

NATURALISTIC PERSPECTIVES OF TRADITIONAL TIBETAN MEDICINE AND CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE

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ABSTRACT. *Traditional Tibetan Medicine (TTM) has unique naturalistic connotation. Understanding naturalism from the TTM helps us to increase our understanding of organic cosmology and naturalism itself. It also helps us to realize the potential of naturalism. Hopefully this will show us a broader Asian naturalism and multidimensional prospect of the international organic cosmology. This paper intends to describe and analyze the naturalism hidden in the TTM by combining the source, theory, system and practice of TTM. Firstly, on the basis of the theory of the Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), it traces the naturalism of TTM and analyzes the original meaning of naturalism. At the same time, TTM is compared with TCM considering organic philosophy, and the traditional essence of naturalism is highlighted. Secondly, naturalism is examined from the system of TTM and from the perspective of human beings, material, environment, and so on, thus the dimension of naturalism is highlighted. Thirdly, in combination with the contemporary issues related to the dilemma, this paper analyzes the specific path, significance, and potential prospects of problem solving through naturalism, thus highlighting the height of naturalism. Finally, on the basis of TTM, the paper illustrates naturalism as a scientific practice which integrates technology, expands the potential, highlights the nature of borderless practice, and creates a scientific future.*

KEYWORDS: *naturalism; Traditional Tibetan Medicine; potential; three causes; five elements*

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TTM has a long history [Tuption, 1999:2]. Its understanding of organic cosmology and naturalism itself helps to realize the potential of naturalism. Hopefully, it may demonstrate a broader Asian naturalism and the multidimensional prospect of the international organic cosmology.

Part 1. The Prospect of Nature and Cosmos in TTM

Tracing the history of TTM, we can find that there are many recordings of plants, animals, and minerals used as medicine [Dimar, 1986:297–298]. The origin and development of medicine is from the snow-capped plateau (not one snow mountain, but thousands of snow mountains, forest mountains, and grass mountains [Muge, 2010:13]. During the rule of Songzan Gampo, although medicine had come into being, it was a loose system and was not well developed. Until Trisong Dezan took the rein, and medicine began to blossom [Taktsang Tsopa, 1986:15]. Through budding, laying a foundation, competition, development, and prosperity, now it is well acknowledged that TTM has a long history of more than 2300 years. The historical books recorded precisely that the twenty-ninth heir of Tibet, Drongnyen Deu, born in 394 AD, were buried alive together with his princess and chancellors in order to prevent leprosy from spreading [Kelzang, 1996:90]. However, these historical stories have not been fully explored. Just as the professor Lois N. Magner said in her work, *A History of Medicine*: “Western science and western medical scientists always ignore the function of China [Magner, 2009:55].” The medical circle also takes research and practice of TTM for granted. Therefore, it is urgent to further research TTM through the aspects of medicine, science, and philosophy.

According to TTM, *Rlung* (roughly understood as “energy” or “wind”), *Mkhris-pa* (roughly understood as “fire”) and *Badken* (roughly understood as “earth” or “water”) exist in the human body. They are the basic factors which keep human beings healthy, but they are also the origins of diseases as well. Just like all other things in nature, the body is made up of the five elements (earth, water, fire, wind, and emptiness). These five elements are the primary elements of everything in the cosmos, which also help form the body of human beings [Yutok, 1986:8–11; 62–63]. The theory of *Three causes* and *Five Elements* is the principal theory for Tibetan doctors to acknowledge the cosmos, the human body, and diseases. Sde srid sangs rgya mtso, a great person in Tibetan science history [Cai, 2002:31; 132], chaired and drafted painting of the medical map, *Thangkha (Sman thang)*. In order to make the medical knowledge clear and easy to understand, the map compares roots, trunk, branches, and leaves to parts of human body, and draws three trees of life. Let us take the first tree (Figure 1.1) as an example, and take a quick look at Tibetan medical theory.

