Book Review


Reviewed by Tenzin Namdul, BTMS

There was a time when one had to struggle hard to find decent reading material in English on any form of Tibetan culture. The English writings of most Tibetan scholars mainly emphasized ways to preserve their culture. Now with recent exposure to Tibetan culture, particularly Buddhist philosophy and Tibetan medicine, people in the West and Europe have started to embrace this philosophy of healing as a remedy for balancing their hectic lifestyle and disturbed mental attitude.

Most books on Buddhist philosophy or Tibetan medicine were in the Tibetan language because of a scarcity of Dharma teachers or Tibetan doctors with a command of the English language. Eventually, the demand of Westerners for this information prompted the translation of these texts. However, these translated versions of texts on Tibetan medicine seemed to diverge from the main concepts, taking their content unclear and difficult to understand. Miriam Cameron’s *Karma and Happiness: A Tibetan Odyssey in Ethics, Spirituality, and Healing* could not come at a better time. Her writing style is clear and easy to read, and a forward written by The Dalai Lama attests to his support and encouragement of her writing.

This book is a treat for anyone—from traveler to administrator, from health worker to arbitrator. Cameron has so rightly stated “this book was written as a statement from one human being who, like anyone else, yearns to be happy, to avoid suffering, and to live with meaning and integrity” (p. 2). In this book, Cameron has simplified the tangled meaning of ethics. Although it lacks depth in its portrayal of the political situation in Tibet, it would be hard to find any book in English that is more convincing and unbiased.

As a Tibetan doctor, I fully enjoyed the chapters dealing with Tibetan medicine, and I would not hesitate to recommend the book to anyone interested in the basics of Tibetan medicine. As Cameron is done throughout the book, she succeeds in making so-called mysterious “Tibetan Medicine” much more understandable and approachable.

Tibetan medicine teaches how one can maintain balance between the psychological factors or affective emotions (attachment, hatred, and obscuration/close mindedness) and five Cosmo physical elements (earth, water, fire, air, and space). According to Tibetan medicine, the root cause of all suffering can be traced to ignorance. The display of ignorance as “I” or “Ego” leads to psychological imbalance, as manifested by the three afflictive emotions. Subsequently, a disturbed mental state affects the composition of the five elements, leading to disturbances of the three principle energies. When in balance, these energies—*riang*, *nakhirpa*, and *Bad-kan*—help to maintain and monitor bodily functions. However, when these energies are disturbed or not in balance, they have an opposite effect. Because everyone has egotistical feelings that are clouded by the three afflictive emotions, it is impossible to be free from suffering. As said in the Tibetan medical text—“even if birds soar high in sky, its shadow always remains on the ground. In the same fashion, even if we eat and live with joy, the fact that we are governed by ignorance, disease always surround us.”

The nature of the relationship between the mental and physical states is described in this theory of three psychological factors and five Cosmo physical elements, an imbalance of which can upset the harmony of our body’s three principles. It is, therefore, important to understand this theory in order to unearth the secret of keeping healthy and happy. Coming closer to understanding one’s ignorance can not only keep one healthy and happy but will also transform one into a better person.

Cameron takes the reader through concepts that are very basic, yet unbelievably relevant to our every day life. To me, the best thing about this book is that it unknowingly consumes you, injecting you with the feeling of being a part of her wonderful journey.

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