

The Five Source Theory in Tibetan Medicine and Pharmacy from the Perspective of Dialectics of Nature

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Abstract:

The “Five Elements” in Tibetan medicine and pharmacy are composed of five substances: soil, water, fire, wind, and air. Tibetan medicine believes that these five substances (elements) are the origin of all natural things in the world and the fundamental core of Tibetan medicine theory. It summarizes natural things based on the dynamic, stable, and other properties of matter in nature, as well as their changes, using the properties of the five sources of matter to summarize natural things. Their stable relationships prove that all things in nature have a common functional mechanism. They explain that the five sources are related to the physiological tissues of the human body, the ingredients of drugs, physiological efficacy, pathological changes, diagnosis, and treatment, which are in line with natural scientific perspectives.

Keywords:

Tibetan Medicine, Five Sources, Natural Science, Three Evils (Long, Chiba, Bacon)

1. The Five Sources and the Natural Laws of Pregnancy and Fetal Formation

In the second part of the *Treatise on Medical Theory and Practice* in the *Four Tantras of Tibetan Medicine*, the second chapter of the *Human Body Formation* states: “The internal cause of embryo formation is that the parents have disease-free semen and blood, and the five sources gather together, which is the root of embryo formation. For example, if the parents have diseased semen and blood, or if the five sources are incomplete, they will not conceive”.

The birth of a healthy life is first and foremost inseparable from the essence of a healthy and high-quality father, the blood of a mother, and the five sources. The book further discusses: “The lack of soil sources in the five sources cannot form, the lack of water sources cannot gather, the lack of fire sources cannot mature, the lack of wind sources cannot breed, and the lack of air sources cannot develop space”. This indicates that the soil source can fuse and condense the essence and blood of its parents, while the water source can nourish the essence and blood, making them

gather together without dispersing; Fire sources can generate temperature, promote fetal growth, while wind and air sources promote fetal growth, development, and space.

There is another explanation: soil forms the muscles and bones of the fetus, generates the nose, and thus gives the fetus a sense of smell; The water source forms fluid substances such as fetal blood and yellow water, which generate the fetal tongue, thereby causing the fetus to develop a sense of taste; The fire source forms the body temperature of the fetus, generates the eyes, and enables the fetus to have the visual ability to distinguish objects; The wind source forms the fetus's breathing, generates skin, and thus gives the fetus a sense of touch; The orifice that forms the life of the fetus and the seven elements that run through it generates ears, thereby enabling the fetus to have hearing. This statement more clearly discusses the relationship between the five sources and the specific tissues, organs, consciousness, temperature, light source, breath, etc. of the fetus. From the above paragraph, it can be seen that the entire process of life formation follows the natural law of the Five Sources Theory.

2. The Application of Dialectics of Nature in the Five Sources and Physiological Functions

Tibetan medicine believes that the structural components of the human body are the five sources, and all substances (elements) are composed of countless particles from the five sources. Each part and the shape and function of the vital organs of the human body are different, and they each manage different physiological functions. That is to say, soil sources have properties such as firmness, stability, and adhesion; Water sources have properties such as being moist, cold, nourishing, and conducive to downward flow; The fire source has the attributes of warmth, rising, and promoting growth; Wind sources have the attributes of being lightweight, adaptable to various sources, and promoting material activities; The attribute of having infinite space as a source of space for material growth. According to these attributes of the five sources, Tibetan medicine practitioners classify human tissues and organs as the five sources. The classic metaphors of dialectics of nature are also used to explain the relationship between the five sources and the vital organs of the human body.

2.1. The Five Internal Organs

The five organs are like a court under the rule of a king. The reason for dialectical thinking is that the heart is located at the center, much like a king who governs all. The liver can be likened to the queen, while the spleen represents the princess, both of whom are positioned beneath the king but maintain close ties with the heart of the king. The lungs, on the other hand, serve as loyal ministers and princes, always revolving around the heart like a king, symbolically reflecting the close connection between respiration and heartbeat. The kidneys, on the other hand, act like the lowest level of strength, playing a role in human excretion.