In the tree, physiological and pathological functions of the body are described by the branches of left and right stems respectively. The physiological branches describe the physiological functions of a healthy body. It uses branches of three causes to describe the physiological functions of a human body. The blue leaves on the branch of three causes represent *Rlung*, while the yellow ones represent *Mkhris-pa*, and the white ones represent *Badken*. *Three causes* are the origins of a human body’s

formation, and they are the causes of disease development and death, too. If the *three causes* are balanced with each other, the body will function well and people are healthy and safe from illness. Then, there will be two blossoming flowers at the top of the tree, with colorful fruits in the center. The flowers represent health and longevity; while the fruits represent fortune and happiness, benefits of being healthy. Pathological branches symbolize different kinds of diseases. The pathological root branch means that all the internal anguish and physiological discomforts are caused by ignorance, greed, anger, and fatuity. The pathological cause branch means that weather, food, activity, and psychology play important roles in affecting health. The branches describe paths to diseases, demonstrating the condition of the human body. Apart from the above, there are branches to describe the lifestyle, the spread of diseases, the transformation of diseases, and the cause of death. From Figure 1.1 we can see a life branch describing the life in every stage. The leaf describing an old man with a crane means the excessive *Rlung* inside his body when one enters his old age; the leaf describing a man collecting corn means *Mkhris-pa* is excessive in autumn. There are two leaves beneath the branch: one is a woman burned by fierce fire, and the other is a man overwhelmed by cold blue water. These are the two final states of all disease: heat and cold.



Figure 1.1 A life tree (a physiological and pathological branch) of TTM

The understanding of the human body through nature originated from the cosmology of Tibetan forefathers. We can quote from *Root Book of Kalachakra* to have a rough idea of the cosmic model [Huang, 2002: colored pages 74] (Figure 1.2). The outside circle is a bright colorful ring. From outside to the center: green stands for emptiness, a black circle symbolizes wind, while a red one is fire, white is water, and yellow is earth. *Root Book of Kalachakra* includes an outside time wheel and an

inside time wheel. In the 17th century it was listed as the second article in the first chapter of *Translation of Commandments* in the Beijing version [Huang, 1981]. It explains the relationship between the human body and the cosmos, mainly through the structure of the human body. Both the Tibetan medical science and the *Root Book of Kalachakra* regard five elements as the most fundamental materials in the cosmos, having a close relationship with all living creatures. It expresses different opinions from other Buddhist works. But, *Round Calendar Essentials* says that they do not conflict with each other. It is natural, the fates of all living creatures are variegated and complex in nature [Huang, 2002: colored pages 74].



Figure 1.2 The cosmic model of Tibetan

With the development of science, we can further study of the cosmos with the help of modern equipment. We discovered millions of stars in the sky and realized that our planet, the earth (E), rotates around the sun. We have a clear view from every direction in the cone-shaped flat and can calculate the location of remote galaxies (Figure 1.3). We find that galaxies are distributed all over the sky in a relatively even way (Figure 1.4).



