Wisdom and Method

Extraordinary Practices for the Realization of Longevity and Optimal Health

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The focus in our discussion of longevity-enhancement has centered on developing techniques and technologies to control the environment as well as the physical body and its functions. The Tibetan contemplative and medical sciences offer a sophisticated view of the mind-body complex in which efforts to control the external world are insufficient without the development of “inner” technologies to train the mind. From the Tibetan perspective, training the mind is in fact essential to the realization of extraordinary levels of longevity, happiness, and optimal health.

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The Tibetan mind-body complex is conceived as three layers: the “gross body,” referring to the physical body and the sensory mind; the “subtle body” or energetic body, which is composed of “channels” (rtsa), “energy centers” or “wheels” (rtsa ’khor), “winds” (rlung), and “drops” or “vital essences” (thig le); and the “extremely subtle body” or “indestructible drop” referring to the extremely subtle mind of clear light.1 This tripartite system provides a framework for practitioners to engage in advanced yogic and meditative practices that promote sensitivity to the subtle energetic system, thereby facilitating an awareness of normally unconscious or automatic psycho-physical processes. This orientation provides the basis for the practitioner to creatively transform aspects of the mind-body continuum in order to realize his or her innate optimal health potential.

In order to develop such a sophisticated degree of sensitivity to the subtle energetic processes, practitioners must first dissolve what is understood as their “coarse” attachment to ordinary perceptual phenomena and their dependence upon a fixed notion of the physical body, the environment, and of reality in general. This habitual reification of persons and things, or the sense that persons and things have an intrinsically objective, fixed, unchanging status, is identified as the root of suffering in the Four Noble Truths—the fundamental teachings of Buddhist philosophy, medicine, and contemplative science, expounded by Shakya-muni Buddha.2 The first two of the Four Noble Truths first identify the existence of suffering and trace its origins to craving and the aforementioned misknowledge. The third and fourth truths lay out the course (referred to as the Noble Eight-fold Path) that, through the application of wisdom, ethics, and mental discipline, leads to the transformative realization of innate optimal human potential. Wisdom here refers to experiential knowledge of ultimate reality, as opposed to simple intellectual understanding. Ethical training is aimed at generating generosity, acceptance, and compassion. Meditative technologies are aimed at overcoming afflictive emotional states and cultivating the...
experiential realization of the nature of both mind and reality.

Building upon this foundation, the Tibetan tradition enhanced this path with the inclusion of tantric practices. These advanced practices include the cultivation of “creative” meditations that use imaginative visualizations of an optimal self, body, and environment in order to provide a model for the extraordinary transformation of self and universe. The theoretical foundation for such practices is that once one has become aware of the conventionality of reality, whose apparent fixity is determined by the collective imagination of the world’s beings, one achieves an exceptional freedom to reconstruct or transform the manner in which that reality is structured. Such “creation stage” practices prepare one for the transformative yogic techniques of the “perfection stage” which enable the practitioner to intervene at the subtlest levels of the mind-body complex in order to transcend the limitations of the ordinary, habitual self and transform this ordinary perception into the extraordinary self-identification with a compassionate and wise being.

According to this tradition, these advanced esoteric practices do not merely transform one’s imagination, they also transform the practitioner’s subtle, gross, and extremely subtle psycho-physical processes. The subtler levels of this mind-body continuum are more malleable than the gross body and environment, as these coarse, “external” levels are understood to be manifestations of the extremely subtle mind and body. Although these subtler consciousnesses are always potentially available, most ordinary individuals do not actively experience these states because of their extreme over-identification with the gross mind and body. This habitual reification of the self essentially prevents one from accessing these subtler states and normally unconscious processes, and therefore an experiential understanding of selflessness or emptiness is necessary for success in these yogic and meditative practices. Such practices prepare the practitioner to achieve conscious identification with the “indestructible drop,” the essential nature of the individual, which is tantamount to enlightenment. (This “indestructible drop” is said to survive the physical death of the body, which has resulted in it being misinterpreted as conveying a meaning of infinite life or immortality. It is important, however, not to misconstrue this drop as a fixed, permanent, “soul”-like entity; rather, it has a relative, dependent nature, which operates momentarily on an endless continuum.) Accordingly, the transformation of these psycho-physical processes could be likened to a sophisticated form of “engineering” aimed at enabling the innate, optimal health potential “encoded” in the indestructible drop to manifest. This could be understood as the Tibetan tradition’s “subtle” genome project.