Modern medicine believes that the main physiological functions of the heart are biochemistry and the storage of essence, qi, blood, body fluids, and spirit. Due to the fact that essence, qi, and spirit are fundamental to human life activities, the five internal organs play an important role in human life.

2.1.1. Physiologic Function

The heart governs the blood vessels, which are the overall hub of the body's blood vessels. The heart transports qi and blood throughout the body through the blood vessels; The heart, which also controls the mind, is the center of spiritual consciousness and thinking activities, and occupies the highest dominant position in the human body.

The liver is responsible for relieving stress, regulating emotional activity, and assisting digestion of the spleen and stomach. The liver also stores blood, has the function of storing blood and regulating blood volume.

The spleen is responsible for transportation and transformation, promoting the digestion, absorption, and distribution of nutrients in the diet. It is the source of qi and blood biochemistry, hence its postnatal origin.

The lung regulates qi and regulate respiration, serving as a place for gas exchange in the human body. They also promote the circulation of health qi and body fluids throughout the body to warm and moisturize the skin.

The kidney stores essence, which is closely related to the growth, development, and reproductive ability of the human body, hence it is known as the innate origin; It plays an important role in regulating human fluid metabolism.

2.1.2. Mutual Influence

Although the five organs have their own physiological functions, their activities are not isolated. Through the connection of meridians, the five organs coordinate and cooperate with each other to maintain normal life activities in the human body.

2.1.3. Correspondence

The Five organs: Liver, Heart, Spleen, Lungs, and Kidneys. The Five Bodily Structures: Tendons, Veins, Muscle, Skin, and Bones. The Five Manifestations: Nails, Face, Lips, Body Hair, and Hair on the Head. The Five Emotions: Anger, Joy, Pensiveness, Sorrow, and Fear. The Five Bodily Fluids: Tears, Sweat, Saliva, Nasal Mucus, and Spit. The Five Flavors: Sour, Bitter, Sweet, Pungent, and Salty. The five colors: Green, Red, Yellow, White, and Black. Five directions: East, South, Central, West, and North. Five seasons: spring, summer, long summer, autumn, and winter. Five Qi: Wind, heat, dampness, dryness, and cold. The Five Transformations: Growth, Maturation, Transformation, Preservation, and Storage. The Five Sounds/Notes: Jue, Zhi, Gong, Shang, Yu. The Five Sensory Organs: Eyes, Tongue, Nose, Mouth, and Ears. The Five Spirits/Mind Aspects: Soul, Spirit, Yi Intent, Corporeal Soul, and Will.

2.2. The Six Hollow Organs

The six hollow organs are like indispensable utensils in the court, and in the classic *Four Tantras of Tibetan Medicine*, the stomach is likened to a pot for cooking food; The gallbladder is located between the liver and stomach, like a hanging skin bag; The bladder is like a pitcher of water; San Jiao (The Triple Energizer) are the male seminal vesicle and the female ovary, which are like treasure troves for storing treasures. The above four hollow organs are all described as containers for storing items, as well as the large intestine and small intestine, which are likened to servants of the queen and also serve as auxiliary tools.

2.2.1. Gallbladder

The main function of the gallbladder is to store and excrete bile, which has the effect of promoting the digestion and absorption of food. Bile is transformed from the essence of liver qi and stored in the gallbladder; hence the gallbladder is referred to as the “depot of central essence” and the “palace of purity”. The excretion of bile must rely on the regulation and control of the liver’s dispersing and draining functions. When the liver functions normally, bile excretion is smooth, and the spleen and stomach’s digestive and transport functions are robust. However, if there is stagnation of liver qi, which leads to impaired bile excretion, it will affect the digestive function of the spleen and stomach, manifesting as chest and rib distention, loss of appetite, or bowel dysfunction. If the liver’s dispersing and draining functions are excessive, resulting in rising bile qi, symptoms such as bitter taste in the mouth and vomiting of yellow bitter fluid may occur. If damp-heat accumulates in the liver and gallbladder, causing bile to not follow its normal path and spilling over to the skin, jaundice may be observed. Prolonged impaired bile excretion can lead to the accumulation of stones and sand.

