecrations (news report in *Kuensel*, November 9th 2013).

¹¹Pema Yoedling Dratsang, <http://pemayoedling.org/>.

for the duration of the practice session. The lamas and monks are all part of the Jangsa Dechen Choling Monastery in Kalimpong in West Bengal, India [Image 03], and the new temple was founded specifically as a Vajrakīlaya temple by the Jangsa Monastery’s head lama, Lama Kunzang Dorjee. Only a few monks and practitioners had been based there during the hot summer months, so there was an influx of practitioners from Kalimpong and elsewhere in the lead up to the practice session. As may be clear from the decision to dedicate the Gelegphu temple to Vajrakīlaya, Lama Kunzang is a specialist in Vajrakīlaya, and the Jangsa team are particularly proficient in this practice. Lama Kunzang received the main Vajrakīlaya transmissions from his father, Lama Pema Longdrol, who had been appointed as the Head Lama of Jangsa Monastery by Dudjom Rinpoche and the Bhutan Queen Mother. Thus the older generation Jangsa lamas had considerable experience in Vajrakīlaya practice long before Lama Kunzang took the helm.



02. Pema Yoedling Dratsang, Gelegphu, Bhutan (photo Cathy Cantwell 2013)

Preparations

[Images 04, 05, 06] Preparations began in earnest several days before the nine full days of the practice session. Sixteen monks were assigned to perform various recitations in the temple, e.g. the *Prajñāpāramitā* in one hundred thousand verses, in order to generate virtue to support the practice and remove obstacles so that previous bad karma would not interfere with it. Meanwhile, other monks ornamented the temple building and surrounding area, decorating the gateway to the monastery grounds and erecting mantra flags which lined the route from the gate to the temple. [Images 07, 08, 09, 10, 11, 12, 13] Ritual preparations began with making the decorative *tormas* (*gtor ma*) or ritual sculptures, which may serve as icons for the tantric deities, or as offerings to them. One group worked principally on shaping the *tormas* from dough, painting them and adding some basic ornamentation, while a group in another building focused on making the elaborate butter/wax decorations (“white ornaments,” *dkar rgyan*) to add to the *tormas*.



09. Working on a Wrathful food offering torma (photo Cathy Cantwell 2013)



11. Decorating the main body of the tormas (photo Cathy Cantwell 2013)

[Images 14, 15, 16, 17] Three days before the practice session began, a select group of four senior practitioners started work on creating the two-dimensional sand *maṇḍala*, which depicts a plan of the tantric deity's celestial palace. It took two days to complete. In the final days before the practice, the assembly room was prepared, with thrones for the principal lamas, seating and little tables for other practitioners; the ritual items needed for the three-dimensional *maṇḍala* construction were also prepared. The day before the practice was to start, the Senior Master of Ceremonies (*dbu mdzad*), who had been Dudjom Rinpoche's own Master of Ceremonies, and who retains an important advisory role, sitting next to the Head Lama during practice sessions, sought out the main current Master of Ceremonies in the temple. He passed to him a number of already prepared packets of the key medicinal ingredients, which he had just brought with him from Kalimpong.

[Images 18, 19, 20] The first day of the Major Practice session was devoted entirely to preparatory ritual meditations to create the appropriate atmosphere for the session: the consecration of the space; the demarcation of ritual boundaries so that the practitioners should be symbolically bound together in the group with disturbing influences excluded; the construction of the three-dimensional

maṇḍala containing the symbolic supports and the items to be consecrated through the ritual; and the symbolic preparation of the assembly as tantric practitioners. These preparations were sandwiched within the short regular Vajrakīlaya practice, beginning after the mantra session and closing before the final section of the practice. Some important sections of the main Vajrakīlaya Ritual Manual were integrated within appropriate parts of the preparatory rituals, but it was not performed in full. The initial consecration of the space entails an Earth Ritual, in which offerings are made to the Earth Goddess and other local deities, and the site is ritually appropriated for the tantric practice. The boundaries around the site are then drawn, beginning with establishing the presence of the Four Great Kings, protective deities placed outside the temple building at its four sides. Further boundaries are set up, progressing towards the centre: in front of the temple; outside and inside the temple doors (respectively keeping obstacles out and the tantric attainments within); and around the space where the three-dimensional *maṇḍala* is to be constructed. This inner boundary of the ten Wrathful Deities who form a circle around Vajrakīlaya in the centre of the *maṇḍala* was set up through a ritual dance performed by the Head Lama; wearing the Black Hat costume of the tantric master, he hammered *phurbu* daggers into their holders in the ten directions of the *maṇḍala* area, while the assembly chanted the mantras of the individual deities in turn. The final secret and indestructible boundary is created through awareness of the sameness of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, and here the Ritual Manual's section on "Demarcating the Boundaries" was recited. This is followed by a ritual liberation of negative forces, performed by the Head Lama, accompanied by a dance of two masked dancers taking the part of the ritual functionaries, the white and the dark *ging* deities. Having changed back into his usual robes, but wearing his ceremonial hat, the Head Lama then circled the *maṇḍala* table, sprinkling it with consecrated elixir. [Image 21] Then both he and the Master of Offerings, each holding one end of a long string of twisted threads of five-colours, circled the *maṇḍala* table, marking out the primeval lines which outline the principal lines of the *maṇḍala*.

[Image 22] During the break in the practice which followed, the full three-dimensional structure for the *maṇḍala* was erected, and the two-dimensional sand *maṇḍala* was placed on the lower table surface within it. [Images 23, 24, 25] The ritual resumed with a purificatory rite specifically for the elixir medicinal substances. After an elaborate expulsion of hindering spirits, an Ablutions Ritual was performed, its main section dramatised by the Master of Offerings standing

before the medicinal substances on the *maṇḍala* table, holding a mirror out in his left hand, and pouring saffron water from a flask with his right hand. The ritual is performed in many contexts, usually in relation to *buddha* images; the recitation makes clear that the purpose is to cleanse one's own defilements with the water of wisdom and compassion, so that the image is seen purely. In this case, it is all the *maṇḍala* items which are to be seen as *buddha* manifestations, but especially the medicinal substances. A further ritual sequence performed by the Head Lama, wearing his ceremonial hat and standing before the *maṇḍala*, served to consecrate the *maṇḍala* items. [Images 26, 27, 28] There was then a procession of the lamas and key practitioners carrying the different items; it circumambulated the *maṇḍala* three times. Each article was then in turn placed in the *maṇḍala* while an appropriate verse was recited. First, the *phurbu* ritual daggers representing the *maṇḍala* deities were positioned in the appropriate directions above the two-dimensional *maṇḍala* depiction. Next, the medicinal substances were put in place, with a recitation from the specific Medicinal Accomplishment text, inviting the medicinal substances as *buddha* body emanations (Volume Tha: 313). The other sacred articles were then put in place with further lines from the manual for the Major Practice session, the Ritual Practice Framework (*sgrub khog*) text (Volume Tha: 253). [Images 29, 30, 31] After this, the three-dimensional *maṇḍala* structure was ornamented with silks and other decorations, and surrounded by *tormas* and offerings.