Figure 1.3 The earth's rotating around the sun

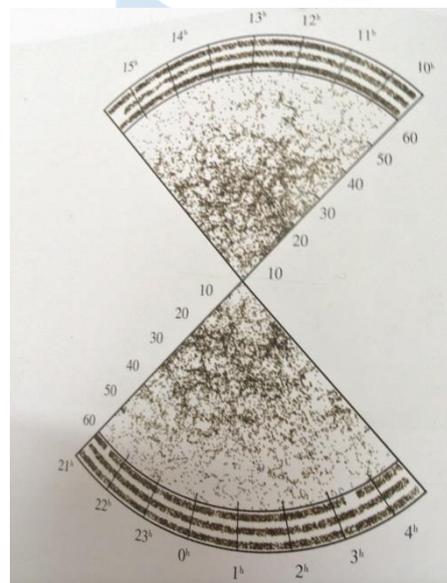


Figure 1.4 Distribution of galaxies

From these figures, we can see that the cosmos is quite different if seen from different angles. Just like Stephen Hawking once said that the universe has multiple histories, each of which is determined by a small, hard nut. The universe should possess all possible histories, each of which has a probability [Hawking, 2014:69–72]. The TTM science is deeply rooted in Tibetan traditional culture. It believes that the human being is originated from nature and a part of nature, just as all living creatures. It puts great emphasis on the relationship between human beings and nature and places us into a macro time and space to measure its value. Each stage of life, no matter birth, illness, or death, all are the process of changing and developing in all living creatures. The nature recognized by Tibetan traditional science generates the Tibetan medicinal science. It has the primary and fundamental meaning as well as the

important philosophical and scientific meaning which is summarized and deposited in medical history throughout thousands of years.

Part 2. TTM and Naturalism

In Tibetan Language, the word nature is pronounced as “半爸≌春~”, which means made by nature, made by self, inborn or natural [Zhang, 1993:2650; 2593]. It is the synonym of Brahma. Brahma is the creator of all the things in the world in Hindu mythology. In Sanskrit, Brahma is the paraphrase of Brahmā. “Brahma, who is regarded as the creator of the universe in Brahmana, represents the universe itself in Upanishads [Huang, 1991:38]”. Nature is the synonym of Brahma which represents the universe. However there is another noun, “刁拜≌斑~”, referring to the universe in Tibetan Language. In ancient times, the Tibetan ancestors used the form of *Song of Ask and Answer of the Universe* to explain the origin of heaven and earth and the origin of everything in the world. Under the guidance of naive materialism, they could explain various natural phenomena which they countered in daily life, such as heaven and earth, high mountains, and road. They used familiar things to illustrate the reasons why everything generates (Tong, 1984). Stephen Hawking said that when we talk about the scientific theory of the universe, the theory is just the model of the universe itself or the section limited by it, and it is a set of regulations that connect the quantum of the model to the observation we conduct. It only exists in our mind, and it has nothing to do with reality. Perfect theory should properly illustrate the facts of plenty of observations [Hawking, 2014: 80; 7–9].

There is no vocabulary for naturalism in Tibetan language, and it only has “半爸≌春≌抵≌电邦~”, which means natural wisdom, natural wisdom without being taught, the special wisdom passed down generation by generation [Zhang, 1993:2650; 2593]. This should be the best annotation of naturalism. Especially the word “抵≌电邦~”, which means wisdom, the original wisdom in Tibetan language, is the natural existence of awareness in mind [Huang, 1991:38]. *Upanishads*, the fundamental classics of Brahmanism of ancient India, has more improved explanation of wisdom: “What is wisdom? Adjusting your body, cultivating your moral character, being close to and respecting your teachers, listening, thinking, comparing, thus you can discover more and understand yourself. Your knowledge will include everything, which is not like bottle, clothing, etc. and which is the unchanged among the changeable, which is a luminant. Everything is proved through practice” [Xu, 2007:475]. Natural wisdom should be the initial meaning of naturalism.

Compared with TCM, the TTM has special explanation of mind and feelings, which contains ethnic wisdom, such as the dissertation of the internal cause of illness explained in *Rgyud bzhi* (the Four Medical Tantras), which is an ancient record of Tibetan medicine. It says that illness is caused by ignorance, greed, anger and fatuity, which produce *Rlung*, *Mkhris-pa*, and *Badken*. And, it has special theories about mental organs and mental process in Tibetan medicine [Lhusham, 2004:31–37], especially the detailed description of Shenhun (i.e. soul), which deserve to be investigated deeply. Tibetan medicine holds that “the mind bodhi of a man lies in the

left, for the reason that it is produced for the function of spermatozoon; the mind bodhi of a woman lies in the right, for the reason that it is produced for the function of blood.” And, the mind bodhi is named as Shenhun [Mao, 2012:58–60; 39].