2.2.2. Stomach

The primary functions of the stomach are: receiving and initially digesting food and water. This refers to the stomach’s ability to accommodate food that has descended from the esophagus, and to partially digest this food for further passage to the small intestine. Therefore, the stomach is known as the “sea of grains and water” and “the great granary.” The stomach’s functions of receiving and initially digesting food provide a material basis for the spleen’s transportation and transformation functions. Therefore, the spleen and stomach are often collectively referred to as the foundation of postnatal life, and the source of postnatal nutrition in the human body is closely related to the strength of “stomach qi.”

2.2.3. Small Intestine

The main functions of the small intestine are: Firstly, it serves as a container to receive food that has been initially digested by the stomach. Secondly, the food that has undergone initial digestion in the stomach must remain in the small intestine for a certain period of time to undergo further digestion and absorption. Specifically, digestion and transformation refer to the process where the small intestine further digests and absorbs the initially digested chyme, converting the water and grains into fine essence.

2.2.4. Large Intestine

The primary function of the large intestine is to receive the food residue transferred from the small intestine, absorb the excess water from it, and form feces that are expelled through the anus, thus earning the large intestine the title of “the organ of conduction.” The role of conduction and transformation in the large intestine is an extension of the stomach’s function of descending turbidity, and it is closely related to the spleen’s function of ascending clarity, the lung’s function of dispersion and descent, as well as the kidney’s function of qi transformation.

2.2.5. Bladder

The primary functions of the bladder are to store and excrete urine. Urine is transformed from body fluids, and its formation relies on the qi transformation function of the kidneys. The urine is transported to the bladder, and the kidneys

regulate the opening and closing of the bladder, ultimately leading to the excretion of urine. Therefore, the exertion of the bladder's qi transformation function is physiologically based on the qi transformation function of the kidneys.

2.2.6. Triple Energizer

The specific function of the Triple Energizer (Sanjiao) is as a pathway for the passage of the human body's primordial qi. Originating from the kidneys, the primordial qi must be distributed throughout the body via the Triple Energizer to exert its role in stimulating and promoting the functional activities of various organs and tissues, thereby maintaining the normal conduct of life activities in the human body. Primordial qi serves as the driving force for tissue qi transformation, and the passage of primordial qi through the Triple Energizer is closely related to the role of qi transformation functions throughout the body. The metabolism of human fluids depends on the joint action of various organs, but it must be carried out under the condition of unobstructed Triple Energizer. When food and drink enter the mouth, they pass through the esophagus into the stomach. After being partially digested in the stomach, they descend to the small intestine. Through the small intestine's function of separating the pure from the impure, the pure essence (fine nutrients and body fluids) is absorbed by the spleen, transferred to the lungs, and distributed throughout the body to meet the needs of the vital activities of the organs and meridians. The impure residue (waste) is passed down to the large intestine, where it is further processed and expelled as feces. The waste liquid is transformed into urine through the qi transformation function of the kidneys, which then infiltrates into the bladder and is expelled from the body. The common physiological function of the six hollow organs is "transformation and excretion," and their physiological characteristics are "excreting without storing" and "full without being overfilled." The metaphors and theories regarding these six hollow organs adhere to the laws of nature's cycles.

3. Using Dialectics of Nature to Explain the Composition of Five Sources and Drugs

Based on the understanding that all things in the universe are composed of five sources, Tibetan medicine believes that the drugs for treating diseases should also be composed of these five sources (elements). The six tastes, eight properties, and seventeen effects of drugs are closely related to the five sources.

3.1. The Composition and Characteristics of Five Sources and Drugs

In the second part of the classic medical text "*Four Tantras of Tibetan Medicine*," known as "*Treatise on Medical Theory and Practice*" it states, "All medicinal flavors originate from the five elements: earth, water, fire, wind, and space." Medicines rely on the earth element to shape their external structure, on the water element to nourish and prevent desiccation, on the fire element to maintain vitality, on the wind element to facilitate growth and development, and on the space element to provide room for growth. Therefore, the growth conditions of medicines are generally similar. Specifically, the earth element is the origin of medicinal plants; the water element keeps them moist and supplies water; the fire element generates heat and humidity, promoting their maturity; the wind element enables their movement and growth; and the space element provides the necessary space for their growth and movement. In summary, the growth of medicines depends on these five sources. This, in fact, illustrates the relationship between medicines, their ecological environment, and

natural laws. In essence, the earth element serves as the origin for the production of medicinal herbs; the water element keeps the herbs moist and provides hydration; the fire element generates warmth and humidity, promoting the maturation of the herbs; the wind element facilitates the movement and growth of the herbs; and the space element provides the necessary room for the herbs to grow and move. In summary, the growth of medicinal herbs is entirely dependent on these five elements. This actually demonstrates the relationship between medicinal herbs, their ecological environment, and natural laws.