27. Standing before the *Maṇḍala*, holding the bowl of Medicinal Substances (photo Nicolas Chong 2013)



28. Placing the items in turn (photo Cathy Cantwell 2013)

The Medicinal Ingredients

At this stage, the *Medicinal Accomplishment* text refers to the *maṅḍala* as the medicinal mansion (*sman khang*). For the first half of the Major Practice session, the medicinal substances are described as unground (*khrol sgrub* or *sman khrol bu*), and a turning point in the progress of the ritual is when the substances are ground up, mixed, and formed into small medicinal pills or tiny lumps. However, it would be too difficult to grind up all the substances in the middle of the practice session, and the quantity of medicinal powders needed is too large to place

them all at the uppermost section of the *maṇḍala*. [Images 32, 33] Therefore, a mix of ready prepared medicinal powders was placed in a large sack, while small quantities of unground medicine pieces were kept in a large bowl to be placed at the top of the *maṇḍala*. They were arranged in the bowl in accordance with the *Medicinal Accomplishment* text, which specifies five groups of specific ingredients, positioned separately in the centre and the cardinal directions, with additional substances in the intermediate directions. There was a skull-cup for the central ingredients, while the other types were placed in small bowls, all of which were individually covered by pieces of cloth in appropriate colours. The large sack was not given so much ritual attention: it was not carried in the procession around the temple, but left in front of the *maṇḍala*; and whereas the bowl of medicines was put at the top of the *maṇḍala*, the sack was put at the bottom. Nonetheless, all the *maṇḍala* items were linked together by *dhāraṇī* threads (see below), so that they were all connected and the consecrations could travel along the linked cords.



32. *The bowl of the unground Medicinal Substances*
(photo Cathy Cantwell 2013)



33. *The bowl of Medicinal Substances placed at the top of the Maṇḍala (photo Nicolas Chong 2013)*

I am not here going to give details of the identifications of the many substances used: in any case, I currently have too many uncertainties about these identifications. I focus instead on the text's overarching classification of the different types of ingredients. The *Medicinal Accomplishment* text mentions first (Volume Tha: 308-309) the five tantric elixirs and five fleshes. These are the tantric substances par excellence: the transmuted emotional poisons, embodying the five *buddha* qualities. The five fleshes are meats which were taboo in the Indian context: human, cow, horse, dog and elephant; while the elixirs are human products: urine, excrement, semen, menstrual blood and brains. In the Indian tantric context, their use was deeply transgressive in a society governed by laws of pollution, but in Tibet the potencies ascribed to the substances have been more connected with emotionally charged connotations which may be universally human, as well as Tibetan ideas about their magical efficacy; in the Buddhist context, connotations of engagement in violence and sex are of particular significance. To collect these substances literally is problematic, but they are considered to be present in the Dharma medicines made by the great tantric masters of the past, and the primary active ingredient to be used in the pills is the sacred "fermenting agent" (*phab*

gta') of previous batches of consecrated pills, passed on in an unbroken line from an authentic and appropriate lineage source. When *Medicinal Accomplishment* rituals are performed, small amounts of sacred pills coming from previous generations of practice are always added to the mix, and especially pills from relevant deity practices of great lamas in one's own lineage.

Next in importance are *the eight principal medicines*: briefly, the list consists of maroon sandalwood, roots of inula plants, cloves, juniper leaves, saffron, nutmeg, camphor, and cinnamon.¹² The large number of subsidiary medicines includes plants considered to have life-giving properties, such as the three myrobalan fruits, which are fundamental also in Tibetan medicine and here in fact make up the largest quantity and the basis for the medicinal powders.¹³

For the large bowl with the skull-cup and four bowls of unground medicinal substances which are to be placed at the top of the *maṅḍala*, a list of ingredients needed for each specific bowl is given in the text (Volume Tha: 312). Interestingly, here each bowl is considered to contain one of the five fleshs and one of the tantric elixirs. Thus the central skull-cup is seen as containing human flesh and urine, the eastern bowl beef and excrement, the southern bowl horse meat and semen, the western bowl dog meat and blood, the northern bowl elephant meat and brains. Each of the main five groups of herbal substances also covers one (or more) type(s) of taste: the central skull-cup should contain bitter and hot-tasting substances, the

¹²More fully, and giving what appear to be the ideal species equivalents for the Tibetan names, 1. maroon sandalwood (*tsandan smug po*), the wood of *Pterocarpus santalinus*, 2. *mū la pa tra*, the dried roots of inula plants, most probably, *Inula racemosa*, 3. cloves (*li shi*), the flower buds of *Syzygium aromaticum*, 4. gandhabhadra (*gandha bha dra*), the leaves of *Juniperus indica*, 5. saffron (*gur gum*), the dried stigmas of *Crocus sativus* flowers, 6. nutmeg (*dzā ti*), the kernel of the fruit of *Myristica fragrans*, 7. camphor (*ga bur*), perhaps produced from *Cinnamomum camphora*, and 8. cinnamon (*shing tshwa*), generally, the bark of *Cinnamomum cassia*, but other varieties may be used. Tibetan plant names are often used for a broad range of species. It is probable that for all the eight, slightly different species may be used, depending on local availability. Note that this category of *the eight principal medicines* (*sman rtsa brgyad*) is ubiquitous in ritual manuals, mentioned not only in *Medicinal Accomplishment* texts, but also in *sādhanas*, in the section on offering elixir (*bdud rtsi*) or medicinal cordial (*sman mchod*), when the consecrated liquid is visualised as containing the primary medicinal ingredients. Yet the category is apparently unknown in standard Tibetan medical sources (Barbara Gerke, personal communication 7/12/2009).

¹³Relative quantities of the different substances to be used are spelt out in the *Medicinal Accomplishment* text Volume Tha: 310. The text (309) also mentions other categories, such as powdered gemstones (which would need to be refined and purified, as done in the medical tradition), and animal products from different groups of animals, although these can be included symbolically through the use of the dough animal stamp discussed below.

eastern bowl should contain sweet-tasting substances, the southern bowl sour-tasting, the western bowl salty-tasting, and the northern bowl astringent-tasting substances. The text adds that the substances are made into essences through their blending with the five elixirs and fleshes. Above the central skull-cup, a further small golden bowl is placed, containing relics from the great lineage lamas of the past, and the sacred “fermenting agent” (*phab gta*) of consecrated pills (“*samaya* substance *dharma* medicine”, *dam rdzas chos sman*). The Master of Ceremonies explains that some of these sacred Dharma pills should also be added to each of the bowls.

Installation of the Practitioners

[Images 34, 35, 36, 37, 38] The *maṇḍala* set up, the final part of the preliminary rituals is to prepare the active participants themselves by installing them as suitable tantric practitioners. Thus the Vajra Master (*rdo rje slob dpon*)¹⁴ stood and read out the appropriate sections of the *Public Address for the Major Practice Session* (*gtong thun*), informing or reminding the assembly of the special nature of the practice and the auspiciousness of the occasion, and that everyone present must take the part of the yogic master, taking on the appearance of the tantric deity. He then led the assembly in chanting lines relating to the donning of the tantric *heruka* costume and its significance, and each item of dress was in turn offered first to the Head Lama, and then taken around the hall, and individually bestowed upon everyone. After this section, the Head Lama gave a ritual authorisation, so that those who had not previously received empowerment would be able to take part, and everyone was bound by the tantric bond or *samaya*. Some preliminary sections of the main Vajrakīlaya Ritual Manual were recited, and then mantras were recited with *mudrās* (tantric hand gestures) to bless the *vajra* and bell to be used in the practice. [Image 39] A separate text for *The Descent of Consecrations* (*byin ’bebs*) was then used for the final main event of the day. The principal lamas and practitioners, wearing ceremonial hats and holding five-coloured silk streamers, stood before the *maṇḍala*, and at the end of each verse they ritually brought down consecrations, waving the streamers towards the *maṇḍala*. Finally, they processed around the *maṇḍala* and central shrine of the temple three times,

¹⁴Here this does not refer to the Head Lama, who is the Vajra Master of the tantric practice, but to the monastic role of *rdo rje slob dpon*, who should be a senior and advanced tantric practitioner, who takes a leading role in many of the rituals, acting as the Regent (*rgyal tshab*) who stands in for the Vajra Master in tantric ceremonies.

stopping to wave the streamers down at each of the cardinal directions. The root Vajrakīlaya mantra was then sung. This ritual was repeated at the end of every day of the Major Practice Session until the *maṇḍala* dissolution on the final day. On this preparatory day, a few further rituals concluded the session.

