Tibetan Medical Illustrations from the History Museum of Buryatia, Ulan Ude

Natalia Bolsokhoyeva

Abstract

The Atlas of Tibetan Medicine is the illustrative material to all four volumes of Tibetan medicine's locus classicus, the Four Tantras (rGyud bzhi), and their commentary, the Blue Beryl (or: Lapis Lazuli, Vaidurya sngon po). It is kept at the collection of the History Museum of Buryatia in Ulan-Ude. It took more than sixteen years (from 1687 until 1703) to complete the full set of these medical paintings. The following includes a brief description of the contents of the Atlas, how the copy was brought from Tibet to Buryatia, how it was transferred to the Tsegol manba datshang and to the Aschagat medical school and finally, how it got to the Museum of Atheism in Ulan-Ude.

Keywords
Tibetan medicine, Tibetan medical paintings, atlas of Tibetan medicine, visual aids, instructional guide, rgyud bzhi, Vaidurya sngon po, Blue Beryl

Introduction: The Tibetan Medical Paintings

The Tibetan medical paintings, also known as 'The Atlas of Tibetan Medicine', are the illustrative material to all four volumes of the basic reference text of Tibetan medicine, the 'Four [Medical] Tantras' (rgyud bzhi—'Gyu zhi') and its encyclopaedic commentary 'Lapis Lazuli' (vaidurya sngon po—'Vaidurya onbo'). It was composed by the most prominent scholar of medieval Tibet Desi Sangye Gyatso (sde srid sangs rgyas rgya mtsho, 1653–1705), the regent of the Fifth Dalai Lama Nawang Lobson Gyatso (ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho, 1617–82).

The set that follows, from the collection of the History Museum of Buryatia in Ulan-Ude, consists of 76 plates. Each painting is numbered: from one to seventy-seven. The sixty-second plate is missing. Each plate of 'The Atlas of

Tibetan Medicine’ has a different number of images (between 90 and 274), and the full set consists of about ten thousand drawings, painted in strikingly beautiful colours. The contents of ‘The Atlas of Tibetan Medicine’ and its chapters can be read against the corresponding Tibetan texts of the ‘Four [Medical] Tantras’ and its comprehensive commentary ‘Lapis Lazuli’. The Atlas follows their structure quite strictly and the captions under each drawing have their Tibetan text derived from these two books. The plates of the paintings are composed according to a precise scheme, shared by all 76 plates. In the upper part of each plate there is an ordinal number with an indication of the related chapter from the text of the ‘Four [Medical] Tantras’ and the ‘Lapis Lazuli’, the contents of which would be found illustrated in that plate.

‘The Atlas of Tibetan Medicine’ is an instructional guide to the Tibetan medical systems and traditions that are based on the ‘Four [Medical] Tantras’ and ‘Lapis Lazuli’. Both treatises, ‘The Atlas’ and the ‘Four Tantras’, consist of four volumes and have 156 chapters. The first four plates (1–4) cover the content of six chapters of the first volume ‘The Root Tantra’; the illustrative material of the next 31 chapters of the second volume ‘The Explanatory Tantra’ is distributed among the next 33 paintings (5–37) of ‘The Atlas’; the contents of the 92 chapters of the third volume ‘The Oral Tradition Tantra’ of the treatises is illustrated in the following 16 (38–53) of ‘The Atlas’. The remaining 24 paintings (i.e. twenty-three in the Buryatian set, 54–77, with the missing plate 62) illustrate the contents of the fourth volume ‘Last Tantra’ of the ‘Four [Medical] Tantras’ and ‘Lapis Lazuli’.²

‘The Atlas of Tibetan Medicine’ was created by a group of medical doctors and professional artists, who worked under the leadership of Desi Sangye Gyatso. It took more than 16 years (from 1687 until 1703) to complete. 60 plates of medical thankas are referred to in the colophon of the encyclopaedic commentary ‘Lapis Lazuli’. These were completed by the artist Norbu Gyatso from Lhobrag (lho brag nor bu rgya mtsho) and the painter Lhasa pa Genyen (lha sa pa dge gnyen).³ Different stages of the work are also connected with the name of a young geshe, Chagpa Choinam (dge bshes grhon nu chags pa rnam), also known as Chagpa Choiphel (chags pa chos ’phel) from the monastery Phun Tshog Ling (phun tshogs gling), located in Tsang (gtsang).⁴