3.2. The relationship between the five sources and the six tastes of medicinal herbs (sweet, sour, salty, bitter, pungent, and astringent)

In the second part of the classic medical text “*Four Tantras of Tibetan Medicine*,” known as “*Treatise on Medical Theory and Practice*” it states, “However, the taste of medicinal herbs is not singular. Earth and water can create a sweet taste in medicinal herbs, fire and earth can form a sour taste, water and fire can produce a salty taste, water and fire can also yield a bitter taste, fire and wind give rise to a pungent taste, and earth and wind can create an astringent taste, thus generating the six tastes of medicinal herbs.”

3.2.1. Sweet Taste

The sweet taste can linger in the mouth for a long time and stimulate appetite. Sweet-flavored herbs can enhance vital energy and physical strength, nourish the elderly and children, and be effective in treating diseases such as emaciation, bronchitis, lung disease, and so forth. They can also promote weight gain, wound healing, rejuvenate the skin, sharpen the senses of the five organs, and prolong life. They are beneficial in treating poisoning, Long disease, and Tripa disease. However, excessive use of sweet-flavored herbs can easily induce diseases such as Bacon disease, obesity, decreased digestive capacity, and diabetes.

3.2.2. Sour Taste

Sour taste can cause itching and discomfort in teeth, as well as salivation. Sour medicines can generate stomach fire, aid digestion, dilute fat, and regulate qi flow. However, excessive use may lead to hematological diseases, Chiba disease (a traditional Tibetan medical concept referring to imbalances in the body’s three humors), muscle relaxation, blurred vision and dizziness, erysipelas, scabies, skin rashes, thirst, edema, and distension.

3.2.3. Salty Taste

Salty taste causes saliva to accumulate; salty medicines can strengthen the body, have a dredging effect, can treat occlusion and obstruction syndromes, and have a stomach-strengthening effect. However, excessive use may lead to hair loss, graying of hair, increased facial wrinkles, physical weakness, and can also induce diseases such as leprosy, erysipelas, hematological diseases, and Chiba disease.

3.2.4. Bitter Taste

Bitter taste can eliminate halitosis but may also induce nausea. Bitter medicines can sharpen the mind, expel worms, quench thirst, and detoxify, while also treating diseases such as leprosy, vertigo, plagues, and Chiba diseases. They exhibit astringent properties, can dry ulcers, fats, bone marrow, urine, and feces, and treat conditions

like mastitis and hoarseness. However, excessive consumption may lead to debility, Wind disease (Lung disease in Tibetan medicine), Bacon disease, and other health hazards.

3.2.5. Pungent Taste

The pungent taste, upon reaching the mouth, stimulates the tongue and may cause tears to well up. Pungent medicines can treat diseases such as leprosy and edema, as well as heal wounds, increase body temperature, stimulate appetite and aid digestion, remove necrotic tissue and promote tissue regeneration, induce bowel movements, and dredge blood vessels. However, excessive consumption can deplete semen and physical strength, leading to conditions such as spasms, tremors, dizziness, and lower back and waist pain.

3.2.6. Astringent Taste

The astringent taste, upon entering the mouth, creates a sticky sensation on the tongue and palate, accompanied by a rough feeling. Astringent medicines can treat diseases such as hematological disorders, Tridosha diseases (a Tibetan medical concept referring to imbalances in the body's three humors), and hyperlipidemia. They have the ability to remove necrotic tissue, promote tissue regeneration, heal wounds, and nourish the skin. However, excessive consumption can lead to conditions such as gastric juice stagnation, constipation, abdominal distension, heart disease, weight loss, and anal obstruction. Based on the above observations, the five elements (sources) in Tibetan medicine align with the concept of trace elements found in modern pharmacology.