The TTM has systematic understanding of how human beings came to the world. In the process of forming and developing, the Tibetan medicine has related awareness of religion. It holds the opinion that everyone is produced by various casual relationships, and the human being formed by Karma and affliction, Alaya, results in the noble world. But, it is quite different from religion of the fundamental viewpoint. The Tibetan Medicine suggests that the form of human being has internal causes and external causes. Its theory is more rational and scientific than the recognition that the God created the whole world and all the creatures in 6 days.



Figure 2.1 Fetal development in TTM

Since the 8th century, Tibetan medicine has already had deep recognition of human embryology [Otsang, 2012:27;187], and it has held the opinion that a woman can become pregnant 12 days after menstruation, which equals ovulation in modern medicine. And five to nine weeks after that is the fish period, which equals the embryonic period in modern medicine. The sixth week is the formative period of the blood vessels, heart, and liver, and the seventh week is that of the eyes and head. The eighth week forms the image of head (modern medicine has certified that eyes, ears, mouth and nose can be seen at the end of the second month of pregnancy, and the circulatory system is activated.) From the tenth week to the 26th week is the turtle period, during which the tenth week is the formative period of the projective parts of the body, such as shoulder and hip (limbs are mamelons at first). Upper arms and thighs form in the 14th week, and the forearms and calves in the 15th week, and fingers and toes in the 16th week, and connective veins inside and outside in 17th week (now we think that the fetal heart can be heard and the movement of limbs can be felt at the end of the 4th months). The fetus begins to have memory in the 26th

week, which matches the antenatal training proposed by intellectuals at home and abroad. The 28th week is the end of the pig period. If the fetus is head down in the 38th week, it can be delivered [Ma, 1933:3–7]. In Figure 2.1, we can see that the description of the fish, turtle, and pig period of fetal development in Tibetan medicine is identical to that of the vertebrate sequential evolution through Pisces, Reptilia, and Mammalia to human [Jampa, 1998]. It is earlier than the Theory of Evolution proposed by Charles Darwin, which was highly awarded as one of the three greatest discoveries of natural science in 19th century by Engels. Science does not admit the existence of supernatural things. The scientific recognition method is the combination of experience and rational [Lu, 1997:654–656]. It is obvious that the details of human embryos in TTM is a combination of experience and rational.

Besides, the recognition of material and environment in TTM also develops the recognition of Tibetan tsema. Tibetan tsema believes that the environment and objective things can be divided in three ways: external realm, internal realm, and certified realm [Yang, 2002:42–43]. This recognition of perspective in TTM combines the theory of five elements, and the smell, property, function, and efficacy of medicine are closely connected with the five elements. The fundamental reason of why the Tibetan medicine can cure diseases is that human beings are formed by the five elements, too. Except for the theory of five realm of color, sound, smell, taste, and touch, the practice of realm can take season, environment, and territory into consideration to assess the properties of people from different places, time, and constitution, and decides the treatment according to the source, current situation, and future development of disease. It can have deep recognition toward part and details, such as the description of tiny vessels to connect the exterior skin. We will take the right leg as an example. The total number of the tiny vessels of right leg is 59 (as shown in the Figure 2.2).

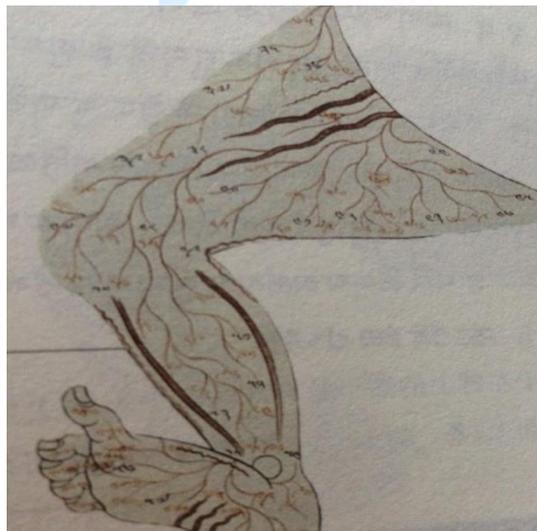


Figure 2.2 tiny vessels of right leg

If we compare it with the picture of the estuaries of Mississippi River (www.hydro30.org), we can find they are very similar. Figure 2.3 and Figure 2.4 show that the veins resemble the river, illustrating a human as nature.