The Structure of the Daily Practice

Clearly, there is not space here to give details of the full practice over the nine day session, so I will summarise and focus on the *Medicinal Accomplishment* sections. Each of the main days followed a similar structure, with some variations. The communal practice began at around 6am each day, and finished around 6pm. It was divided into morning and afternoon sessions, both with breaks in the middle. The lunch breaks were usually around an hour and a half, allowing time for ritual preparations for the afternoon sessions, and also the chance for visitors to pay their respects to Lama Kunzang in his house. There were in fact two further sessions performed during the night, since the principle of a Major Practice session is for the practice to be continuous throughout the day and night. The night sessions consisted of intensive practice of the main *sādhana* and the *Medicinal Accomplishment* text, and were attended only by a small group. The monks took turns in attending, and other monks stood in for the key practitioners, such as the Master of Ceremonies, who did not attend the night sessions.

[Images 40, 41, 42] In each morning session, the tantric foundation practices were followed by the main Vajrakīlaya Ritual Manual. The principal *sādhana* practice of generating and accomplishing oneself as the deity was practised intensively through the two morning sessions. There were extended mantra recitation periods, and following the mantras for the central deity, the other deities of the *maṇḍala* were addressed in turn and their mantras also recited. After this extended mantra recitation, for the first three of the main days the same sections from the *Medicinal Accomplishment* text (Volume Tha: 314-319) were performed, focusing on purifying the unground medicinal substances. The notes in the text remind the reader that the correct basis of the practice is to meditate on the three aspects of oneself as the practitioner, the deity's *maṇḍala* in front of one, and the practice substances, all partaking of the same enlightened nature. The main basis of the *sgrub chen* practice is oneself as the principal *yidam* deity and the deity's *maṇḍala* palace in front. But at this point the focus shifts slightly to pay particular attention to the medicinal substances themselves. First, they are visualised as the deity, green Amṛtakunḍalī (Tib. *bdud rtsi 'khyil ba*, Pooling Elixir), holding a

crossed *vajra* and a skull-cup of elixir, in union with his consort, Vajra Elixir Lady, who holds a lotus and a skull-cup of elixir. Following various practices which reinforce this visualisation, the medicinal guardians are invited: the great *vidyā-dharas*, gods and sages of the past who attained *siddhis* (tantric powers) by perfecting the alchemical transmutation of medicinal substances. They are pictured gathering like clouds in the sky above the medicinal mansion *maṇḍala*. During this invocation, the lamas wave five-coloured streamers, symbolically bringing the medicinal guardians down into the temple; music is played, and the Master of Offerings circumambulates the *maṇḍala*, stopping and waving five-coloured streamers in each of the cardinal directions. A recitation then focuses on the need to transcend the distinction between purity and impurity, and the medicinal *vidyādharas* are requested to bestow consecrations on the practitioners and the substances, and in particular, to expunge clinging to notions of the pure and the impure, thereby bestowing *siddhis*. With the mantra recitation, the Head Lama takes the *vajra* with the attached *dhāraṇī* cord and attaches it to the robes near his heart. Throughout a *sgrub chen*, during mantra sessions, the end of a *dhāraṇī* cord which winds around all the practice substances in the *maṇḍala* is given to the Head Lama, so that the mantra meditations in his heart can travel along the cord and empower the *maṇḍala* items. In this case, the *dhāraṇī* cord was not used for every mantra session,¹⁵ but it was consistently used for every one of the medicinal mantra sessions. The meditation was of light radiating from one's heart to the substances as emanations of Amṛtakuṇḍalī in front, so that the impurities in the substances, the poisons of the animate and inanimate universe, are cleansed, and they become pure elixir. The appropriate mantra is recited, and then the essence liquids produced through the union of the male and female deities are visualised mixing with the medicinal substances, becoming one taste. Finally the medicinal *vidyādharas* are meditated upon, raining down the elixir of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, which softly melts into the practice substances. The substances become inseparable from blissful primordial wisdom elixir, their colour, smell, taste, potencies and essence qualities perfected. The main medicinal mantra is then recited. At the end of the session, there is a further meditation on clouds of blissful deities generated in front, producing creative seeds of light, dissolving into the medicinal substances, which become the jewels from which *siddhis* arise.

¹⁵It was used for the first mantra session each day of the main Vajrakīlaya deity practice, but not for all the sessions repeated throughout the day.

After this specific practice on the medicinal substances, there is a ritual which drives out distracting spirits, followed by the consecrations section of the main Vajrakīlaya Ritual Manual. A few of the medicinal mantras are added to the mantra following the consecrations mantra. Then the practice continues with a repeat of the main sections of the Ritual Manual, up to and including the mantra sections.

On the first and the final full day, the afternoon session began with Vajrakīlaya dances from the Pema Lingpa (*padma gling pa*) tradition, and the other afternoon practices were shortened, in particular by omitting the self-empowerment ritual. On the other days, the afternoon began with further Vajrakīlaya mantra practice, along with the introductory consecration of the flask for the self-empowerment. The self-empowerment ritual serves to renew the tantric bond which dates from each practitioner's first empowerment in this deity practice tradition, and this renewal is considered important from time to time, especially during a *sgrub chen*, when there is the support of a good lama and the consecrated *maṅḍala*. But it was not considered an indispensable part of the daily *sgrub chen* practice, so that it could be omitted if there was not enough time. Repetition of the Medicinal Accomplishment practice was, on the contrary, considered crucial. Thus for the afternoon sessions of the first three main days, following the initial practices, the same sections of the *Medicinal Accomplishment* text as were done in the morning (Volume Tha: 314-319) were repeated. On the third day, further mantras for the mixing together of different medicinal substances (Volume Tha: 323) were added.

[Images 43, 44, 45, 46] The daily afternoon practice continued with the tantric *tshogs* feast, based on the practice in the main Vajrakīlaya Ritual Manual, and the recitations which usually accompany it. Apart from the first and last day, the main sections of the self-empowerment ritual were inserted within the practice, before the final offering and consumption of the foods. Also, the supplications and offerings to the Dharma protectors were made at this point. In the final afternoon session, the tantric *tshogs* feast and the final sections of the Vajrakīlaya Ritual Manual were concluded. After this, there was an elaborate expulsion of disturbing evil spirits, in which the Vajra Master (*rdo rje slob dpon*), wearing the Black Hat costume, performed the ritual of “liberating” or “releasing” the hostile forces. At the same time, two masked dancers as the white and the dark *ging* deities, who danced on the preliminary day, performed a dance while an invocation to them was recited, requesting them to destroy all hostile forces. This was followed by the invocation and masked dance of Kun thub rgyal mo (the Om-

nipotent Queen), and as she danced out of the temple, the Black Hat Vajra Master followed, pelting the retreating disruptive spirits with small white pebbles. [Images 47, 48, 49] A further dance of the male and female spiritual warriors in the entourage of the buddha, Guru Rinpoche, was accompanied by chanting a verse requesting Guru Rinpoche's presence, and the consecration of the place and the practitioners. The practice was then concluded with the same consecrations ceremony which had been performed at the end of the preliminary day (see above), now adding the medicinal mantra to the root mantra which is sung at the end.