---

² See Bri cha, plates 1–77.
⁴ For scientific activities, see Vaidurya sngon po, vol. IV, L. 240 b; sde srid sang rgyas rgya mtsho, Khog bug 1986, p. 386; Bolsokhoyeva and Gerasimova 1998, p. 49; Bolsokhoyeva 2003; Bolsokhoyeva 1993, pp. 23–4; Bolsokhoyeva 1994, p. 30; Dashiyev, Aseyeva, Bolsokhoyeva et al. 1994, p. 36.
Chagpa Choinam was chief disciple (slob ma'i gtso bo) of the regent of Tibet, Desi Sangye Gyatso. The medical paintings were a key component of classical Tibetan medical education, and they are still used as visual aids for the in-depth study of both theory and practice of the Tibetan medical systems and traditions, not only in Tibet but also in the vast cultural space of the Mongolian world.

**How did the copy of ‘The Atlas of Tibetan Medicine’ find its way to Buryatia?**

At present, there are three known sets of the medical paintings in existence: two of them are in Lhasa and one, reproduced in part here, is in Buryatia. We still have no definite information about who initiated the copying of the Tibetan medical paintings. It is also not entirely clear yet how the set got to Buryatia. Most likely it was the tshannid khenpo lharampa (mtshan nyid mkhan po Iha ram pa) Agvan Dorjiev (1854–1938), one of the most important figures in the history of Tibet and Russia at the beginning of the twentieth century.\(^5\) Agvan Dorjiev was born in the Buryat village of Khari Shibiri, Zaigraev region, near the Aschagat datshang. The Buryat Lama Namanai Gegen took him as a novice, ordained him as a monk and sent him secretly to Tibet.

In Lhasa, Agvan Dorjiev entered the Goman datshang (sgo mang grwa tshang) at the prestigious monastic university Drepung ('bras spungs). Here he studied Buddhist philosophy and received the highest degree of geshe lharampa (dge shes Iha rams pa). Selected as one of seven outstanding scholars to become tutor to the Thirteenth Dalai Lama Nawang Lobsang Thubten Gyatso (ngag dbang blo bzang thub brtan rgya mtsho, 1876–1933), he specialised in the field of Buddhist philosophy and literature. He came to enjoy high status and soon became an advisor in all matters of policy for the Tibetan government. He travelled to China, Russia and France to learn their policies, their governmental structure and lifestyles.\(^6\) As a highly-educated scholar, Agvan Dorjiev had a unique knowledge in classical Buddhist sciences, including Tibetan medical culture. He knew the rich Tibetan collections. He also knew about access to the medical paintings in the depository of the Chagpori medical college of Lhasa.

---

5 For more on Dorjiev, see Snelling 1993 and Andreyev 2006.
6 For more details, see Bolsokhoeva and Gerasomova 1998, pp. 40–1.
As a prominent Buryat Buddhist, Agvan Dorjiev established not only many Buddhist monasteries throughout ethnic Buryatia, he was also a key figure in building the Buddhist temple in Saint-Petersburg, the capital of the Russian Empire. He poured great energy into establishing the Ashagat medical college (sman ba grwa tshang) in Buryatia. Keen to develop the college as a centre of excellence in teaching, he planned to use the medical paintings as visual aids. It appears that Agvan Dorjiev managed to secure a certain amount of money from the Thirteenth Dalai Lama himself in order to realise his ambition of commissioning the long and expensive project of producing a copy of the original illustrative guide to the ‘Four Tantras’ and the ‘Lapis Lazuli’.7