Details of these advanced yogic and meditative practices and maps of the subtle body vary across tantric systems, as well as in relation to the states and/or realizations of the practitioner. In order to effectively engage in subtle esoteric practices, the practitioner must undergo specialized training that involves a series of preparatory practices. Such training is actually intended to protect the practitioner, as unguided or misinformed manipulation of the subtle body is understood to be potentially harmful. Further description of specific meditative practices requires more elaboration than is possible or appropriate here. Tantric practitioners, however, rely on the techniques and insights of the eightfold framework described above. One must understand the lack of intrinsic identity of all objects, including the self, in order to experience extremely subtle states of awareness (wisdom). All practices must be undertaken with the appropriate intention to heal oneself and others specifically for the purpose of reducing pain and suffering (ethics). In order to create and sustain vivid and clear visualizations (as required in the advanced “creation” and “perfection” stage practices), one must develop high capacities for concentration and awareness (mental discipline). It is useful to discuss these foundational meditative practices.
Quiescence is a meditative technique involving continuous single-pointed concentration on a meditative object. In order to maintain this focus, the practitioner relies on the force of mindfulness, or attention or recollection, and awareness. Mindfulness is often likened to a rope that fastens one’s attention to the object of meditation. Awareness refers to a type of meta-awareness of whether one’s attention is distracted from the object of focus. Specific instructions exist to aid the practitioner through the stages of this practice, as do detailed directions for overcoming specific obstacles such as excitement and laxity. Upon attaining mental quiescence, one’s mind is said to be capable of holding its chosen object without wavering; one also is said to experience bliss as well as great mental and physical suppleness. The ability to hold the mind in this way is a prerequisite for completion of various esoteric and exoteric practices. Afflictive emotions are said to arise less frequently between meditation sessions, as the mind becomes less prone to conditioned reactivity. This practice alone, however, will not address the fundamental causes of maladaptive cognitive, emotional, and behavioral patterns.

In order to dispel this fundamental misknowledge at the root of various maladaptive processes, one relies on this foundation of mental one-pointedness, and systematically analyzes the nature of reality in order to gain insight into the habitual reification of persons and things. In practice, one “looks for the self and discovers there is no independent point of subjectivity.” The classic example used to illustrate this point is the deconstruction of a chariot. If the chariot is disassembled, it becomes clear that the chariot is not its parts; rather, the chariot is imputed on the parts. If it were separate from its parts, there would be no need to label the parts “chariot,” and if it were each of its parts, then there would be many chariots.

This analysis can be systematically extended to dispel the false knowledge that sees intrinsically identifiable existence in both persons and phenomena.

Quiescence and insight are both essential practices, both for the exoteric and esoteric paths. Concentration alone does not include the analytical force necessary to reveal the nature of reality; even with a perspective that understands this true nature, one lacking in mental stabilization will continue to be distracted by discursive thoughts and afflictive emotions. It is important to consider that these meditations are not merely stress-reducing; they are aimed at building awareness of, and ultimately regulating, the subtle psychophysical processes of mind and body. In order to overcome maladaptive, addictive processes of mind, one practices observing the cognitive, emotional, and physiological processes without reacting to or becoming involved in these fluctuating patterns. In this way, habitual thoughts and emotions, such as anger, can begin to lose their recurrent power over one’s mental state. Observing the continuously fluctuating, transient nature of experience can help one overcome the habitual reification of persons and things as intrinsically identifiable, permanent, and unchanging entities, and ultimately lead to the realization of emptiness. Another approach to decondition the influence of afflictive emotions is to actively engage in meditations which reinforce positive emotions such as love, and compassion. It is said that when one understands the nature of emptiness, or the interconnectedness of all things, compassion arises simultaneously. This unified expression of wisdom and compassion is the essence of this practice.

The Tibetan tradition maintains that the cultivation of wisdom, ethics, and mental discipline can support a healthier, happier existence, and that such practice can serve as a basis from which to enter the esoteric practices briefly mentioned above. With proper guidance, commitment, and training, the practitioner on the esoteric path achieves realizations more subtle...
and profound than otherwise possible—in particular, the realization of extraordinary levels of longevity, health, and happiness. A magico-religious perspective of “immortality” is not required to comprehend the tradition’s understanding of the relative, yet endless, extremely subtle mind-body continuum, which stands as an alternative to the objective-materialist view that death is the total annihilation of the mind-body continuum. The radically transformative effects of the exoteric meditation practices on cognitive, emotional, and behavioral health and well-being may be easier to appreciate, but although the methods for esoteric and exoteric practices differ, the nature of wisdom as understood in both sets of practices does not. Perhaps it is this fundamental realization of emptiness that is the ambrosia of “immortality.”

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

References