4. The Natural Laws of Five Sources and Pathological Changes

Any disease in our human body arises from the interaction of internal and external factors. Where do diseases originate from? How do they accumulate and ultimately get triggered by what causes? Let us refer to the "Four Medical Tantras": "The cause of illness is the imbalance and disturbance of the five elements, which leads to the disturbance of the three factors and three poisons, thereby causing disease." In other words, the essence of disease is the result of the disturbance, excess or deficiency, and the disruption of the mutually restraining relationships among the five elements. As mentioned above, the three humors of Long, Chiba, and Bacon, along with the five elements, each occupy their respective positions and maintain a balance under normal conditions, jointly sustaining healthy life activities. Imbalances between the five elements and the three pathogenic factors of Long, Chiba, and Bacon can be direct causes of disease, thereby endangering human health and life.

Diseases that endanger human health and life originate from seasonal changes, the conditions of the five sense organs, and daily living habits. The cold and heat of the seasons, as well as the individual senses of the human body, each govern a specific sensation. If the sensory stimuli are too small or too large, or if the applied stimuli do not match the functions of the senses, it can also lead to illness. The harmony between people's daily routines, the five elements, and the environment is essential to ensure good health and the absence of disease. Conversely, disharmony among these factors can result in the onset of illness.

4.1. Diet

From a dietary perspective, improper diet can lead to abnormalities in the body's "three evils" and "five elements." For instance, consuming an excessive amount of coarse food can result in the accumulation and excess of "long", as coarse food reduces the body's internal heat source and stomach fire, causing people to feel cold and deficient in moisture. Conversely, consuming too many foods with a cooling nature can cause "Chiba" to accumulate excessively, leading to a sensation of heat throughout the body. Similarly, ingesting heavy and greasy foods excessively can also evoke feelings of heat and coarseness in the body.

4.2. Season

Long, Chiba, and Bacon each have their specific seasons of latency and manifestation. Lung corresponds to the weather of spring, so it gradually accumulates during this season, manifests in summer, and resolves in autumn. Similarly, Chiba accumulates in summer, manifests in autumn, and resolves in winter, while Bacon accumulates in winter, manifests during the spring festival, and resolves in summer. From the above passage, we understand that abandoning unhealthy dietary and lifestyle habits and adopting a healthy lifestyle can naturally reduce the occurrence of illnesses. Tibetan medical theories of pathology and etiology follow natural laws and are inseparable from natural dialectics.

5. Diagnosis of Five Sources and Observation, Palpation, and Inquiry

To become a qualified physician, one must start with the three diagnostic methods of observation, inquiry, and palpation, as diagnosing the illness is the prerequisite for treating it. The location and nature of the disease are judged according to the belonging of the Five Elements and their laws of generation and restriction. As stated in the *"Four Tantras of Tibetan Medicine,"* "Diagnosis aims to uncover the cause of the disease, for nothing can exist without the Five Elements and the law of cause and effect, where every cause inevitably leads to an effect."

Observation: It involves careful observation of the patient's living environment, body type, skin color, and particularly, the urine and tongue coating. This method utilizes visual examination to diagnose diseases.

Palpation: The physician diagnoses diseases by physically touching the patient's body to assess heat or cold sensations, areas of swelling, and pulse conditions through pulse-taking.

Inquiry: The physician employs a questioning approach to inquire about the patient's primary symptoms and comprehensively understand the onset and progression of the disease from both the patient and their family members. This serves as an essential basis for differentiating and diagnosing the disease.

6. The therapeutic methods of the Five Sources Theory

In the *Four Tantras of Tibetan Medicine*, it is stated, "There are four exquisite methods for treating illnesses: dietary therapy, regimen therapy, pharmacotherapy, and external surgical therapy." As mentioned above, the essence of disease is the result of the disruption of the five elements, and treatment aims to harmonize these disrupted elements and restore the balance between the three pathogens. In light of

this, the theoretical framework of pharmacology adheres to the three fundamental laws of dialectical naturalism.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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