There are two versions of the story of how the copy of ‘The Atlas of Tibetan Medicine’ got to Buryatia. The first suggests that it was brought to Buryatia by the outstanding Buryat scholar, Professor Bazar Baradiin (1878–1937) between 1905 and 1907, during his travels to Labrang (bla brang), in Amdo Province (north-east Tibet).8 The second version is connected with the name of a Buryat lama and physician Sherab Sunuev (1860–1930), an Aginsk Buryat, who studied medical sciences in the Serktog manba datshang (Tib.: gser tog sman ba grwa tshang) for ten years, at the very end of the nineteenth to the beginning of the twentieth centuries.9 According to P. B. Baldanzhapov, lama Sherab Sunuev and his disciples studied the fundamentals of Tibetan medicine, using the medical paintings at the time when they were kept in the Tsugol medical school.10 We do not, however, have enough information to give a final account of who really brought ‘The Atlas of Tibetan Medicine’ to Buryatia.

The Buryat-Mongolian Museum of Atheism

The paintings were kept at the Tshugol datshang Tashi Choiphel Ling (bkra shis chos 'phel gling), (Chita region), until approximately 1926. Then, upon the request of Agvan Dorjiev, abbot of the Tshugol datshang, geshe lhamo (dge shes lha rams pa) D. Norboyev (1887–1935) transferred them to the medical school of the Ashagat.11 He had a Tibetan citizenship and was recog-

---

7 For more information, see Bolsokhoeyva 2004a; Bolsokhoeyva 2006, pp. 78–84; Bolsokhoeyva 2007, pp. 284–5, 291.
8 Gammermann and Semichov 1963, p. 6.
9 Baldanzhapov 1982, p. 15.
10 Ibid.
nised as a reincarnation of the Ganjurba (literally: ‘Connoisseur of the Kan­jur’) from Dolonor. At the medical faculty of the Aschagat monastery, the medical illustrations played an important role in classical medical education and were used as visual aids or illustrative commentaries on the theory and practice of Tibetan medicine. Here Buryat artists and emchis copied the 32 plates from ‘The Atlas of Tibetan Medicine’ under the guidance of L. D. Endonov (1870–1937?), who was a director of the medical school in Aschagat from 1926 until its closing in 1936. It was subsequently destroyed. It was one of the biggest medical schools throughout Transbaikalia and a centre of excellence in medical education.

In 1936, Z. Zhabon (1899–1971), at that time a member of the ‘Republican Organization of the Society of the Militant Godless’, brought the set of ‘The Atlas of Tibetan Medicine’ to the Buryat-Mongolian Museum of Athe­ism (now the History Museum of Buryatia named after M. N. Khangelov). Z. Zhabon was a teacher by profession and very knowledgeable about Tibetan, Mongolian and Buryat culture. He was chief curator of the valuable collection of rare Buddhist art held at the History Museum of Buryatia from 1952 until 1970. The Buddhist collection of the museum includes Buddhist scriptures, scroll paintings, sculptures, masks, costumes, various Buddhist objects and musical instruments.

The plates of ‘The Atlas of Tibetan Medicine’ were safely protected in Hodigitriya, an eighteenth century Russian Orthodox cathedral. The copy of the medical thankas was subsequently kept secretly in storage in the museum for more than 20 years with only a few museum staff aware of the existence of this priceless monument of Tibetan culture and we have a debt of gratitude to Z. Zhabon for taking care of the treasure—‘The Atlas of Tibetan Medicine’—throughout many years.

In 1958, Professor A. F. Gammerman, a knowledgeable pharmacologist, and B. V. Semichov, a Tibetologist, the composers of the *Tibetan—Latin—Russian Dictionary of the Names of Medicinal Raw Materials*, used in Tibetan Medicine, published in 1963, learned of the existence of the Tibetan Medical Paintings from the Buryat scholar, K. M. Gerasimova, daughter of the former director of the Buryat-Mongolian Museum of Atheism, A. I. Gerasimova. Subsequently they analysed only the plates dealing with medicinal plants of the medical paintings (plates no. 22–33). They had plans to publish them

---


13 In 1992, the Aschagat datshang was rebuilt thanks to the religious revival in Russia.

as the second illustrated part to their dictionary. It is worth noting here that in the section devoted to medicinal plants in the medical paintings, there are 540 drawings whose names are introduced in the published dictionary. The medicinal plants were copied from the medical paintings by the skilled Buryat artists, A. Okladnikov, T. Pud' and E. Nevolina, but unfortunately they were not published due to lack of financial support.15