The Practice focused on the Compounded Medicinal pills

On the fourth main day of the practice, the unground medicines were powdered, and all the medicinal substances were mixed up to make the small medicinal pills. The morning sessions began in the usual way, and the same *Medicinal Accomplishment* practice was performed in the morning, but after the mantra practice a recitation was added to complete the practice focusing on the unground medicines (Volume Tha: 320). First, the Elixir Offering from the Vajrakīlaya Ritual Manual (Volume Tha: 114-116) was recited, as a way of celebrating the enlightened qualities of the medicinal substances, and a further verse of praise was added. Then the Master of Offerings recited a verse and offered the bowl of medicinal substances to the Head Lama, who recited a mantra while visualising little globules of light being absorbed in the heart as the *siddhis*.

Instead of further practice on the main Ritual Manual, as on the other days, the second part of the morning practice repeated in a slightly simplified form the section on bestowing the tantric *heruka* costume which had been performed on the preliminary day (see above). The focus was for the practitioners to maintain the view of themselves as the enlightened tantric deity (Volume Tha: 321). [Images 50, 51, 52] Then, while the root mantra was chanted, the Head Lama and the Master of Offerings stood before the *maṇḍala* holding five-coloured streamers (the Head Lama also carrying his *vajra* and bell, the Master of Offerings the incense thurible). They performed circumambulations of the *maṇḍala* in opposite directions, at each side waving the streamers towards the *maṇḍala*. Meanwhile, the invocation of the *maṇḍala* deities and their vows from the main Ritual Manual (Volume Tha: 122-123) was recited with music. Then they were seated in front of the *maṇḍala*, facing each other, and they performed the ritual grinding of the medicinal substances from the bowl which had been kept at the top of the *maṇḍala*, while the appropriate mantra was recited. The *Medicinal Accomplish-*

ment text describes the meditation for this (Volume Tha: 321-322). The Master of Offerings is here seen as the consort, and he holds the mortar with slightly opened hands, while the Head Lama holds the pestle with the consecration *mudrā* (*byin dbab pa'i rgya*). As he pounds the substances, the visualisation is of the union of the male and female deities. At first he is said to grind with passion, so that white and red *bodhicitta* is produced. Then he grinds with hatred, smashing all obstacles to enlightenment; and finally he grinds with delusion, so that all discursive thoughts regarding the medicines are released in the unfabricated spatial field.



51. Ritual grinding with pestle and mortar (photo Cathy Cantwell 2013)

[Image 53] The next sections (Volume Tha: 322-323) concern sieving and mixing, and here the various mantras were recited for adding the different substances in turn. The Head Lama and the Master of Offerings again circumambulated the *maṇḍala*, this time in the same direction with the Head Lama leading and the Master of Offerings carrying the bowl of medicinal substances. At each side, the Head Lama stopped and mixed the contents of the bowl. The session ended with the usual closing prayers. [Images 54, 55, 56, 57, 58] There was a long break before the afternoon assembly, but during this time one group, led by the Vajra Master (*rdo rje slob dpon*), performed a pacifying burnt offerings ritual in the courtyard, while another took out the sack of medicinal substances from the

maṅḍala, and made the medicinal pills in the temple. A large plastic sheet was laid out on the ground, and the sack of powdered medicines was emptied out onto it. Meanwhile, the special ingredients were further prepared. Using the pestle in a cup and in a bowl, both the Master of Ceremonies and the Head Lama ground the large pieces further, adding more of the sacred pills and other key substances.



57. Grinding the special unground ingredients (photo Cathy Cantwell 2013)

[Images 59, 60] An important additional item was some water in a saucer, in which a long curled strip of dough had been placed. This dough strip had been stamped with moulds of animal figures, a procedure referred to in the *Medicinal Accomplishment* text (Volume Tha: 309-310). The strip is to be meditated upon as embodying all beings in existence, visualised as animals who have died natural deaths, and are released and liberated by the practice. This is a further symbolic representation of the five fleshs, specifically connected to the “union and releasing” (*sbyor sgröl*) practice in which all beings of the three realms are meditated upon as being liberated from the ocean of *samsāra*. The day before, the dough strip had been put in the saucer and placed near the effigy during the tantric *tshogs* feast, when the Head Lama wielded a *phurbu* dagger to “liberate” hostile forces into the *buddha* realms. Thus the consciousnesses of the beings

represented in the strip would be summoned at the same time as the evil spirits. After this practice, water was added to the saucer, which then had a day to absorb the essence of the animal stamp. Only the water which had taken on this essence was then mixed into the medicinal substances.



59. *The dough strip stamped with animal moulds*
(photo Nicolas Chong 2013)

[Images 61, 62] The special medicinal substances were poured into a cauldron with warm liquid ingredients, and this mixture was added to the heap of powdered medicines. [Images 63, 64] A group of practitioners, including the Head Lama and his consort, then sat around the medicinal powders, wearing face masks so as not to defile the pure substances, and kneaded the mixture, which gradually formed into pieces with the characteristic appearance of Tibetan Dharma medicinal pills. At first its texture was like pastry, but it suddenly changed to become the characteristic small hard pieces.



64. *Adding liquids and kneading the medicinal mix*
(photo Nicolas Chong 2013)

[Image 65] When it was ready, it was measured out into new sacks by the Head Lama, using a skull-cup as a measuring unit, with the help of a group observing and calling out each number. The purpose of this counting is the check on how much the medicinal pills increase in size over the next days. Yeast is included in the mix, lit butter lamps are put under the container to keep it warm, and it is expected that the pills will become larger to some degree. The more they expand in size, the more auspicious it is considered to be. The Head Lama took charge of the counting and involved the group, following a previous occasion in his experience when there had been some error and discrepancy between the first and second measuring techniques. The bulk of the substances were packed into two large red sacks and a smaller amount was put into a smaller blue bag. The tops were tied, leaving expansion room at the top.



65. Measuring the medicinal pieces, using the skull-cup, and putting into a red sack
(photo Nicolas Chong 2013)

[Images 66, 67, 68, 69] Two medicinal cauldrons were prepared, one large (for the red sacks) and one small (for the blue bag). The *dhāraṇī* cords of five-coloured twisted threads were placed first, so that they would go right around the medicine bags, later to be attached to the *dhāraṇī* cord which went round all the other *maṇḍala* items. Both containers were lined with juniper foliage. In the small container, the blue medicine bag was placed within a skull-cup, and another skull-cup was put upside down on top. The idea here is that the substances are contained within the male and female union. In the large container, instead of two skull-cups, the male and female seed syllables of the five *buddha* families were represented in gold lettering on two red pieces of material, the cloth with the female letters below, and that with the male letters above. Damp grains were also added. [Images 70, 71, 72] The containers were then covered with decorative brocades, and each of them was topped with a five-lobed *buddha* family headdress with a high black topknot adorned with a jewel, as well as a *vajra* and bell secured with a ceremonial white scarf (see Volume Tha: 325). Such symbolism is used because the medicinal pills represent tantric deities and should be shown respect; the *maṇḍala* sands are treated similarly when they are gathered up at the end of the ten day session.



