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100th Anniversary Celebrations of the Men–Tsee–Khang - Dharamsala, India

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100th Anniversary Celebrations of the Men–Tsee–Khang - Dharamsala, India

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100th Anniversary Celebrations of the Men-Tsee-Khang

Dharamsala, India

23–25 March 2016

It was a sunny spring day in 2016 in Dharamsala, in the northwestern Indian state of Himachal Pradesh. Crowds of Tibetans were streaming to the Thekchen Chöling temple to see His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama commemorate one hundred years of their Tibetan medical institute, the Men-Tsee-Khang. Fifty-five years earlier, the Dalai Lama settled here with around 8,000 Tibetans in exile, fleeing Lhasa, where the Thirteenth Dalai Lama had set up the first Men-Tsee-Khang in the early twentieth century.

In Dharamsala, in 1961, a small medical institute of Tibetan medicine (or Sowa Rigpa) was established to

provide health care to Tibetans across the growing diaspora. Since then, the Dharamsala Men-Tsee-Khang has developed into the largest institute in the Tibetan diaspora catering to a large clientele of Tibetan, Indian, and foreign patients.

The Men-Tsee-Khang staff had been working long hours, each having dedicated one hundred hours of their salaries to raise more than 5.3 lakhs of Indian rupees (approx. \$82,000) to co-sponsor this important event. Students also each donated one hundred hours of voluntary work. It signified not only the successful continuation of Tibetan culture in exile, but also (re)established a strong historical link with Lhasa, the center of Tibetan power since the seventeenth century and home to the first significant medical institutions of Tibet—the Lhasa Men-Tsee-Khang (founded in 1916) and the Chakpori monastic medical college (founded in 1696, destroyed by the Chinese Red Guards in 1959).

The celebrations at Thekchen Chöling were attended by large crowds of Tibetans, a group of foreigners, as well as three Indian government dignitaries, each of whom presented a short speech: Thakur Singh Bharmori (Minister for Forests, Himachal Pradesh), Karan Singh (Minister of the Department of Ayurveda, Yoga and Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha, Sowa Rigpa, and Homoeopathy (AYUSH), Government of India, under which Sowa Rigpa was officially recognized in 2010), and Ravi Thakur (a Member of the Legislative Assembly of Lahaul and Spiti). Also, a Russian member of Parliament, Irinchey Matkhanov, a member of the State Duma Committee on Health Protection, was present. We witnessed a moving scene when the Dalai Lama personally honored Yeshe Donden (born in 1927), his long-time personal physician who established

his private clinic in McLeod Ganj in 1979 after having served the Men-Tsee-Khang for eighteen years (1961–1979), and who, at almost 90 years of age, still sees patients. This honor reflected many decades of hard work and dedication that led to firmly establishing Sowa Rigpa as a significant medical system in India and beyond. Jamyang Tashi, head of the Men-Tsee-Khang pharmacy, was also honored for his processing of mercury into *tsotel*, the complex mercury sulfide powder added to many precious pills (see Figure 1). He directed the making of *tsotel* the three times that it was made at the Men-Tsee-Khang between 2008 and 2014, after receiving the transmission from the Tibetan physicians Tenzin Chödrak in 1998 and Namgyal Tsering in 2001.

Tashi Tsering Phuri, director of the Men-Tsee-Khang, spoke on the history of Tibetan medicine, the situation of Tibetan medicine in exile, and the need for cooperation with the Indian states across the Himalayan region to help source medicinal raw ingredients. During their speeches, the Indian dignitaries expressed their admiration for Tibetan medicine but Bharmori cautioned that any form of collaboration would have to take into account the preservation of the Himalayan flora and fauna.

The Dalai Lama praised the ability of Tibetan medicine in the past to absorb medical knowledge locally but also from Ayurveda, Chinese, and Unani/Tibb medicine. He said, “Regarding Sowa Rigpa, if a great conference could have been convened in the eight century when facilities were so poor, today when we have facilities and opportunities we should be able to repeat it” <<http://bit.ly/2ua8LxD>>. He urged: “We should meet with practitioners of these traditions, discuss and exchange what we know. We shouldn’t rely only on



Figure 2. Jamyang Tashi, head of the Men-Tsee-Khang pharmacy receives an award from the Fourteenth Dalai Lama during the Men-Tsee-Khang centenary celebrations, Dharamsala, March 23, 2016.

(Men-Tsee-Khang, 2016)

the *Four Tantras* [the fundamental work of Tibetan medicine that is still partially memorized by students today], but should also take other findings into account.” He also called for more preventive health care in the Tibetan settlements, which show high rates of chronic illness. Since the centenary celebrations in March 2016, the Men-Tsee-Khang has organized several public health programs in Tibetan settlements e.g. <http://bit.ly/2vjoNUr>, the “Healthy-Body-Healthy-Mind” conference in Delhi in December 2016, and the publication of disease prevention handbooks.