Exhibitions of ‘The Atlas of Tibetan Medicine’

The first exhibition of 40 plates from the set of ‘The Atlas of Tibetan Medicine’ was organised by Anna Suiza, director of Pro-Cultura, Inc. from New York, USA, in cooperation with the History Museum of Buryatia and the Buryat Scientific Center of the Siberian Branch of Russian Academy of Sciences. Professor Fernand Meyer of the CNRS (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique) in Paris was one of the curators of this exhibition. With financial support from the Swiss company Padma AG, manufacturers of Tibetan medicines, the plates of the Tibetan medical paintings were restored, conserved, framed with natural beech and protected against the sun with special glass.

This international exhibition was on display for one year (May 1998 to May of 1999) within the Buddha’s Art of Healing project at the Michael C. Carlos Museum at Emory University in Atlanta. It later travelled to the Sackler Gallery of the Smithsonian Institute in Washington DC. The 40 plates were then brought from the USA to Moscow where they were displayed at the Museum of Oriental Art in Moscow. In August 1999, the first exhibition, where the full set of the Tibetan medical paintings, consisting of 76 plates, was shown, opened at the History Museum of Buryatia. It was a great event for Buryat culture. For one year, the inhabitants of Ulan-Ude and guests of the Buryat capital had an opportunity to get acquainted with ‘The Atlas of Tibetan Medicine’, a treasure of Tibetan culture.

How ‘The Atlas of Tibetan Medicine’ became known in the West

It is difficult to say how this treasure of Tibetan medical knowledge came to the attention of people in Europe and American. Perhaps it was thanks to the publication of ‘The Tibetan Medical Paintings’ (Serindia Publications, 1992)

15 Ibid., for more detail.
from the History Museum of Buryatia. In this publication, the sixty-second plate, missing in the Buryat set, was copied by the British scholar and artist Robert Beer from the complete set of Tibetan medical paintings kept at the Institute of Tibetan Medicine and Astrology in Lhasa and published by Chinese scholars in 1986 and 1988. This plate has drawings illustrating the correct preparation for the analysis of urine, the proper vessels for inspecting urine, a chart showing the physiology of urine. In 1992 an English version of ‘The Atlas of Tibetan Medicine’ was published in New York, followed in 1994 by an Italian version and then the German version.

**Russian research on the Tibetan Medical Paintings**

Russian scholars began their research of the Tibetan medical paintings at the end of the 1950s. The foremost experts on the Tibetan medical paintings, Professor A. F. Gammerman, and B. V. Semichov, mentioned above, studied 540 medicinal plants, drawing on plates 22–33 of the medical paintings. Four hundred and twenty of them are included in their dictionary, with their Latin equivalents. The remaining 120 names of medicinal plants were not fully identified.

A fuller study of the medical paintings was undertaken by K. M. Gerasimova, a Buryat scholar, when she investigated Tibetan and Mongolian sources on the theory of Buddhist Art in 1967. In her monograph *The Monuments of the Aesthetic Thought of the East—The Tibetan Canon of Proportions*, there is a chapter entitled ‘Anthropological Fundamentals of the Buddhist Iconometric Measurement’. Here she compared and contrasted an anthropometrical classification of the traditional structure of the human body with the principles of the aesthetic model of beauty as they represent a synthesis of the physical and spiritual perfection of a person. To illustrate her argument Gerasimova included some reproductions of the Tibetan medical paintings along with an interpretation of the structure of the human body. She also analysed the Tibetan medical paintings as a source for the history of Tibetan culture, ethnography and symbolism. In the early 1980s, Professor E. G. Bazaron made

---

18 Comba and Meyer (eds) 1994; Parfionovitch, Geist et al. 1996.
an important contribution to the field when he provided an outline of the entire set and identified a number of diseases described in the Tibetan medical thankas.\textsuperscript{22} In 1968–1970, a group of Buryat researchers from the Institute of Oriental Studies of the USSR Academy of Sciences (Moscow), under the guidance of P. B. Baldanzhapov from Ulan-Ude, began to prepare an annotated version of the Tibetan medical paintings, but this work is presently incomplete.