From top to bottom:

*68. Preparing the large medicinal container; note the seed syllables of the male buddhas
(photo Cathy Cantwell 2013)*

*71. Placement of the medicinal containers to the sides of the maṇḍala
(photo Cathy Cantwell 2013)*

[Images 73, 74, 75, 76] Before the afternoon session, the medicinal containers were ritually sealed. This was performed only by the Head lama, his consort, and the current and senior Masters of Ceremonies. The large container was to the left of the *maṇḍala* while the small container had been placed on a table in front of the *maṇḍala*. The group of four stood before the *maṇḍala* and containers, and recited the verse (Volume Tha: 324), after which the Head Lama made a crossed *vajra* sign, placing his *vajra* on the two containers, first one way and then at right angles to this position.

[Images 77, 78, 79, 80] The afternoon session commenced with a ritual placement of the medicinal containers into the *maṇḍala*. The lamas donned ceremonial hats, everyone stood, and the principal lamas and ritualists stood before the *maṇḍala*. After preliminary mantras, the section from the *Medicinal Accomplishment* text (Volume Tha: 313) for the placing of medicinal substances in the *maṇḍala*, which had been included in the first day's preliminary rituals (see above), was again recited. Then a procession circumambulated the *maṇḍala* three times while the musical instruments were played. A monk carrying the incense thurible walked ahead, followed by the trumpet players, after which came the Head Lama holding a bunch of incense sticks, leading the Vajra Master (*rdo rje slob dpon*), who carried the small medicinal container on his shoulder, while a monk with a butter lamp took the rear. Then the small medicinal container was placed inside the *maṇḍala*, and the *dhāraṇī* cords were attached. A new medicinal mantra was recited (Volume Tha: 327), after which the main Vajrakīlaya practice from the Ritual Manual was performed up to the mantra recitation. At this point, the generation practice for the section on *Accomplishing the Elixir in the Powdered Medicines* (*bdud rtsi phye mar sgrub pa*) was performed (Volume Tha: 325-326). Oneself, the *maṇḍala* in front, and the substances, are meditated upon as the enlightened manifestation, taking the form of the assembled deities of the dark green Elixir, in union with his consort, with the seed syllable and mantra rosary in his heart. Here, the practitioners turn back, and repeat the previous section on inviting the medicinal guardians, and on clearing away discursive thoughts of the pure and the impure (Volume Tha: 317-318; see above). They then return for a new mantra meditation (Volume Tha: 326-327) on the *dhāraṇī* cord and the mantra light rays radiating from one's heart to the visualised deities in front. The deities passionately unite, blazing in bliss and drawing in the essence juices of the universe, which are absorbed as great clouds of elixir in the form of blazing light rays. The new medicinal mantra was recited; this now becomes the main medic-

inal mantra for the fourth and fifth main practice days, and is also added to the root mantra which is sung at the end of the consecrations practice, both during the morning and at the final moment of the afternoon practice. After the mantra practice, there is a recitation on the deities melting into light and dissolving, becoming an oceanic pool of the elixir of immortality (Volume Tha: 327). The practice then continued with the tantric *tshogs* feast and the other rituals performed in the afternoons of the previous days.

[Images 81, 82] Essentially, this same Medicinal Accomplishment practice focusing on the powdered medicines was repeated in both the morning and afternoon sessions of the fifth main practice day. Then on the morning and afternoon of the sixth day, following this practice, an extension was added before the dissolution of the deities. This is the second section on the actual practice of accomplishing the powdered medicines, invoking the deities' heart vows, reminding them of their *samaya* tantric commitments and requesting them to grant the *siddhis* (Volume Tha: 328-329). A different mantra is then recited, and becomes the Day 6 medicinal mantra, repeated again in the Consecrations section in the morning and at the end of the day. After the mantra, a further invocation to the medicinal *vidyādhara*s evokes the charnel ground symbolism as part of the tantric *samaya*, and in transcending concepts of the pure and impure, light rays of great bliss are visualised radiating. The potencies of the medicinal elixirs are then said to be reabsorbed. The *vidyādhara*s are enjoined to display manifest signs. The earlier recitation on the deities dissolving is then returned to (Volume Tha: 327), and the practice continues as before (see above).



81. Large medicinal container, the *dhāraṇī* cord attached to the items in the *Maṇḍala* (photo Cathy Cantwell 2013)



82. Day 6 Medicinal Mantra meditation; note the *dhāraṇī* cord held at the heart (photo Cathy Cantwell 2013)

On the seventh day, the Day 6 Medicinal Accomplishment practice was repeated, but again with a further extension before the dissolution (Volume Tha: 329-331). The first part of this is a visualisation of the *maṇḍala* deities above the skull-cups containing the medicinal pills, uniting and producing white and red *bodhicitta*, which glistens like liquid mercury, trickling down into the skull-cups of medicine, flowing and pooling there. The second part involves transforming the substances into essence juice elixir, through invocation of the charnel ground *mamo* deities, further inducing passion in the male deities, which produces more *bodhicitta* flowing down from all the deities, so that the *samaya* substances become perfected in colour, smell, taste and potencies. A new medicinal mantra which is recited at this point becomes the Day 7 mantra. In the afternoon session, yet another extension is added (Volume Tha: 331-332), to gain possession of the elixir. The five family *herukas* are invoked and reminded of the *samaya* to grant *siddhis* to the destined practitioners. They bring down the essence juices of the universe into the heart in the form of red light, and through a stream of *bodhicitta* mixing with the elixir medicines, and travelling along the *dhāraṇī* cord, light rays dissolve into oneself and one meditates on obtaining the *siddhis* in such a way that no one can take them away.

Imbibing the Accomplishments (*Siddhis*)

The final day of the Major Practice session, in which the *siddhis* are imbibed, attracts large numbers of lay people for the blessings. The practitioners convene at about 2 am, since the *siddhis* should be taken at dawn, and it is necessary to complete the full main practice before this. The previous days' morning practice is therefore performed from this early hour, up to and including the Day 7 Medicinal Accomplishment practice. Following a break, from around 5 am, the ritualised acceptance of the *heruka* costume which had been performed on the preliminary and the fourth main day was again repeated (see above). As in the previous mornings' practice following the Medicinal Accomplishment recitation, there was a ritual for driving out distracting spirits, followed by the consecrations section of the main Vajrakīlaya Ritual Manual. But rather than continuing with a repeat of the other sections of the Ritual Manual as usual, the *Ritual Practice Framework* (*sgrub khog*) text was then turned to for a recitation on the appropriate meditation for the mantra practice when taking the *siddhis* (Volume Tha: 264-265). The visualisation is of oneself as the principal deity with his consort, and their union incites the five family *herukas* residing in the consort's skull also to unite. They produce white and red fluids which flow down through the body's central channel into the consort's *lotus*, and are then sucked up through the male deity's *vajra* to the heart, which takes on a vibrant lustrous nature, and one rests in bliss and emptiness free from grasping. There is then a mantra recitation session, in which a *siddhi* accomplishment mantra is added to the main mantra. After the recitation, there is an invocation of the *maṇḍala* deities, and an elaborate version of the Elixir Offering performed in the regular Ritual Manual (Volume Tha: 114-116), combining it with a *rakta* or symbolic blood offering, so that both the male and female liquids are included in the single offering. [Images 83, 84, 85, 86, 87, 88, 89, 90, 91] Finally, there is a recitation preceding the distribution of *siddhi* substances (Volume Tha: 266-267), recalling that the practice has been completed correctly and the right time has come, so that the deities should take heed and grant the *siddhis*. For this recitation, the Head Lama remained seated, folding his hands in supplication throughout, but the other principal lamas stood up, donned their ceremonial hats, and were given various sacred items from the *maṇḍala*. As the verses were recited, they stood in a group facing the Head Lama, with the young tulku (*sprul sku*, incarnation) of the Jangsa Monastery's previous Head Lama in front, holding the flask. At the end, with the music continuing, the Head Lama took the flask, put it on his head and took a little of the water to drink,

after which he bestowed it on the lamas and some of the main lay practitioners in turn. Further consecrations were then similarly bestowed with other items: the *phurbu*, the deity *torma*, the elixir liquid, the collection of texts wrapped in blue silk, and a red dough human-like figure.¹⁶