The celebrations at Thekchen Chöling were followed by an evening of celebrations of songs and dances composed and choreographed by medical students and Men-Tsee-Khang staff that took place in a large tent on Men-Tsee-Khang grounds. The mood was elevated and happy.

On the second day of the centenary celebrations, the international conference “Unlocking the Truth of Tibetan Medicine” was held at the Men-Tsee-Khang in Dharamsala. It was organized by Rigzin Sangmo

of the Men-Tsee-Khang’s Research and Development Department. Medical students, teachers, Men-Tsee-Khang physicians, and foreign participants of ten countries attended the ceremonies and five lectures. The director addressed the need for international exchange. The chief guest, the Tibetan Health Minister (Kalon) Tsering Wangchuk, pointed out that while biomedical and Sowa Rigpa medical health care is organized independently in the Tibetan communities, it has been the Tibetans themselves who have successfully benefited from combining both systems, which in itself suggests that a fruitful collaboration between the two systems is possible to meet today’s public health needs.

The five international speakers presented short abstracts of their speeches, followed by the recitation of the Yuthok Prayer, a photo session, and lunch. The afternoon was dedicated to the five full-length presentations.

Sarah Sallon of the Hadassah Natural Medical Research Center in Israel presented the outcome of a cross-

sectional study on patients taking Tibetan medicine with and without refined mercury in the form of *tsotel* and other forms of processed cinnabar. The paper has since been published in the journal *Experimental Biology and Medicine* (2016, vol. 242, issue 3) and “results suggest mercury containing Tibetan Medicine does not have appreciable adverse effects and may exert a possible beneficial effect on neurocognitive function (p. 316).”

Cecile Vennos of PADMA Ag, Switzerland (the only company manufacturing Tibetan medicines in the West), in her lecture “From Medical Tradition to Traditional Medicine: A Tibetan Formula in the European Framework,” summarized the legal and Good Manufacturing Practice (GMP) constraints under which Tibetan medicine can be produced and sold in Europe (registered either as a medicine or a food supplement), where it is still not officially recognized. This has also been discussed in the article by Schwabl and Vennos in the *Journal of Ethnopharmacology* (2015, vol. 167). Vennos highlighted the highly regulated environment for

Tibetan medicines in Europe with the example of Sindu 5, a formula produced in Switzerland as Padma Digestin, which took eight years of work and five boxes of paperwork to become a legally recognized medicine.

Džiugas Meskelevičius of Vilnius University, Lithuania presented “Traditional Tibetan Medicine as a Potential Source of Agents for the Treatment of Glioblastoma Multiforme: A Controlled, Cell Culture Based Pilot Study,” which focused on a project he carried out in collaboration with the Men-Tsee-Khang. Meskelevičius applied two Tibetan medicines usually used for cancer patients on animal cancer cell cultures that “died” with the treatment. The mechanism of whether this happened through killing cancer cells directly or perhaps through increasing the immunity of patients to be able to attack cancer cells themselves could not (yet) be established.

The Men-Tsee-Khang-trained physician Namgyal Qusar, who established the Qusar Tibetan Healing Centre near Dharamsala, presented a study that he carried out with colleagues in Germany on the relationship between diet, obesity, and heart disease and was published in the *International Journal of Cardiology* (2013, vol. 168, issue 2). His presentation, “Weight Reduction in Patients with Coronary Artery Disease: Comparison of Traditional Tibetan Medicine and Western Diet,” suggested that a wholesome Tibetan diet was more effective in reducing weight, BMI, and total cholesterol levels in patients suffering from coronary artery disease and metabolic syndrome.

Marie T. Nicolas, a French researcher and educationist, analyzed the different fields of knowledge involved when teaching “science” and compared these with Tibetan medical

ways of imparting knowledge, which use allegorical medical trees as concept maps. She explored how Tibetan ways of learning are inclusive of intense listening, memorization, receiving lineage transmissions, and working within a Buddhist ethical code, thus synthesizing knowledge in a more holistic way.

To further celebrate the centennial anniversary and to spread Sowa Rigpa worldwide, the Men-Tsee-Khang in Dharamsala also organized Centenary Tours in South America, the USA, Canada, Singapore, Australia, Taiwan, and several European countries (see <http://bit.ly/2tGN1X3>). Moreover, Tashi Tsering Phuri expressed during the 5th International Sorig Congress in Kathmandu in March 2017: “There is certainly no reason to be contented just with the Centenary Celebration, and not carry out Post Centenary Celebrations. For the year 2017, Men-Tsee-Khang will promote 101 Years as ‘Men-Tsee-Khang Wellness Camps’” <http://bit.ly/2vClVRY>. Three wellness centers in India already offer *Ku-Nye* massage, steam baths, and other relaxing therapies, and Sowa Rigpa therapists receive six months training. Sowa Rigpa wellness and preventive health care have not been affected by the shortage of raw materials, toxicity issues, or international GMP regulations, but can still contribute to wellbeing.

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