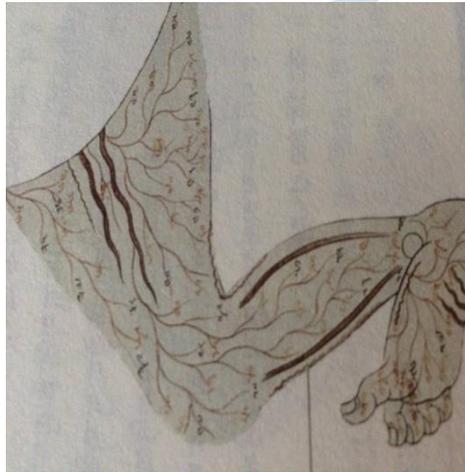


Figure 2.3 tiny vessels of right leg

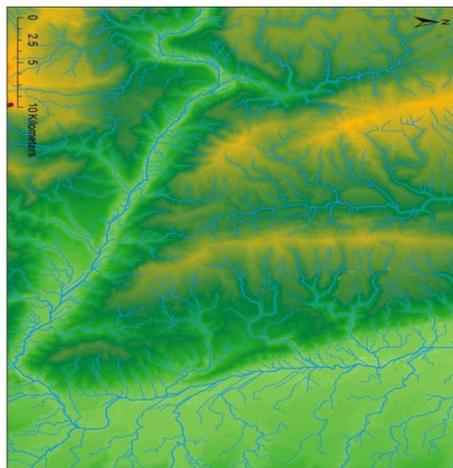


Figure 2.4 estuaries of Mississippi River

Part 3. Naturalism of Traditional Tibetan Medicine and Contemporary Problems Related

To explore the personal ontology of “what am I?” from human formation of TTM, it is not difficult to draw such conclusion as “I” is composed of matter. But the theory of embryology of Tibetan medicine also tells us, in addition to the physical elements, “I” also has the non-physical elements, such as “the soul” (as shown in Figure 3.1) [Otsang, 2012:27;187]. In addition, mere possession of father's semen and mother's blood and soul cannot guarantee conception, for only through mixing the five elements together by chance can an intact human being be formed [Tsering, 2010:45], as shown in Figure 3.2. As recorded in *Baidurya snogon po* (Blue Lapislazuli): If you ask how the soul of knowledge which is beyond the sensory environment is put into the embryo in a mother, it can be explained with an obvious

metaphor. Just like the sun light burns wood through a convex mirror, soul and knowledge are reincarnated into an embryo in an unseen way [Mao, 2012:58–60;39].