At this stage, further practice from the *Medicinal Accomplishment* text was done (Volume Tha: 332-335). This was like an extended version of the *Ritual Practice Framework* (*sgrub khog*) text's request for the granting of *siddhis*, beginning with an invocation of the heart *samaya*, and then petitioning the deities to heed and grant the *siddhis*. During the petitioning section, the Vajra Master (*rdo rje slob dpon*), wearing his ceremonial hat, stood in front of the Head Lama, and at the end with the mantra, he circumambulated the *maṇḍala*, ringing his bell. [Image 92] The next recitation describes the *siddhis* which are being requested, and during it the Vajra Master stood before the *maṇḍala*, in front of the small medicinal container, which had been put on a small table under a white canopy in front of the *maṇḍala*. For the final verse of the section (Volume Tha: 334-335), which was sung very slowly, the Vajra Master put on an extra turquoise and multi-coloured brocade shawl over his left shoulder, took up the small medicinal container, and stood before the Head Lama. The medicinal mantra which had been practised intensively on Days 4 and 5 was then sung slowly several times, and then, following the appropriate verses, the Head Lama took the medicinal container and put it on his head, receiving empowerment. The visualisation is of primordial wisdom light dissolving into oneself, and the deities flowing into the elixir and dissolving, so that all beings are pervaded with the elixir's smell, taste and potencies, and transformed into the enlightened deity. Then the students make a ritual request to the Master, and he responds by reciting a number of lines (Volume Da: 556; Volume Tha: 335-336) instructing them to focus on themselves as the deity *maṇḍala*, the elixir dissolving into them, and to receive the medicinal elixir in their body, speech and mind, so that it bestows empowerment upon them. While the Day 4/5 mantra was sung, the principal lamas and lay people came up and the Head Lama put the medicinal container on each person's head. Finally, he recited another verse advising the students that seeing, smelling and tasting the medicinal elixir would purify their defilements and enable them effortlessly to attain blissful primordial wisdom. Then the medicinal container

¹⁶This is associated with the Fulfilment practice (*bskang ba*); its hands hold two small bowls for medicinal cordial and *rakta* (red liquid or symbolic blood), it has a butter lamp in front, and a *torma* placed on top of its head.

was taken away:

*“By seeing the colour, defilements of the body are purified,
lifespan, merits, and youthfulness increase.
By smelling the fragrance, defilements of the speech are purified,
Capacities blaze up and are mastered.
By experiencing the taste, defilements of the mind are purified,
greatly blissful primordial wisdom arises effortlessly.
You become equal to the Great Glorious wrathful tantric deity,
and can accomplish all supreme and ordinary actions.”¹⁷*

Thus we can see that the medicinal pills are not only considered to bestow “liberation through taste”, but to impact on the other senses as well.

In the next section (Volume Tha: 336-337), the container was ritually opened. First, there was a meditation on entrusting the elixir to the deity, Mañjuśrī Sharpness (Skt *mañjuśrī tikṣṇa*, Tib. *'jam dpal rnon po*), as the one who absorbs or gathers elixir, so his heart vows are invoked, and he bestows the elixir back in return. Then the Master of Offerings, taking the role of the consort, offered the medicinal elixir back to the Master. He put the turquoise and multi-coloured shawl over his left shoulder, returning with the medicinal container. As he gave it to the Head Lama, he recited a verse praising the practice. The Head Lama then said an elixir mantra, accepting the container, and after this the Master of Ceremonies led the assembly in chanting a mantra for unwrapping. After putting the container to his head in respect, the Head Lama and several helpers untied the fastenings at the top of the container. With a further mantra, the upper skull-cup over the top of the medicinal bag was opened, accompanied by a meditation on the lustrous essences of the medicinal elixir, in the form of white, red and blue lights, dissolving into the body, speech and mind centres of one's body (respectively the forehead, throat and heart).

The final part of the Medicinal Accomplishment ritual performed at this stage (Volume Tha: 337) was for offering and sharing the medicinal elixir. The Head Lama opened the blue medicinal bag, spooned some of the medicinal pieces into the skull-cup, and mixed them around. There was an invocation of the *maṇḍala*

¹⁷ *kha dog mthong bas lus sgrub dag: tshe dang bsod nams lang tsho rgyas: dri la bsnams pas ngag sgrub dag: nus pa 'bar zhing dbang du 'du: ro la myang bas yid sgrub dag: bde chen ye shes rtsol med 'char: dpal chen he ru ka dang mnyam: mchog thun phrin las thams cad 'grub: (Dudjom Rinpoche Collected Works Volume Tha: 336).*

deities arising in the sky in front, and the regular Elixir Offering in the Ritual Manual (Volume Tha: 114-116), was recited in the usual way, with the Head Lama flicking liquid from his small medicinal cordial offering bowl, while the Master of Offerings in front of the *maṇḍala* spooned the liquid in the similar bowl from the shrine. Meanwhile, the Vajra Master (*rdo rje slob dpon*) stood in front of the Head Lama, holding the skull-cup with the medicinal pieces and adding more from the bag. At the end of the section, a single line was added from the *Medicinal Accomplishment* text, specifying the visualisation of a sun disc upon one's own tongue, on which there is a horizontally placed *vajra* which has a hollow central spoke, with the deity's seed syllable. It is through this hollow spoke that the elixir is to be visualised as taken in. The main Ritual Manual then continues with the Imbibing *Siddhis* section (Volume Tha: 116-117), which once more reiterates that the *bodhicitta* elixir flows from the great bliss of the male and female deities, bringing *siddhis* of the transcendence of birth and death. With the appropriate hand gesture, the Head Lama took up a small amount of the medicinal pieces, and with the final *siddhis* mantra he touched them to his forehead, throat and heart centres, and finally tasted them. Singing the root mantra, the Head Lama then bestowed a spoonful of the medicinal pieces on the principal lamas and prominent lay people, who came to the front. [Images 93, 94] He then rose, and a procession of the lamas with the various sacred substances was formed. Led by a monk carrying an incense bundle with a white ceremonial scarf, and two monks playing trumpets, the Head Lama went first with the flask of sacred water, and the lamas with the other items followed in roughly the same order as that in which they had earlier been ritually bestowed, except that the Vajra Master with the small medicinal container was now the fourth in line. One by one, everyone present, including all those in the crowd gathered outside the temple, was given the consecrations by the lamas in the procession, which snaked up and down all the rows of people. The root mantra continued to be recited throughout. When the procession finally returned, a single line from the *Ritual Practice Framework* text (Volume Tha: 267) was recited, dissolving the deities and *siddhis* into light which is absorbed into the heart, so that *buddha* body, speech and mind are attained.