The author has devoted around 26 years to understanding, translating and researching Tibetan medical texts and the Tibetan medical paintings. Her investigations have been based on Tibetan written sources and rich oral information received from informants that include most eminent Tibetan Emchis from India, Tibet, Nepal, Mustang, Italy, Switzerland and Buryatia.\textsuperscript{23} D. B. Dashiyev, an outstanding Buryat expert on Tibetan medical culture, has undertaken the enormous task of translating the \textit{rGyud bzhi} into Russian.\textsuperscript{24} This, to date, is the first complete translation of this important text into any European language.

In 1994, a Russian version of the Tibetan medical paintings was published, involving the collaboration of scholars from Moscow, Ulan-Ude, Tartu (Estonia) and Kaunas (Lithuania). This project lasted for many years and was supported by the Russian Academy of Sciences.\textsuperscript{25,36}


\textsuperscript{23} For my publications on this topic see, for example, Bolsokhoyeva 1986; Bolsokhoyeva 1992; Bolsokhoyeva 1993; Bolsokhoyeva 1994; Bolsokhoyeva 1999; Bolsokhoyeva 2004.\textsuperscript{b}

\textsuperscript{24} Dashiyev 2001.

\textsuperscript{25} See also Bolsokhoyeva and Gerasimova 1998.
Plate 1: The Buddha of Medicine Teaching
Plate 2: The Tree of Health and Disease
Plate 3: The Tree of Diagnosis
Plate 6: Metaphors and Measurements of the Human Body
Plate 9: rtsa (front view).
Plate 23: Materia Medica of Mineral Origin.
Plate 26: Herbal Medications.
Plate 28: Materia Medica of Herbal and Animal origin
Plate 60: Feeling the Pulse: General and Specific Pulses
Plate 66: Urine Divination
There are still many aspects of the medical paintings which have not been studied. However, new historical realities, modern technology and information systems allow us to create the international joint scientific projects to combine the efforts and qualification of diverse specialists. I believe such an approach could bring significant advances in the study of this rich material in the future.

References

Tibetan Medical Paintings


Byams-pa ’Phrin-las and Wang Lei 1986, Bod lugi gSo Rig rGyud bzhi'i Nang Don Bris cha Ngy mtshar mThong ba Don lDan (Tibetan Medical Thangkas of the Four Medical Tantras), Lhasa: People's Publishing House of Tibet.


Tibetan language sources


g.Yu thog Yon tan mgon po [1982], bDud rtsi snying po yan lag brgyad pa giang ba man ngag gi rgyud (The Four Medical Tantras), (Reprint) Lhasa: Tibet People's Publishing House.

Pa sangs Yon tan 1986, Bod kyi go ba rig ba’i lo rgyus kyi bang mdzod g.yu thog bla ma dkan pa’i pho nya (The History of Tibetan Medical Culture), Leh: The Yuthok Institute of Tibetan Medicine.

sDe srid Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho [1982], dPpal ldan go bo rig pa’i khoog ’bugs legs bszhad vaidurya’i me long drang srong dgyes pa’i dga’ston (Desi Sangye Gyatso, Khog ’bugs, The History of Tibetan Medicine), (Reprint) Gansu: People’s Publishing House.

sDe srid Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho [end of 19th century], gSo ba rig pa’i bstan bcos sman bla’i dgongs rgyan rgyud bzhi’i gsal byed vaidurya sngon po’i phreng (Lapis Lazuli or: Blue Beryl), Aginsk
Secondary sources


Bolsokhoyeva N. D. 2007, 'Atshagatskaya medizinskaya shkola i ee vklad v razvitie medizinskoi kul'tury burayrskogo ernosa', ('Ашагатская медицинская школа и ее вклад в развитие медицинской культуры бурятского этноса'), *Buddhism of Russia* 38: 159–67.


— 1993, Introduction to the Studies of Tibetan Medical Sources, Kathmandu: Mandala Book Point.