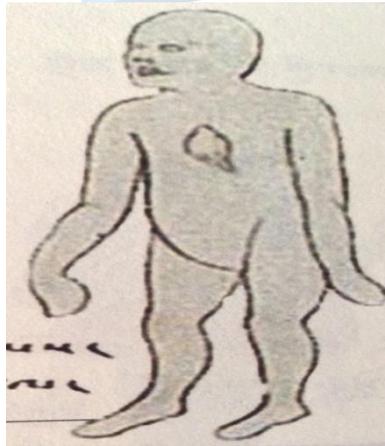


Figure 3.1 Formation of consciousness

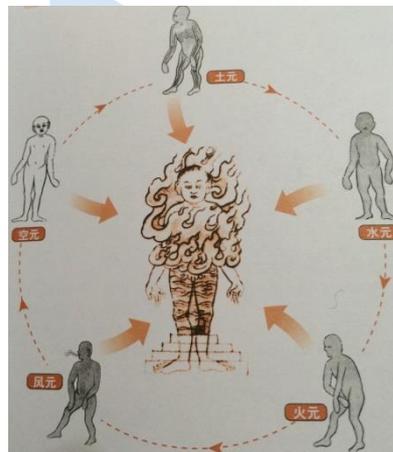


Figure 3.2 Five elements and formation of human body

The TTM description of the source of “I” is different from the concept of nihilism which believes that there is no “I”. It is also different from animalism which believes that “I” is of organisms. It is far more different from the belief that “I” is the idea of the brain. The human brain is perhaps the most complex and the most attractive structure created by nature. When a surgeon opens the skull, he sees that the surface of gray matter is very even and is full of fine texture. In fact, this is the unimaginably complicated network of the nerve cells. In the second half of the 20th century, Camillo Golgi, an Italian made individual nerve cells visible through dyeing (figure 3.4) [Haken, 2003:155]. Tibetan embryology also describes the brain's generation. As to the formation of human consciousness, TTM believes that both the brain and the heart combine with each other to produce the “I” consciousness. Organisms begin from fertilized eggs, at the same time “I” comes into existence. This is different from naturalism on individual ontological question, with the latter believing the existence of “I” comes later than organisms.

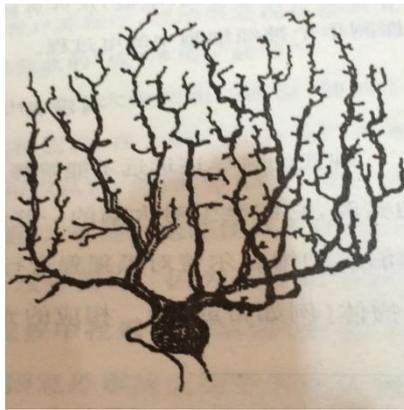


Figure 3.3 A nerve cell

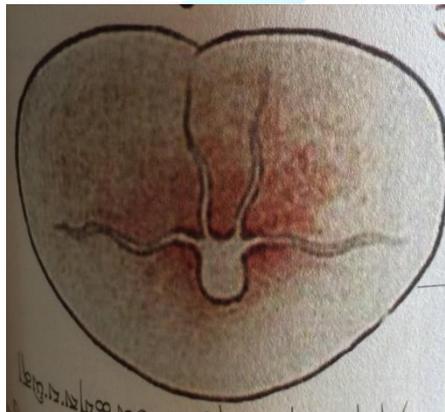


Figure 3.4 Formation of brain

In today's world, in addition to the philosophical issues, social issues involving human beings and nature, human beings and environment etc. are increasingly serious. If we, from the perspective of naturalism, fully recognize that the human beings and all others in the world are parts of nature and incorporate the social issues into the big cosmos, we can get more from the natural potential. The TTM naturalism advocates ultimate symbiosis, attaching great importance to the universe and does not regard the human being as the center. It fears and respects nature in thinking about and answering the major questions like why and how heaven and earth and the human body come into being. Based on complying scientific observation, it has its own research and theory of such issues as the origin of the universe, the birth of life, and the functions of the heart and brain. It has humanistic thoughts and scientific thinking, exhibiting the experience and laws from real practice, believing in nature and holding firm to nature.

Owing to the limited space, unfortunately more interesting questions cannot be discussed here. In one word, observed from the vision of the TTM, naturalism can be seen as a kind of scientific practice rooted in experience. Basing on theory, it integrates technologies, augments the potential, highlights the borderless practice of naturalism, and creates the future of science. The “natural wisdom” way of thinking of TTM is expected to push open the window for us to see the night sky, to open a

door leading to freedom. Both the window and the door are open to nature, through which we witness a universe as bright as the sun and the moon and in which we will let the thought deer run freely, boundlessly, and naturally.

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