Final Rituals and Preparations of the Pills

During the break before the afternoon session, there were two burnt offerings rituals performed simultaneously in the area around the temple, one a pacifying and the other an increasing burnt offerings rite. [Images 95, 96, 97, 98, 99] Meanwhile,

a group of practitioners convened in the temple to work further on the medicinal substances. The larger container was also opened, and the sacks again emptied onto a large plastic sheet. [Images 100, 101, 102, 103, 104] The Head Lama and his consort joined the group, and once again the total amount was measured using the skull-cup, again with the group calling out the count. It now came to just over one hundred and eight skull-cups (he piled up the final one to count it as a hundred and eight). Before, there had been ninety-three, and this increase of fifteen was considered very auspicious. At this stage, the medicinal pieces were still slightly moist and there were some rather large lumps. Several of the group remained to rub the pieces between their fingers, breaking up the lumps. [Images 105, 106, 107] The Senior Master of Ceremonies worked on sewing further large red cloth sacks, into which some medicinal pieces were put. Both ends of each sack were sewn up with a hem at each end, allowing long pieces of wood to be inserted as handles.



99. Emptying out the medicinal pieces onto the plastic sheet
(photo Cathy Cantwell 2013)



101. Measuring the medicinal pieces, using the skull-cup
(photo Cathy Cantwell 2013)

[Images 108, 109, 110] Pairs of volunteer helpers – mostly lay women – then held the two ends of each sack and worked on rolling the pieces by moving the sack ends up and down. This process helps to expedite the drying out process. Eventually, they ran out of cloth for making sacks, so some of the pieces were stored beneath the shrine to work on later.



109. Rolling the medicinal pieces to dry them out (photo Cathy Cantwell 2013)

[Images 111, 112, 113, 114, 115, 116, 117, 118] In fact, the work of rolling the pieces in the cloth sacks and making them smaller continued over the following two days, and included chopping up the larger pieces, mincing and sieving. At the end, the volunteers all received small bags of pills which they could use over time.



113. chopping the medicinal pills (photo Cathy Cantwell 2013)

The afternoon session of the final day included the usual supplications and offerings to the Dharma protectors, as well as the tantric *tshogs* feast, and the remaining sections of the main Ritual Manual. Some of these were done more elaborately, since it was the final day. For instance, during the section of the *tshogs* feast when the deities are offered the foods to consume, the paper effigies which had been used for the “liberating” ritual performed each afternoon by the Black Hat Vajra Master were set alight in an iron dish as a burnt offering. On this occasion, the Head Lama also gave the Vajrakīlaya empowerment. This is not generally done on the last day of the Major Practice session, and in fact it had not been

scheduled, but the Lama decided to bestow the empowerment since the practice had gone well, and a large number of visitors had travelled a long distance in hope of receiving empowerment. The scheduled afternoon practice includes a longevity ritual, with the distribution of the longevity pills which had been kept within the *maṇḍala*, and this time the longevity ritual was integrated with the empowerment. When the main practice had been completed, the boundaries which had been symbolically erected at the start were sequentially opened. Offerings of thanks were made to the Four Great Kings outside the temple at each side, their icons were taken down and they were visualised as departing. The deities guarding the temple doors were also given offerings, and the inner boundary of the *phurbus* of the ten Wrathful Deities was ritually dismantled. Finally, the sand *maṇḍala* was destroyed. The Head Lama drew his *vajra* through the sands from the centre to the east, after which the sands were swept up and put into a treasure vase. The Butter Lamp Aspirations ritual was the main formal concluding rite of the Major Practice session. This ritual is for dedicating the merit and making aspirations, in the hope that having practised together, the practitioners may persevere and the lamp of compassion illuminate the path to enlightenment. The Vajra Master read from the *Public Address (gtong thun)* to explain the significance of this practice, and then everyone was linked together by a continuous line of white ceremonial scarves and butter lamps while they held incense sticks in their hands. The Vajra Master stood and recited each line of the verses from the *Ritual Practice Framework (sgrub khog)* text (Volume Tha: 271-275), and the assembly repeated it after him.

The following day, the *maṇḍala* sands were taken to a nearby river, and further practice was done for this ritual disposal into flowing water. On the group's return to the temple, after a ritualised approach to the temple by a procession following the path of the auspicious emblem of a "jewel coil of joy" (*nor bu dga' khyil*) outlined on the ground, an auspicious offering was made at the temple porch. As a final purificatory blessing ritual, the Head Lama then sprinkled water all around the temple, using water brought back from the river in the treasure vase in which the sands had previously been placed. The Master of Offerings afterwards took the treasure vase water and also sprinkled it outside in the temple grounds.

Conclusion

The entire congregation received a small portion of the pills during the distribution of the consecrated items on the final day. At least some were to be consumed immediately, but some could be preserved and later given to friends or relatives. Even after this distribution, large quantities remained, to be worked further during the following days. Monasteries may generate stores of such pills, carefully labelled with the occasion and the officiating lama. Small amounts may be given to the monk practitioners and retreatants during the early morning practice, as a kind of spiritual tonic. Bags of the pills may also be given to visiting lamas, who can then distribute small quantities to their students. Although the main effects are clearly considered to relate to the spiritual consecrations of the lama and the tantric deity practice, medicinal pills may also be prescribed in cases of ill-health, and are considered to help in restoring the body to good health, regardless of the specific condition.

I would like finally to raise the question of what we might learn from this Medicinal Accomplishment example which might have some relevance for understanding Tibetan medicine, and may support the kinds of approaches exemplified in much recent academic work on Tibetan medicine and its broader social contexts of practice.¹⁸ Now, the Buddhist practice is not only addressing medical health: as we have seen, it is interested in spiritual development. But in this case, health benefits are claimed to be linked to the spiritual well-being said to be engendered by the practice. Not only are claims made for the health as well as spiritual benefits of the substances given out on the final day. Other kinds of beneficial health impacts are also assumed. For instance, at his house outside the formal practice sessions, the Head Lama had to cater to many requests for individual or family protective blessings, generally for those who were sick. Such requests are apparently very typical in Bhutanese contexts when a major ritual performance takes place. He performed a short protective ritual (*bka' bsgo*) based on the *Meteoric Iron Razor* regular practice for each of these occasions. Clearly, this practice had the advantage for the recipients of focusing the lama's attention on their individual concerns. However, the lama commented that such additional practices are really unnecessary while the Major Practice session is in progress, since essentially the same protective ritual with the same name is included within the practice, and people can benefit from this simply by attending. Of course,

¹⁸See, for example, Vincanne Adams, Mona Schrempf and Sienna R. Craig, 2011; and Sienna R. Craig, 2012.

greater benefits are assumed to result from participating in the meditative transformations, such as the consecrations bestowed by the medicinal deities etc. It would not be easy to study efficacy in the case of a major monastic rite like this, but it is worth noting that in this case, although the medicinal pills are assumed to have some natural ingredients with medical benefits, far greater attention is paid to the symbolic and meditative manipulations throughout the ritual. Indeed, the most crucial active ingredients are: first, the substances carrying the tantric blessings of the great tantric saints of the past; secondly, the tantric ingredients of the five fleshs and five elixirs, which are considered to be symbolically embodied within the bowls of herbal substances with the added “*samaya* substance *dharma* medicine” (*dam rdzas chos sman*) placed at the top of the *maṇḍala* on the first days of the ritual. The fleshs are also considered to be contained within the water in which the dough strip with the animal stamps was soaked. In other words, much of the efficacy of the pills is thought to derive not from the natural substances in them, but more from transformations of the substances enacted through meditative ritual and tantric accomplishment. This would seem quite different from the modern medical context, in which it seems that the ritual consecrations are merely a matter of enhancing the effects of the natural substances in the pills. But it is worth asking whether the Buddhist ritual and the medical contexts are really so very different, or whether the tendency for Tibetan medical practitioners within the mainstream institutions today to focus principally on the actual ingredients in Tibetan medicines and the physiological effects attributed to them may be detracting from an important aspect of Tibetan medicine in the past.

Glossary

- anuyoga* (skt.): The second of the three Inner Tantras in the rNying ma classification, *anuyoga* teachings are generally focused on spiritual transformation through meditation on the internal subtle body, with its *cakras*, channels, subtle airs and seminal seeds.
- bodhicitta* (skt.): In tantric teachings, the Mahāyāna notion of *bodhicitta* (“thought of enlightenment”) has a further connotation, symbolised by the “white *bodhicitta*” of the tantric deity’s seminal fluid, productive of realisation in its fusion with the female “blood” (or “red *bodhicitta*”) embodying emptiness.
- dhāraṇī* (skt.): Collections of sacred syllables for recitation, sometimes equivalent to the term *mantra*, but its sense in Buddhism is broader and not specifically associated

with the Vajrayāna teachings. Many *dhāraṇī* recitations are included in Mahāyāna *sūtras*.

ging (tib.): Deriving from Sanskrit, *kiṃkara* (servant, attendant), *ging* are celestial male messengers, often with a slightly wrathful appearance. In rNying ma imagery, they are male spiritual warriors of Guru Rinpoche and act as his messengers, heralding his imminent arrival.

heruka (skt.): A wrathful male tantric deity, considered to embody enlightened wisdom and terrifying to the negative forces and spirits which obstruct enlightenment. *Herukas* are generally depicted with fearsome bone ornaments and skins. The Tibetan equivalent term, *khrag 'thung*, literally means “blood-drinker”.

Inner Tantras: The rNying ma pa classify tantric texts into outer and inner tantras. The three outer tantras are considered to depend on a dualistic view of a contrast between the defiled practitioner and the pure enlightened deity needed to consecrate and transform the practitioner. The three inner tantras, which are the basis for most rNying ma practices, assume a primordial identification between the practitioner and the wisdom deity.

maṇḍala (skt.): A tantric circle or symbolic representation through which tantric transformation of everyday realities is effected. In the ritual described here, the transformation involves the establishment of “pure vision”, such that the ordinary world and its beings are experienced as the wisdom *maṇḍala* of the divine palace and the tantric deities embodying enlightenment.

mamo (tib. *ma mo* = skt. *mātṛkā, mātaraḥ*): “Mother” deities, this class of female deities includes both enlightened or wisdom deities and worldly deities, often fearsome, some of whom are incorporated into tantric rites as protective deities on the margins of the celestial *maṇḍala*.

mudrā (skt.): A multivalent term, its basic sense is that of a symbolic gesture or movement conveying some aspect of enlightened realisation; in the tantric path, all movements should become *mudrās* expressing wisdom.

phurbu (tib. *phur bu* or *phur pa*): A tantric ritual dagger, wielded by the lama in tantric rituals for purposes such as striking and destroying representations of the emotional poisons or defilements, or pinning down worldly spirits so that they act as a basis for the transformed tantric *maṇḍala*. *Phurbus* also represent the popular *heruka* wisdom deity, Vajrakīlaya (Tib. *rdo rje phur pa*), and his entourage. In the ritual described here, *phurbus* of different sizes are placed in the appropriate positions within the three-dimensional *maṇḍala* to represent the deities.

rakta (skt.): Symbolic blood, offered as one of the “inner offerings” in tantric *sādhana*s. It is coupled with the elixir offering, conceived of as the “male” fluid. The two offerings are represented by red and white liquids offered in miniature skull-cup shaped offering bowls. Black tea or a reddish coloured alcoholic drink are used for the *rakta* offering.

- sādhana* (skt.): A tantric liturgy which gives the basic practice for visualising and identifying with a tantric wisdom deity, so that meditative accomplishment is attained.
- samaya* (skt. = tib. *dam tshig*): The sacred bond or connection between the practitioners and the enlightened vision, established through initiation into the tantric *maṇḍala*. It is embodied in the sacred relationship between the tantric master and his students, which is considered to persist from one lifetime to another, and it is upheld through adherence to a tantric code of discipline or *samaya* vows.
- siddhi* (skt.): The tantric accomplishments, classified into worldly accomplishments such as magical powers to influence everyday realities, and the supreme accomplishment of enlightenment. In tantric rites such as those described here, symbolic items and consumable substances installed in the *maṇḍala* for the duration of the practice are considered to become *samaya* substances, so that their bestowal at the end confers *siddhis* upon the recipients.
- sgrub chen* (tib.; pronounced and often written as Drupchen): A Major Practice session or intensive communal tantric practice focused on attaining realisation, held over a number of days, and typically requiring a large team of lamas and ritualists as the principal practitioners.
- sman sgrub* (tib.): A tantric ritual of “Medicinal Accomplishment”, involving the preparation of medicinal pills and their transformation into sacred substances, considered efficacious in healing disturbances of body, speech and mind.
- sgrub khog* (tib.): A class of tantric texts which describe the framework of rituals needed for a Major Practice session, and elaborate on important features of the rites.
- sgrub mchod* (tib.): A Ceremonial Practice session of intensive tantric rituals, generally sharing many features of a Major Practice session, but performed more simply, or with a smaller team of lamas, usually omitting some requirements, such as continuous day and night recitation.
- torma* (= tib. *gtor ma*, equivalent to skt. *bali*): Sculptured food offerings, generally formed from a roasted barley flour dough, and decorated with adornments of coloured butter and wax. The relationship between tantric practitioners and deities is mediated through *torma* offerings. Elaborately designed *tormas* are also used as symbolic representations of the *maṇḍala* deities and their divine residences.
- tshogs* (tib., short for *tshogs kyi 'khor lo*, equivalent to skt. *gaṇacakra*): Literally a gathering, assembly or accumulation, the circle of *tshogs* is a tantric communion feast, in which the assemblies of deities and practitioners gather, share the assembled offerings and restore their tantric bond. The practice, which incorporates extensive confessions, is considered a powerful antidote to breakages in the tantric *samaya*, and is performed on a regular periodic basis in rNying ma monasteries. In Major Practice sessions, a *tshogs* feast will be offered each day.

- vajra* (skt. =tib. *rdo rje*): A development on the Indian symbolism of the *vajra* as the god Indra's most potent and indestructible weapon, "*vajra*" implies the indestructible nature of enlightenment and the tantric means for realising it. Buddhist tantric practitioners are endowed with a symbolic *vajra* implement (representing means) and bell (representing wisdom), and these are used throughout tantric rituals. In sexual yoga and tantric imagery, the male deity's sexual organ is the *vajra*, which penetrates the female deity's "lotus".
- vidyādhara* (skt. = tib. *rig 'dzin*): A bearer or "holder of pure awareness", a *vidyādhara* is a realised tantric adept. Tibetan tantric mythology has much to say on various sets of historical *vidyādhara*s of India and *vidyādhara*s of Tibet.
- vidam* (tib. *yi dam*): A tantric deity to be meditated upon in order to attain enlightenment. Each *yi dam* incorporates specific features considered to embody specific qualities of enlightened realisation. A tantric practitioner may take a particular *yi dam* as their tutelary deity, although it is also common for an individual to practise a number of *yi dams*. Monasteries will specialise in one or more *yi dams* of the tantric lineage they are affiliated to, but several *yi dams* are likely to feature in their regular cycles of tantric practice.

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